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**THE POWER OF SEXUAL AESTHETICS:
WOMEN AND GIRLS CRAFTING BODIES**

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Power of Sexual Aesthetics: Women and Girls Crafting Bodies

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The Power of Sexual Aesthetics: Women and Girls Crafting Bodies examines how people of color respond creatively to being framed as sexually deviant through normative assessments of their corporeal styles in the U.S. This work comprises a comparative study of how aesthetics shape the racialization of African American, Latina, and black, non-Latina Caribbean immigrant women and girls. The dissertation constructs its argument by juxtaposing the body crafting practices of heterosexual and LGBTQ young women of color I have worked with through community arts outreach, with contemporary women artists of color whose work portrays explicitly raced and sexualized bodies.

Employing a multi-method approach, the study combines focus groups with young women, interviews with artists, reception study, and visual analysis of music videos, YouTube media, photographs, collages, and paintings, to fashion a transdisciplinary synthesis. Bridging Art History, Gender, Sexuality, African American, Latino/a, Critical Race, Ethnic, and Cultural Studies, the dissertation traces the circulation of raced female bodies in the visual fields of popular culture, fine art, and everyday social spaces, domains in which norms of body presentation and representation are both crystallized and challenged. Case studies of “chonga” girls, masculine body presenting young women, and contemporary cultural producers elaborate the modes through which racialized corporeal aesthetics are valued. This project highlights a double standard: vernacular images and embodiments of sexuality fashioned by disadvantaged girls more often draw negative critiques and cultural devaluation in social discourse when compared

to more professional pictures and bodies lauded as “edgy” and “innovative” for their sexual content in the elite art world, popular culture, and media.

The Power of Sexual Aesthetics analyzes how body crafting practices may work to both reveal and occult class disparity in a contemporary neoliberal context. The power of neoliberal discourse lies in its obfuscation of class exclusions and structures, and effective circulation of narratives concerning the putative potential of self-making and overcoming economic circumstances. This dissertation argues that the dissident aesthetics of poor and working class women and girls of color have the potential to unmask realities of class stratification, hence their disciplining as racially, sexually, and aesthetically excessive.

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INTRODUCTION

*I grew up with females like this and it's gross...how can people admire this shit? This makes me want to move away from here so bad. They're your stereotypical ghetto Hispanics who cause uproar for attention. They call themselves "Chongas", I call them ignorant.*¹

This post was entered on the blog site *Miaminights* by a user named "Laura" in June 2007 in response to a story on *Chongalicious*, a widely viewed and popular YouTube video in South Florida that caricatured a style of Latina girls in Miami, Florida who are pejoratively labeled "chongas." The term typifies an adolescent Latina girl who wears heavy makeup, tight clothing, long acrylic nails, large gold hoop earrings, and intricate hairstyles that utilize copious amounts of gel. The presence of chonga bodies in the visual field agitates this Miami resident, whose hyperbolic language articulates a desire to move to a space in which she would not need to encounter such unsightly excesses.

Female-gross-stereotypical-ghetto-uproar-attention-ignorant. Many of these terms are used to describe subjects such as the working class women and girls of color who I researched in this project through cultural analysis, focus groups, and participant observation. Some wear revealing clothing and heavy makeup; others like to dress in the styles of black male hip hop artists, skateboarders, or dandies. These vilified forms of dress have been appropriated by artists such as Nikki S. Lee, who photographs herself donning clothing and hairstyles that are associated with poor and working class Latinas and African American women in her work. These photographs have earned Lee critical acclaim in the international art world for the manner in which she transformed her body to fit into various subcultures in the U.S. Why is an artist celebrated for taking on modes of embodiment that in everyday contexts are considered hypersexual, inappropriate, and tasteless? Is it because audiences believe she is being ironic? What brands the body of an artist as an elite artifact of cultural significance and the body of a racialized woman as an

1 <http://www.miaminights.com/miami-new-times-dissects-the-chonga-trend-4242.phtml>.

“authentic” object of hostile social consumption?

In *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics: Women and Girls Crafting Bodies* I investigate how women and girls of color engage sexual norms through creating visual art or styling their bodies. I argue that the racializing of women and girls of color as sexual others through normative assessments of their styles serves to occult structural economic hierarchies. The racially marked sexuality that is ascribed to them takes the fall for the class exclusions that cannot be acknowledged in a contemporary neoliberal context saturated with mobility discourse.

It is commonly believed in American popular discourse that when women and girls dress in overtly sexual ways they are viewed as “low class.” I suggest the opposite, it is the coding of class difference in the feminine and masculine body styles employed by the women and girls in my study that make them subject to denigration through rhetorics of racialized hypersexuality or queerness. *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* shows how reactions to the bodies of chongas and black young women who embody masculinities are shaped by class politics. These styles attract negative attention while the sexualized bodies of artists and performers of color such as Jennifer Lopez and Nicki Minaj are celebrated in mainstream popular culture because they signal purchasing power through meticulous styling and fine dress.

The neoliberal context I refer to here is one in which government and education institutions are becoming increasingly corporatized, subjects are hailed as responsibilized entrepreneurs and consumers who should fend for themselves without the aid of the state, and in which subjectivity becomes the work of self-branding (Rose 1999; Harvey 2005; Ferguson 2009; Banet-Weiser 2011; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Ramos-Zayas 2012). The power of neoliberal discourse lies in its occlusion of class politics and structures, and its effective circulation of narratives concerning the putative potential of overcoming economic circumstances and “self-making.” I argue that the sexual aesthetics I study have the power of unmasking realities of class stratification. Bodies signifying

these sexual aesthetics are policed for this transgression, in turn, through discursive devaluation as racially, sexually, and aesthetically excessive.

In line with neoliberal discourse, these judgments are rarely articulated through vernaculars of class, but rather, of style (Bettie 2003). Departing from sociologist Julie Bettie's significant work on class and dress in *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*, which centers on style politics in a high school context, I interrogate how the circulation and reception of visual art by women and young women's bodies, in contexts such as an art gallery or neighborhood street, have varying cultural effects, politics, and powers. Following Bettie, I stress that these aesthetic forms produce discourse effects regardless of the intentions of the girls and women who embody or represent them. I am careful not to frame these practices as expressions of free "choice," or unmediated agency, but rather, as complex, constrained, and socially contextualized negotiations and what Saba Mahmood terms, *inhabitations* (2005), of various norms and economic circumstances.

I developed this work out of years of curating exhibitions of contemporary art and through outreach to young women of color through the Women on the Rise! program at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Miami, Florida. This program, which I established in 2004 in response to the growing number of girls entering the juvenile justice system, utilizes feminist, queer, and anti-racist artwork to engage girls in art making and critical dialogues about body image, social relationships, and expressive culture. Women on the Rise! facilitates conversations on visual art and collaborations between women artists and girls. It is these exchanges, images, and approaches to body styling that drive and inspire my research.

The Power of Sexual Aesthetics centers on heterosexual and LGBTQ young women of color and contemporary women artists whose work reflects a conspicuous sexual semiotics. I theorize the ways that the presentation and representation, even hypervisualization, of bodies, by themselves and others, shape the lives of women and

girls. Employing a multi-method approach, I combine interviews with artists, focus groups with young women, participant observation, reception study, and a mode of visual analysis derived from art history, to fashion a transdisciplinary synthesis. My emphasis on the power and politics of aesthetics in this project probes how the surveillance of female bodies is driven by their classification through rhetorics linking style, class, and sexuality, such as “trashy,” “butchy,” “glamorous,” and “slutty.”

This dissertation centers on case studies that examine the hypervisibility and denigration of Latina chonga girls; the erotic pleasures and social pains that attend the crafting of masculine bodies by young women of color; the rhetorics of corporeal fakery and neoliberalism that attend the work and reception of black mainstream hip hop artist Nicki Minaj, and the manner in which women artists of various racial and ethnic backgrounds--Wangechi Mutu, Shoshanna Weinberger, Rachel Lachowicz, and Heather Benjamin, fashion images of female bodies that disturb established representations of female racial and sexual embodiment. The work of visual and performing artists Crystal Pearl, GisMo (Crystal Pearl and Jessica Gispert), Zanele Muholi, Yo Majesty, Nikki S. Lee, Luis Gispert, and others, will also be discussed in various chapters. These case studies tell the story of the complicated ways that bodies become subject to power and subjects *of* power, and of the significant role played by visual culture and body practice in shaping, contesting, transforming, and reifying established social meanings of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

I demonstrate how the visual field is a key site where formations of race and sexuality take their shape and become positioned in plays of social, cultural, and economic power. One of the visual domains I center on in the dissertation is the mainstream contemporary art world. Images branded as “cutting-edge” in the international art market emblemized by auction houses such as Sotheby’s and legitimated by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wield significant influence in defining visual trends that are incorporated into marketing and fashion

imagery for mass consumption. Examples include the line of garish makeup parodically crafted by photo artist Cindy Sherman that was sold and marketed by MAC Cosmetics, and the branding alliance between Japanese conceptual artist Yayoi Kusama and Louis Vuitton, which has likely resulted in the ubiquitous appearance of her signature polka dot patterns in low-cost fashion stores for women like Forever 21. The worlds of fashion design and art are in consistent conversation, as is evidenced by the numerous articles on art and artists featured in fashion publications. At the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, I once gave a tour to makeup art students from a local cosmetology school who were assigned to craft ideas inspired by the work featured in a solo exhibition of New York based artist Rita Ackermann's work. Through complex processes, art and artists shape the crafting of everyday bodies.

I find that caricaturing the body styles of working class women and girls of color produces cultural and economic status for the producers who appropriate them in artwork and visual media. I have identified several visual and discursive modes through which these politics and powers are elaborated.

- 1) *Sexual-Aesthetic Excess*: I offer sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept for theorizing modes of dress and comportment that are often judged to be "too much": too ethnic, too young, too cheap, too loud. Sexual-aesthetic excess is a discourse that correlates fashion deviancy with sexual impropriety, and vice versa. The bodies of women and girls of color are particularly subject to racialization through rhetorics of sexual-aesthetic excess, which in turn shape their class performance and position. However, beyond indicating a hegemonic trope, or normative gaze, sexual-aesthetic excess can also be mobilized to signify instances in which bodies present styles that reveal the contingency of normative structures through conspicuous dress, and agitate the visual field. Sexual-aesthetic excess is figured in this dissertation through the body presentations of chonga girls, masculine young women of color, Nicki Minaj, and the bodies rendered in the visual art

of artists Luis Gispert, Nikki S. Lee, Zanele Muholi, Shoshanna Weinberger, Wangechi Mutu, Crystal Pearl, GisMo, and Heather Benjamin.

- 2) *Protection of Parody*: The protection of parody is a discourse that exempts women and girls from negative readings of their sexual and racially marked body aesthetics when their styles are framed as forms of parody. The discourse of parody protects the bodies of privileged subjects who could signify sexual aesthetic-excess by performing a distancing between body presentation and sexual subjectivity—as is played out in chonga discourse, and in the reception and reading of the body and sexualized performances of Nicki Minaj and Nikki S. Lee. The protection of parody legitimates the presentation and consumption of spectacular and deviant embodiments through their discursive neutralization as temporary performances, as opposed to troubling non-normative existences.

- 3) *Appropriation as Incorporation*: I consider modes of race appropriation performed in the practices of cultural producers like Nicki Minaj as tactics of *incorporation* that are not thefts, or attempts to approximate authentic ideals, but rather work as sartorial forms that combine multiple, impure, pre-existing elements of racialized style to fashion bodies that communicate indifference to norms of dress and racial fixity by highlighting the constructedness of identity. The term “appropriation” connotes the theft or borrowing from original work, the improper use of an object or signifier without the permission of an owner. However, racial, gender, and sexual signifiers are socially constituted, and as such have no pure origin. In thinking the politics of appropriation as incorporation I attend to the ways in which racial, gender, and sexual markers do not inherently belong to particular bodies and identities. *Incorporation* stresses the ways in which the styling practices I analyze are embodied, and also points to how cultural producers like Nicki Minaj and Nikki S. Lee have assumed racial signifiers for

creative, professional, and corporate ends.

4) Blank Background Compositions: What I term a *blank background composition* is a pictorial approach in photography and various forms of image-making that poses elaborately styled bodies against empty backgrounds devoid of references to time or social space. Blank background compositions have roots in Western medieval representations of religious icons and political figures such as Emperor Justinian. 16th century portraits of royalty were also commonly framed against flat, vacant backgrounds, which served to highlight the significance of the subject.

The semiotics of blank backgrounds shifted in the 19th century through European practices of anthropological and medical image making, which corresponded with colonial projects and the racial/gender inscription of the bodies of ‘primitive’ others through ‘empirical,’ visual means. These images did not aim, as the icons and portraits of previous centuries in the West, to stage the subjectivities of their subjects, but rather to categorize and homogenize cultures in racial taxonomies through portraits of “representative” individuals. Plain backgrounds are often employed in the quasi-ethnographic modes of staging bodies to be read for style. These striking styles are thought to evince novel or deviant cultural phenomena, unique specimens, pathologies, and/or curiosities.

I find that the conspicuous bodies of women and girls of color I examine in this study are regularly figured in blank background compositions that brand them as spectacles, comic caricatures, and/or visually enticing deviants. The blank space works to contain the transgressions of non-normative difference coded by these bodies by subjecting them to disciplinary gazes and making them seem singular, unique, not as parts of larger, contextualized, possibly oppositional social formations. Not all blank background compositions work to contain difference however; queer artists such as Catherine Opie have employed blank backgrounds precisely to highlight deviance, subjectivity, and provoke and trouble disciplinary

looks.

I employ the term “crafting” in this dissertation to point to how girls style their bodies through practices of dress and corporeal modification. Likewise, I examine how the women artists in my study engage in crafting by producing images of sexualized female bodies or transforming their own. Here I mobilize the polysemy of craft. The term is implicated in aesthetic hierarchies of low versus high art. Historically, the handiwork that went into creating objects such as quilts, which are associated with women and coded as “craft,” have been attributed less aesthetic value than objects such as oil paintings, for example². I find almost a double standard; it is the more “crafty,” provisional, vernacular images and embodiments of sexuality that draw negative critiques and cultural devaluation when compared to those more polished, professional pictures lauded as edgy for their sexual content in the art world, popular culture, and media. I do not intend to judge cultural workers, artworks or media representations for failing to generate images that mirror the “real world,” on the contrary, I am an avid consumer and lover of contemporary art and many mass media products. What this project critiques is a racist, sexist, classist, heteronormative visual economy that subjects women and girls of color to corporeal policing, which has palpable negative effects on their lives, while conversely valuing and affording cultural and material capital to similar embodiments when they are branded as elite or popular cultural forms.

In thinking of craft I also evoke craftiness as a tactic, to refer to the clever ways that women and girls engage aesthetics of embodiment and representation that disturb normalization. Framing these practices as modes of crafting facilitate a understanding of the complex ways that women and girls play active roles in constructing and reading body images while also investigating how these practices are constrained by their social position in terms of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and class.

² Although the art world has become more inclusive of craft forms, there remains a stark discrepancy between amateur or outsider craft workers, and the value attributed to their products, and the cultural capital attributed to fine artists and their productions.

In analyzing the power of sexual aesthetics this study draws from Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. He writes,

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...power is not an institution, and not a structure...it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society... Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always "inside" power....(Ibid. 93-95).

Foucault's theorization of power is particularly suited to my work as it stems from his understanding of the ways in which the body is a conduit and point of application of power, particularly in regards to discourses of sexuality that undergird biopolitics. The bodies of women of color are primary targets for biopolitical interventions from the state and non-profit sector through pregnancy "prevention" initiatives that aim to curb birthrates among Latina and black populations (Bridges 2011; Briggs 2002). Foucault's work enables examination of the power relations that are conducted by and applied to the bodies of women of girls.

What kinds of discourses about sexuality and aesthetics inform the body crafting practices of women and girls and how do these embodiments place them in particular power relations in culture and society? When do these embodiments resist or reproduce established power relations? How do they sometimes conduct both? What are the varying power effects of embodiments represented in visual culture when compared to those bodies that occupy space in everyday life? How can the examination of these power relationships expand our understandings of the constitutive relationships between body practices, racialization, sexual subject formation, and the circulation of sexual discourses in the context of neoliberalism?

The Power of Sexual Aesthetics advances the literature on contemporary art, race, and sexuality published by scholars such as Jennifer Doyle (2006) and Maurice Berger (2004) by addressing the analytical blind spots in this work that ignores how race

organizes sexual norms. It at once centers queer women of color performers/visual artists and brings queer theory to bear on the work of cultural producers of color who do not identify as queer. In this, the dissertation builds upon the work of scholars such as Judith/Jack Halberstam (1998; 2005), José Esteban Muñoz (1999; 2009), and Anne Cvetkovich (2003). *The Politics of Sexual Aesthetics* also traverses the boundaries between vernacular, popular, and elite expressive practices.

Focus Groups with Girls on Embodiment, Representation, and Expressive Culture

While the events or experiences in Tracey Emin's work may range from the everyday (going to the lavatory) to the exceptional and traumatic (an abortion procedure that went wrong), her sex and sexuality are there, central, and where appropriate, celebrated, but otherwise simply matter of fact...Emin also is under no illusions about who has the best understanding of her work: not the art critics, but 17-year-old working-class school girls.

--Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*

"There were quite a number of pictures, little pictures by Baudouin in the Salon, hung in a window enclosure, and all the young girls, after having looked distractedly at a few paintings, ended up where they could see The Peasant Girl Quarreling with Her Mother and The Cherry Picker; it was at this window bay that they studied most attentively." Diderot's objections to the pictures center on their too transparent references to illicit sex and sexuality.

--Melissa Hyde, *Making Up the Rococo: Francois Boucher and His Critics*

Let me begin with an anecdote: while I was looking at Donald Judd's gleaming brass floor box of 1968 from a distance in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art last Spring, two teenage girls strode over to this pristine work, kicked it, and laughed. They then discovered its reflective surface and used it for a while to arrange their hair until, finally, they bent over to kiss their images on top of the box.

--Anna C. Chave, *Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power*

The art historians I cite above attest to the unwieldy and radical ways in which girls encounter and read art. My process for recruiting girls and young women for this research enables the interface of the vernacular, popular, and artistic practices I study, as participants of focus groups were involved in the Museum of Contemporary Art's Women

on the Rise! gender specific outreach art program for girls. I created the program in 2004 and remained involved as a consultant while pursuing graduate studies at Rutgers. I commenced my work as an educator in residence at the museum in 2011, when I relocated to Miami from Rutgers to conduct this dissertation research.

Women on the Rise! workshops are conducted off-site from the museum in the spaces of collaborating non-profit, government, and educational organizations that work with girls. The program consists of workshops that introduce girls and young women to the work of feminist, anti-racist, and queer artists. These workshops, which are free of charge to students, culminate in the production of artworks by participants in a range of media that are inspired by the practice of these featured artists. Women on the Rise! workshops are collaboratively taught and developed by Miami artists Anya Wallace, Crystal Pearl, Monica Lopez de Victoria of the artist collective TM Sisters, Guadalupe Figueras, Nereida Garcia-Ferraz, Dionorah de Jesus Rodriguez, and myself.

I observed hundreds of girls and conducted focus groups with 61 young women throughout 2011-2013 at the facilities of partner organizations, such as Pridelines, which provides support to queer youth. Investigating young women's corporeal practices through Women on the Rise! allowed me to bridge empirical analysis and cultural analysis, as I learned what the girls thought about the embodiments created by women artists through the focus groups and program workshops. How did the art speak to their life experiences? If the girls felt no relation to the art is it because it is out of touch with vernacular practices? How did popular culture figures such as Nicki Minaj inspire the girls' styles? What can the interpretations of art articulated by the girls offer to scholarly analysis of visual culture? What do they see that perhaps scholars are not attending to?

Focus groups have been my primary qualitative method because the girls are accustomed to working with me as a class through Women on the Rise! and I want to emphasize the dynamics of their group interaction. These exchanges capture how they negotiate with discourses of sexuality through discussion of body practices. I theorize

focus groups as a feminist mode of sharing what queer Latina writer Gloria Anzaldúa has termed *la facultad*. Anzaldúa writes,

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomenon the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning... Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense (1987, 60: emphasis in original).

Beyond a mode of critical, socially attuned and situated intuition, I frame *la facultad* that is operative in my focus groups as the wide range of *faculties*, aptitudes, talents, and knowledges contributed by all participants. Not only am I interested in what young women see below surface phenomena but in the “surfaces,” the corporealities they craft, which have a weight of their own, as has been understood by artists such as Rachel Lachowicz and Andy Warhol. I draw on the young women’s unique ways of seeing, reading, thinking, knowing, and making to form this work. Youth are so often ignored in theoretical scholarship or their voices are utilized to confirm the ideas of the academic or abjected as the antithesis to knowledge. The melding of art and social science performed in this dissertation, in addition to references to my personal connections to the project as a working class, second generation Latina of Cuban and Puerto Rican heritage who did not have access to art museums or galleries until reaching the university, work to resist this. Truth, image, fantasy, and possibility mix and re-mix in this work and will be further altered by those who encounter the text.

In the focus groups I co-create a narrative of body practice and visual culture with the young women who participated. The collaborative approach of focus groups has been noted by sociologist Esther Madriz in the essay “Focus Groups in Feminist Research,” where she writes,

For years, the voices of women of color have been silenced in most research projects. Focus groups may facilitate women of color “writing culture together”

by exposing not only the layers of oppression that have suppressed these women's expressions, but the forms of resistance that they use everyday to deal with such oppressions. In this regard, I argue that focus groups can be an important element in the advancement of an agenda of social justice for women, because they can serve to expose and validate everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective resistance strategies (2003, 364).

I advance Madriz's conception further by positing that focus groups can also serve as powerful tools for documenting not just the struggles, but the pleasures that young women experience in culture as well. Beyond examining how young women of color are marginalized in culture and how they trouble social structures, I also consider complicated questions regarding their acquiescence to and reinforcements of normative regimes.

Madriz articulates the political work of feminist focus groups for and by women of color by framing them as consciousness-raising sessions. She posits that the manner in which focus groups capture interaction and multivocality support a power dynamic that allows for participants to take more active roles in the process, as opposed to the more stringent power relationship that attends one-on-one interviews. Madriz describes how focus group discussions often escape the intentions of the researcher, as participants drive and deviate from the conversation. These "digressions," including disagreements among participants, moved me to examine issues I had not previously considered, such as the topic of masculinity in young women's body crafting, which now constitutes two chapters.

In the chapters that draw from focus group narratives I excerpt extended portions of transcripts in order to communicate the tone of the interactions to readers and evoke the young women's unique voices and personalities. I utilize "narrative" instead of "data" here to point to the co-construction of stories the focus group occasioned and eschew notions that they revealed coherent "facts" or "data" that can uphold my theories. Although I cannot communicate an unmediated portrayal of the young women in the study I work to maintain the integrity of what they shared. The girls are not objects of

observation but subjects who stimulate, challenge, affirm, and expand my thinking. I acknowledge them as critical interlocutors in the knowledge production process. Together we make art, ideas, and conversations. I honor what they have given me by sharing their experiences and hope to draw from what they discussed to contribute to the emergence of social, artistic, and theoretical possibilities that challenge the policing of their bodies.

The statements I cite in this study do not provide evidence that help us “know” young women of color, but show how young women of color *know* and how their knowledge can contribute new perspectives to theoretical, cultural, and social practices. I am not so interested in articulating how “real” girls of color feel about particular topics, but in evoking how they see and make sense of their bodies and the bodies they encounter in culture, both on tv, phone, and computer screens and in their daily lives, as in the 21st century these realms of the “real” continue to collapse.

Talk among the girls and my talks *with* the girls have been mediated by cultural texts. Rather than disaggregate girls’ talk about themselves and their readings of cultural productions, I mesh these narratives to attend to the complex interplay between the sexual, race, class, aesthetic, and gender discourses circulating in media and girls’ interpretations, transformations, negotiations, and incarnations of these meanings. The ubiquity of media in girls’ consumption practices and in the construction of their subjectivities makes this approach theoretically and methodologically necessary.

I shared my work with artists, educators, activists, and professionals who work with young women as part of the grassroots organization The Girls Coalition of Miami-Dade County in September 2012 to raise consciousness about the issues participants addressed in the focus groups, with emphasis on our conversations about hostilities concerning their masculinities. We discussed how the insights of the young women in the focus groups can potentially be utilized to develop initiatives that meaningfully engage them in social critique, activism, and creative production. I hope this research can further inform the creation of spaces in which young women can express their embodied

subjectivities more freely, and establish relationships that support and nurture other women in their body crafting, instead of utilizing the reading of the body to categorize and exclude those who stray from the normative.

I recruited young women for focus groups after working with them through Women on the Rise! for at least one month but in most cases I had worked with them for over six months to one year prior to the focus group discussion. The focus groups were completely voluntary and the girls understood that their participation in my research did not affect their status as participants in the Women on the Rise! program. Parents and guardians granted permission for the girls under 18 years of age to participate and for me to record our conversations. As the Women on the Rise! program serves girls who move in and out of various education, social welfare, and juvenile justice institutions and processes, I would sometimes meet a girl only once, while I have consistently worked with others for two years as of this writing.

Each focus group consisted of between 5 to 12 young women, and the adult women who worked as case workers or program facilitators would also participate at times. The girls had the option of creating their own pseudonym to protect their identity and if they did not want to create one or could not come up with one I would create it. There were several instances in which I had the sense that a girl might have used a name associated with a social networking account and in those cases I gave them an alternate pseudonym. All focus groups and several Women on the Rise! classes were documented with a voice recorder and later transcribed. I conducted textual analysis of the transcriptions for salient themes and critical commentary regarding body practice, race, gender, class, and sexuality in everyday life, art, and popular culture. I reference ideas shared by the young women in the focus group discussions in various chapters of the dissertation. In addition to discursive textual analysis of the transcriptions, I have listened to the focus group recordings several times to hone in on affective expressions that escaped translation into words and communicated significant insights.

Focus group discussions took place in the classrooms and office spaces where I regularly met students for Women on the Rise! workshops. Although these are very sterile environments, as they are not designed for art classes, the young women were engaged in the process and took seriously the opportunity to share their knowledge, experiences, comments, and critiques over sweets I would bring them and sometimes tea and Bahamian cocobread baked by my Women on the Rise! colleague Anya Wallace.

The girls seemed eager to help me with my work. There was a sense of camaraderie they expressed as they felt they were helping an older woman of color along with her career, instead of being the ones always in the position of being “helped.” At times the space of the focus group was one of support among the girls and at others of tense disagreements, these dynamics attest to the complexity of the focus group as a research method and to the active roles assumed by the girls in driving the discussion, despite my authoritative role as researcher/teacher.

I designed a two-part, semi-structured focus group discussion. Part one asked participants to describe what their ideal embodiment would be in detail (clothes, accessories, hairstyles, and body modifications if applicable). I prompted them to articulate their “ideal” embodiment in order to examine the physical traits and aesthetics that they found to be the most valuable and desirable. The girls wrote descriptions and/or made drawings of their styles on index cards and I asked them to share their ideal embodiments with the group if they felt comfortable doing so. The index cards were meant to help the girls remember the style they imagined when it came time for them to share. More importantly, utilizing the index card slowed down the process of responding to my prompt, making it possible for girls to be thoughtful about the style they wished to craft and to edit and revise their ideas. The index card also provided me with a written document to analyze after the focus group was conducted. Participants were given an additional index card in which they were invited to write any thoughts they wanted to share with me but did not feel comfortable discussing with the group.

When participants were finished with the index cards describing their ideal embodiments, which I collected at the end of the discussion, I asked them questions like: How would this look make you feel? What do you think this look says about you to a stranger walking by you in public? What do you think other girls your age would think about this look? How about other boys your age? Would your parents, caregivers, teachers, like this look for you? Why/why not? Is this look inspired by the style of any celebrities? If so, who?

In the second part of the focus group I showed participants images of work by artists who draw from the style practices of young women of color such as Nikki S. Lee and Iona Rozeal Brown, in addition to images of pop culture figures who seem to be inspirations for girls' styling practices such as popular hip hop artist Nicki Minaj. I also prompted them to comment on images of chonga girls and products related to chongas and Minaj such as Barbie and Bratz mass-market brand dolls. The questions I posed to participants in this part of the discussion encouraged them to critically analyze the images and share their thoughts on how they felt the women and girls in these works were being represented, on the meanings of race and gender articulated in the images, and on whether the styles/products depicted were ones they would purchase and/or adopt.

A total of 61 girls and young women participated in my focus groups. Most participants were between the ages of 13 and 17. The youngest participant was 10 years of age and the oldest was 31, as several youth-serving professionals participated in the study along with the girls they work with. 18 participants identified as African American and 11 identified as non-Latina black Caribbean with references to countries such as Jamaica and the Bahamas. 25 participants identified as Latina or "Hispanic," 6 identified as multi-racial, and one did not respond.

It is not my aim to frame the insights of these participants as reflecting how young women of color in Miami generally feel about issues of body practice and representation. I work instead to situate the narratives produced in the focus groups within the spaces

where I met and worked with the girls. Their insights should not and could not be generalized, but the wealth of insights they presented contribute unique perspectives that have rarely been engaged in feminist, sexualities, ethnic, critical race, and queer studies. In 2008, before relocating back to Miami from central New Jersey to conduct dissertation research and writing, I recruited South Florida residents for an electronic survey study about chongas and the *Chongalicious* YouTube video. I discuss my methodological approach in that 2008 study in depth in chapter one.

Reading Bodies in Miami

Miami is a generative site for research on embodiment and sexuality as it is unique among many other cities in the U.S. for the manner in which the sexualized female body takes center stage in the social landscape. It is also where I had established relationships with organizations that work with young women through the Women on the Rise! program, which facilitated study recruitment. Although advertisements depicting sexualized women are common in cities throughout the U.S., in Miami, public space is heavily saturated with large billboards selling liquor and luxury items to tourists coming to enjoy the sexed-up debauchery of South Beach, which is glorified in visual culture through media such as *CSI: Miami* and the video game *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. These ads usually depict women in sexualized poses. Miami has been associated with vice and these vices are primarily referencing sexual activity with readily available women. Like in other “tropical” spaces that attract tourists, it is the endless supply of exotic, bikini clad “babes,” in addition to buff and stylish gay men, that lure people in and become a marketing tool. South Beach, however, comprises a very small portion of Miami-Dade County and in no way reflects the social context that most residents live.

Yet, in more working and middle class suburban neighborhoods, you find a different mode of hypervisibility of the sexualized female body. Along main roads that people use to get to and from work you find smaller billboards and bus advertisements that market countless aesthetic treatments to women such as botox, breast enhancements,

hair extensions, and butt lifts. Many of these ads utilize l.e.d. technologies and their bright lights and movement compete for the attention of drivers and passers by. They market payment installment and financing plans that frame these treatments as economically feasible for women with limited budgets. All over Miami you see beauty, booty and body, and all female subjects are interpellated. Women are seen everywhere here, but it is a glamorized, usually light-skinned Latina or white woman who is represented. These images do not reflect the middle class, working class, poor, and un-glamorous urban and suburban realities lived by many women and girls of color in Miami-Dade County.

I felt the weight of this intense body consciousness as a 12-year-old girl when my family moved from our working and middle class neighborhood of West New York, New Jersey to Miami in the early 1990s. Although the population in Miami, of which the majority are Latinos, was similar to that of my New Jersey town, I was unprepared for the scrutiny my adolescent body received both from other girls and from harassing boys and young men.

Although New Jersey adopts the fashion consciousness of New York City in many ways due to its proximity to the city, both New Jersey and New York allow for the articulation of various style practices through a kind of cosmopolitan indifference. However, in Miami, the range of acceptable embodiments is much more stringent, codified, and centered on class politics. These dynamics were likely the result of recently established immigrant populations in Miami, in contrast to the more established ethnic populations in the Northeast, negotiating their belonging in the U.S. context. As Lisa Sun-Hee Park notes in her book *Consuming Citizenship*,

The achievement of social citizenship rights is deeply interwoven with consumption because “successful” immigrant adaptation is narrowly prescribed in economic terms wherein personal wealth and income become the primary indicator of adjustment. Economic gains are presumed to precede the next stage of true acceptance. The second generation plays a crucial role in this scenario in that they become the primary evidence of their parents’ successful or unsuccessful

incorporation to the United States. In addition, evidence of this wealth must be routinely displayed (2005, 4-5).

Park's work centers on the children of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs, who share with Cuban-Americans in Miami interpellation as a "model minority." I remember being made fun of in middle school for my "wack" clothes, shoes, and accessories and begging my mother to purchase expensive items for me, like Z. Cavaricci label shorts which were popular in the school at the time, and which my mother could not afford to buy me on her salary as a retail clerk at a luxury department store. Body image and style were issues I struggled with in Miami until late in high school.

Despite the images of bronzed, fashionably dressed women depicted in pop culture representations of Miami, the situation for women here is far from comfortable. According to the 2010 census, the median per capita income of Miami-Dade County residents is \$20,970 and the median household income is \$40,000. 36% of female-headed households live below poverty level and 20% of all Miami-Dade County residents live below the poverty level. 13% of the population is un-employed and 30% are uninsured. Life for the majority of Miami-Dade County residents is a struggle to maintain working and middle class status and women fare significantly worse when they are single, and a growing number of women with children are.

Miami is also a fitting site for my research as there are large populations of girls of color. The 2010 census reports that 64% of the population of 2.5 million residents consists of Latinos and 18% are African American, making it unique among other regions in the U.S. in terms of racial and ethnic profile. Miami markets its large population of folks of color as exemplary of diversity, however, racial and ethnic groups are highly segregated in the county and children rarely attend school with students of different races, ethnicities, and classes. Engaging Miami as a research site allows for an analysis of comparative racialization that unpacks and demonstrates how Latina/o racialization is imbricated and understood against *and* through blackness in dynamic relation to

whiteness and Asian/American racial formations. In this, the dissertation advances the growing body of literature examining the social, cultural, and political implications of how populations of color are racialized and how they positions themselves in relation to one another in a contemporary neoliberal context that is hostile to immigration and pits minorities against each other in the struggle to obtain jobs and social “benefits” that are becoming ever more scarce (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Hong and Ferguson 2011; Ramos-Zayas 2012).

I mediate the case studies here through my lens as a Latina who has shared space with African American and black, non-Latina Caribbean girls for nine years through the community work of Women on the Rise! I have always been struck by how most of the girls I encountered through the program are black when the population of Latina girls in Miami is considerably larger. Paradoxically, given the ethnic makeup of the city, I had to make a concerted effort to recruit Latina young women for my focus group study. It seems that the racialization of black girls in the minority-majority city has situated them in communities that are more heavily policed, with increased state and non-profit intervention in the lives of residents. Most of the girls I worked with at the Miami-Dade Juvenile Detention Center were black with small contingents of Latina, Euro-American, and Asian/American girls. Having a Puerto Rican/Nuyorican mother and coming from New Jersey, I often feel like something of an outsider in Miami, despite the fact that my father is Cuban-American. My mother crafted her subjectivity in relation to the African Americans she grew up with in the Bronx, and in West New York my friends were Latin@, African American, Italian American, Indian, and Asian/American children.

The urgency of taking seriously a commitment to comparative racialization and examination of sartorial politics has come to the fore in the wake of the deadly shooting of African American teenage boy Trayvon Martin, a resident of Miami-Dade County, by a light-skinned Latino male in 2012 in central Florida. Although the boy was unarmed, the shooter claimed to have felt threatened by the youth, who was wearing a hooded

sweatshirt that night. The Latino media personality Geraldo Rivera drew outrage when he claimed on Fox News that Trayvon's donning of the hoody was partly to blame for his death, as it is associated with criminal youth of color. In discussing how he warns his son against donning apparel associated with deviancy, Rivera frames the sartorial decision to wear baggy pants and hooded sweatshirts by young men of color as invitations to be read as criminals³. This discourse demands that folks of color discipline their bodies, rather than challenge the racist scopical regime that frames their bodies as perilous.

When I was visiting a graduate course on community youth development as a guest speaker at the University of Miami in 2013, along with a panel of local community activists, Lionel Lightbourne, Outreach Coordinator of the Belafonte Tacolcy Center in Liberty City, linked the shooting of Trayvon Martin to the increased policing of black male bodies in Florida. Evidenced in an ordinance issued by Opa-Locka, a city in Miami-Dade County, which is now fining \$250.00 or requiring community service to those exposing their underwear under saggy pants in city parks and buildings. Opa-Locka officials have framed the law as helping improve the image of the low-income city in the neoliberal project of attracting business investment, and as protecting the community against obscenity⁴. Signs displaying the ordinance code in municipal spaces features a photograph of two adult African American males pictured from behind wearing baggy jeans revealing their boxer shorts, the intended public to be regulated under the law is clear.

The ethnic and racial population concentrations of the county are as follows; deep south Miami-Dade has a large African American and central American immigrant population, the southwest and central parts of the county are predominantly Latino with concentrated, isolated African American neighborhoods, and north Miami-Dade County has a higher population of African Americans, non-Latina/o Caribbean immigrants, and middle and upper class South American and ethnic Jewish populations. Miami's image

3 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/23/geraldo-rivera-trayvon-martin-hoodie_n_1375080.html

4 <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/12/21/3152705/opa-locka-cracking-down-on-saggy.html>

as a city in which people of color are the largest population and actively participate in political life has resulted in its denigration by politicians like 2008 presidential hopeful and Colorado Congressman Tom Tancredo, who caused a media sensation when he likened the city to a “banana republic.” The notion of Miami as quasi-un-“American” space within the nation suppresses the fact that such a city may eventually become the model of what a future “America” may in fact look like due to the growing populations of Latinos in the U.S.

The Politics of Style and Aesthetics

Dick Hebdige’s 1979 classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, examined the class and race politics that informed the development of the punk, rasta, skinhead, mod, and rude boy styles that emerged in post World War II England and stirred moral panic. Treating these styles as cultural formations and “maps of meaning” that declared racial and class difference at a time in which English society was drastically transforming due to the influx of black immigrants from countries such as Jamaica and a weak economy, *Subculture* paved the way for the study of youth style politics. Hebdige frames subcultural style as a form of refusal,

I would like to think that this Refusal is worth making, that these gestures have meaning, that the smiles and sneers have some subversive value, even if, in the final analysis, they are, like [Jean] Genet’s gangster pin-ups, just the darker side of a set of regulations, just so much graffiti on a prison wall. Even so, graffiti can make fascinating reading. They both draw attention to themselves. They are an expression both of impotence and a kind of power—the power to disfigure (3: emphasis in original).

Hebdige’s emphasis on the signification of difference through spectacular styles and the vicissitudes of power and powerlessness mapped on the body, remains relevant for the arguments on race and class I advance in this study. Cultural studies scholars Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, contemporaries of Hebdige, noted the absence of girls from the burgeoning cultural studies literature on subcultures in the late 1970s. In “Girls and

Subcultures” (1996), originally published in 1975, they drew attention to the different material and familial realities of girls, who were constrained by gender to remain in the home and frame their identities through practices of media and fashion consumption. McRobbie and Garber highlighted the ways in which girls negotiated their consumption practices to form bedroom cultures with friends in which they engaged in forms of fandom that articulated sexual subjectivities that deviated from the expectations of parental figures.

The women and girls of color I research in this study are viewed as disfiguring constructs of normative style by embodying sexual and aesthetic excess. Notions of such excess have a genealogy in the aesthetic philosophies of racist, colonialist, white European male cultural producers such as influential Viennese architect Adolf Loos, whose 1908 treatise on the role of style in modernism titled, “Ornament and Crime,” frames the indulgence in elaborate aesthetic practices as evidencing a deviant primitivism comparable to that of “negros.” Loos states,

Primitive man had to differentiate themselves by various colours, modern man wears his clothes as a mask. His individuality is so strong that it can no longer be expressed in terms of clothing. The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power. Modern man uses the ornament of past and foreign cultures at his discretion. His own inventions are concentrated on other things (Loos 1985, 103).

Those “other things” that preoccupied modern man were precisely those past and “foreign” cultures who he frames as providing the modern subject with the inconsequential and degenerate products of ornament.

French architect, tastemaker, and contemporary of Loos, Le Corbusier, disavowed aesthetic excess through articulating a connection between adornment and practices of girlhood consumption that were just emerging in the early 20th century. This is noted by film scholar Rosalind Galt in her book *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (2011), where she notes,

Le Corbusier also abhorred glitter, posing aesthetic purity against the fashionable

patterns beloved of shopgirls. Here, pretty denotes rejection of a popular visual culture, pitting the modernity of true art against the debased modern commodities enjoyed by a feminized and marginalized mass audience (66).

In *Pretty* Galt challenges the established notion in film theory that “truly” political cinema is legitimately articulated through simple, austere styles. Galt works to demonstrate how these aesthetic valuations stem from racist and sexist modernist logics and argues that pretty, ornate imagery can serve to communicate anti-establishment and queer meanings. In *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* literary theorist Anne Anlin Cheng, in discussing the legacy of Loos, remarks,

This dream of undistracted surface will impact not only the development of modern architectural theory but also stylistic revolutions in the diverse fields of art, literature, fashion, commercial design, and technology. To this day, we uphold some of the most basic tenets of this ideal in the celebration of the ‘tasteful’ (in our language, clothing, and everyday objects) as the sleek, the understated, and the unadorned (2010, 25).

The racialized and gendered aesthetic discourse effects of Loos and Le Corbusier, which traveled to the U.S. through the institutional valuation of canonical Western art history and aesthetics, finds contemporary life in the negative assessments of the styles of poor and working class women and girls of color—whose raced girlhood situates them as the very antithesis of high style according to modernist discourse.

In *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (2003) sociologist Julie Bettie examines how the class identities of white and Mexican American young women in central California are constructed through clothing styles and subcultures in the high school context. My project builds on her work as she recognizes that girls utilize commodities creatively and that regardless of whether they intend it or not, their personal styles can “represent anti-bourgeois, antipatriarchal, or antiracist meanings... (44).” In a different geo-political context, gender scholars Linda Duits and Liesbet Van Zoonen have also offered interpretations of girls’ clothing styles as political or as “speech acts” in their 2006 article “Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European

Multicultural Society.” The authors discuss the moral panics that have circulated in Europe regarding the sexualization of girls who are being marketed revealing clothing and the growing number of Muslim young women donning headscarves. Duits and Van Zoonen point to how it is impossible for girls to achieve the ideal sexual subjectivity, as they are either too sexual (donning porno-chic) or too decent (donning headscarves). They argue that these dichotomous discourses both perform the work of regulating girls’ bodies and sexualities.

In a reply to Duits and van Zoonen by Rosalind C. Gill titled “Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and ‘Choice’ for Feminism”, published in 2007, she critiques what she finds to be too simplistic a notion of girls’ ability to make autonomous choices articulated in “Headscarves and Porno Chic.” Although I concur with Gill that it is critically important to attend to the various networks of power that constrain girls’ abilities to determine their actions, I reject the totalizing way in which she argues that neoliberal discourse dominates girls’ consumer desires, styling practices, and notions of self. Girls play various roles in framing the meanings of their sexualities and bodies.

Rosa Linda Fregoso’s “Re-Imagining Urban Identities in the Public Sphere, Cool Chuca Style,” (1999) locates oppositional politics in the styles of the young Chicana girls known as “cholas,” who wear dramatic make-up and clothing similar to those worn by young male Latinos in poor and working class communities. I draw from this work in my analyses of how girls of color whose mode of dress is framed as anathema to bourgeois norms has political effects through generating discourses that counter sexual policing and pressures to appear “less ethnic” in order to achieve a social respectability predicated on hegemonic constructs of “acceptable” behavior for girls (non-existent or bourgeois heterosexuality, demure self-representation, polite speech). Duits and Van Zoonen, Fregoso, and Bettie enable me to analyze how girls’ styles can be interpreted as political; however, they assume a heterosexual girl subject which invisibilizes queer girl

subject positions. In contradistinction to my project, these texts do not utilize the work of queer theory and sexuality studies to inform analysis. My analyses will be examining gender politics, but following Gayle Rubin (1993), and unlike these other studies, I privilege investigating the unique ways that norms of sexuality affect the lives of women and girls.

Sexual and Racial Politics in Girlhood Studies

This study utilizes feminist scholarship that explores the possibilities of girls' corporeal pleasures in contradistinction to texts such as the *American Psychological Association's 2007 Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do About It* (Levin and Kilbourne 2008) and *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (Durham 2008), which I suggest are promoting a moral panic about girls' sexuality by arguing that "toxic" representations of gender and sexuality in popular culture are causing sexual abuse and violence towards girls. These publications target similar media texts and market commodities such as Hip Hop music, particularly videos. This aspect of their critique of girls' sexualization is troubling in that it asserts a convention of normal/healthy sexuality as summarily European American and middle class.

Hip Hop and R&B music and videos are vilified for presenting "sexually degrading" role models for girls. Although at times targeting pop music in general, genres of music in which African Americans are the primary performers and audience are more frequently singled out in the works. For instance, in a list of five examples of sexually problematic lyrics compiled by the APA Task Force, three featured African American Hip Hop performers. In *So Sexy So Soon* the sexual innuendo conveyed by performers such as Elvis (referenced as a historical comparison) and Britney Spears is juxtaposed with the impropriety presented by black Hip Hop artists. The authors contrast Elvis' playful hip shaking to the sexually explicit lyrics of Ludacris, and Britney Spears, a performer known

for mobilizing sexuality as part of her act, is considered to be “...tame though, compared with Lil’Kim who sings ‘I’ll do it anywhere, anyhow/ I’m down for anything (Kilbourne 2008, 145).” When people of color assert erotic agency it does not assume the valence of empowerment in these texts. Neither pleasure nor power present possible alternatives for the sexual victimization of girls. Black modes of sexual expression occupy an untenable position in the rigid continuum of “normal” sexuality that undergirds their arguments.

Girls’ sexual pleasure is the subject of psychologist Sharon Lamb’s *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do—Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* (2001). In *The Secret Lives of Girls* Lamb conducts interviews with women about their sexual experiences during childhood and finds that many have internalized shame as a result of the pleasure they experienced engaging in sexual and aggressive play, as these are behaviors deemed unacceptable for “good girls.” Lamb’s aim is to problematize notions of “good” girlhood that limit the possibilities for girls to own their experiences of pleasure and righteous anger. I am particularly interested in Lamb’s critique of the “natural look” that is considered healthy for girls. She states,

The idea of a natural (or true) self actually is anything but natural and springs from stereotypes used to control girls’ behavior. Like the idea of modesty in the forties and fifties, “natural” is a term of control...But it’s even more complicated than that. Today we might assume, as many feminists do, that makeup and heels are a male invention to make women objects for their viewing, to make them ridiculous and powerless. Regardless, many girls see these items as having special power (41).

Middle and upper class white girls are the epitome of the “natural” look, a construct that is supported by its antithesis, the hyperfeminine, “artificial” excesses ascribed to black and Latina women and girls. I build upon Lamb’s work by further interrogating the value of the “natural look” and rigorously examining the “special powers” of make-up and clothing for girls and their sexual politics.

In *Pleasures and Perils: Girls’ Sexuality in a Caribbean Consumer Culture* (2009) anthropologist Debra Curtis investigates how processes of globalization and consumption

are shaping the sexual identities and practices of teenage girls in the Caribbean island of Nevis. Curtis examines how girls are exchanging sexual favors for commodity items such as cellular phones. While exploring the “perils” of girls’ relationships with older men for access to these items, she also foregrounds how “the coming-of-age process on Nevis provides girls with the opportunities to experience new forms of pleasure, to resist traditional structures of power, and to challenge dominant ideologies about sexuality (29).”

Like Curtis, African American studies scholar Tricia Rose examines the varied ways that girls shape their sexual identities and practices. Drawn from an analysis of the 1992 film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, which centers on an African American high school student grappling with the threat pregnancy poses to her promising future, Rose’s essay “Race, Class, and the Pleasure/Danger Dialectic: Rewriting Black Female Sexuality in the Popular Imagination” (1998) shows how discourses on the sexuality of girls of color tend to silence their experiences of agency and pleasure. By analyzing the reception of the film, which did not receive the widespread attention that films which narrate black girls’ sexual victimization such as *The Color Purple* (1985) and more recently, *Precious* (2009) have garnered, Rose argues that popular culture does not have an interest in recognizing the complex sexual subjectivities of girls of color.

Scholars working on the sexuality of girls of color overwhelmingly emerge from the field of psychology (this also holds true for the subfield of girls’ studies more generally). Texts such as the *Urban Girls* anthologies edited by psychologists Bonnie J. Leadbeater and Niobe Way (2007 and 1996) are unique for their focus on Latina and African American girls and for showing how they manage to be resilient despite their marginal positions in society, however, they do not focus on girls’ styles or sexual politics.

Literature on the sexuality of African American girls that has followed Rose’s “Race, Class, and the Pleasure/Danger Dialectic,” such as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s

Pimps Up, Hos Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women (2007) and Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Phillips "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts" (2003), center on the harms hip hop music and videos pose to their self-esteem through the proliferation of hypersexual female representations. Although this dissertation explores the ways that cultural forms such as hip hop proliferate models of corporeality that can reify norms of sexuality, gender, and race, it utilizes conceptual tools that more thoroughly unpack the complex politics of raced and hypersexual embodiments and representations.

Race, Beauty, Sexuality, and Representation

Sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig's work in the book *Aint I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, lays the groundwork for understanding why the topic of hip hop performer Nicki Minaj's body has spurred so much debate among the young women of color in my study and in wider popular culture. She shows how black women's bodies have served as carriers for shifting racial meanings and how black women have received competing messages from both hegemonic social discourse and black activist discourse concerning how to best craft their bodies. She states,

In the early calls for women to 'elevate the race,' in celebrations of Negro beauty queens, and in demands that black women restore dignity to the black race by remaining subordinate to men, black women were told by black leaders that their carriage, demeanor, appearance, and behavior embodied the dignity of the race (2002, 166).

Craig follows black beauty discourse from the late nineteenth century, through the black power and civil rights movements, to the late 1970s. Issues concerning black women's hairstyles and clothing choices have been loaded with political significance. Although there is no longer overtly radical or political discussion about black female body crafting in the contemporary moment as there was in the 60s and 70s, which revolved around

debates concerning natural versus straightened hair, for example, much discourse arises today when issues concerning black female embodiment reach the level of pop culture. Take for instance the media attention on the racial valences of Twitter comments criticizing African American gymnast Gabby Douglas for her “unkempt” hair⁵ during the 2012 London Olympics.

Although there is a history of devaluing black bodies and aesthetics in the U.S., the rhetoric of “natural” black beauty that emerged in the era of black radicalism was not, as Craig indicates, without its problematics. The ideals had reversed, and black women who appeared to be emulating whiteness through their bodies became subject to new forms of policing. Nicki Minaj’s body is a current icon that is mediating constructs of natural versus artificial beauty. Gendered and sexual meanings of race are being negotiated in the mainstream culture industry through her form.

The topic of fashioning the black female body is a vexed one. The meanings produced by this body, which we tend to think we “know” due both to stereotypical imaging and its critiques (Nash 2008; Cheng 2012), are over-determined by histories of abuse, sexual exploitation, and (hyper)sexual representation, which raises the stakes of debates concerning aesthetic politics. Feminist discourses about black female embodiment often revolve around notions of pop culture hypersexualization (Sharpley-Whiting 2007), acquiescence to Euro American beauty ideals, and alternative notions of more Afro-centric and “natural” representations and styling practices. Pop culture icons with highly sexualized personas and body presentations such as Nicki Minaj become subject to critiques concerning the replication of negative, stereotypical constructions of black women’s hypersexual identity.

Debates about the meanings of sexualized black female bodies in popular culture emerged in 2011 in response to the publication and critical reception of sociologist Shayne Lee’s book *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*

5 http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gabby-douglass-hair-sets-off-twitter-debate-but-some-ask-whats-the-fuss/2012/08/03/38548064-ddaf-11e1-9ff9-1dcd8858ad02_story.html

(2010). Lee aimed to conduct sex-positive analyses of contemporary cultural production by black women such as Janet Jackson and Beyoncé Knowles in order to show how they articulate a brand of feminism that provides modes for black women to enjoy the sexual freedom that has for so long been the privilege of men.

Critiquing the “politics of respectability,” that has saturated black feminist thought on the subject of black women’s sexuality and sexual embodiment, Lee calls for black female scholars to conduct work such as that of white scholars like Jane Gallup and Maria Elena Buszek, who read feminist valences in sexualized pop cultural texts, which he finds to be more complex. Although Lee notes the contributions of scholars such as Tricia Rose and Angela Davis in noting the ways in which cultural forms such as hip hop and the blues have been a means for black women to express their sexual subjectivities, he fails to cite the more recent work of black feminist scholars such as Mireille Miller-Young (2009) and Jennifer Nash (2008), whose work on pornography maps spaces through which black women and men craft hypersexual representations that exceed stereotypical constructs even as they variously acquiesce with them. Lee reserves erotic revolution for heterosexual black women, who are discussed in the bulk of his analysis, which rarely mentions black lesbian or queer sexual and cultural practices.

African American studies scholar Tamura A. Lomax opens her review⁶ of *Erotic Revolutionaries* published in *The Feminist Wire*, with disclosure concerning her hostile relationship with Lee, who she claims “ran her down” as a graduate student when she critiqued his book *T.D. Jakes: American’s New Preacher* (2005). Lomax shares how she received threatening text messages from him as she prepared to write her piece about his book on the feminist wire, as he was slated to publish a response piece. According to Lomax, the text message from Lee read,

I strongly suggest u read the book carefully to rewrite the review. My response will expose each and every hole. . . . It won’t be pretty, I can promise u that. It’s obvious no one taught u the format of good book review. I hope u learn it fast bc

6 http://thefeministwire.com/2011/04/erotic-or-thanatic-black-feminist-criticism-on-the-ropes/#_ftn12

my response will indicate your gross flaws (Ibid.).

Lee's policing of Lomax undermines his arguments concerning black female empowerment. Yet, Lomax's negative assessments of *Erotic Revolutionaries*, many of which I share, ultimately fall back upon notions of the overarching danger that attends black female sexual embodiment and performance, she states,

...the sexual liberalism of everyday black women and girls, dissimilar to Lee's "erotic revolutionaries," is often (mis)read as "ho-ing." Further, most lack the benefit of having someone guard their bodies, or safeguard their space, integrity, and humanity, either materially or symbolically. What Lee is touting as sexual power and agency is mock power, an illusion of power and choice, both of which function within history and context (Ibid.).

Although I agree that considerable power is afforded to wealthy black performers like Nicki Minaj who indulge in sexual representation in contrast with the less glamorous existences of poor and working class black women in the sex industry, ho-ing is framed by Lomax as the product of a misreading. This rhetoric traffics in the moral panic surrounding sex work and frames the "ho" as a stigmatized identity.

A similar reinstating of respectability attended the Crunk Feminist Collective's response to the debate between Lee and Lomax⁷, which rightly takes him to task for his grossly unprofessional behavior, and for the lack of rigor of the *Erotic Revolutionaries* text as a whole. In, "Shayne Lee Your Revolution Will Not Happen Between These Thighs: An Open Letter," the writers of the online forum for hip hop generation feminists of color note how rather than show how racist constructions of sexuality limit the expression of sexual subjectivity for black women, Lee levels his attack primarily at black female scholars who he frames as retrograde in comparison with white women scholars' pro-sex attitudes and work. They assert,

We don't need more attacks about our sexual "dysfunction." We need allies, fellow scholars who are especially sensitive to the ways that white supremacy

7 <http://crunkfeministcollective.wordpress.com/2011/04/19/shayne-lee-your-revolution-will-not-happen-between-these-thighs/>

and male supremacy make the pro-sex framework advanced by white women an always difficult space for Black women to enter and inhabit (Ibid.).

But will it always be difficult? And who are they speaking for? Although sex-positivity is a fraught discourse for women of color to engage, the work of scholars such as Nash and Miller-Young, and initiatives such as “The Black Sexual Economies Project” at Washington University in St. Louis, spearheaded by scholars of color who conduct sex-positive work, is shifting the terms of debates on black female sexuality.

The theoretical bridge between the dissertation’s empirical research on girls and cultural analysis of the work by women artists stems from my utilization of literature on race and hypersexuality to understand and articulate the politics of their sexualized embodiments. Myra Mendible’s edited volume *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (2007) and Magdalena Barrera’s anthologized essay “Hottentot 2000: Jennifer Lopez and Her Butt” (2002) focus on images of the sexualized Latina body. Mendible and Barrera, in addition to Sharpley-Whiting, Stephens, and Phillips, point to how representations of women of color reify stereotypical notions of their hypersexuality. In diverging from these approaches, *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* engages what film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu terms the “productive performance of perversity.” In her book *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (2007), which examines representations of Asian/American women in pornography, independent/mass-market films, and theater, Shimizu argues,

Productive perversity involves identifying with “bad” images, or working to establish a different identity along with established sexual images so as to expand racial agendas beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization. To engage hypersexuality as a politically productive perversity pays attention to the formulations of sexual and racial identity that critique normative scripts for sexually and racially marginalized subjects (21).

Through engaging with Shimizu’s work the dissertation conducts multivalent readings of sexual and racial meaning production.

What are the productive perversities of black lesbian sexuality? In “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” (1994) Evelyn Hammonds observes,

Black feminist theorizing about black female sexuality, with few exceptions—Cherly Clarke, Jewelle Gomez, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde—has been relentlessly focused on heterosexuality. The historical narrative that dominates discussion of black female sexuality does not address even the possibility of black lesbian sexuality, or of a lesbian or queer subject (136.)

The omissions of the historical narrative Hammond refers to is rather paradoxical given the inscription of black female sexuality *as* lesbian in 19th century medical discourse. In “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality” (1985), Sander Gilman describes how images of Hottentot female genitalia were framed as evidencing biological anomalies that caused for their sex organs to be erroneously developed. Gilman writes, “The author, H. Hildebrandt, links this malformation with the overdevelopment of the clitoris, which he sees as leading to those ‘excesses’ which are called ‘lesbian love.’ The concupiscence of the black is thus associated with the sexuality of the lesbian (89).” It is surprising that there has been little interrogation of the theoretical and political ramifications of this passing discussion by Gilman by scholars working in critical race, ethnic, gender, and sexuality/queer studies.

Sharon Patricia Holland contends that the absence of black female queer female sexualities in queer theorizing stem from a notion of black female subjectivity as fixed in history, and black queer sexuality as exogenous. In *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) she notes that despite the growing body of queer of color critique that purports to draw from the insights of women of color feminists such as Audre Lorde,

By this time in the theoretical game, feminism has solidified as a project that should be superseded, which gives it the status of a relic and simultaneously excises the very contributions of women of color to the production of a very diverse feminist discourse that queer of color critique is poised to commit itself to. The difficulty lies in this deployment of black.female.queer as an entity whose historical underpinnings necessitate a situation in were S.H.E. (Singular. Historical. Exogenous) is functionally illiterate, where S.H.E. can be forgotten, and where her intellectual contributions matter insofar as they awaken the senses

to past politico-knowledge formation in which S.H.E can be readily contained (78).

My work on the sexual subjectivities of young black, masculine body presenting lesbians hopes to address what Hammonds states is the need for “rigorous cultural criticism detailing how power is deployed through issues like sexuality and the alternative forms that even an oppressed subject’s power can take (Ibid. 140).”

In “Theorizing Black Lesbians within Black Feminism: A Critique of Same-Race Street Harassment” Hawley G. Fogg-Davis (2006) argues that black feminist theory has not adequately addressed the black lesbian community and analyzes the discourse surrounding the murder of Sakia Gunn, a young black masculine body presenting lesbian, to theorize the role of street harassment of black women by black males as a product and tool of black male domination. Fogg-Davis calls on black feminist theorists to address individual forms of street harassment and understand the wider social role harassment plays in the maintenance of heterosexist culture. Her theoretical intervention in the article is important, however, she frames Gunn’s murder in the context of black lesbianism, and does not engage in questions regarding how Sakia’s masculinity in particular marked her for street harassment on the morning she was murdered.

Framing Masculinities

R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities* draws on feminist theory, social theory, and interviews with Australian men to examine the emergence and social impacts of masculinities in the contemporary West. Connell argues that masculinity has been understood as a natural, unitary gender presentation and works to challenge this conventional view by demonstrating the existence of multiple masculinities and the relationships of “alliance, dominance, and subordination” between them (Connell 2005, 37). Connell interrogates the politics of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities, and utilizes the example of European colonialism to describe how certain masculinities, such

as that of black males, are positioned as threatening and deviant. However, he does not conduct a substantive analysis of race in his study beyond a mention of colonialism. In conceptualizing masculinity, Connell writes,

‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture (Ibid. 71).

This understanding is useful for guiding research that attends to the complexities of masculinities. However, despite Connell’s attempts to socially, culturally, and historically situate masculinity in order to de-natural and theorize it, his exclusive focus on interviews with men in his study indicate an underlying assumption in his work that masculinity is only embodied by biological males.

In Judith Halberstam’s 1998 book *Female Masculinity* she challenges the notion of masculinity as the product and gender presentation of exclusively male bodies. Halberstam discusses how masculinity has been framed as a more natural, genuine form of gender presentation that resists imitation, in contrast to notions of the inherent performativity and fakery of femininity. She claims that women have made their own contributions to modern masculinity and recognizes female masculinity as a multiplicity of masculinities that go beyond the logics of female same sex desire. Halberstam supports her claim about women’s contribution to modern masculinities by analyzing representations of masculine women in film, performance, and literature. She notes that masculinity comes under higher scrutiny when it leaves the white male middle class body and analyzes the portrayal of the black butch lesbian Cleo in the film *Set It Off*, which is played by actress and hip hop musician Queen Latifah. Halberstam notes the varying gender politics that race plays in the articulation and dominant valuation of black masculinity, but, like Connell, race is not a sustained focus of her study. The chapters on black girl masculinities in *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* will draw on the insights of scholars such as Mignon Moore and Kara Keeling, who interrogate the role race plays in

the sexual subjectivities and representations of queer black women.

In *Dude You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (2007) sociologist C.J. Pascoe examines how a singular masculinity is defined, embodied, performed, and policed by students in a suburban California high school. The text is unique in its integration of queer theory, feminist theory, and sociological work on masculinities. Pascoe argues that in the high school where she conducted her field work, masculinity constitutes a form of dominance that is often expressed through sexualized discourses. She discovered that a significant aspect of attaining a masculine identity for the young men in her study entailed the repudiation of the label “fag,” which symbolizes a kind of “failed” masculinity. Pascoe writes, “Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions of girls’ bodies and their own sexual experiences (2007, 5).” Although most of the book centers on examining how boys negotiate the “fag” discourse of masculinity, she also investigates how masculinity is embodied and claimed by girls at the school.

Pascoe found that although some female athletes at the school identified as lesbian and donned masculine styles, they often drew on and reinforced boy’s performances of masculinity by engaging in aggressive play and sexually harassing other girls. Pascoe argues that this conduct made it possible for them to garner popularity due to their association with athleticism and the fact that many boys and girls found them physically attractive and cool. In contrast, the queer girls who participated in the gay-straight alliance at the school did not garner any popularity due to the masculinities they performed, and were subject to policing in the school due to their activist work towards addressing homophobia there. Pascoe’s work provides significant insights into the multiple approaches girls take to performing masculinity and to the way these performances are celebrated or denigrated in the high school context.

The Power of Sexual Aesthetics attends to aspects of young women’s

embodiments of masculinity that Pascoe leaves unexplored by doing more in-depth investigation of how race shapes the manner in which their embodiments are crafted and perceived, talking to young women about how their masculine styles emerged and how they affect their sexual and family lives, giving detailed attention to the particular looks they put together, which convey a range of un-examined social meanings, and by situating their masculine embodiments within the wider context of representations of black female gender non-conformity in visual culture and arts. This dissertation builds upon and advances the work of the scholars cited above by including the perspectives of black young women in my investigation of masculinity, by investigating how race, gender, and sexuality informs their everyday practices of body crafting, and by combining my ethnographic observations with analysis of black female masculinity in artistic production.

Race and Sexuality in the Visual Field

The manner in which race informs the reception of contemporary art is examined in art historian Darby English's book *How to See a Work of Art In Total Darkness* (2007), where he states,

The work of black artists for whom questions of culture are a subject but visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end obligates us to displace race from its central location in our interpretations of this work. More, it recommends a turn toward the subjective demands that artists place on the multiple categories they occupy, and that we grant this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies (12).

English works to uncover the analytical blind spots that result from the habitual focus on race and identity politics in the work of black visual artists. I further English's project by applying sexuality studies and class analysis to the interpretation of work by artists of color and by centering on the work of women, as Kara Walker is the one female artist in his study that features the work of Glenn Ligon, William Pope L., and Fred Wilson.

The field of art history has been gradually integrating insights from queer theory

and sexuality studies. Visual culture scholar Jennifer Doyle's *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (2006) is a notable contribution. Moving beyond identity-based art historical work that explores how works of art reveal the "repressed" or avowed queerness of their authors, *Sex Objects* explores how sexual norms police the boundaries between art and pornography and shape the very conditions of possibility for art production and critical reception. What follows is an example of her argument about how sexual norms have affected the reception of Andy Warhol's work,

The use of figures of prostitution as allegories for the artist's relationship to the market taps into the anxiety provoked by the idea of using the body as a "means," in order to manage the paradoxical nature of the work of art (in the conflict, for instance, between the notion of the autonomy of art and its commodification). The emphasis on sex within this rhetoric may be thought of as an effect of the repressive hypothesis insofar as it ascribes to sexuality the value of a foundational, revelatory truth. The rhetoric of prostitution in criticism is an extension of this overdetermination of sex into how we understand art as a category because, as we see in reading Warhol's critics (and as was anticipated by Eakins's detractors), it inevitably suggests sexual deviancy as the generative source of "bad" art (xxiv: emphasis in original).

Thus Doyle shows how what counts as "art" and "good" art partly relies upon normative sexual values that are then applied to objects and expressive practices. However, Doyle's analysis remains within the realm of artistic normativity, as all of the work she engages with, such as the paintings of Thomas Eakins and drawings of Tracey Emin, have been created and received as "art," even when negatively critiqued. I want to push Doyle's work further by queering the boundaries between vernacular and artistic practices. This dissertation expands upon *Sex Objects* by paying close attention to how race organizes sexual norms.

Chapter Overview

My opening chapter, "Miss You Look Like a Bratz Doll": On Latina Chonga Girls and Sexual Aesthetic Excess," centers on the politics that attend the hyperfeminine embodiments of the Latina girls that are pejoratively labeled chongas in Latina/o

communities due to their conspicuous style of dress. I analyze chonga discourse in the context of the ethnic, race, and class politics of Miami, which has a largely white-identifying, conservative-leaning Latino population. The chapter analyzes in particular works such as the YouTube video *Chongalicious*, which has over six million views, and other representations of chongas to theorize how constructions of Latina sexuality, race, and class are being negotiated through their hypervisible bodies. The chonga body is subject to mockery and shaming in contemporary U.S. discourse for signifying ethnic, race, class, and sexual difference in a neoliberal context. I claim that the sexual-aesthetic excess of chonga style signifies an identity politics that undermines the sexual policing of Latina girls' bodies.

Chapters two and three, "Style Blues," draw from my conversations with the young women of color at Pridelines, a non-profit organization that serves queer youth, during Women on the Rise! classes and focus group discussions held in 2011 and 2013. I blend ethnographic and cultural analysis in my examination of how these young women embody, theorize, and judge masculine styles. I also discuss the work of black lesbian cultural producers Yo Majesty, Zanele Muholi, and Kin4Life, and interpret how they are received among the Pridelines participants. I discuss how these young women frame their masculine styles as affording them modes of attracting sexual partners, expressing subjectivity they framed as "ego," and performing purchasing power.

Style Blues is followed by two chapters that center on the work and imaging of popular mainstream hip hop performer Nicki Minaj. While chonga styles and woman of color masculinity come under fire for signifying class through aesthetics of racialized sexual difference, I find that the body of Nicki Minaj, which is freighted with signifiers of sex, wealth, hyperfemininity, and race performativity, is subject to both admiration and derision due to paradoxical valuations and critiques of neoliberal capitalism among critics. She is framed as either a semi-feminist exemplar of entrepreneurship and perseverance against sizeable odds, or as an opportunist willing to subject her body to

modification in order to become a marketable product. The Barbie doll fashion cited by Minaj in crafting her style is framed by those who negatively judge her as exemplifying her lack of substance and status as a sell-out.

I contend that although Minaj overtly cites and embodies black aesthetics and hypersexuality, her mobilization of the Barbie icon, like the doll itself, obfuscates the difference and deviance that is habitually associated with sexualized, raced bodies, thus making her body a flexible image that circulates *both* heteronormative/neoliberal *and* feminist/antiracist/queer meanings in the arena of pop culture. Through the unique appropriation of race, or racelessness, that she performs, Nick Minaj generates status and wealth in the culture industry through embodying sexual aesthetics that would likely be subject to mockery and policing if embodied by women or girls in everyday contexts. I locate non-normative politics in the images and sounds circulated through Minaj, which I suggest express women of color subjectivities as contingent and varying, and women of color sexualities as significantly self-determining.

The final chapter, “Critical Excesses: Artists and Girls Crafting Grotesque Bodies,” conducts a comparative analysis of the work of visual artists Wangechi Mutu, Candice Bretiz, Shoshanna Weinberger, Rachel Lachowicz, and Heather Benjamin. I discuss how these artists draw upon and hyperbolize pornographic imagery to trouble normative conceptions of female sexuality, and raced hypersexuality in particular. I also describe how the engagement of girls of color with the work of Weinberger through *Women on the Rise!* resulted in expressions of sexual shame, critiques of racism and heteronormative male visuality, and affirmations of black female sexual embodiment.

CHAPTER 1

“Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll”: On Latina Chonga Girls and Sexual-Aesthetic Excess

I was wearing tight black leggings under a fitted olive green sweater dress with a “v” neckline. My shoes were vintage style bone white peep-toe heels. Half of my hair was streaked with chunky blonde highlights at the time and it was flat-ironed straight. I had thick black eyeliner on and brick red lipstick. This was how I was dressed on the day a student told me, “Miss, you look like a Bratz doll”. My initial response to the comment was that of everyone else in the room, laughter, and I enjoyed following the girls’ jovial, yet intense debate over whether this was an accurate description. However, I found myself thinking about this characterization of me later that evening. Was it a joke? Do I really look like one of those tacky dolls? She must have been kidding...

I was teaching a Women on the Rise! art workshop with girls at the Miami-Dade County Regional Juvenile Detention Center along with the GisMo artist collective that day. As an art teacher, I felt my style reflected my eclectic tastes. I did not associate myself with the “type” of woman who would look like a Bratz doll, the multi-racial, mass-marketed dolls for young girls who wear heavy make-up and miniskirts. Why was I interpellated as such? Why was this comparison so objectionable to me? As a girl of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent raised in the Latin@¹ enclaves of West New York, New Jersey and Miami, Florida I “knew” what Bratz-type women looked like. They *didn’t* look like me. I came from a middle-class family, attended a private Catholic elementary school, and was college educated. *They*, on the other hand, were girls who hung out on the street, didn’t do well in school, and dressed in clothes that were cheap and too revealing.

The self-evaluation sparked by the student’s description of me, which she qualified through my make-up, heels, form-fitting clothes, and highlighted hair, prompted

¹ My use of “Latin@” is an abbreviation of Latina/o, and has been used in scholarly work in Latin@ studies.

me to examine my unacknowledged biases toward the Latina women my mother trained me *not* to emulate. Many of the girls I worked with in the detention center and other institutions such as drug rehabilitation centers could be perceived as exemplifying this “bad” subjectivity, yet I found that these stereotypes did not speak to their intelligence, complexity, and creative negotiation of a culture in which they are marginalized by gender, race, class, and ethnicity. I also learned of my own social proximity to them via appearance. If the girls think I look like a Bratz doll, who is to say the men who have harassed me as I’ve walked along the streets of Miami, or the older women who looked at me disdainfully when I was a pregnant nineteen year-old, haven’t viewed me in the same way? Other than perhaps my thick-rimmed glasses, does anything separate me from such women as my body navigates social spaces? My work on chonga girls stems from consideration of these questions.

My “Bratz doll” conversation with the girls took place while a discourse on “chongas” was beginning to circulate in 2007 in the local print, broadcast, and Web media in Miami, Florida. Chongas have been compared to Bratz dolls because of their style of dress and dramatic application of make up. A major mass-market film based on Bratz was also released in 2007, which likely fed the rhetoric linking the two. Often described by Latin@s in South Florida as a low-class, slutty, tough, and crass young woman, the hypervisible figure disparagingly labeled as a “chonga” is practically invisible in sexuality studies, ethnic studies, media studies, and feminist scholarship. Representations of chonga girls such as the widely viewed YouTube video *Chongalicious* mock young Latina women who don tight clothing, heavy lip liner, and large gold hoop earrings. In this chapter I examine the sexual powers and politics of chonga embodiments in addition to visual representations of chongas across media such as contemporary art, YouTube, and print/broadcast outlets. How do the varying forms of production, circulation, and reception that attend these media produce and reflect discourses about Latina girls’ sexuality? How does chonga style racialize Latina girl bodies? In what ways has the

chonga come to signify and embody tropes regarding Latina girls' hypersexuality? What power dynamics are conducted by the chonga body?

I claim that the non-normative sexual-aesthetic excesses of chonga styles signify an identity politics that undermines the sexual policing of girls' bodies and conveys indifference toward portraying an assimilated white bourgeois subjectivity. Chonga bodies signal class disparity in a culture that masks its structural workings. This is the power of hypersexual and hyperfeminine chonga embodiments. Akin to a camp Butlerian (1990) parody, the chonga girl's de-naturalized visibility is a citation of gender, class, and racial/ethnic signifiers, from her faux-gold jewelry, gelled-straight hair, and synthetic nails to the imitation designer clothes she buys at the flea market. I find that the chonga body is subject to mockery and shaming in public discourse precisely for signifying difference in a contemporary neoliberal context that interpellates Latin@s through post-race, neoliberal mobility discourse.

In her book *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race*, anthropologist Arlene Dávila shows how the mobility discourse regarding Latin@s' growing entry into the middle class through hard work and conservative values have been articulated against contrasting tropes concerning the perils Latin@s pose to the nation via immigration and strain on social services. She states,

Something about the immigrant lifestyle renews America in positive terms, while pundits and scholars tell us that Latinos are the solution to America's racial problems. That almost half of all Latinos identified themselves as white in the last census was considered a sign of their mainstreaming; just as the fact that 43 percent rejected traditional racial categories, checking "some other race," was taken as proof that they are at the crux of transforming the meaning of race itself. Put briefly, next to any news about Latinos' ill effect on society, one is likely to find another news story or research brief telling us that there is something about Latinos we can all learn or profit from (2008, 2).

Dávila's analyses of media rhetoric demonstrates that these two seemingly opposed discourses work to fashion Latin@ subjects as faithful consumers and voting blocs on both the left and the right.

The 2010 census occasioned a different approach to measuring the Latin@ population, as it disaggregated questions regarding “Hispanic origin” and race. According to the 2010 Census Brief “The Hispanic Population²,” “Hispanic” or “Latino” refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. Therefore, the 2010 census prompted individuals to identify with a racial category subsequent to reporting Hispanic/Latin@ origin. The racial categories provided were white, black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander, some other race, and two or more races. Echoing the 2000 census data that Dávila cites in the quote above, the majority of Latin@s identified as white (53 %) or some other race (37%) in 2010. More than half of the total population growth in the U.S. between 2000 and 2010 was due to the increased Latin@ population. Of significance to my study of chonga discourse in Miami, where Cuban and South Americans have established political and economic power, the groups who most identified as *only* white in the 2010 census were of Cuban and South American origin.

Dávila’s *Latino Spin*, published in 2008, anticipated the high pitch of political discourse on reaching out to Latin@s after the re-election of President Barack Obama in 2012, which spurred endless commentary on what their political influence means for the future of the Republican Party, and the nation. If the politics of race for Latin@s is obscured through emphasis on physical markers, traditions, and practices that are said to be inline with “American values,” such as whiteness, hard work, and close family ties, the attention that chonga girl bodies attract through their sartorial styles become social liabilities, or bad “public images,” as it were, as their bodies deviantly signal race, class, and sexual difference. As postcolonial theorist Rey Chow argues in her essay “The Politics of Admittance: Female Sexual Agency, Miscegenation, and the Formation of Community in Frantz Fanon,” the sexualized woman of color is posed as a threat to the formation of ethnic community due her potential to reproduce and produce new forms

2 <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>

of impure, miscegenated social relations. Examining the politics of chonga bodies is especially timely given the recent spotlight on Latin@s that raise the stakes of social visibility and invisibility.

While I contend that chonga styles are a counter-cultural means of expressing difference in neoliberal society, I also understand that these culturally devalued styles potentially reify tropes regarding Latina women's sexual excess and volatile behavior. However, my project in this dissertation is to shift critical discourse from stereotype critique and exaltation of "positive" images to more complex forms of reading that attend to the politics of how images of racialized sexual subjects are produced, circulated, and received, both by themselves and others. Engaging sexual-aesthetic excess means rejecting established aesthetic hierarchies in favor of multivalent interpretations of styles, bodies, and creative processes in both quotidian and artist contexts.

I offer sexual-aesthetic excess as a concept in order to theorize modes of dress and comportment that are often considered "too much": too ethnic, too sexy, too young, too cheap, too loud. My feminist, antiracist, and sex-positive reading of chonga bodies differs substantially from hegemonic meanings that circulate about them. For many Latin@s, the sexual-aesthetic excess of chongaesque styles merely conform to the worst stereotypes of young Latina identity as poor, ignorant, and hypersexual, and make girls targets for mockery and intervention. However, my aim in this work is to probe the manner in which Latina bodies are policed, and how they sometimes trouble regulation.

Rather than ask girls to conform to established aesthetic standards to better their social opportunities and cultural representations, we need to generate critical discourse about engaging these girls on their own terms and recognizing the contribution their embodiments offer to feminist, antiracist, and queer politics, a strategy that Cathy Cohen calls for in her landmark essay "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1997). My analysis is indebted to the work of Cohen and scholars such as Dick Hebdige (1979) and Julie Bettie, who in her study *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*, examines

the “symbolic economy of style” that structures performances of class among Mexican-American and white teenage girls in California. I argue that dominant readings of chonga style racialize their Latin@ bodies through a rhetoric of aesthetic and sexual excess, however, this racial marking only constitutes part of the “trouble” that negative rhetorics concerning the chonga body strive to manage. I stress that *styles indicate ways of life*, and that beyond a racial coding that is undesirable in contemporary discourses about Latin@ mainstreaming, chonga style more acutely signifies a classed way of life, a life of poverty or working class existence. The class performance of chongas complicate notions of attainable class mobility, resulting in their disavowal through tropes of bad taste, hypersexuality, and race. As Bettie notes,

Because of the various and many displacements of class in everyday talk, it would be wrong to conclude that class meanings are absent for people if the common-sense categories of cultural difference they use are not named as *class*. But the lack of an available public discourse on class makes it difficult to “think class,” to put a label on this difference (2003, 49: emphasis in original).

This dissertation strives to locate and think class through investigation of sexual styles.

Methods

My arguments in this chapter are based on a questionnaire regarding chongas that I administered to South Florida residents in 2008, focus groups conducted with young women in Miami, Florida in 2012, and interrogation of visual representations. The questionnaire and focus group responses illustrate the meanings associated with the chonga identity and reflect the discursive field in which images of these young women circulate in South Florida. The chonga images and research participant responses inform each other, as there is a recursive relationship between social discourse and visual production. This transdisciplinary methodology aims to provide a context for situating the chonga figure that is just emerging in scholarship.

I take an expansive approach to selecting the images under consideration here,

as I examine visual media that mobilize the term “chonga” in addition to works that do not, yet whose subjects “fit” the discursive framework of the figure via sartorial style. I conduct visual analyses of the widely-viewed You Tube video *Chongalscious*, artist Luis Gisbert’s *Cheerleaders* photographs, artist Nikki S. Lee’s series of photographs titled *The Hispanic Project*, the video work *Off the Chain* by artist Crystal Pearl, and the GisMo artist collective’s multi-media installation “*Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll.*” I also engage with colonial representations of racialized women in Cuba as I trace the genealogy of chonga embodiment in visual culture. There is no explicit connection or relationship among these visual works, other than their portrayals of “chonga-esque” young women. These images present distinct instances of representation with dissimilar audiences and producers. Interrogating these disparate projects demonstrates how the production, circulation, and reception of chonga images have varying politics, despite the fact that the chonga body has become a stable, stock image.

I find that unlike most images of chongas that depict them as caricatures, the manner in which Latina artists GisMo and Crystal Pearl depict girls who look like chongas in their work problematizes dominant stereotypes about girls of color *and* hegemonic constructions of healthy girlhood as white, middle class, and sexually modest. By “dominant stereotypes,” I am referring to discourses about the gang-activity, academic failure, low self-esteem, and early pregnancy/hypersexuality of Latina young women found in mainstream media in addition to race, gender, and class biases articulated by elites in multiple ethnic groups, including Latin@s.

GisMo and Pearl, who identified as chongas as adolescents, craft bodies that creatively document and aesthetically value the style practices and subjectivities of Latina women and girls who often occupy the position of improper subjects through their over-the-top bodies and behaviors. By comparing their work to that of artists Nikki S. Lee and Luis Gisbert, who flatly appropriate chonga-esque styles, we find that the more simplistic approach to crafting images of chonga girls result in more career success for

the producers of the image. Luis Gispert and Nikki S. Lee have international reputations and success in the art world, and their images of chonga girls have been used to market their practice, where GisMo and Crystal Pearl are still emerging and do not have similar name recognition. Caricaturing the Latina body can be a lucrative enterprise. In what follows I interrogate these visual politics in greater detail.

Excessive Presence: Latina Bodies in Visual Culture

The images of chongas and chonga-esque young women I discuss in what follows stem from historical representations of Latina bodies in the United States and those produced in 19th century colonial contexts, such as images of sexualized “mulattas” that circulated in pre-independence Cuba, which I discuss in another section of the chapter. Latin@ cultural and communications studies scholars have demonstrated how representations of Latinas structure social relations in the United States by fashioning an exotic, “tropicalized” other in response to ongoing panic over Latina reproduction and immigration (Aparicio and Chavez-Silverman 1997; Mendible 2007; Gutierrez 2008). A contemporary example of this trope is the loud, sexy housewife Colombian actress Sofia Vergara plays in the hit network television show *Modern Family*. Most literature analyzes images of Latina celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Salma Hayek. This dissertation advances scholarship on representations of Latina bodies by analyzing the vernacular figure of the chonga, who is not represented by a famous actress or music performer. The chonga figure warrants examination as it is an emerging “icon” that is producing and circulating discourses about Latina young women (Molina Guzman and Valdivia 2004).

Communications scholar Isabel Molina Guzman has shown how Latinas have often been portrayed as “disorderly bodies” that are emotionally and sexually excessive. In “Disorderly Bodies and Discourses of Latinidad in the Elian Gonzalez Story” she describes the “visual excess” that marked the news coverage of Marisleydis Gonzalez, the aunt of Elian Gonzalez, a young Cuban boy who was at the center of a high profile

immigration and custody case in 2000. Molina Guzman notes how the “excesses” the media focused on, such as Marisleyxis’ public crying, long acrylic finger nails, and form-fitting clothes marked her as a brown, unlawful body that did not fit the framework of a “proper” U.S. subject. The mobilization of Marisleyxis’ excessive body discursively unraveled the privileged, model minority status of Cuban Americans and framed them as “bad”, disorderly subjects due to the impassioned demonstrations they held on the streets of Miami following the decision to return Elian to Cuba.

The hyperbolic, stereotypical representations of Latinas as emotionally, sexually, and stylistically excessive often found in visual culture are measured against an imagined white, middle class, construct of U.S. citizenship. Latina bodies and subjectivities are read as out of control and used against the communities they represent. Many efforts to counter these stereotypes in Latin@ communities by practices such as aesthetically altering one’s body to appear more Euro-American or distancing oneself from more recent immigrants, often signify the internalization of technologies of discipline that center on policing women’s bodies (Foucault 1977). Are Latina women hoping to embody the “normal” so that they are not associated with those “other” bodies of excess, as I was hoping not to *really* look like a Bratz doll?

The scholarship of feminist filmmaker and scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu (2007) has done important work towards addressing the discourse of “bad images” that saturates discussions of racialized hypersexuality. In her book, *The Hypersexuality of Race* she states, “To panic about being identified within perversity can too easily lead us to strive toward self-restricting normalcy or the impossible constraints of sexual purity” (5). Constructs of sexual purity and respectability can in fact prove to be more dangerous than sexual inscription in visual culture. As sociologist Lorena Garcia points out in her book *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity* (2012), discourses of sexual purity, and Latina girls’ attempts to distance themselves from other girls viewed as hypersexual, or slutty, often hinder them from addressing issues of

contraception and safe sex practices with their partners.

I focus on the *sexual-aesthetic excess* that marks the heavily adorned chonga body and propose that we read them as potentially indexing ethnic identity politics, confidence despite marginalization, and non-normative sexual self-presentation. Young Latina bodies are currently being marketed by the culture industry that is driven to profit from the growing population of Latin@s in the United States. Media scholar Angharad N. Valdivia demonstrates the imperative to examine representations of young Latina girls when she points out, “Three elements—census data, a Latina/o cultural boom, and the gendered tweening of popular culture—coalesce to redirect our attention to the location of Latina girls in popular culture (2011, 94).”

Chongalicious Definition

Chola
Chusma
Chocha
Chula
Chonga

These Spanish terms, some emerging in the United States among Latin@s, index female sexuality. Roughly translated, in order, they denote a street girl (“homegirl”), loud/gossipy/lower-class woman, vagina (or “pussy”), “cute chick”, and slut/thug girl. Their lexical similarities point to gender and class inscriptions that are articulated and reproduced through everyday speech in Latin@ communities. Such terms interpellate specifically marked bodies in primarily urban locations (Miami, New York, Los Angeles). To employ the Althusserian (1971) term, women whose dress and behavior are interpreted as sexual and low/working class, are *hailed*, literally (in everyday social interaction, e.g. “Oye/Hey mami!”) and discursively, as representative of these marginalized or “bad” subjectivities.

Performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz has described the chusma identity as

antithetical to “standards of bourgeois comportment” (1999, 182).

Chusmeria is, to a large degree, linked to a stigmatized class identity. Within Cuban culture, for instance, being called *chusma* might be technique for the middle class to distance itself from the working class; it may be a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black; it sometimes connotes gender nonconformity. In the United States, the epithet *chusma* also connotes recent immigration and a general lack of “Americanness,” as well as excessive nationalism—that one is somewhat over the top about her Cubanness. The sexuality of individuals described as *chusmas* is also implicated. The prototypical *chusma*’s sexuality is deemed excessive and flagrant—again, subverting conventions. (Ibid: emphasis in original)

The chonga, a more recent term that appears to have stemmed from the Cuban-American community, is in many ways a younger version of the chusma, or the chusma-as-teenager.

The chonga finds a Chicana counterpart in the chola (“homegirl”). The stock representation of cholas is similar to that of chongas. Their style is marked by intricate, styling product sculpted hairdos, dark eye and lip liner, and large gold hoop earrings. The clothing style of cholas differs from that of chongas in that it often entails wearing baggy clothing items such as loose fitting flannel shirts and jeans, as it is inspired by the dress of young Chicano men. In her essay, “Re-Imagining Chicana Urban Identities in the Public Sphere, Cool Chuca Style”, Rosa Linda Fregoso describes the absence in feminist scholarship of young women interpellated by these terms,

Within the Chicana feminist deconstruction of Chicano familial discourse, the figure of the pachuca, chola, or homegirl is inadvertently overlooked as an agent of oppositional practices, despite her notable contribution to the politics of resistance. (1999, 78)

I am situating this essay in the critical “chusma” and “chola” theorizations of Munoz and Fregoso as they look beyond the negative connotations of racialized sexual subjectivities to locate their unique powers and politics.

“You Could See Me, You Could Read Me”: YouTube and the Branding of the Chonga Body

Though no official definition of the chonga exists, she entered the realm of popular discourse in South Florida through the YouTube video *Chongalicious*, which presents a characterization that has resonated in this community. The work was posted on the site www.youtube.com on April 1, 2007 and tallied almost one million views within several months (over six million to date). *Chongalicious* parodied the 2006 song *Fergalicious* by pop music performer Fergie, which likely bolstered its rapid local circulation.

The video was created by Latina teens Mimi Davila and Laura Di Lorenzo, then drama students attending an arts magnet high school in Miami-Dade County³. The girls neither anticipated nor initially worked toward garnering widespread attention. What would have just been a silly faux music video circulating among a group of friends for laughs now has the potential of entering popular culture in the era of You Tube. The viral circulation of videos on social networking sites spurs the creation of “everyday” celebrities.

In *Chongalicious* Davila and Di Lorenzo don tight outfits and vigorously move their behinds to electronic beats as they enact the sexual-aesthetic excess of the chonga script. The clothing that serves as their “costumes” consist of a basketball jersey worn as a form-fitting mini-dress, a one-piece spandex short jumper, metallic gold flip flops and plastic mesh slippers with sequined flowers. The girls wear large hoop earrings and dark red lipstick. Their hair is wrapped in buns worn high atop their heads and the bottom portion of their hair runs down to their shoulders in waves.

The opening shot of the video is a close up of the girls’ shaking buttocks, they then turn to face the viewer and begin to perform the *Chongalicious* song with animated hand gestures and simulated thick Latin@ accents. A schoolmate recorded the

³ The *Miami New Times* reported that Davila is of Cuban-Bulgarian heritage and Laura Di Lorenzo of Venezuelan-Italian descent. (Volume 22; Number 22. June 14-20, 2007. “Chongas! Two Aventura girls’ You Tube sensation is only the beginning” by Tamara Lush, p. 22.

performance in the interior of Davila's home and outdoors in the housing complex. The work emulates the genre of the music video through the emphasis on the girls' dancing and montage of varied scenes edited to synchronize with the song. The majority of the shots are close ups and capture scenes of the girls looking into mirrors while styling their hair and make-up using glue for gel and Sharpie pens for lip liner, flirting with a young man on the street, pushing each other around, and sloppily eating pizza and smearing it over their mouths. These hyperbolic, slapstick parodies serve to convey the chonga's over-indulgent nature and "excessive" or trashy application of beauty products. The performers speak in the "voice" of chongas and address the viewer/camera with a confrontational attitude throughout the work. This is a sample of the lyrics they perform in unison:

*Chongalicious definition arch my eyebrows high
 They always starin' at my booty and my panty line
 You could see me, you could read me
 Cuz my name is on my earrings
 Girls got reasons why they hate me
 Cuz they boyfriends wanna date me
 Chongalicious
 But—I aint promiscuous
 And if you talkin' trash, I'll beat you after class
 I blow besos--muuuuaah!⁴
 I use my Sharpie lip line
 And ain't no other chonga glue her hair like mine
 Chongalicious*

Although they claim not to be promiscuous, the lyrics nevertheless typify chongas as sexualized, antagonistic toward other girls, violent, and hypervisible ("You could see me, you could read me"). In a later segment of the video, the performers make references to the chonga's lower-class status by describing her as "ghetto" and stating that she buys her "bling" at the flea market for \$2.99.⁵

4 "Besos" is Spanish for kisses.

5 "Bling" is a term utilized in hip hop culture for jewelry.



fig 1.1, Cover of Miami New Times featuring performers of Chongalicious

Chongalicious crossed over from YouTube to traditional print, radio and television outlets in South Florida. It was featured in a news segment by the internationally broadcast Spanish-language network *Univision* and the song the girls performed in the video frequently rotated on Miami's popular music station Power 96. Despite its seeming status as a media-generated "sensation", *Chongalicious* circulated virally via the social networking accounts of locals prior to its intensive media blitz. A host of spin-offs and parodies of the video appeared on YouTube such as *Preppylicious*, *Hoochielicious*, *No More Chongalicious!!!*, and Davila and Di Lorenzo's sequel videos *I'm in Love with a Chonga* and *Chonga Ladies/Chola Ladies* (the number of hits these videos have attained, in the hundreds of thousands, seem minimal compared with those of *Chongalicious*). The coverage on chongas, particularly in Spanish language media, has persisted since 2007. An episode of the *Univision* talk show *Cristina* that featured the *Chongalicious* performers aired in January 2009 and in 2013 YouTube users continue to post comments on the video on a regular basis.

After gaining celebrity in the South Florida community Davila and Di Lorenzo

aimed to capitalize on the chonga body by branding it to sell themselves as emerging actresses in order to crossover from YouTube to more lucrative teen and tween venues such as MTV, Disney Channel, and Nickelodeon. In “Branding the Post-Feminist Self: Girls’ Video Production and YouTube,” communications scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that young women’s performances on YouTube often function more as promotional tools than modes of self-expression. Banet-Weiser describes how girls often reference brands in their videos to portray their identities with logos visible in the background of their bedrooms. In describing the neoliberal politics that undergird girls’ video production on YouTube Banet-Weiser notes, “The fact that some girls produce media—and thus ostensibly produce themselves through their self-presentation—within the context of a commercially-driven technological space is not only evidence of a kind of empowering self-work but also a way to self-brand in an increasingly ubiquitous brand culture (Banet-Weiser 2011, 284).”

The performers of *Chongalicious* were not attempting to present themselves but rather to embody the chonga trope as a comedic shtick. The attention they garnered, however, prompted them to sell themselves as performers who could reach the sought after market of Latin@ youth. On the website of the talent agency Uno Entertainment there are promotional photographs of the girls, without chonga regalia, marketing them as actresses, comedians, and “YouTube starlets.” The company applies the gendered language of old Hollywood, with its attendant associations of whiteness, to new media production in order to brand the girls as wholesome and potentially profitable marketing investments. A banner on the Uno Entertainment site⁶ reads,

YouTube starlets, actresses, comedians, and writers Mimi Davila and Laura di Lorenzo aka Chonga Girls present their own spin on the news with Chisme News and other stuff, Enjoy!!! With a coast-to-coast fan base of over 8 million 14-24 year olds, Mimi and Laura have an insider’s fluency with urban youth and Hispanic-American culture, and they celebrate and poke fun at their surroundings in a way that brings everyone together.

6 <http://www.unoentertainment.com/portal/hgxpp001.aspx?75,12,26,O,E,0,MNU;E;6;4;MNU>

Here the logic of marketing merges with the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism to make the mockery of working class Latina girls Di Lorenzo and Davila emulate benign and in good taste. Mockery of the chonga body is employed to create a brand and achieve publicity.



fig 1.2, Image of Chongalicious Performers on Uno Entertainment Website in 2011

Despite their marketing work the performers of the *Chongalicious* video have yet to achieve crossover success. I posit that this stems from the association that has been forged between the performers and everyday chonga girls. The attempts of Uno Entertainment to brand Davila and Di Lorenzo as multi-talented starlets cannot wipe away the ethnic, aesthetic smudge of chonga girl hypersexuality. The makeup that they used to construct the chonga mask seems more difficult to take off than they had imagined. Although their performance as chongas reached a wide audience the connection that was established between them and “real” chongas may have already positioned them as unfeasible products for the teen/tween media enterprise. Unfortunately for aspiring and talented Latina young women such as Davila and Di Lorenzo, Latina girls can only fit a narrow range of roles, ranging from the marginalized excess of chonga girls, to the dramatic dorkiness of *Ugly Betty* and the new normative “cool” of emerging Latina stars like Selena Gomez.

In “This Tween Bridge over My Latina Back: The U.S. Mainstream Negotiates

Ethnicity,” media scholar Angharad Valdivia discusses the representational politics of mass-market figures and products such as Selena Gomez and Bratz dolls. In a culture industry that is targeting the growing population of Latin@s in the U.S. with aggressive marketing tactics, the figure of the light skinned Latina girl has emerged as a vehicle for attracting audiences and consumers. Valdivia, drawing from the pioneering work of women of color feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, argues that light skinned Latin@s are serving as viable marketing products as they do not embody the threat of difference and political power of African Americans. She states, “The bridge metaphor remains useful in this cultural moment. In all of these sites of contemporary mainstream tween girl culture the identifiable and the ambiguous Latina serves as a bridge between whiteness and difference (2011, 106).”



fig 1.3, Still from 2011 MTV Euro Awards Promotional Video Featuring Selena Gomez

Valdivia’s theories are supported by images of light skinned Latina young women that continue to emerge in popular culture, such as images of Selena Gomez, who in a promotional video for the 2011 MTV Euro Music Awards was styled to look like a chonga/chola-esque alter-ego in juxtaposition to her “normal,” conventionally fashionable style. The promotional video opens with a scene of Gomez looking at her reflection while sitting at a vanity in a hyper-rococo styled bedroom that consists of pale

pink walls and ornate pink furniture. The Selena who looks in the mirror is wearing light, “natural” makeup, delicate jewelry, a strapless, flowing white top, short denim shorts, and stiletto heels. Although the short shorts and cleavage sexualize her image they are in keeping with styles that are fashionable among contemporary celebrities. As she sits at her *toilette* Gomez contemplates how hosting the MTV EMAs marks a new level of success in her life. Her moment of staged, modest self reflection and self confidence is abruptly interrupted by an alter ego Selena Gomez dressed in chola style wearing large gold bamboo hoop earrings, baggy jeans revealing boxer shorts, sneakers, and a loose fitting flannel shirt buttoned at the neck. This interpretation of chola style has been “sexed up” by MTV to downplay the masculinity that is part of chola style by leaving most of the flannel shirt unbuttoned to reveal Gomez’s feminine bra and flat stomach. This kind of bra-revealing look is not typical of vernacular chola styles.

The alter ego Selena busts into the hyperfeminine bedroom and begins to rap about how all of the attention is going to be on her during the MTV EMAs. In contrast to the soft, melodic “congratulations to me” that the “normal” version of Gomez sings, her chola alternate raps “S-E-L-E-N-A to the Gomez, yeah you know I’m the dopest⁷.” The alter ego jumps on furniture and uses curse words that are bleeped out throughout the video. She performs an egotistical, vulgar, and unruly personality in juxtaposition to the pretty, restrained, and feminine Lopez. The fashionable pairing of these two Selenas seeks to show how Gomez has a tough “edge” that is beginning to emerge as she gets older and sheds her Disney Channel image as the teenager Alex in the family sitcom *Wizards of Waverly Place*. Although Gomez’s character Alex was confident and often abrasive in the TV show, she did not dress or act at all like the alter ego in this promotional video. In order to fit the marketing logic of MTV culture she must be fashionable, sexy, and edgy, but the edge of the chola is in excess of acceptable, safe images of Latina girls that are consumable in the culture industry and again, we find that the aesthetics of poor and working class Latina girls are appropriated to execute a joke. The chola version of

7 The term “dope” is slang for cool.

Selena is meant to be a humorous deviation from what is her normal, “classy,” yet sexy, behavior. The entertainment news website On the Red Carpet⁸ posted a story about the promotional video that included a poll where readers shared what they thought about Gomez’s alternative look by choosing between three responses.

According to the poll results, most readers did not think that chola embodiment would be an improvement to her image.

What do you think of Selena Gomez's alter ego?

I love her new look! 27.68%



It's funny, but hopefully temporary! 44.27%



Make it go away! 28.04%



[Return To Poll](#) [Create Your Own Poll](#)

fig 1.4, On the Red Carpet Poll Results

The performers of the *Chongalicious* video also presented a similar juxtaposition between themselves in their chonga embodiments and their “natural” look in the *Chonga Ladies/Chola Ladies* video. Girls have consumed and mimicked videos such as *Chonga Ladies/Chola Ladies* and the promotional MTV 2011 EMA video with Selena Gomez. In their parodies girls rearticulate the chonga/chola-esque figure as a humorous script to embody, not as an articulation of personal styles. This indicates an organic understanding by young girls of color that their hypersexual embodiments would only be sanctioned through the framework of parody. I find that images of chonga-esque young women are often juxtaposed against images of young women in “normative” dress. As I discuss further in what follows, the visual rhetoric of juxtaposition between normative

⁸ <http://www.ontheredcarpet.com/Selena-Gomez-dons-chola-look-in-MTV-European-Music-Awards-promo/8398364>

embodiments and sexual-aesthetic excess outlines a clear demarcation between desirable and un-desirable embodiments, and corresponding attitudes for Latina young women. Latina girls are presented with a false choice between assertiveness and composure, sexual/bodily confidence, and modesty.

Chongas Talk Back

The excessive figure of the chonga has been framed as the antithesis of the respectability and class that has historically marked elite white and light-skinned Latina femininity. The manner in which the chonga typifies a sexualized hyperethnicity was staged on the *Cristina* talk show episode on chongas that aired on the Spanish-language network Univision in 2009, in which chongas were literally posed against bourgeois white femininity and its attendant embodied propriety. The talk show host herself, who critiqued the style of the chonga girls she invited on the show embodies the social aspirations of normative, bourgeois white Latinidad with her straightened, bleached blonde hair and Chanel inspired jacket. In *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*, sociologist Joshua Gamson examines the “paradoxes of visibility” that attend the engagement of non-normative subjects in tabloid talk shows, in which they are situated in a venue that both exploits them, and provides them with a platform for divergent speech. He notes,

Talk shows wreak special havoc with the “public sphere,” moving private stuff into a public spotlight, arousing all sorts of questions about what the public sphere can, does, and should look like. In doing so, they mess with the “normal,” giving hours of play and often considerable sympathy to stigmatized populations, behaviors, and identities, and at least partly muddying the waters of normality. And since those brought into the public sphere of TV talk are increasingly distant from the white middle-class guests of earlier years, talk shows wind up attaching class difference to the crossing of public/private and normal/abnormal divides (1998,18).

The complex politics of visibility and normalization Gamson describes were powerfully elaborated in the *Cristina* episode, which staged a scene in which chonga embodiment

was both regulated and radically affirmed. Each self-proclaimed chonga girl on the panel was seated next to a light skinned Latina in modest, contemporary trendy dress that served as her opposite. The chongas were asked questions that prompted them to defend their mode of dress and the “normal” Latinas barraged the girls with negative comments as they pontificated about proper feminine class, dress, and style. The overall purpose of the show was to laugh at the chonga girls and advise them to change their style so that they would not look ridiculous.



fig 1.5, Still from Cristina show episode featuring chongas

In true tabloid talk show fashion, a segment of the episode featured a “chonga makeover” in which the gay, light-skinned celebrity stylist Rodner Figueroa stated that he was going to transform a “pretty” woman into an “ugly” woman by turning a “well dressed” audience member into a chonga. Through the performative makeover the homonormative Latino stylist sustained heteronormativity and racial/ethnic hierarchies by disciplining the bodies of chonga girls and “scaring” them into abandoning their “ugly”, excessive look.



fig 1.6, Stylist Rodner Figueiroa with self-proclaimed chonga girl Elizabeth

In this episode, a young, a self-proclaimed chonga named Elizabeth who was on the panel claimed to have been the inspiration for the *Chongalicious* video⁹. She wore large bright neon colored combs in her hair, tight short shorts, a black shirt, heavy makeup, and many bangles and necklaces. In the show she was consistently called “vulgar” by a tall, thin Latina woman with a fashion model physique who had light and straightened hair. Elizabeth became increasingly agitated during the show due to the consistent negative comments directed at her and told Cristina, the celebrity stylist, and the other women on the panel and in audience that she would continue to dress like a chonga no matter what advice they had to persuade her to the contrary. When the audience responded to the panel Elizabeth’s mother stood at the microphone stand and said that she wanted to defend her daughter who is an honor roll student. Emboldened by her mother’s public statement, the young chonga girl proclaimed,

“Yo puedo salir ahora vestida asi porque yo tengo el balance academico y social que puedo vestirme como yo quiero. Lo que tengo aqui no me lo quita nadie.”

“I can go out right now dressed like this because I have the academic and social balance that I can dress the way I want. What I have here (pointing to her brain) no one can take away from me.”

I do not utilize Elizabeth’s speech act as an example of how chonga style can be

appreciated as normal through a narrative of academic achievement, what interests me about her performative statement is the manner in which her chonga body talked back and queered dichotomies between sexualized self-presentation and academic performance, feminized grooming practices and self-esteem. I also locate non-normative politics in the statements made by the other chonga girls who did not mention school or work success but pointed to the significance of their power in crafting their embodied presentations, and disdain for the bourgeois morals articulated by the women who attacked them.

The Meaning(s) of “Chonga”

The emerging hypervisibility of the chonga in 2007 body prompted me to develop a questionnaire regarding chongas and the *Chongalicious* video in 2008 that I distributed via e-mail from my location in New Jersey to friends and family members who live in Miami, Florida. Respondents were instructed to submit completed questionnaire forms to me via e-mail. As in a snowball sample, my initial pool of respondents aided me in recruiting additional participants via e-mail, Facebook messages and Myspace posts. For example, my brother, who at the time the study was conducted was a senior in a Miami-Dade County high school recruited peers to participate through his Myspace account. In this way, the circulation of the survey paralleled that of the *Chongalicious* video.

The questionnaire posed questions concerning the provenance and meaning of the term *chonga* and the reception of the *Chongalicious* video. In addition to those regarding demographics (gender, race, nationality, age, and Miami neighborhood where participants reside) it consisted of the following questions: Have you heard the term “chonga” before? Where did you hear the term first? Do you think it is an official Spanish word? Where do you think the word came from? Who uses the term? What is a chonga?¹⁰ Is describing someone as a chonga positive or negative? Have you ever met anyone that describes themselves as a chonga? Have you seen the *Chongalicious* video on YouTube? How did you find out about it? Did you enjoy it? Do you think the video is a realistic

10 I did not want to present my participants with the assumption that a chonga is a person.

representation of chongas? Do you think the video was popular?

I am approaching the responses to my questionnaire as folk discourse. In some instances, I will aggregate responses in order to highlight interesting points of consensus and divergence among the participant group, I do not intend for these figures to be interpreted as statistical data. While it is not possible to present my findings as symptomatic of how most Miamians feel about chongas or the *Chongalicious* video, they provide a window into the meanings associated with the chonga with regard to sexuality, gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

I received thirty-one responses to the *Chongalicious* questionnaire. All respondents reside in Miami-Dade County with a concentration in the middle-class neighborhoods of Westchester, South Miami, and Kendall. This may present a middle-class bias in my study that excludes poor and working class subjects who may be labeled as chongas. However, I suggest that the responses of these middle-class South Floridians can point to how the chonga identity is perceived and constructed by the dominant culture. The majority of respondents, 26, were female. 21 participants identified themselves as Latina/o or as a specific nationality (Colombian, Dominican, etc.); over half of these specified Cuban descent. Two respondents identified as African American. 25 respondents were between the ages of 18-24, the eldest respondent in the sample was 34 years of age (18 years of age being the youngest).

When asked where they first heard the term, twenty respondents stated they encountered it in school, mostly in middle school/junior high. The remainder recalled learning it from friends or public discourse in Miami. The connection articulated between exposure to the word “chonga” and the middle school setting points to the negotiation of identity that often takes place in adolescence. Molding an identity can sometimes employ a negative process of defining oneself via the recognition of who one is *not* (Pascoe 2007: Bettie 2003). Respondents of the chonga questionnaire described how the function of the term was to identify, exclude, and deride “bad” subjects.

Most participants stated that the term is slang, not “official” Spanish. Connections to other words were proposed in response to the question regarding the provenance of “chonga”, among them associations to the Chicana girls known as cholas. Links of the term to Afro-Cuban spiritual practices were also forged. One respondent posited that it could have derived from the syncretic religion Santeria. Another more specifically offered that the root of the word “chonga” might be found in *Chango*, the name of a male Yoruba deity whose Santeria icon is the Catholic Saint Barbara. These associations index the blackness that is often correlated with Santeria practice in Cuban American culture, and suggest the status of the chonga as an “other” Cuban-American identity that is often disavowed by elite Cubans through its connection to marginalized subjects such as Afro-Cubans and African Americans via the chonga’s adoption of hip hop culture and aesthetics, such as donning gold jewelry and intricate hair styles (De La Torre 2001).

Ten respondents offered that “everyone” uses the term, followed by six who stated that “chonga” primarily circulates in teenage circles. Other groups noted for use of the term included Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and people “under 40”. An additional six participants suggested that “chonga” circulates among homosocial groups of women in the antagonistic mode of drawing attention to and mocking the girl identified as such (“Girls that hate on each other”, “Mainly females describing other females”, “Everyone who wants to offend someone else, mainly a girl”). Several respondents noted that people who do not identify as chongas, or who were chongas prior to being “preppy” use the word. Beyond its classed Caucasian connotations, “preppy” in Miami denotes an upper-class non-Black Latin@ that lives in an exclusive area of Miami such as Coral Gables.

24 out of 31 respondents stated that describing someone as a chonga is negative, with others proposing that it is context-specific. One respondent suggested that the chonga’s negative connotation is due to the fact that it “melds all the bad Hispanic stereotypes into one word.” For the most part, participants advanced that the detrimental quality of the word stems from its deriding and exclusionary function.

Eighteen respondents stated that they have encountered individuals who describe themselves as chongas. Several indicated that this was representative of a phase in their own life or that of a friend. In addressing the question, “Have you ever met anyone who describes themselves as a chonga?” one subject responded, “Yes, myself, in the mirror along with all of my adolescent friends.” An eighteen year-old subject wrote, “My best friend, lol, she used to be the biggest chonga till she met me and my friends.”¹¹ The portrayal of the chonga as juvenile may stem from the view that it is an identity that is passed through and sheds with maturity and social/class mobility.

Participants who claimed they had not encountered individuals who identified as chongas made sweeping and assertive proclamations such as “no chonga admits to being a chonga” and “no [I have not met someone who describes themselves as a chonga]... but sadly they are blinded”, one even went as far as declaring “If I did [encounter a self-described chonga] I’d slap them.” The majority of respondents attributed little to be desired in the chonga role. She is framed as an identity antithetical to the efforts made by second and third generation Latin@ youth to assimilate into American culture. Like an embarrassing cousin one is reluctant to introduce to friends, the chonga is not a figure to be associated with, as she loudly speaks her broken English and wears all the “right” commodity items (jewelry, trendy clothes) the wrong way. The deployment of the term, and the attendant laughter it induces, can enable Latin@ teens to distance themselves from her hypersexual, hyperethnic, and under-class inscription.

The question that generated the lengthiest responses was “What is a chonga?”. 29 of 31 participants provided vividly detailed descriptions of a young urban female’s style of dress. She was described as wearing ill fitting clothes that were either too baggy or too tight, applying an excessive amount of gel to her hair, donning large gold hoop earrings engraved with her name in cursive lettering, using heavy eye and lip liner, and gaudy amounts of jewelry. Chongas were largely described as Latinas. Several respondents proposed that there are also white chongas (a pop culture figure like Fergie could fit into

11 “Lol” is an Acronym for “laugh out loud” used in internet chat applications.

this framework due to her mode of dress). Study subjects situated chongas in middle and working class areas of Miami-Dade County such as Hialeah, Sweetwater, Westchester, Cutler Ridge, and Kendall. Her class status was also articulated through descriptions of where and what she consumes. Respondents stated that they eat large amounts of fast food and shop at flea markets, U.S. Tops and D'or, establishments that sell juniors clothing at bargain prices.

The hypersexuality of the chonga was indexed by references to her “skimpy” or “hoochie” style of dress and assertions that “they aren’t home bodies” and “chill with a lot of guys.” These descriptions of chonga sexuality proliferated through *I Love Chongas*, a 2009 song by South Florida hip hop performer KC Chopz that rotated frequently on the Power 96 radio station. The male performer professes his “love” for the figure through the chorus:

*That chonga last night was awfully crazy, I wished we taped it
I danced my ass off and had this chonga completely naked
Real tight jeans and hoop earrings
Chinese slippers are my thing
Went out with three, woke up with ten
Left Hialeah straight to Weston
Man I love chongas*

The sexual identity attributed to chongas is intimately connected to descriptions of their clothing and residence in Hialeah, which are freighted with signifiers of class and ethnicity. The cheap, mass produced plastic mesh “Chinese slippers” with sequined flower designs associated with chongas in the lyrics give an Orientalist turn to the rapper’s desire of chonga bodies, which seem to multiply exponentially to service him. The song articulates a fetishistic link between aesthetics of impoverishment and sexual access in excess.

Chongas were additionally portrayed as “reffy”, a term used in Miami to denote recent refugees (recall Munoz’s description of the hyperethnic chusma). The chonga was framed by some as being “loud”, “crass”, and unable to master neither English

nor Spanish, thus speaking “Spanglish”. Other respondents described chongas as “un-intellectual” and apathetic about gaining skills and bettering themselves through education. The characteristics attributed to chongas are tinged with failure. She fails at acculturating, not being able to speak English “correctly” or without an accent. Her flaunting visibility is perceived as foolish, as “they are not aware of how ridiculous they look in public”. She also falls short of convincingly projecting a hip hop-inspired attitude of toughness, as one respondent stated, she is a “girl that’s fake and acts like she’s from the ghetto” or a “wannabe ghetto Hispanic chick” who “tries to talk like they’re from New York but never quite achieves the tone.” Davila and Di Lorezno articulate the chonga’s aspirations for thugdom in the *Chongalicious* lyric, “g-to the h-to the-e-t-t-o girl you ghetto.”

The recurring characteristics of the chonga as un-intellectual, hypersexual, and of lower-class stems from stereotypical views regarding urban girls of color that have been circulating in the dominant culture and elite circles of Latin@s for decades (McLean Taylor, Veloria, and Verba 2007). *The New Times* story on the *Chongalicious* video has reinforced this view. Reporter Tamara Lush makes efforts to articulate to the reader how *unlike* chongas Davila and Di Lorenzo *really* are. Lush notes,

In character, they are brash, sexy, bold creatures. They seem self-assured rather than the moody, curious girls they really are... They have noticed that guys like them better as chongas, a fact that makes them more than a little depressed. Both girls get plenty of looks from guys as they walk down the street in their chonga wear—but not, for example, when they are sitting in their AP English class, wearing sweatshirts, jeans, and glasses.¹²

Beyond problematically bemoaning the girls’ failure to attract male attention when they are not embodying the chonga role, which reinstates the slut vs. good girl dichotomy, Lush continually makes references to the fact that the girls reside in Aventura in her report, an area of Miami-Dade County replete with “luxury” high-rise condominium developments and a large mall with exclusive stores and boutiques. When describing how

12 Ibid 30-31.

the girls came up with the idea for the video she recounts the story of how they conversed about the “chonga-like” outfits worn by girls in the school cafeteria and secures this admission from Davila, “We were kinda making fun of them”¹³. In Lush’s framework, the roles of chonga and intelligent young woman are mutually exclusive. Davila and Di Lorenzo are applauded for their clever parody and are protected from the negative ramifications of embodying the sexual-aesthetic excess of the chonga role through allusions to their intelligence, modest form of dress, and upper-class lifestyle. *The New Times* reporter’s attempts to normalize the creators of *Chongalicious* did not hinder the circulation of negative responses to the story. As I discussed in the introduction, a thread on the *New Times Chongalicious* article on the blog site *Miaminights* (www.miaminights.com), a user by the name of “Laura” posted a comment on June 15, 2007 that read,

I grew up with females like this and it’s gross...how can people admire this shit? This makes me want to move away from here so bad. They’re your stereotypical ghetto Hispanics who cause uproar for attention. They call themselves “Chongas”, I call them ignorant.¹⁴

The blogger’s intense reaction points to the chonga’s intimate connection to Miami as place, as she describes how the sensation generated by *Chongalicious* makes her want to relocate. If the chonga is to be so disavowed, why did many other Miamians celebrate and enjoy their performance? In “Exploring Dora: Re-embodied Latinidad on the Web”, a study on the discourse surrounding the image of the Latina Nickelodeon cartoon character Dora the Explorer, communications scholars Susan J. Harewood and Valdivia state,

We argue that, despite the rhetoric of “disembodiedness” that often accompanies the Web, its representations, and its participants, the body follows the narrative, repeatedly reinserting itself as a way of enforcing and policing boundaries about ethnicity and mainstream culture. Dora reminds us of the impossibility of leaving the body behind in any kind of form of popular culture because people are always bringing the body back into discussion and embodying the representational, which

¹³ Ibid. 24.

¹⁴ <http://www.miaminights.com/miami-new-times-dissects-the-chonga-trend-4242.phtml>, accessed on April 28, 2008.

itself embodies dominant tropes of ethnicity. (2005, 86)

Drawing from this understanding, I posit that that the video generated pleasure in viewers through the *recognition* enabled by Davila and Di Lorenzo's performance. Viewers were reminded of the embodied young women they encounter in their everyday lives and by extension, Miami as place. The chonga exemplifies Miami the way that "booty" music by acts like 2 Live Crew typified the city in the 1990s. Like chongas, the controversial group did not project normative bourgeois roles. The hedonistic nature of their music spoke to the materialistic identity of Miami as a tropical playground for the rich and famous that has been celebrated by popular performers such as Will Smith and P. Diddy. However, where 2 Live Crew provided a cultural space for men and women to openly engage in sexual discourse, the chonga's sexuality is framed as immature and humorous. She succeeds only in arousing laughter.

Twenty-four out of 31 respondents reported they viewed *Chongalicious* on You Tube. Ten noted that they heard about it from friends. The remainder learned of it through the radio (with some specifying the Power 96 radio station), TV, and the Web, particularly Myspace comments and Live Journal entries. When asked if they enjoyed their viewing twenty subjects stated that they had, overwhelmingly because it made them laugh. Those who did not enjoy the video found it "annoying", "stupid", and a "waste of time." Fourteen participants suggested that the video was a realistic depiction of chongas, the remaining participants stated that it was "exaggerated." Most participants, 22, proposed that the video was popular. The most recurrent reasons provided for its positive reception were its accuracy of representation and reflection of Miami culture. One subject explained that the girls were glorified "as the true embodiment of the Female Miami Image."

“Just like, a lot of extra-ness...”: Focus Group Responses to Bratz & Chonga Bodies

From 2011 through 2013 I conducted focus groups with 61 young women of color in Miami that focused on issues of embodiment (dressing, grooming, body modification) and visual representations of women of color in art and popular culture. Among the images I prompted girls to respond was the image of the *Chongalicious* performers published on the cover of *The New Times* in 2007 and images of Bratz dolls. I also asked them if they had seen the *Chongalicious* video and what the term “chonga” signifies. Since five years had passed since the video received a surge of media attention, and because contemporary youth media trends are fleeting, I was not expecting for so many of the girls to be familiar with the video and say that they had recently viewed it. *Chongalicious* continues to inform girls’ interactions with each other through the performance of parodies of the video they post on YouTube.

In a focus group that consisted of Latina girls in the Sweetwater area of Miami, which is a primarily working class community of recent Latin@ immigrants, a shy 11-year old girl who gave herself the pseudonym “Big Bird,” and identified herself as “Hispanic/White,” said that she had heard the word chonga before as it had been used to describe her and a friend. But she was quick to add, “Not like, [because of] what we wear cuz, we wear a uniform and everything but we try. It’s kind of stupid cuz we pretend like if we’re them but we’re really not.” Asking young women in Miami about what they thought about the video and what it means to be a chonga did not yield responses that differed significantly from those articulated by the participants of my 2008 questionnaire, attesting to the discursive power of the chonga script of “bad” subjectivity.

The majority of participants in my focus groups framed Bratz dolls as bad objects as well, due to their sexualized body presentations. Many of them using the denigrating terms that emerged in my previous survey study on chongas. A 17 year old African American girl who gave herself the pseudonym C.Kold Blooded blamed Bratz dolls for her younger sister’s adoption of sexual styles, “My sister, now she be wearin’ little

short shorts and her little makeup on. Like she obsessed with it. She got the bookbag, the bedspread. She loves all that.” Paradoxically, C.Kold Blooded, whose comedic performance with other Women on the Rise! girls in a parody television commercial video they created with artist Susan Lee Chun was outstanding, often crafted a sexualized self presentation herself, as she commonly wore tight “skinny” jeans and close fitting, belly revealing tops with low necklines accentuating her cleavage. When I asked C. if she would purchase a Bratz doll for her sister she said no, that she would prefer to buy her a Barbie doll instead. C. Kold Blooded’s choice is notable in that she resists the marketing of the dolls to the demographic of black girls, which seems to have worked successfully on her younger sister. Valdivia also analyzes the cultural politics of Bratz dolls in “This Tween Bridge over My Latina Girl Back,” in which she contends that they are one of many products being sold to girls that claim to emphasize a post-feminist agency on their part while also “sexualizing” them. She writes,

Much of the reaction to Bratz dolls focuses on their sexuality and generates a moral panic. Still their “brattitude” coincides with the representation of ethnic girls, including Latinas, as physical and pushy in other mainstream media. Whereas assertiveness can be coded as positive, its slippage into “brattitude” places it within the racialized realm of behavioral problems. These hybrid girls are tamed when they cross into Hollywood film; they are made more assimilable and therefore commodifiable for a mainstream audience (Ibid. 99).

Bratz embodiment is sanitized in the 2007 movie, in which the girls are primarily light skinned and there is a marked difference between the sartorial styles the young women in the film assume, which is in line with contemporary trends considered fashionable, and the more gaudy, “ghettolicious” outfits of the dolls their characters are based on. The girls of color in my study did not mention the *Bratz* film in the focus groups and instead responded to the dolls themselves, which they read in various ways.

One might think that C. Kold Blooded, who often talked about how male rappers who glorify violence such as Plies were an influence on her body style and personality, would have valued Bratz due to the tough attitude she would often perform, but perhaps

she knows too well what being an assertive girl is like, and it isn't cute. I sadly witnessed how C., like many other girls who participate in Women on the Rise!, was sent to juvenile detention, then referred to a drug rehabilitation program, and then sent back to detention again. Instead of rehabilitation, the punitive rules in both institutions, and C.'s refusal to remain silent when dealing with unfair treatment, placed her in a recursive and heartbreaking trajectory through the justice system. Bratz may have attitude but they are not "cold blooded," and she may not want her sister to rely on similar tropes to fashion her identity.

Although Valdivia rightly critiques the moral panic that attends much adult discussion of Bratz, she articulates a stereotype critique that takes issue with the racialized associations of the term "brat," which connotes behavioral problems. But like chongas, perhaps Bratz, who in the hands of their owners are likely implicated in childhood narratives that exceed marketing logics, can signify more than an injurious stereotypical trope. In her book *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and Consumer Culture*, anthropologist Elizabeth Chin conducts a powerful analysis of how low-income black girls living in the blighted neighborhood of Newhallville, Connecticut play with white dolls.

Chin discusses the discursive power of the Clark doll studies in supporting the school de-segregation agenda in the 1960s, which by implication established the notion that children of color would have increased self-esteem if they played with toys that looked like them. Although Chin agrees that this has been a progressive cause, she has found that products such as Olmec toys and "ethnically correct" mass market toys of color such as the Shani line by Mattel, have in fact reinforced problematic notions of the fixity of race as evidenced in psychical traits. These products are also economically out of reach from many of the children of color who could benefit from the self-esteem boost they purport to provide. Chin found that the marketing language of neoliberal multiculturalism, in which politics is ignored in favor of a more "democratic," "diverse"

marketplace in which consumers have more choice, is much more simplistic than the complicated understandings of race, gender, class, and sexuality that the girls in her study evidenced through their play with white dolls.

In the introduction to *Purchasing Power* Chin describes how her black girl participants wondered why there is no pregnant Barbie, fat Barbie, or abused Barbie. For these girls, more than hoping for a toy that would reflect their phenotype, they questioned their lack of access to a doll that lives their kind of life. Chin noted that children in her study possessed very few “ethnically correct” dolls and instead found that girls manipulated the bodies of their white dolls in order to bring them into their own worlds. In describing how Newhalville girls often gave their white dolls black hairstyles Chin writes,

In what way can the similar hairdos of Clarice and her doll seem like a challenge to the fixity of racial identity? Clarice, like a number of other girls I knew in Newhalville, does not appear to assume that just because her doll is white she must treat her that way. When deciding to do her hair, she gives her very white, very blonde, and very blue-eyed doll a hairstyle that is worn by young black girls. She does not put her doll’s hair into a ponytail, or brush it over and over again just for the pleasure of feeling the brush traveling through the long strands. Clarice was not alone in this: other girls’ dolls had beads in their hair, braids held at the end with twists of tinfoil, and series of braids that were themselves braided together. In some sense, by doing this, the girls were bringing the dolls into their own worlds, and whiteness here is not absolutely defined by skin and hair, but by style and a way of life. The complexities of racial reference and racial politics have been much discussed in the case of black hair simulating the look of whiteness; yet what these girls are creating is quite the opposite—white hair that looks black (2001, 163).

I quote Chin at length here as her work deepens our discussion of the politics of style in the lives of poor and working class girls of color. Chin’s observation grounds critical race theories that challenge fixed notions of biological race, and shows how the girls’ everyday practices exhibit an organic understanding of the social complexities and modalities of race. Therefore, I am not arguing that we ask girls of color to embrace Bratz over Barbies as Bratz may appear like them. But I would argue that perhaps what makes

Bratz appealing to girls of color is that they perhaps *look like girls who live like them*, through sartorial codes that index the style practices of poor and working class girls and women of color when they “dress up.” Whereas Barbie seems to live a safe and protected domestic life, Bratz dolls are situated against cold brick walls in their packaging, which is often riddled with graffiti. Girls may imagine that a Bratz has been or can become pregnant, fat, or abused.

The only girls who expressed their affection for racialized Bratz as children in focus groups attended Edison High School in the Liberty City area of Miami. Liberty City is a historic hub of black life and murals depicting black leaders such as Martin Luther King and Obama mark its landscape. The girls at Edison are involved in an activist and Afro-centric program called “Rights of Passage,” that is presented after school by the non-profit organization URGENT, Inc. URGENT, Inc., a long standing collaborating partner of Women on the Rise!, is run by people of color and provides education and arts programs in underserved communities in Miami. I contend that the Edison girls’ positive valuation of Bratz dolls is due in part to the critical race and activist discourse of their community, which affirms black lives and bodies.

The group of African American and Haitian American girls at Edison articulated the notion that Bratz are better for girls through a racial perspective. Tashell Shakur, a tall, thin, dark-skinned, 15-year old African American girl who earlier in the focus group stated that her ideal look was inspired by the rapper Tupac Shakur, said, “I think Barbies are kind of what Caucasian people look like and Bratz are like what black people look like. So it’s like, we can relate more to Bratz dolls. They have curves and they have big lips.” Another girl added, “They are all different, one is darker than the other one is darker than the other one.” When I asked them to compare Barbies to Bratz dolls in terms of what they think would be a better choice for girls who are younger than them, Zayan, a soft-spoken, introverted, and thoughtful 15-year old African American girl who often wore her long weave in thick, interlocking black and blonde highlighted braids

responded, “Bratz I think is positive. It shows the young girl that there are different types of stuff. Barbie just has one white girl.”

My conversation with the Edison girls about Bratz demonstrates the need for feminist work on girls to meaningfully engage race in analysis about the nexus of gender, sexuality, class, and consumption practices. Although conventional feminist wisdom contends that Bratz bodies are patently negative for girls, the narratives of my participants at Edison show how their bodies can also be affirming to girls of color, who view the other products on the market as solely reflecting and attracting a white consumer. I suggest that it is the particular manner in which Bratz dolls signify race, through the sexual-aesthetic excess of their style, that the Edison girls value them, as they appear to occupy similar class positions.

Race politics also complicated the discourse about chongas in my focus groups. In my 2008 survey study, references to the chonga’s citation of blackness were obliquely coded through connections to Afro-Cuban spiritual practices and invocations of her “ghetto” attributes and aspirations. However, in the focus groups, participants were much more candid about their thoughts on race and chonga style. A consistent response to my question “what is a chonga?,” were statements such as, “A chonga is a Hispanic girl that is trying to be black. That’s what a chonga girl is.” The chonga’s attempt to emulate blackness was consistently referenced as a major reason why her style is characterized as ridiculous. In response to my inquiry about why people think that chongas are ridiculous, Betty Boo, a 13-year old dark-skinned girl who identified herself as Haitian in my focus group with girls in Coconut Grove, a historically black community in Miami that has marked economic disparity between black folks and more newly established rich white and Latin@ residents, said “It’s like, they’re trying to be black. The long nails, the makeup, the earrings, that’s stupid, yeah.” The other girls in the group, all of whom identified as black or Haitian, nodded in agreement with her.

In the essay, “Becoming American, Becoming Black? Urban Competency,

Racialized Spaces, and the Politics of Citizenship Among Brazilian and Puerto Rican Youth in Newark” (2007), Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas found through her field work that,

For many young Latin American migrants and United States-born Latinos, “becoming American” was not equated with “becoming white,” as has been the case for other (mainly European) migrants, but rather with “becoming Black (Ibid. 86).”

Ramos-Zayas explains that a notion of blackness, divorced from actual black bodies and linked instead to Puerto Rican youth in Newark who were perceived as successfully appropriating it, was imbued with cultural capital stemming from associations of blackness with modernity and cosmopolitanism in contrast to the “backwardness” of Latin@ and Latin@ immigrant youth. She found that blackness became synonymous with “Americanness” in the low-income urban spaces of Newark. Ramos-Zayas notes how performances of blackness were very carefully evaluated among youth of color, with failed performances resulting in denigration and loss of face. Like the chongas described by my participants, many Latin@ youth in Newark were perceived by fellow Latin@ and black youth as lowly “wannabees” (Ibid. 90).

My discussion with lesbian-identified black young women at Pridelines Youth Services also resulted in commentary regarding the chonga’s citations of blackness and sexual-aesthetic excess. Q, a 25 year old African American member of the group defined the chonga as, “Just like, a lot of extra-ness. Every time I saw a chonga she had like 40 bracelets on her arm.” To which Alaika, a Haitian American young woman in the group added, “The name bracelets. And when they walk around all you hear is cling cling cling cling cling!” Alaika was particularly harsh in her judgments of chongas, and mocked them through emulating the sounds of the copious amounts of jewelry they wear. In elaborating her view on chongas Alaika said,

Cuz I’m like [to chongas] ya’ll must take a lot of time just to do like the curl in the hair and certain things and they’re like [in a simulated Latin@ accent], ‘Yeah I have to get up at five in the morning to get my hair like this and da-da-da...go up there and get my nails done.’ It’s stupid, it’s worthless. It’s worthless. At the end

you have to get home and take like a good five hour bath just to get all that goo off of you and then start all over again in the morning, to me, it's worthless.

Q articulated a divergent view in response to Alaika that valued the chongas bodywork and stated that she found it to be “creative.”

Q: I think it is creative because of the simple fact that it's their culture more or less, so it's like they're not trying to look like everyone else and they found ways to stand out and make themselves look different. Like African American women, they stand out to try to make themselves look different so they put the weave in, some put the extra stitches in, some lock their hair, some cut their hair, they do things to stand out to look different. Same thing with them [chongas], um, it's not a waste of time for them, because they stand out to look different, people will look at them, maybe for a good reason, maybe for a bad reason but people are looking at them for a reason. So they get some attention.

Q powerfully articulates the identity work of chonga style, as signifying difference, and frames its relationship to African American women's aesthetic body practices not through a rhetoric of failed imitation, but through an understanding of the politics of visibility in a political economy that would otherwise discipline them into neoliberal forms of being in the world. A world in which perhaps you would refrain from putting so much gel in your hair, and in which you would think twice before putting those extra stitches in, as these practices can cause you work and social problems. Q's statement is particularly important given the often antagonistic relationships between black and Latin@ populations in urban areas of the U.S. such as Newark and Miami (Ramos-Zayas 2012), and the fact that, as Ramos-Zayas has found in her research, the appropriation of blackness by Latin@s “... generally failed to engage discussions of civil rights, segregation, and inequality or lead to enduring coalitions with African Americans in Newark (2007, 86).” My focus group discussion with young women in Miami about Bratz dolls and chongas point to the power of engaging girls of color in scholarship and theorizing about race, gender, sexuality, class, and embodiment, as they provide narratives that continue to complicate our analyses, and demonstrate that they have astute insights to share.

Re-Imagining Latina Girl Embodiments: Body as Bricolage

Although the overall consensus among the black girls I work with was that chonga girls are just trying to look like black girls it was also a common response that emerged among Latina girls in the focus groups as well. There is a representational vacuum when it comes to models of unique Latina embodiments. Latinas are either perceived as emulating the styles of African Americans, with whom we have shared marginalized spaces and experiences in culture, as in hip hop, for example, or as absorbing the normative embodiments and beauty ideals of Euro Americans in our hopes of achieving inclusion and success in U.S. society. Most young women in my study believe that the chonga is just a bad copy of fashion references that do not belong to her. Her citations spectacularly fail, no matter how often they are repeated (Butler 1990). The few models of Latina girl embodiment visible in culture do not differ much from those of Euro American celebrities and cultural figures, except for their slightly curvier figures and in some instances, dark hair. Yet as we see the bodies of celebrities like Jennifer Lopez and Demi Lovato transform we find that they become ever thinner, with lighter skin and bleached hair.

I do not want to frame this lack of radically ethnic role models of embodiment, like Angela Davis was in the 1970s, as dooming Latina girls to a destiny of forever copying the embodiments of others, but as providing a critical opening for the continuing articulation of Latina girl subjectivities and embodiments that are in the process of becoming. Eva Longoria and Salma Hayek are highly normative, and girls are not trying to look like Frida Kahlo, Celia Cruz, La Lupe, or Sandra Cisneros in their everyday lives. I argue that chonga-esque styles embody the possibilities for crafty re-invention by Latina girls, who appropriate and re-mix the styles they encounter in culture to craft unique sartorial practices. As mulatta/mestizas living in spaces where we have little history, and where our parents have tenuous connections and legal status, we have learned how to borrow and recreate; we are bricoleurs of style.



fig 1.7, Luis Gispert, *Untitled (Chain Mouth, a.k.a. Muse Ho)* 2002

Chongas in “High” Culture

The projection of chongas as Miami icons has also seeped into the contemporary art world. The works that launched the career of Cuban-American artist Luis Gispert were a series of widely exhibited photographs entitled *Cheerleaders* (2000-2002). The works feature a cast of multi-racial young women donning cheerleader uniforms with hair, makeup and accessories that reference chonga style such as large gold hoop earrings, acrylic nails, stylized ponytails, and athletic shoes. The young women enact scenes ranging from the fantastical to the mundane such as posing in luxury vehicles or floating in air as if in a trance. The poses of the subjects often cite canonical Baroque art historical narratives such as Mary mourning the body of Jesus.

In *Untitled (Chain Mouth, a.k.a. Muse Ho)*, a work from the series, Gispert references contemporary artist Bruce Nauman’s well-known photograph *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1967-70). Nauman’s *Self-Portrait as Fountain* is a play on art historical conventions of statuesque male nudes. Often described as a reference to Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917, Nauman playfully conflates his body with an object by

capturing himself unclothed and spewing a stream of water from his mouth (see image below). Unlike Nauman, Gispert utilizes the body of a young woman to execute the parodic gesture in *Untitled (Chain Mouth, a.k.a. Muse Ho)* instead of his own.



fig 1.8, Bruce Nauman, *Self-Portrait as Fountain* 1967-1970

The description of the subject as a “ho” in the title and the manner in which her make-up, hair, and costume are styled situates her in the discourse of sexual-aesthetic excess attributed to chongas. It is worth noting that Gispert grew up in Cuban-American enclaves in Miami, where he likely encountered “chonga” discourse. Where Nauman emits a thin jet of water from his mouth in *Self-Portrait as Fountain*, the female figure in *Untitled* expels a long, thick, phallic gold chain. The sexual athleticism on display is reinforced by the cheerleader uniform, which symbolizes a “type” of girl that is usually framed as being, like the chonga, sexually available, immature, surrounded by men, and hostile toward other girls.

Most of the young woman’s body is decked in gold. The ornamentation makes her seem otherworldly and goddess-like but the tattoos that ring her arm and belly button situate her in contemporary culture. The tattoo, coupled with the frosty blue eye shadow she wears (which is considered out of step with current conventions of taste and style),

further signifies her as a “trashy” subject. The uniform that clothes the figure makes the quasi-mythical scene anachronistic. The lack of a contextualizing background in the photograph leaves the eye to wander ceaselessly around her body. Enticed and guided by the ornaments, the viewer, like her, is visually arrested by the body.

The green chroma-key background that frames the performances of Gispert’s cheerleaders divorces them from a social milieu and indexes them as “types” on view. *The New Times* employed a similar approach in their photographs of the *Chongalicious* performers in character, which are captured against an empty background. These images represent chongas as spectacles and stock characters in the manner of a blank background composition.



fig. 1.9, Luis Gispert *Untitled (Hoochy Goddess)* 2001

The *Cheerleader* series, completed soon after Gispert’s graduation from Yale’s Master of Fine Arts program, were ripe for commodification by the art world. In *The Miami Herald* article “Homecoming: Luis Gispert returns to his Miami roots as a major art world player” published on October 14, 2007, reporter Tom Austin introduces Gispert to the reader by recounting the unpredictable success of the *Cheerleader* series.

Austin explains how “Gispert’s image of an airborne cheerleader was featured in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, then bought by the Whitney and used in a Biennial advertising campaign.¹⁵” The chonga images successfully “branded” Gispert as an up-and-coming artist from the City that typifies *Scarface* action and Hip Hop bling. He has since exhibited work at the Royal Academy of Art in London, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, and Guggenheim—Bilbao, among other prestigious venues. The appeal of the chongasque girl as a symbol of Miami facilitated the success of the artist, which the City lauds in turn through the “local success story” discourse expressed in the article in order to highlight its cultural cache.

Art historian Krista Thompson extols Gispert’s work for the manner in which the visual excess of bling he features in his work make the *Cheerleader* images sonic, or “loud,” to use the term employed by the artist. She posits that the visual rhetoric of shine in Gispert’s images trouble scopic regimes of race that have commodified blackness (2009). I diverge from Thompson in my reading of the *Cheerleader* images, as I do not find them sonic. Instead of hearing, my eyes, in response to the absence of a mise-en-scène in the works, which perhaps could trigger an association with sound, continually survey the bodies of his models. In her article “The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop,” which compares the work of Gispert and Kehinde Wiley, another U.S. artist of color who cites contemporary racialized style vernaculars in his work, she draws parallels between the historical practice of greasing the skin of slaves to make them more attractive to buyers on the market, and the representational politics of donning conspicuous jewelry in hip hop culture and high art.

Thompson draws on Frantz Fanon’s rhetoric of “crushing objecthood” (1967) and Fred Moten’s (2003) critique of Marx’s notion that commodities cannot speak by framing slaves as examples of commodities with voices, to suggest that the visual excess of style in Gispert and Wiley’s works generate sounds, or voices, for black commodities/subjects.

15 The Miami Herald: “Homecoming: Luis Gispert returns to his Miami roots as a major art world player”, October 14, 2007.

Yet, in returning to Rey Chow's "The Politics of Admittance," and thinking about the differential experiences of women of color in the economy of race and visibility, we are reminded that, "Unlike the black man, who is considered a (wronged) sovereign subject, the woman of color is first of all an object with exchange value (2010, 60: emphasis in original)."

In appraising Gispert's use of the chroma key screen in *Cheerleaders*, Thompson writes,

But Gispert's Baroque juxtapositions [of art historical and hip hop inspired styles], like Wiley's, are not simply a contemporary restaging of an art historical representational script but rather a Brechtian unveiling of the visual effect of canonized modes of artistic production (ibid. 497: emphasis added).

I agree that Gispert's images emphasize the constructedness of representation by refusing to give the *Cheerleader* figures pictorial or personal depth, however, I do not believe that this emphasis on staging achieves the transgressive claims posited by Thompson when she suggests that Gispert's work ushers in a new politics of black representation that troubles normative modes of visibility. "The Sound of Light" argues that Gispert's emphasis on the hypervisibility and shine of bling, rather than reveal knowable and commodified subjects, in fact points attention to the limits of visibility.

My reading does not find that Gispert's photographs generate a vivid effect of light; more significantly, my visual analysis is attuned to the gender politics of the *Cheerleader* images that are unexamined in Thompson's analysis by noting how the semiotic work of Gispert's photographs is performed through the (re)presentation of primarily light-skinned and normatively gendered female bodies that, instead of being blurred and possibly freed of visual conscriptions from the blinding lights of bling, provide a visually pleasing and marketable surface that feeds the scopic demand for spectacular and knowable, often female, bodies.

Through the protection of parody, Gispert's surface aesthetics enable the adoption and positive valuation of chonga embodiment in the art world through referencing a

“ghetto fabulous” visual rhetoric that is found in popular portrayals of Miami that are successfully mobilized in mainstream culture through video games such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. However, his citation of the art historical canon and categorization of his work through the language of fine art, situate the images in a more highly valued cultural register, and provides a way for art collectors and institutions to feel fashionable, in the know, with an ear to the “streets.” The pleasure garnered from the chonga’s idolized visual representation, however, is not echoed in Miamians’ descriptions of her corporeal presence in their day-to-day encounters, for which she is derided.

Chonga embodiment has not only been a lucrative style to mobilize for artists from Miami. Images of chonga-esque young women featured in *The Hispanic Project* by celebrated contemporary New York based artist Nikki S. Lee comprised part of the *Projects* series of photographs that launched her career. *Projects* (1997-2001) documents the artist’s interactions with groups such as “punks”, “skaters”, and “yuppies”. She began work on the series several years after moving to the United States from South Korea to study fashion and photography in New York City. The artist would approach members of subcultural groups, explain her artistic project, and obtain permission to document her interactions with them as a character. Lee underwent physical transformations through weight gain and loss, make-up, and costume in order to situate herself in these milieus. The snapshot-style photographs serve to document the artist’s success in entering these “American” spaces and in the critical literature she has been described as a “chameleon” or someone “infiltrating” these various subcultures (Smith 2011: Kaplan 2005: Chase 2007; Lee 2008; Waltener 2004).

In *The Hispanic Project* Lee images herself posing primarily with other Latina women around New York City and her embodiment reflects the style of the Latina women she surrounds herself with. She dons low cut and stomach revealing tops, tight jeans, large gold hoop earrings, thick eye and lip liner and curly hair worn in long gelled tresses or gathered up in buns high atop her head. In the photographs Lee and her “friends” are

situated in informal, recreational settings such as the New York Puerto Rican Day Parade, hanging out at the beach, or engaged in animated conversations on building stoops in a New York neighborhood. In one of the few domestic scenes in the series she is shown tending laundry hanging outdoors in a tenement yard while she holds a small child on her hip. Her facial expressions in the photographs tend to be serious, as she performs the “tough” attitude of the Latina women she emulates.



(L) fig 1.10, caption Nikki S. Lee from *Projects 1997-2001, The Punk Project*;
(R) fig 1.11, caption, Nikki S. Lee from *Projects 1997-2001, The Yuppie Project*

Although Lee’s images are not as staged as those of Luis Gispert, who posed his chonga-esque girls against a green chroma key screen, there is a similar representational flatness to the works, as they redeploy stock representations of Latina young women carrying babies and displaying their bodies. As in Gispert’s work, Lee’s images of chonga-esque young women have proven to be consumable, as a close-up shot of the artist’s chonga-fied face in *The Hispanic Project* was used as the cover for the book on the *Projects* series, making it emblematic of the work as whole.

Although Lee utilizes make up and costume to craft a body that facilitates her engagement with other subcultures in the *Projects* series, *The Hispanic Project* is the only grouping of photographs that documents the artist applying makeup. This image represents the performativity that is associated with the sexual-aesthetic excess of Latina, chonga-esque style. In the photo the artist is not revealing to the viewer how she

modifies her own racialized body to fit into a group of Latinas, but how Latinas craft their subjectivities through aesthetic practice. The application of makeup is portrayed as constitutive of their identity.



figs 1.12 and 1.13, Nikki S. Lee from
Projects 1997-2001, The Hispanic Project

I do not intend to articulate a critique of Lee's images via a Cartesian mind over body valuation; in fact, my project in this dissertation is to plumb the politics of the body surfaces that Latinas craft. What I find is that Latinas are framed as performing their identity while in other images, such as those in *The Yuppie Project*, for example, race appears to be "natural," and not constructed through body practice. As feminist theorists such as Lauren Berlant (2008) and others have shown, constructs of abstract, disembodied personhood wield considerable power for those who can claim it.

Critics such as Louis Kaplan (2005) and Cherise Smith (2011) have noted how Lee's *Projects* convey voluntarist messages concerning the ability of all to surmount material realities and become whatever subject they choose through the consumption of various styles. Smith's analysis sheds light on the possible reasons why the work of Luis Gispert and Nikki S. Lee, which stage racialized sexual aesthetics that are typically denigrated in social discourse, have accrued so much value in the contemporary art world. In discussing *Projects* she states, "They embody the postmodern notion of the commoditized identity wherein tradition is one among many attributes used to gain

cultural capital and lure economic investment (Ibid. 209).” Smith suggests that these images traffic in discourses of neoliberalism and post-race colorblindness, while seemingly privileging the subject positions of minoritized groups. “Yet, the identifications portrayed in the photographs are freed from any social, political, and historical positioning that might lead them political or social action (Ibid.)”



fig 1.14, Nikki S. Lee from *Projects* 1997-2001, *The Hispanic Project*

Lee’s exploration of American life in the *Projects* series as an outsider looking in and capturing cultural “types” reminds me of the work of Spanish artist Victor Patrizio Landaluze, who traveled to and settled in Cuba in the 19th century. The representational legacy of Landaluze’s oeuvre is significant for considering the politics of chonga representation as his visual rhetoric both reflected and shaped what have been durable notions regarding the sexuality and beauty of dark and light skinned Cuban women, and chonga discourse emerges from a primarily Cuban American context. His work was fashioned in the style termed “costumbrismo,” a quasi-anthropological aesthetic that portrayed the customs and everyday life of the island. Rather than portray grand narratives, costumbrismo privileged documenting quotidian experiences for consumption among European populations both inside and outside of Cuba. Landaluze’s work, which

circulated through reproduction in popular publications and cigar labels, was popular in the island during his time, and articulated hegemonic notions about Africans and mixed-race mulatto/a subjects on the island that defined them as simple minded, exotic, and sexually depraved. His practice reinstated established colonial hierarchies of racialized beauty and sexual desirability, in which white femininity was figured as the most socially valued and desired form of sexual embodiment.



fig 1.15, Victor Patrizio Landaluze, *Jose Francisco*

Take for example his painting *Jose Francisco* (n. d.), in which a buffoonish black domestic slave is caught in the act of kissing a classically styled white marble bust of a European woman while his masters are away. Jose is shown puckering his lips up to the mouth of the stark white figure, whose cleavage is highlighted. The image comically portrays the inaccessibility of white females to black men, who are often depicted in Landaluze's work as lazy. The aesthetic excess and sensuality that attends the rococo style Landaluze drew upon in fashioning the domestic interior in the painting is a fitting backdrop for these racial erotics to play out, and the artist utilizes humor to contain the fear of black men's potential sexual access to white women through their presence in the home.



(L) fig. 1.16, Victor Patrizio Landaluze, *Damas En La Ventana* 1860
 (R) fig. 1.17, Untitled work attributed to Victor Patrizio Landaluze, n.d.

Performance studies scholar Jill Lane has analyzed Landaluze works like *En la ausencia* (In the absence, n.d.), which pictures a black female domestic servant putting on the airs of her white mistress while she is home alone. The servant holds a broom in her hand as she attempts to strike a dainty pose that is undermined by the massive bulge of material that is affixed to her raggedy clothes to fashion a makeshift bustle. Her head is cocked to the side against her shoulder as she pretends to smile at imagined admirers in an exaggerated controposto stance that accentuates her hips. The racial erotics signaled in the image are further complicated by the portrait of the handsome white master of the house that hangs on the wall directly above her. Lane writes,

This image, then, performs a certain exercise in the fantasy of Africanization and the crisis of surrogation it occasions: the white mistress is absent, and is replaced by the slave—the black surrogate is in the white woman's space, in her clothes, even in her physical stance. One imagines that the humor of the image—the idea that the surrogate fails to accurately impersonate the mistress—is meant to contain any fear such a surrogation might cause. Indeed, the image might work to reassure a racially panicked white population that such surrogation has no hope of succeeding, and I have no doubt that this was the dominant way the image was understood (2010, 20).

Again we find that the hyperbolic representation of sexualized Afro Cubans is mobilized to contain a threatening difference. In thinking of Landaluze's work we find a historical referent for the genealogy of visual tropes we have seen elaborated in representations of chongas. The rococo styled room in which Jose Francisco enacts his desire for the white female body recalls the room in which Selena Gomez encounters her chola counterpart in the MTV Euro Awards video, and the slave woman's mimicry of her white mistress is echoed in the posing of chonga girls as ridiculous figures in contrast to "classy," light skinned Latinas in media portrayals. Racialized Cuban women are not only framed in Landaluze's work as less beautiful than white women, but also as more sexually available. Note the contrast in the spatial positioning of white and mulatta women between his works *Damas En La Ventana* (Ladies at the window) of 1860 and an untitled painting¹⁶.

Street scenes centering on the everyday life of women were common subjects in Landaluze's work and the motif of women looking onto the streets through gated windows from their homes was often repeated. In comparing these paintings we find that the body of the white woman being romantically courted by a well-dressed man of European descent outside her home is much more concealed than the mulatta figures that populate and overcrowd their window. The arm of one of the ornately dressed mulattas in *Damas en la Ventana* rests on the iron gate and emerges from the window, transgressing the gendered boundary between the home and the street. In the untitled work, we only see the childlike, innocent face of the young white woman, and the remainder of her body is hidden behind the window covering. Whereas the white woman is approached with tenderness and responds with coyness, the conspicuous bodies of the young mulattas, overseen by an older, darker matron, seem to solicit sexual attention from passersby, and could be read as prostitutes.

The investment in valuing white femininity is a colonial legacy that continues

¹⁶ Thus far in my research I have not been able to verify the title or year of this work, but it has been consistently attributed to Landaluze.

to have a hold on visual discourses of Latina bodies and beauty. But I would also argue that there is a haunting ambivalence at play here as well. The denigration of excessive, racialized Latina embodiment does not result in their bodies becoming obscured in the visual field. The fear of the racial, sexual, gender, and class transgressions these bodies signal indeed result in their very hypervisualization. I suggest that the potent, ambivalent desire to gaze upon and disavow excessive Latina bodies is in fact what makes them marketable in visual culture. For example, images of mulatta women were commonly found in the quasi-fetish forms of cigar labels in 19th century Cuba, making their bodies consumable brands in multiple registers, as images of chongas in the artworld and media have also proven to be (Fraunhar 2008). My reading of *Damas en la Ventana* is shaped by ambivalence as well. Although I recognize that the image was crafted by and for a colonizing gaze, I admire the attitudes and adorned bodies of the mulattas Landaluze depicted, who seem to embody a measure of pleasure and power.

Imaging Sexual-Aesthetic Excess and Subjectivity

It is not my aim to frame the images in the YouTube video *Chongalicious*, Luis Gisbert's *Cheerleaders*, and Nikki S. Lee's *The Hispanic Project* as "bad" representations; rather, they function here in contrast to the depiction of chonga-esque young women in the artwork of the GisMo collective and Crystal Pearl. I am withholding such critique due to the unreliability and unknowability of representation as described by film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu, who holds that visual media are limited in their capacity to fully capture subjects and social experiences as the creative process involves complex negotiations of meaning making among those involved. Among other methodologies, Shimizu illustrates this unknowability and unreliability through interviews with Asian/American actresses who play stereotypical roles in works such as *Miss Saigon*. Shimizu describes how the actresses exhibit agency through making subtle changes in the narrative via their real-time performances (gestures, cadences) and illustrates how feminist Asian/American artists explore "taboo" or "non-normative

perverse” roles such as “whores” and “druggies” (Ibid. 20).

Shimizu’s work suggests that the models in Gispert’s works and participants in Nikki S. Lee’s photographs may have had some influence in how they were portrayed, and would further recognize that perhaps the *Cheerleader*, *Chongalicious*, and *Hispanic Project* images could be, or have been affirming to girls who are hailed by the chonga script. In what follows I draw a contrast between the rather one-dimensional representations of Latina sexual-aesthetic excess in the work of the *Chongalicious* producers, Gispert, and Lee and the more socially situated images created by the GisMo artist collective and Crystal Pearl. I consider how the work of these Latina women artists can push us to re-imagine the aesthetic politics, powers, and possibilities of Latina girl embodiment.



(L) fig 1.18, Paperdoll from GisMo (Jessica Gispert and Crystal Pearl) *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* 2007; (C) fig. 1.19, JDC girls’ designs; (R) fig. 1.20, “Candy Girl”

The artists of GisMo (Jessica Gispert and Crystal Pearl Molinary), who identified with chongas in their youth, were born and raised in the ethnic enclave of Hialeah-Miami Lakes, a largely working class Cuban exile community. In fact, Jessica Gispert is Luis Gispert’s younger sister, and takes an approach to imaging Latina bodies that is notably distinct from that of her brother. In *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* (2007) GisMo recalled their adolescent lives. The title of the piece stemmed from the interaction that occurred during GisMo’s workshop with girls at the Miami-Dade County

Juvenile Detention Center (JDC), in which a student suggested that I looked like a Bratz doll. Bratz dolls have a representational affinity to chongas, as Lush noted in the *Chongalicious New Times* story, “Bratz Dolls—the sexy-eyed, thick-lipped toys that have names like strippers (Jade, Roxxy, Valentina)—are chongalike in appearance”.¹⁷ Despite the view circulating in the media and among many feminist mothers that Bratz are bad role models, which I posit stems in part from concern over white girls adopting lower-class and racialized expressions of sexuality, the multiracial dolls are a fitting point of reference for GisMo’s project, as they sartorially embody the aesthetics employed by many teen girls of color in areas like Miami, New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles.¹⁸ GisMo’s project was part of an exhibition I curated for the Bas/Fisher Invitational alternative art space in Miami titled *MOD II: Discourses with Incarcerated Girls*, which featured works created by incarcerated girls in collaboration with local women artists through the Women on the Rise! program.¹⁹

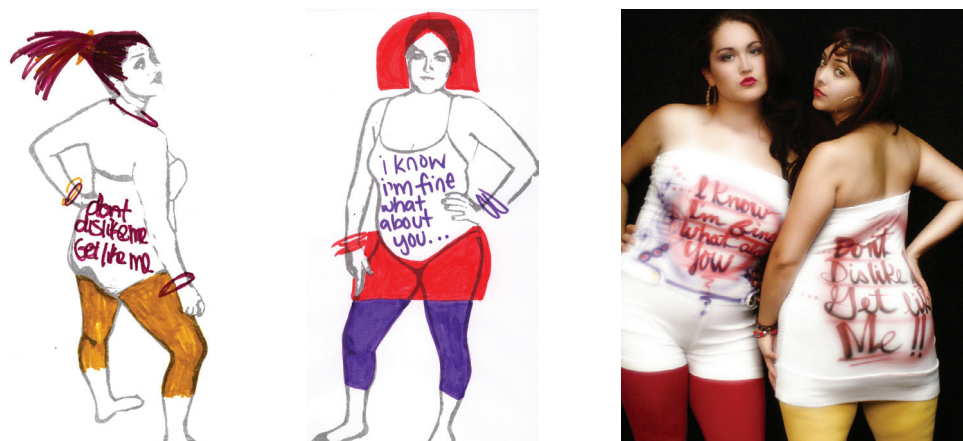
Gispert and Molinary provided the JDC girls with paper-doll style images of themselves that the students transformed into fictional characters with accompanying narratives. The girls used markers and colored pencils to design hairstyles, clothing, and accessories on the figures and envisioned everyday scenarios for their characters such as going to the movies or hanging out with friends. In *Candy Girl*, the figure of Jessica Gispert is transformed into a sexy character preparing to go on a date. She wears a clingy patterned skirt, fitted tank top (with accentuated cleavage and belly bulge), and strappy black heels. Other characters are more modestly dressed in dark, “Gothic” inspired styles.

17 Ibid. 20.

18 Bratz have been framed as “negative”, “sexualized” toys for girls in the following news stories and feminist blog: The New York Times: “Undressed and Hot: Dolls Moms Don’t Love” by Ruth La Ferla (October 26, 2003) and “Fishnets and All, Bratz Image Gets a Hollywood Polish” by Brook Barnes (July 16, 2007). The Daily Telegraph, UK: “Spoilt Bratz” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/fashion/main.jhtml?xml=/fashion/2007/01/28/stbarbie28.xml> Feminist blog: <http://womospace.wordpress.com/2007/09/04/we-will-not-slumber-until-every-woman-wakes-the-carnival-of-radical-feminists/>

19 The exhibition was on view from October through November 2007 and featured work that women artists created with female JDC girls through the *Women on the Rise!* outreach program. The museum worked with the JDC girls through a partnership with the Girls Advocacy Project, Miami.

In some works the girls portrayed the figures with wit and attitude, as in the pieces where the phrases “Don’t dislike me get like me.” and “I know I’m fine what about you?” are colorfully emblazoned on the artist’s bodies, and coupled with imaginative hairstyles (see reproductions below).



figs 1.21, 1.22, 1.23, Details from *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll*

GisMo created a series of photographs based on the girls’ designs and narratives. The photographs, which were later arranged into an album by the JDC girls, were displayed in the exhibition as if they were situated in the bedroom of a Miami teen. Visitors could sit at a bureau and view the girls’ original drawings, review the pictures in the album, and listen to popular music on headphones.

Growing up our bureaus were our altars, the place where we kept the relics of those we held close to our hearts. This almost insignificant space served as a sanctuary for day dreaming, reminiscing, and recollecting our thoughts. Where our bureaus were our altars—our slambooks were our bibles. In them we kept record of our friends, styles, and the minutia of everyday adolescent life. The girls at the detention center don’t get to have a bureau full of picture frames or photo albums housing their adolescent memories. In *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* we have collaborated with the girls to create a collective album of fictional Miami characters.²⁰

The girls framed their work in the context of friendship. In compiling and embellishing the album, they celebrated images of the artists looking bored at school, going to family

20 E-mail correspondence with author September 17, 2007.

parties, and modeling. In one section of the album, the girls gave the artists the names “Sam” and “Toni” and depicted them wearing trendy, alternative-rock inspired outfits. The images capture the characters going to their lockers and photographing themselves with a digital camera. The JDC girls hand-wrote and used stickers to add phrases such as “BFF” (best friends forever) and “girlfriends” to the “Sam-n-Toni” scrapbook page.



fig. 1.24 and 1.25 Installation view *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* at Bas/Fisher Invitational

There has been much concern over the last decade in girls’ studies and popular culture about relational aggression among girls, which have been engaged in films such as *Mean Girls* (2004), for example. Some would argue that the supported friendships the girls depicted in *Miss* are undermined by the conformity of the scantily dressed characters they crafted to hypersexual, mainstream, male-identified standards of attractiveness by looking like chongas or “hoochies”.²¹ However, my aim is to mine the power and political potential of these sexual-aesthetic excesses. As sociologist Julie Bettie observes of Mexican American girls who employed the chola style in middle school before adopting a less stylized, yet still ethnically and sexually marked mode of dress,

Las chicas’ [a term the girls used as self-referents] gender performance and girl culture worked, whether by intent or not, as a strategy to reject the prep version

21 “Hoochie” is a Slang term connoting low-class “slut” or “whore”.

of schooling but, despite appearances, were not necessarily designed to culminate in a heterosexual relationship. Some of the girls whose feminine performance appeared the most sexualized were actually the least interested in heterosexual relations, marriage, or children. Despite what appeared to be an obsession with heterosexual romance, a “men are dogs” theme was prevalent among them. They knew men could not be counted on to support them and any children they might have, and they desired economic independence.

And so their girl culture was less often about boys at all than about sharing in rituals of traditional femininity as a kind of friendship bonding among girls. (2003, 64: emphasis added)



fig. 1.26 and 1.27 Details from *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll* at Bas/Fisher Invitational

Unlike the typological women in *Chongalicious* and the *Cheerleader* series, who seem to perform in a vacuum, the “chongas” in GisMo’s work are subjects who have relationships and are connected to place. Although we see chongaesque young women’s relationships documented in Nikki S. Lee’s photographs, they are only staged in public spaces and do not communicate the texture of everyday life that is conveyed in *Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll*, through the text in the slambook and sketches that reveal the production of the works, and girls’ responses to them. The specificity of social context, reinforced by the manner by which the work was exhibited to encourage the interaction of viewers, makes the images difficult to categorize and fix. This form of refusal, however, does not entail

conforming to a normative position relative to a persistently white, sexually modest, and middle class standard of “healthy” girlhood in the United States. GisMo’s project can serve to complicate stock representations of girls of color through the articulation of their specific, contingent, and varying subjectivities.



fig 1.28, Women on the Rise! participants viewing
Miss, You Look Like a Bratz Doll at Bas/Fisher Invitational

The artists of GisMo have been pursuing solo careers since 2009. Artist Crystal Pearl has continued to explore how aesthetic practices define and are expressive of Latina identities in her work. In the video *Off the Chain* (2009) Pearl dons a wig of straight, black, long hair, a purple tube top that displays her cleavage, and is regaled with jewelry, thus the playful title *Off the Chain*. *Off the Chain* does not only reference the jewelry she wears but also references the slang phrase “off the chain,” which describes something that is so good it cannot be contained. Pearl purposefully crafted this image to embody a chonga character. She articulates the concept of the piece on her website as follows, “Chongas, often portrayed as hardened, unsentimental, tough girls tend to have a soft side too²².”

In the short video piece Pearl takes on a heavy Latin@ accent and shares stories with the viewer while looking directly at the camera about how she came to own the jewelry she wears. In the first few seconds of the video it seems as if she is simply

22 <http://www.misscrystalpearl.com/video/art/>, accessed September 11, 2012.

performing the role of a “ditzzy” young woman obsessed with appearance but as she speaks we learn that the jewelry she wears stems from and is symbolic of relationships that are significant in her life. The video opens with a statement by the character that seems to respond to negative attention she has received due to the amount of jewelry she wears. As the video opens she says, “So maybe you’ve seen that I wear a lot of jewelry and you’re wondering why. Well, because, I like the way it sounds [Pearl jingles the bangles on her wrist]. And also, because, it means stuff to me.” Pearl’s character pedagogically explains to the viewer the meanings of each of the charms on her gold chain necklace and of a ring on her finger. She describes how the ring was given to her by her first boyfriend. One of her charms was a gift from her grandmother, and the heart on her chain was given to her by her parents and keeps their heart close to hers. She further explains how the charm she wears of La Caridad del Cobre, the patron Virgin Mary of Cuba, and the azabache²³ on the chain, help her maintain faith and protect her from evil eye.



figs. 1.29; 1.30; 1.31; Crystal Pearl, stills from *Off the Chain*, 2009

The camera angle remains in an extreme close-up throughout the video, which emphasizes her face and chest as she continually plays with her hair and the rings on

²³ This term describes a black stone that is typically worn by Cubans to ward off evil eye. It is traditionally presented as a gift for newborn children.

her hands as she talks. The viewer's eye is drawn to the shine of the jewelry and the movement of her hands as she gesticulates. It is not only the character's explanation of the significance of the jewelry that gives the viewer a more profound appreciation of her style but the emphasis on the aesthetics of the accessories themselves, and the lovely sounds they make, that articulate how donning "excess" amounts of jewelry can be a practice informed by artistic, spiritual, identitarian, and emotional considerations.

In her essay "Shine: On Race, Glamour, and the Modern," critical theorist Anne Alin Cheng conducts a close reading of Anna May Wong's performance in a gilded costume in the 1929 film *Piccadilly*. Cheng focuses her attention on a major scene in the film in which Wong's character Shosho, who plays a Chinese dishwasher, was discovered by a nightclub owner and conducts her first public performance in a glittery ballroom. Cheng's analysis of Wong's performance elaborates her theorization of a new mode of thinking style, race, and women of color embodiment by examining how the shine of glamour aesthetics provide ways for racialized women to negotiate subjectivity and "objectness." Rather than view objectness as a dangerous state, Cheng instead plumbs the possibilities of objectness for enabling, albeit temporary, escapes from the pressures of performing "authentic" racial and gendered personhood. In discussing the radiating gleam of the gold costume worn by Wong, Cheng states, "In *Piccadilly* the spectacularization of "yellow skin"—the moment that should have been equivalent to Fanon's "Look, a Negro..."—coincides instead with that skin's displacement (2011:1031)." She further writes,

Glamour's shellacked beauty reminds us that the presentation of self as object for consumption coexists with the rendering of that self as indigestible...It may seem counterintuitive or dangerous to talk about the raced and sexualized body's longing to be thinglike or to disappear into things, but it is the overcorporealized body that may find the most freedom in fantasies of corporeal dematerialization, or, alternatively, of material self-extension (Ibid:1031-32).

We can think of Pearl's chonga character as performing the latter. The jewelry extends

the embodied self not only through shine but through sound, and movement, resulting in her occupation of social space and simultaneous protection, not only through charms endowed with special powers, but through signifying a style that is associated with women who talk, and fight back. Although chongas have a soft side, it is up to them to decide whom to reveal that to.

The character concludes the video by stating, “I love everybody that gives me jewelry, and I love all my jewelry, and I love wearing my jewelry because it reminds me of the people that I love.” For poor and working class young women of color, relationships, religion, and valuable objects like jewelry take on added significance for sustaining and surviving life (Berlant 2008). I recall obtaining similar charms from family members as a child and also have memories of my mother and grandmother using their jewelry, the only objects of value that they owned, to pawn and get through tough financial situations. Latina women’s embodiments of sexual aesthetic excess can articulate the few pleasures that attend challenging lives. If life isn’t *Off the Chain*, at least our bodies can be.

Conclusion: Class is Burning

Chongas are subjected to makeovers that aim to re-craft them into normative embodiments. Note how the one Latina in the expensive line of *American Girl* brand dolls is dressed in traditional, indigenous Mexican inspired garb, with a long skirt, white cotton peasant blouse, and shawl. Her straight, charcoal black hair parted in the middle and tied back. According to the *American Girl* narrative about the doll, Josefina lives in a in another time, 1824, prior to the Mexican American war. She is an identity that harkens back to U.S. westward expansion, and does not embody the threat of contemporary immigration. Whereas the white “historical” American Girl dolls live in various eras from the 19th century through the 1970s, the black, Native American, and Latina characters remain fixed in the 1800s. A chongaesque Bratz doll would be a decidedly queer presence in this nation of “American Girls.”

Yet, beyond a policing of the body that aims to regulate the ethno-racial identity politics that chongas code, I suggest that class bias is at the core of her denigration. The racialized rhetoric that attends discussion of chongas speaks the class discrimination that cannot be recognized. The paradox of chonga discourse is that their bodies are no more sexualized than those of Latina celebrities such as J.Lo and Sofia Vergara, yet, their status as celebrities place them in an economic position that legitimizes their body work as sexy but “classy,” and as constituting part of their demanding jobs.

In theorizing the powers and politics of chonga embodiment I engage with Judith Butler’s analysis of class, gender, and racial appropriation and subversion in the film *Paris is Burning* (1990). The film documents drag competitions held by gay men of color in New York City in the 1980s, which were organized around highly codified categories such as “butch queen” and “executive realness.” The primary criterion that measured an effective performance in the ballroom circuit was the achievement of “realness,” a body whose considerable crafting work in embodying a category could not be read on the surface. Butler finds that the manner in which these queer subjects attempted to emulate normative tropes of gendered embodiment “...might be understood as repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat royally, and, in that failure, open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims (1993: 84).”

Chongas are perceived as too easily read for the fakery they perform, recall the *Chongalicious* video lyrics, “You could see me, you could read me.” In contrast to the body work and appropriations practiced by the queer men in *Paris is Burning*, what constitutes an effective chonga performance is in fact *a reading*. I would not frame the citations of gender, race, and class chongas perform as uniformly subversive, in fact, these practices often emerge from unromantic realities of limited budgets and life in marginalized spaces. Whether they intend to or not, however, chonga styles make class burn. Class becomes visible on their bodies, and the power of this coding is especially

policed because it is not marked by shame (Stein 2006).

I am concerned with how the arguments in scholarship on girls of color such as the *Urban Girls* anthologies place emphasis on how they *resist* stereotypes. My position does not hold that these girls are indeed just like the harmful negative typologies that circulate about them. Yet I am loathe to stress their subversion and resistance as if they should be ashamed of being loud, sexual, aggressive, and lower/working class, if that is how they view themselves. I have used works like the *Urban Girls* anthologies as resources and recognize that they address issues that the predominant girls' studies discourses on white, middle-class subjects do not. However, girls' scholars should consider the question of who becomes excluded in frameworks regarding healthy girlhood and stereotype resistance.

I have observed that most popular/academic books on "troubled" girls usually have images of sexualized, sullen or angry white young women on their covers.²⁴ Contrastingly, yet equally problematic, the covers of the *Urban Girls* anthologies present images of girls that have literally been "white-washed". The cover of the first anthology edited by Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way in 1998 features a young African American girl dressed in white and smiling as she is bathed in sunlight. In *Urban Girls Revisited*, edited by Ross Leadbeater and Way in 2007, a group of girls of color wearing white shirts pose together and smile. The design of the cover has altered the photograph so that it is tinged with a grainy light lavender color. These images reinforce notions of "good" and "bad" girls. White girls are framed as needing a "rescue" that will return them to normalized bourgeois subjectivity as they are starting to engage in sexual and aggressive behavior due to the "toxic" gendered representations found in popular culture.

Girls of color, who have been historically characterized as hypersexual in the dominant culture, are framed as being in need of an image makeover in order to be perceived as "good" subjects who are unlike stereotypes. Would a book on girls'

24 Examples include Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown's *Packaging Girlhood* (2006), Rachel Simmon's *Odd Girl Out* (2003), James Garbarino's *See Jane Hit* (2006), and *Aggression, Antisocial Behavior, and Violence among Girls* (2004), edited by Martha Putallaz and Karen L. Beirman.

empowerment be marketable if it had a picture of a chonga-esque girl on its cover? Or would her image work best in selling books on “troubled” girls? What is the message we send to girls who do not conform to normative bourgeois conventions of dress and behavior? Shimizu’s project calls on feminist and critical race scholars to complicate approaches to stereotype analysis as many critiques of sexual representations of women can “unconsciously get caught up in an agenda of moralism and propriety” (ibid 18).

I call for a shift away from stereotype critiques of girls’ representations that generate moral panics and reinstate the normal *toward* reflexive critical analysis that is framed by the sexual politics of queer theory and examines how embodiment and representation affect girls’ lives on the ground. Like the chonga girl whose makeshift memorial I pass regularly as I walk through the parking lot of the Museum of Contemporary Art where I work as a youth educator. Her name is Paola Cordoba and she was killed in a fight in April 2011 with another young woman outside of a bar in North Miami, Florida that is in close proximity to the museum. Real chonga girls live real lives, and their public, hypervisible bodies, instead of making us laugh, should remind us of the pride, performativity, pleasure, and struggles of Latina existence.



figs. 1.32; 1.33; Author photograph of shrine for Paola Cordoba

CHAPTER 2

Style Blues:

The Pleasures and Pains of Black Young Women Crafting Masculinities

Let me tell you about the REAL WORLD of girls/ of Black gay aggressive girls/like Sakia. Nope/ we ain't ever played with plastic kitchens and we never dreamed about playing with Barbie/ We were in love/with girls/ and we didn't think we had a problem/I am not sorry.

--Script of SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths) Performance "The Rhythm, the Rhyme, and the Reason."

*It's true I wear a collar and a tie
Makes the wind blow all the while
Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
You sure got to prove it on me.*

--Ma Rainey, *Prove It On Me Blues*

When I asked Dimple, one of my research participants, what her ideal embodiment would be she replied:

Dimple: *My hair the way it is, picked up. It would be shaved, plaited¹. A tattoo of a money sign behind my ear; some big diamond earrings—some grills². My eyebrow piercing. Snake bites³. A red and black stripe Polo. Some Dickies, some red and black Jordans. A red and black fitted⁴. A gold Jesus diamond piece⁵. Tattoos up to here [sleeves from the elbow to the shoulder area of the arms]. A gold bracelet.*

JH: *And how would you feel in this look?*

Dimple: *I'd feel raw⁶ as hell. People would think that I'm a rich ass dyke [chuckling].*

JH: *What do you think people who would see you out in public think about this look?*

Dimple: *If they were straight girls they'd be like, "She looks like a boy." And if they were gay they'd be like, "That girl is fine as hell."*

JH: *How about boys?*

-
- 1 Braided.
 - 2 Gold tooth caps.
 - 3 Two lower-lip piercings.
 - 4 Fitted, non-adjustable, baseball cap.
 - 5 A gold charm of a Jesus figure.
 - 6 Raw is slang for something that is really "cool."

Dimple: *They'd say, "Is that a bitch?!" It's funny to me, I laugh when it happens.*

Dimple's description of her look is rich with detail that conjures textures, patterns, colors, designer labels, and the shine of gold and heavy ornamentation of tattoos and piercings. The references to grills, fitteds, diamond pieces, Polos, Nikes, and Dickies articulate her mastery over key elements in a fresh masculine contemporary hip hop style as embodied by black rapper Plies, who was mentioned as a style inspiration by Dimple and some of the other girls in the study. Dimple was 16 at the time of the focus group and described her race and ethnicity as Hispanic.

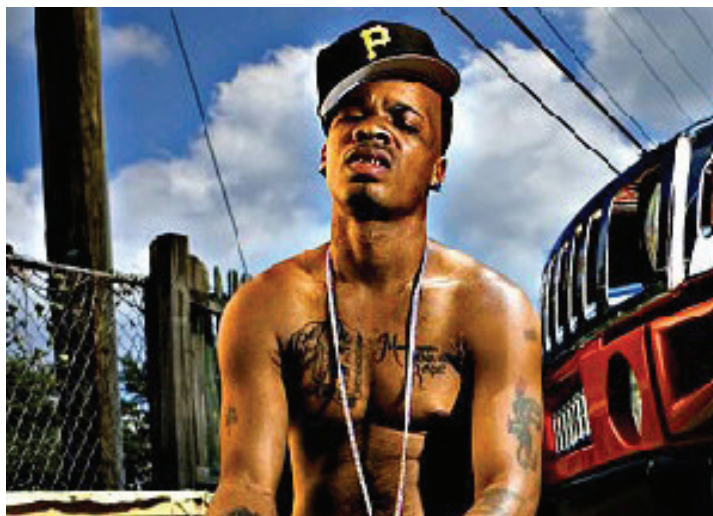


fig. 2.1, caption, Rapper Plies

Despite being very soft spoken she was confident when sharing her ideal embodiment in the focus group and seemed comfortable discussing her ideas with the other girls and myself. Though Dimple was able to be open about her lesbian sexuality and masculine mode of embodiment she was sometimes the butt of jokes by girls in her therapy group at a drug rehabilitation institution in Miami that has a residential program for adolescent girls. For example, when I brought a bag of Hershey Kisses to the group one day and asked them to distribute it girls laughed when Dimple asked me if I wanted a kiss. When she brushed by me by accident during class one of the girls sardonically joked, "Miss, she's just trying to touch you." Although the discourse on sexuality was

relatively open among that group of girls in general, Dimple's sexuality drew particular and often teasing commentary. Though their banter was never mean spirited and she often would laugh with and tease the other girls in turn, interactions like these demonstrated how Dimple's non-normative gender presentation and sexual subjectivity had to be regularly negotiated through humor by the girls in order to facilitate her inclusion as the only lesbian, masculine bodied member of the group.

Dimple would commonly wear her long, wavy black hair back in a simple high ponytail and the sides of her head were shaved. She wore no makeup and would often wear Bermuda shorts, simple Polo style shirts, and brand name high top sneakers. The kind of self esteem she expressed when she made statements such as, "They'd be like 'That girl is fine as hell!,'" were expressed by her nonverbally through the sure way she carried her tall, broad frame and her bright, easy going smile. She exuded confidence despite sharing how she experienced bullying in public by boys and telling me that her family would disapprove of the tattoos and gold jewelry that she would acquire if she could, "My mom would say that's low class."

Through references to the high class aspirations of her mother it seems that the racial associations of the jewelry and tattoos Dimple desires are understood by her mother as reflecting the "low class" connotation of hip hop culture, which is predominantly associated with black masculinity and poor street life. For Latina girls, especially light-skinned Latina girls like Dimple in Miami, with its powerful conservative leaning, white identifying Latino population, the aesthetic excess of tattoos and gold jewelry, and their attendant references to blackness, are causes for correction in the embodiments of masculine Latina girls or chonga-esque girls who are inspired by hip hop fashions.

Despite the loss of the protections and privileges afforded to girls who embody normative femininities, girls like Dimple and others in my study described ways in which their masculine styles afforded them social status (rich ass dyke) and sexual attention (they'd be like that girl is fine as hell). An African American, masculine, student in a

Women on the Rise! class in summer 2011 once described a fantasy scenario to her friend while working on her paper sculpture project in which she would dress up like a successful business man in order to lure a good looking woman to her home and that when they would finally be alone, she would reveal her body, and assuage the woman's anger at her deceit by performing amazing oral sex. Dimple succinctly references the sexual prowess that her style would enable in her statement about girls thinking she would be "fine" in her ideal embodiment, but in a later focus group consisting of all black lesbian identified youth from Pridelines Youth Services, a non-profit organization that serves queer youth, participants provided much more detailed descriptions of how their masculine fashion choices affect their sexual interactions with other girls and women.

My arguments in this chapter primarily draw from my conversations with the young women of color at Pridelines during Women on the Rise! classes and focus group discussions held in 2011 and 2013. I blend ethnographic and cultural analysis in my examination of how these young women embody, theorize, and judge masculine styles. I also interpret the work of black lesbian cultural producers and discuss how they are received among the Pridelines participants. My vacillation from the everyday to the cultural attends to the dynamic ways in which subjectivities are produced through the consumption and reading of cultural texts. The manner in which these young women respond to media signals reveal the ways in which they make sense of class positions, gender, sexuality, and embodiment.

This chapter centers on masculinity, and on the politics of masculinity embodied by black young women in particular, in response to the dynamic discussion on the topic that emerged during my first focus group at Pridelines. The participants in this group who embodied masculine styles were black African American, Haitian American, and Jamaican American young women. I did not pose the topic of masculinity outright, it emerged from the conversation about body styles among the group.

The young women who were present at my initial focus group at Pridelines in

2011 all self-identified as lesbian. I did not make this a criterion for inclusion in the study, and Pridelines serves youth with a range of racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identities. These were the young women who were regularly attending Women on the Rise! classes hosted by Pridelines at the time. When the initial focus group was conducted I had already been working with the participants at Pridelines through the Women on the Rise! program for several months.

In a later focus group session I conducted at Pridelines in 2013, participants consisted of five black young women and one Latina. Sexual identification was more varied among this group, some stating that they were bi-sexual and others defining themselves as lesbians. The focus group session in 2013 consisted of new participants with the exception of Q and Alaika, who by the time of this writing I have known for about a year and a half.

The perspectives of young women of color are missing from or marginal in theoretical work concerning gender identity, sexuality, race, and embodiment (Butler 1993; Halberstam 1998 and 2005; Pascoe 2007; Muñoz 1999 and 2009), this is true even in the field of queer of color critique (Holland 2012). In this dissertation they are at the center. I am interested in understanding how the styling practices of these young women produce their identities, and in the circulation of race, class, and sexual discourses their bodies generate and reflect. The stakes are high for black gender non-conforming young women whose bodies are read through racist and heteronormative logics that subject them to violence and harassment. These are bodies that do not fit stock narratives of proper subjectivity and victimhood (Wanzo 2008).

Take for example the loss of life of Sakia Gunn, a masculine black lesbian teenager who was murdered in 2003 while waiting for a bus in Newark, New Jersey. She was fatally stabbed by a man who was angered at her rejection of his sexual advances and her masculine body presentation. She died on May 11th, early in the morning after spending the night at the piers in Chelsea, New York City, a place where queer youth

meet and socialize. The lack of national media attention on and social outrage at the crime showed how Sakia's black, gender dissident body was not a suitable subject of sympathy or justice.

In "Nobody Knows Her Name: Making Sakia Legible," gender scholar Kiana Green recounts how learning about the story of Gunn's murder filled her with fear for her safety as she herself is a black masculine woman. In the essay she describes how in the effort to assert the value of Sakia's life to the state in the court case charging Richard McCullough with her murder, the Gunn family cited Sakia's clean criminal record and good behavior. Green notes how the family's characterization of Sakia's status as a "proper subject" was crafted through a studied silence regarding her gender non-conformity and lesbian sexuality. Green posits,

Because there seems to be less talk of Sakia's sexuality and her gender transgressiveness, it also makes space for the silence to exist regarding the reality of this being a hate crime. To announce these *deviancies* would be to make her less legible to the state as valuable, in the same way she may have been made less valuable if she had been a drug dealer or a prostitute. Hence the public mourning attempts to make Sakia's death *mean* politically precisely through its appeals to codes of respectability, the very codes that make her sexuality "unspeakable" even as her masculine gender-presentation silently haunts the scene (Green 2009, n.p.: emphasis in original).

Green shows how Sakia's gender non-conformity not only marked her as a target for heterosexist violence but also limits the possibilities for her protection by the state. Black female masculine embodiment crafts a precarious subject position.

In the previous chapter I investigated how the ethnic, hyperfeminine, sexual-aesthetic excess of chonga styles has been and continues to be disparaged among young women in South Florida, and in the discourses surrounding Latina chonga girls in culture and media more broadly. Focus groups revealed that it is not only hyperfeminine excess that is to be avoided in order to fashion an acceptable embodiment for young women, but masculinity is an equally, if not more vilified mode of aesthetic expression. I do not wish to suggest that the modes of over-conformity and non-conformity signified by masculine

and chongaesque styles are commensurate—however, they do similar cultural work by signifying non-normative difference. I frame chonga and what the young queer women in my study term masculine “stud” styles as distinct iterations of sexual-aesthetic excess. The sexual-aesthetic excess of masculine stud fashions the young women in my study embody are negatively judged through rhetorics of sexual, gender, and racial otherness that police their performance of class.

How do neoliberal class(less) politics subject masculine bodied girls to regulation? How is race imbricated in their styles and in what ways does race determine how their styles are read? I investigate how their body crafting affords them access to sexual partners, how parents and peers affect their styling practices, and the manner in which some participants framed their presentation of a masculine body as constituting the expression of an “ego,” or subject position. I do not intend for their experiences to represent gender non-conforming young women of color in a general sense, but do contend that their narratives can open up new avenues for theorizing the dynamics of contemporary formations and entanglements of race, class, gender, sexuality, and embodiment.

My Pridelines participants had divergent views about body politics that sometimes irrupted into heated arguments, and they practiced different forms of self-fashioning. One of my participants expressed and valued gender fluidity by embodying the style of a “stem,” a term that merges the words stud and femme. According to my participants, a stem is a lesbian who moves in out of masculine and feminine body presentations. Some participants challenged normative gender constructs by questioning assumptions regarding the correlation of gender attributes with biological traits. Despite these expressions of gender subversion, most of my Pridelines students drew on normative gender constructs to make sense of their bodies and the bodies of others, attesting to the durability and power of hegemonic gender regimes. As anthropologist Don Kulick has shown in his book *Travesti*, which examines the body practices of transgendered

prostitutes in Brazil, non-normative gender presentation can uphold established gender structures even as they appear to undermine them (1998). Although my students expressed an investment in conventional gender logics, I argue that their practices are nonetheless refashioning what it means to be “masculine,” and are claiming masculinity for what they view their “female” bodies.

None of my students described their body practices as forms of transvestism, transgender, or transsexual practice; in fact, I will discuss how many of them expressed cissexism. Most participants at Pridelines framed gender non-conforming modes of dress in relation to conventional notions of biological sex. Many valued and legitimated butch styles through emphasizing that donning masculine clothing did not alter the fact that studs were “real” women when all is said and done. Furthermore, the masculine bodied young women in my study often articulated their masculine performances through heterosexist tropes and logics.

Normative conceptions of biological sex and its conflation with gender also undergirded the narratives of non-masculine identified young women at Pridelines who critiqued what they viewed as the replication of heterosexist gender relations between studs and femmes. These participants launched their critique through rhetorics that stressed notions of masculinity as inherently belonging to male sexed bodies and femininity as belonging to female sexed bodies. Butch lesbians were framed in their critique as imitators of men who perpetuate gender stereotypes and craft their bodies at the expense of women, understanding butch body practice as sustaining and reproducing male domination. In these ways, the debates I will describe among participants in this chapter echo those of the 1970s, in which butch-femme lesbians were vilified by some feminists for reifying traditional gender roles.

The issue of butch-femme body presentation continues to strike a nerve, and is mired in politics of class and race, as well as those of sexuality and gender. In response to the denigration of butch-femme roles among feminists, scholars and writers such as Joan

Nestle, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, and Madeline D. Davis have shown how rather than reproduce heterosexism, butch-femme marked gender and sexual non-normative difference, and served as a mode of social and sexual organization for lesbians of the 1930s through 1950s.

Butch-femme aesthetics were less visible in the 1960s and 1970s due in part to the influence of feminist politics. In the essay “All Dressed Up, But No Place to Go?: Style Wars and the New Lesbianism,” sociologist Arlene Stein examines its resurgence in the hyper-consumer culture of the late 1980s, “Eighties butch-femme—if it can accurately be termed such—is a self-conscious aesthetic that plays with style and power, rather than an embracing of one’s ‘true’ nature against the constraints of straight society (1992, 434-435).” Stein notes how the late 1980s not only augured a return of butch-femme but also occasioned the commodification of feminine “lipstick” lesbian styles that were appropriated by pop icons such as Madonna. These body practices indicated a kind of “lifestyle” lesbian existence centered on apolitical, post-feminist, neoliberal notions of personal choice and consumption.

My masculine gender performing participants blend the discourses of an inner masculine “ego” with notions of gender presentation as a kind of choice that is marked by the consumption of particular brands and clothing items. The historical, subcultural context for situating the body work of these black young women does not follow the dominant narrative of lesbian style in feminist and LGBTQ studies through a trajectory that begins in working class bar cultures of the 1930s-1950s, is followed by a suppression of butch-femme embodiment during the radical feminist eras of the 1960s-1970s that worked to eliminate codified gender presentation, and developed into the more consumer based body practices of the 1980s that continue today. The young women I work with are black, and as such have different positions in relation to the formations butch-femme sexual aesthetics.

In Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community,

Kennedy and Davis describe how the participation of black lesbians in the butch-femme bar culture in Buffalo, New York of the 1930s through 1950s was constrained due to institutionalized racism. Black lesbians developed an alternative scene that centered on house parties that would be held on the weekends, often running from Friday night through Sunday evening, with breaks for church in between. Although for many white lesbians of the era embodying a butch aesthetic entailed drawing upon signifiers of working class masculinity, such as rolled up blue jeans and t-shirts, Kennedy and Davis note that black masculine lesbians, termed “studs” in addition to butches, would often craft their bodies through more elegant and expensive fashions. They write,

Studs had high standards for dressing up, and often cut an elegant image in three-piece suits...black lesbians adopted this more formal look even on week nights... Whenever they went out they wore starched white shirts with formal collars and dark dress pants. Their shoes were men’s Florsheim dress shoes worn with dark nylon socks. They had their hair processed and wore it combed back at the sides and cut square at the back. Studs put a great deal of money and energy into their clothes, buying the best (1993: 163-164).

I find the fastidiousness of stud style of decades back echoed in the descriptions of stud dress by my Pridelines student Q, who works to craft a formal stud embodiment consisting of sleek, tailored, expensive clothes. In *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Fashioning of a Diasporic Identity* (2009), literary theorist Monica Miller has shown how the donning of fine clothes by black subjects has and continues to be a form of oppositional politics that signifies subjectivity and difference in the face of exploitation and racism.

Sociologist Mignon Moore has described how black lesbians continued to utilize butch-femme presentations of gender to structure their social and sexual relationships in the 1970s. In discussing the divergence between black and white lesbian styling practices at this time she states,

Black lesbians maintained a physical distance from white lesbian-feminists and were less often subjected to the assaults directed at gender presentation in their

relationships. Since many black women were never fully part of white lesbian-feminist leadership or on board with all of its goals, they were less influenced by efforts to replace butch and femme identities with androgynous presentations of self (2006, 117).

Stein (1997) has discussed how part of the denigration of butch-femme by feminists of the 1970s stemmed from a critique of capitalism and the fashion industry for determining the imperative for women to embody normative femininities. Race shifts these dynamics in consideration of the politics of butch-femme practices in African American communities. I contend that the critique of capitalism and renunciation of consumption launched by white feminists in the 1970s stemmed from a position of *privilege* not available to black women. Deciding not to participate in the market was a political *choice* made by subjects who as a social group had more purchasing power than their black lesbian counterparts. These class differences make the politics of butch-femme, and its critique, critically different when analyzed through race.

Though I recognize that the market has benefited from the commodity desires of many black lesbian studs that have strived to craft bodies marked through the consumption of luxury items, I would not frame their styling practices as indicating a lack of politics or financial pathology. Rather, following the work of Elizabeth Chin in *Purchasing Power* (2001), I locate politics in the acquisition and donning of fashion commodities through which black subjects claim a position in the capitalist economy that has historically exploited them, and from which they have continued to be excluded. The seemingly irrational and self-harming indulgences of poor and working class lesbians provide significant pleasures and technologies for expressing their subjectivities. I will show how these commodity items provide avenues to sexual pleasure for queer masculine black girls.

Masculinity and Sexual Access

One of the girls I worked with at Pridelines through Women on the Rise! was

Wicky, a 17 year-old light skinned black teenage girl of West Indian heritage who prided herself on her academic success and was active in her school soccer team. At the time she had short, straightened black hair that reached her chin and framed her round face. Her eyes were big and brown, and she had a wide smile that would reveal her sparkling braces. Wicky would often arrive at Women on the Rise! evening sessions at Pridelines in her athletic gear and was an outgoing member of the group, usually gossiping with friends at the center about who they were “hooking up” with. Her description of the clothing she would wear as part of her ideal look was simple, “No braces. On a normal day I’m in some nice comfy boxers and some nice low jeans to show the boxer line--and a simple shirt.” When I asked her, “What is it that you like about your boxer shorts and your jeans?,” she exclaimed, “Oh my god do you know how sexy that is?!”

JH: *Because you find it sexy in other people?*

Wicky: *No! Because girls find it sexy in ME!*

JH: *What do you think girls like about it?*

Wicky: *It’s cute, it’s attractive.*

JH: *But what do you think they like about it? Is it sexy because it’s underwear? Is it sexy because it’s masculine?*

(At this point Q interjects): *It’s just sexy. It’s masculine. I associate that with a masculine female. So I’m just like take off the pants (starts chuckling).*

Wicky: *No, it’s serious! When I go to my.....um...friend, that’s at FIU⁷ and I have just this much showing [indicating with her fingers an inch or so of boxers] it makes things much better.*

In this passionate and playful commentary Wicky and Q indicate that masculine clothing items such as boxer shorts, which carry heavy connotations of heteronormative masculinity, heighten the erotic charge of their encounters with other women. In the conversation it seemed that what makes the donning of boxer shorts erotic is that it is known by the parties involved in the sexual exchange that there is not a penis under the

pants and boxer shorts.

Part of what drives the desire is the subversion of femininity, the incorporation of masculinity that the boxer shorts symbolize, and the attendant associations of visible underwear with a “cool” masculine sexuality. The showing of boxer shorts under pants has been a trend among young men in hip hop and skateboarding subcultures since the 1990s and has carried on with the hipster and emo styles that have become popular more recently. The style practices Q and Wicky describe enables the femme girls who are attracted to masculinity but not men, to enjoy masculine corporeal embodiment while engaging in sexual relationships with women, and boosts the confidence of the masculine women and girls who are their partners.

When I asked Wicky how her ideal look would make her feel she responded, “Like if I could pull any ho.” Masculine dress provides a method for her to feel that she could attract any girl of her liking, yet this technology is supported by a heteronormative and misogynist attitude of sexual prowess as “pulling hos.” A recurrent pattern in the focus group among some of the young women at Pridelines was the articulation of sexist attitudes towards women, particularly women who were perceived to be sexually promiscuous and/or dress in sexually suggestive ways. These negative judgments demonstrated how even when the girls expressed a flexible attitude toward gender constructs through the masculine styles they purposefully embodied, they often theorized their practices within the constraints of heteronormative and sometimes misogynist gender logics.

Sociologist C.J. Pascoe found similar articulations of heteronormativity by the masculine “basketball girls” in her study *Dude You’re a Fag*, in which she examines how masculinity is defined, embodied, performed, and policed by students in a suburban California high school. In describing how the basketball girls upheld hegemonic constructs of masculinity she writes, “They reinscribed the gender order by engaging in many of the dominance practices that constitute adolescent masculinity, such as taking

up space, teasing girls, and positioning themselves as sexually powerful (Ibid. 133).”

Although there is nothing inherently wrong with taking up space or feeling sexually powerful, as these have been behaviors that have not been socially sanctioned for young women and which have placed them in subjugated positions in their personal and social lives, it seems that the only model they have for engaging in these behaviors and feelings is the hegemonic masculinity performed by young men.

Some participants felt that their masculine style of dress would enhance their sex lives but for other young women masculine dress presented challenges to their dating life. This was a topic discussed by Q, a tall, dark skinned African American woman with shoulder length dread locks who is a mentor figure much loved by the young women at Pridelines. Q, age 24 at the time, has a warm and generous personality and often had profound commentary and critiques to share during Women on the Rise! sessions. Her then girlfriend Alaika accompanied her in the focus group, and is also a regular participant at Women on the Rise! classes.

The role that gender and dress played in their relationship was an issue raised by Q in the 2011 focus group discussion. Her ex-partner Alaika is a masculine gender presenting, light skinned, Haitian American young woman who at the time had short, dread locked hair. Alaika dressed in baseball caps, Bermuda shorts, low, flat-bottomed sneakers often worn by skateboarders, studded belts, and t-shirts. Alaika is one of the most vocal members of the group at Pridelines and was often the center of attention with her consistent cracking of jokes and animated commentary.

Q’s style would range from feminine floral dresses and sandals to basic jeans, sneakers, and t-shirts. Although she described the highly masculine style of her alter ego Kevin Xavier Thomas in the focus group, at the time I never saw her embody the style of a “stud,” the term the girls at Pridelines used to describe butch women. When Q shared her ideal look she described two different outfits, one for a feminine embodiment and one for a masculine embodiment.

Q: *"I would be 5'9". Don't ask why--I would be shorter. My [dread] locks would go down to my lower back. I would still be the same thickness, I love my thickness but I want smaller feet so that I am able to wear heels, at least be able to wear heels and be tall. No glasses, I love my glasses but they're annoying. I will have at least 15 tattoos. I have a tattoo that I want on my arm. I'll just be walking around with pumps and a dress. That's my girly side of me. If it's just my boyish side I would be in some black jeans, white button down with a blue vest on, wearing my cap with my braids locked backward, stud earrings, shoes, most likely Perry Ellis.*

Q's fluid construction of gender identity is further articulated when she discusses the various tattoos of yin yangs she has on her body.

Q: *I already have three yin yangs on me. So, I just have a fascination with them because of the simple fact that it's the diversity, there's the good and the bad and that's how I see myself. There's Q and like I said there's Kevin. It's just Q comes out more than Kevin. Kevin is my boyish side.*

JH: *When did you start dressing masculine?*

Q: *All my life I've been like that. I've been like in high school, not as much lately, because it kinda conflicts with the relationship that I have but...I've always dressed boyish and I've never had no problems dressing like a boy because I always felt comfortable in their clothes. It was one of those things where it fit me better because I'm tall and I'm broad where most female's clothes is kinda awkward in certain places. Like even with the jeans I have on, it feels weird having them on when I'm dressing up in just my regular jeans it feels comfortable, I feel fine in them. I always feel comfortable dressing like a boy.*

JH: *So how does dressing masculine affect relationships with other people? Pertaining to what you were just talking about.*

Q: *The only aspect of my life that it really affects is people that I date. Because I do tend to date women who are more masculine or studs or butches or whatever you wanna call them and most of them down here wouldn't wanna date a female who also dresses like them because it's kinda seen as a taboo. Kinda like, "Why date another dude," in a sense. Where, they want that femmey girl and I'm like, "Ok, I don't care I felt like being boyish that day." And sometimes honestly I'm just lazy. I have five minutes to get to work and I won't wanna throw on the makeup, the dresses. I just throw on some jeans, a shirt, and I'm out the house.*

But it's such a taboo down here, for those who call themselves a stud. It's a headache so I just dress more feminine because it's a lot easier. Especially in past relationships as soon as I started feeling comfortable dressing more boyish the female is like, "I can't touch you. I can't be with you that day because you look like a boy." And that's happened plenty of times where I'm like, "You know what? Ok, fine, whatever."

[Q looks over to Alaika in a playful yet stern fashion to indicate that she is talking about her] This one, yeah, I'm throwing her in. She already knows. We already had that

conversation where she seen a picture of me when I was dressing boyish I think I had on my shades, my hair; my wife beater⁸ on, no, not my wife beater, my button down, and she was kinda looking at it like “ummm” [Q makes a disapproving face]. And when she started seeing the feminine pictures she was like, “Oh ok, I can deal with this.” I already know I can never dress boyish. She never seen me boyish, probably except for one time, or twice, whatever, and I came here [Pridelines] one day dressed boyish because I knew she wasn’t gonna be here⁹.

JH: *And why do you think lesbian culture here is so rigid like that?*

Q: *I don’t know. I think it’s so small. Things have to be a certain way in order for... We already have it hard enough down here so why fuck up the good things that we do have for heterosexuals to mess with us? When I go to Georgia, in Atlanta, stud to stud is so normal. It’s ok. It’s accepted. You go to a club you see two studs kissing that’s fine. Down here, it’s like “huh?!”. “Oh my God what the hell are they doing?!” Quote-un-quote, it doesn’t seem right in their eyes.*

JH: *So it’s almost like they want to look straight?*

Q: *In a way. It’s like ok, “We still have to fit this heterosexual taboo.” When in the male community two twink¹⁰ can be together, two masculine males can be together, two girls¹¹ can be together. But when it comes to females, no, except for if it’s a femme to femme. That’s fine, that’s cute, but let it be two masculine females, “Oh no, that’s an issue.” I got into arguments plenty of times. Because everyone sees that as taboo when it’s like why? When you take off the clothes it’s four tits, two vagaygays¹². So it’s like what’s the difference? So I just leave it alone.*

In this part of the conversation Q describes the constraints that her relationship with a stud places on her ability to dress in a masculine fashion when she desires. She contextualizes her personal experience within a broader landscape of lesbian gender/sexual dynamics in South Florida, which according to her tend to mirror heteronormative structures of masculine/feminine coupling. Here we find that restrictions on the articulation of masculine embodiments by young women play out not only in hegemonic heterosexist society in general but even within lesbian subcultural spaces.

8 This term is used in Miami and other places like New York City by some people of color to describe men’s ribbed white cotton tank-top style under shirts.

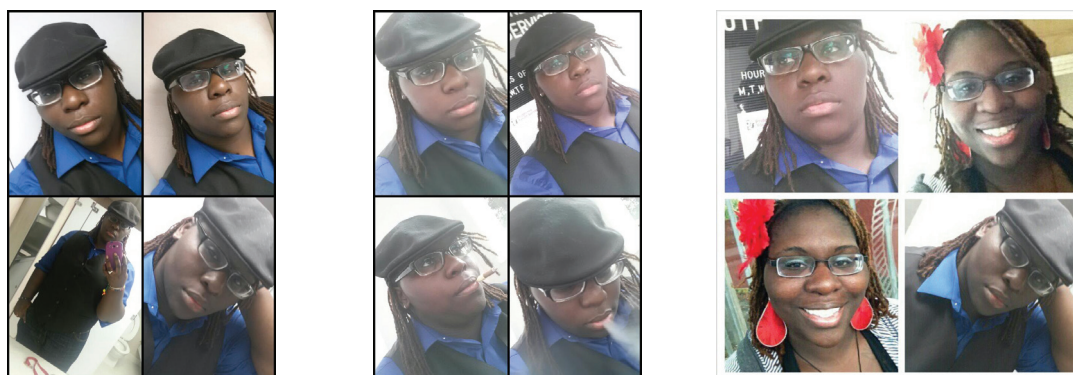
9 While Q was talking here Alaika nodded in agreement, she did not express much as Q described their relationship dynamics.

10 Term used to describe a gay man who looks like a young boy.

11 Term used to describe feminine gay men.

12 Informal term for vagina.

Although Q critiques these disciplining politics she theorizes them as misguided attempts by the marginalized lesbian community to survive in a hostile culture. Gloria Anzaldúa has described how part of how male domination functions is by conditioning women to transmit patriarchal paradigms and police girls and other women into abiding by them. Through the stories Q shared I learned how sexist and heteronormative ideologies seep into lesbian spaces, as these women may feel the burden of transmission and policing more than their normative female counterparts. “The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of and commitment to, the value system than men (Anzaldúa 1999, 39).” Surviving in this culture may mean keeping your lesbian sisters in line.



(L) fig. 2.2, Q as Kevin Xavier Thomas; (C) fig. 2.3, Q as Kevin with hashtag “prettyboiswag”; (R) fig. 2.4, Q as Stem.

Q and Alaika’s relationship dissolved about a year after the 2011 focus group, and Q has since resumed dressing up as Kevin more regularly. When I heard the news I asked Q if the restriction on her masculine dress was a factor in their break up and she said that it was due to other factors. As we are Facebook friends, I have recently seen photo posts Q has shared online of herself as a stud that she has captured with her phone. Q has also posted images in which she highlights her stem identity by juxtaposing her feminine style as Q with that of Kevin. She has given me permission to share the images here. The photos convey the performativity that attends Q’s styling practice, her wide smile and colorful dress as Q contrasting with the restrained and serious posture of Kevin.

Q’s comparison of the gender dynamic in the lesbian community in contrast to the more varied partnerships seen in gay male communities points to how there is a sexist

dynamic at work that regulates lesbian embodiments and partnership formations, and that further prompts lesbians to reproduce this ideology. The only exception of this construct Q can reference is the case of femme to femme coupling, which is a form of lesbian relation that has been successfully commodified for the consumption of heterosexual men through popular film and porn genres such as *Girls Gone Wild*. It is the acceptance of femme-on-femme sexual exchange by heteronormative males that perhaps makes this version of same gender coupling sanctioned in the South Florida lesbian community. It seems there is a limit to how many masculine females can occupy lesbian spaces—the masculine female body, even in lesbian contexts, is framed as a threat to the gender and sexual order. A couple composed of studs can be seen as too visible a subversion of heteronormativity, their relations having the potential of tipping the tolerance of neoliberal gay friendliness into homophobia. When this threat is coupled with the racist fear of black masculinity in particular, girls of color are faced with significant challenges living their lives embodying masculine styles.

Mignon Moore has found similar dynamics of gender duality and coupling at play in black lesbian spaces in present-day New York City. In her article “Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities,” she argues that in black lesbian communities there are three codified gender categories, butch, femme, and gender-blender. She finds that these politics of butch/femme gender presentation are taken up by primarily working class black lesbians, as upper class lesbians do not readily admit to or discuss gender play. Moore contends that highly educated black lesbians avoid claiming membership in categories that are considered deviant in order to avoid reifying negative stereotypes and making their struggle to enter into the mainstream more difficult.

Moore finds that masculine embodiments of black lesbians are viewed as the most problematic in black lesbian spaces. In discussing what is perceived as threatening about black female masculinity she notes,

Transgressive [masculine] presentations of self also reify stereotypes of black women as mannish and are particularly threatening to the male possession of masculinity. Thus, women who dress in a transgressive or gender-blending style may be reluctant to admit publicly that they have a nonfeminine presentation of self. As a result of their gender display, many face hostility from conformists in mainstream society, including middle-class black lesbians (Ibid. 130).

So the ground for masculine women of color is also unstable in New York, a place that is often framed as harboring queer culture. Moore suggests that the lesbians in her study did not view the ability to embody masculinity as providing them access to privileges that were equal to those of men. Contrastingly, in my study with young lesbians of color, they asserted that dressing in a masculine fashion made them “feel” more powerful, even those such as Q, who critiqued rigid codes of gender presentation.

In the case of the young working class lesbians of color who participated in my study, dressing in a masculine fashion serves to craft a body that can signify higher economic status (as in the case of Q and Dimple) and also makes them feel more comfortable in social interactions. It is through bodies clad with male signifiers that they feel they can attain status as subjects in society. So there is a gender dynamics of class beyond sexual coupling that is at play in the embodiment of masculine styles. My study builds upon the work of Moore to contribute examination of how young black masculine lesbians theorize how their masculinity shapes their interactions with other women and larger society and by analyzing the social factors that constrain and enable their masculine styles.

Although some young lesbians have to assume a feminine or masculine form of dress in order to fit a normative logic of gender duality in their sexual encounters, they desire the femmes or studs they are attracted to. Even though we might critique this dynamic for the way it penalizes both masculine and feminine girls for diverging from their gendered scripts, we should also avoid viewing them as simply victims. It should be recognized that there is a coded erotics to these style constraints that stem from lesbian life and that beyond the erotic, the gendered styles of young lesbian women enable them

to craft bodies that reflect their subjectivities in ways they find meaningful. The girls and women in my study negotiate, stretch, push back against, and manipulate gender constructs even as they are managed by them.

Expressing Stud Sexual Subjectivities in Culture

With the exception of Suzie, a 23-year old African American participant from my Pridelines group, none of the black young women in my study described engaging with media that was created by black lesbians or engaged black lesbian existence. In this section I analyze cultural work that explores stud erotics and weave in participants' discussion on the absence of masculine black lesbian figures in media. Their comments reveal the ways in which they consume and mediate music, and negotiate its meanings and politics.

Some of the earliest theorists of black lesbian gender non-conformity and erotics were the women who made art out of it, figures like Ma Rainey, Gladys Bentley, Bessie Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and Jewelle Gomez, who crafted words and imagery and sound to communicate the texture and taste of black female masculinity with complexity. The erotic lives of masculine black lesbians are absent in the contemporary mainstream culture industry, with very few exceptions. Black film scholar and queer theorist Kara Keeling analyzes the politics of black butch and femme identities in the 1996 film *Set It Off*, which centers on the lives of urban black women whose economic struggles lead them to attempt a bank robbery. Keeling pays particular attention to the manner in which Cleo, a black butch lesbian played by actress and hip hop musician Queen Latifah, dies and is mourned in the film; she advances,

In order to generate value from Cleo's characterization, *Set It Off* relies upon sentiment concerning the difficulties heaped upon "black masculinity," sentiment that is already accessible in ghetto-centric common sense. Cleo's car, her ghetto-centric masculinity and her lady provide all the justification Cleo needs to "set it off." Cleo's death scene is the violent affective pay-off that is, as Sharon Patricia Holland points out, characteristic of ghetto-centric narratives, the senseless death of the "black masculine" body (Keeling 2003, 38).

Keeling utilizes the term “ghettocentric common sense” to denote the logics that operate in the spaces of black ghetto life. The heterosexism that undergirds ghettocentric common sense makes death a way in which to make Cleo’s gender/sexual transgressive character “make sense” in the context of her black community. I do not mean to represent the black community as especially homophobic, but recognize the struggles of many black lesbians, and masculine black lesbians in particular, to participate in African American culture. In her essay “Black and Gay in L.A.: The Relationships Black Lesbians and Gay Men Have to Their Racial and Religious Communities,” Mignon Moore describes the fear that gay black folks feel about the violence and homophobia they may encounter in the black communities where they live. Drawing from interviews with black GLBTQ people in Los Angeles in 2008, she found that,

Concerns about violence most consistently arose from non-gender conforming women and men. While there was a wide range of gender presentations that were acceptable for women, people tended to react strongly and negatively to women with a specifically masculine gender presentation (2010, 196).

Thus the gender presentation that seems to be the most vilified and dangerous to occupy in society is that of a black masculine woman.

In *Set It Off*, Cleo suffers a spectacular and violent death as she is killed by heavy police gunfire in the midst of a chase in which she attempted to escape the bank robbery. Keeling reads an alternative significance in the death of Cleo as an articulation and valorization of black butch-femme sociality that is brought about through the film’s emphasis on the process of mourning of Cleo’s feminine, conventionally attractive girlfriend Ursula. She notes,

Ursula’s tearful reaction to Cleo’s death exposes the fact that Ursula had organized her own life around and directed her erotic energies toward her butch, Cleo. Like Cleo’s ghettocentric butchness, Ursula’s femmeness in *Set It Off* was not aimed simply at continuing the existing movement of ghettocentric “black masculinity,” but also at enabling butch-femme sociality to survive by clearing

pathways for its movements (Ibid. 43).

The relationship between Ursula and Cleo in the film make visible the alternative community of lesbian life that co-exists in the spaces of black life. This visibility and valorization, however, came at the price of Cleo's death, which is how her life was marked as valuable. Sadly, that may have been the case for Sakia Gunn as well.



fig 2.5, Members of Yo Majesty

More recently, the hip-hop group Yo Majesty, which was formed in the early millennium by African American lesbians from Tampa, Florida, articulates similar valorizations of butch-femme erotics. Yo Majesty's music combines Southern crunk rap and Miami bass with electronic music. They released their first EP *Yo* in 2006 followed by their last recordings together in 2008, the EP *Kryptonite Pussy* and album *Futuristically Speaking...Never Be Afraid*. The original members of Yo Majesty are Shunda K, Jwl B and Shon B.

All of the women in the group embody the style of a masculine "stud." They often wear baseball caps, baggy jeans, baggy t-shirts or tank tops, no makeup, have their hair done in dreadlocks and braids, and wear boots or sneakers. In 2010 Shunda K was touring with the queer electronic music artist Peaches and began pursuing a solo career. The other members have not continued recording or performing as Yo Majesty. Online sources have presented differing accounts of the disintegration of the group, such as differences over

finances and the alleged arrest of member Jwl B. Yo Majesty's current state of dissolution does not diminish the significance of the work they have created to date, which warrants rigorous intellectual engagement as they are the first such group of out black masculine lesbians in hip hop history and because their creative work meaningfully engages with issues of race, religion, sexuality, and gender.

Yo Majesty's fast-paced, sexually charged raps celebrated lesbian sexuality and the female body. Their live shows were high in libidinal energy. For example, M.C. Jwl B often removed her clothing while in the heat of performance. In interviews Jwl B would often be asked if her topless performances are a provocative gimmick aimed at gaining the group attention, but she framed the removal of her clothing as an expression of freedom from the social constraints on the female body. Jwl B explains that she gets hot when she performs on stage and that she removes her shirt to feel more comfortable, just like many male rappers do without needing to answer for it.

One of Yo Majesty's most popular tracks is "Monkey", a term they use to describe female genitalia. The M.C.'s instruct women to please themselves in the song, "I'm saying to the ladies/ Put your hand between your thighs and rub on your monkey/ Motion to the left, motion to the right." In Yo Majestys' work raunch aesthetics work as a queer pedagogy that communicates teachings that work for women's access to pleasure and against the disciplining of women's bodies. In addition to expressing lesbian sexual desire the artists also take on wider issues of sexism and their songs often affirm the lives of women, such as sex workers or openly sexual women, who are often judged as deviant "hos." Their work extends beyond queer spaces and life to uplift and inspire freedom for all women.

The lyrics of their song "Don't Let Go" from the *Futuristically Speaking...Never Be Afraid* album celebrate the beauty of a young woman who is labeled a "ho" because of the sexy way she dances in the club. Yo Majesty affirms the young woman's self-worth and urges her not to be intimidated, instructing her:

*Don't let go
 Don't stop till we touch your soul
 Don't let go
 Break your back 'till you lose control
 Don't let go
 Let the music set you free
 Don't let go
 Shake your body so we can see*

The opening shot of the music video¹³ for the song shows a light skinned black woman asleep at her desk at work. She leaves the office and after walking through a telephone booth in London undergoes a transformation in which her work clothes are shed to reveal a bright pink, skin-tight, full body cat suit. She carries a pink boom box and spends her evening suggestively dancing in “inappropriate” venues such as a nail salon, bridal dress shop, tanning salon, and yoga studio. The character infiltrates spaces where women discipline their bodies to fit heterosexual norms of attractiveness and infuses them with raunchy revelry.

Men are notably absent in the spaces where the protagonist enters. Her lip licking, titty shaking, and booty clapping are performed for the enjoyment of the women and girls she encounters. The character’s dancing aims to incite the women to stop worrying about their appearances and enjoy their own bodies by dancing and having fun. In the beauty parlor that is frequented by black British women and girls, the character’s hypersexual presence is initially met with discomfort and coyness. However, the patrons cannot resist watching her performance and eventually join in. The anti-heterosexist narrative of the video is most markedly articulated in a scene where the character enters a bridal shop and playfully lays a kiss upon the lips of a woman trying on a wedding gown.

Yo Majesty’s work centers on bodily pleasures defined and enacted by women through erotic play. The “Don’t Let Go” video closes with a scene where the protagonist disrupts a classical drawing class. She climbs over and dances atop the figure drawing model and soon the students in the room start to dance together, draw more freely, and

13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbbvugSXUvc>

remove their clothing. The character serves as Yo Majesty's angel of queerness, blessing heterosexist spaces with corporeal jouissance. What is important about this aspect of Yo Majesty's work is the way in which it embraces a diverse group of women and expresses feminist consciousness. As I noted earlier in the chapter, queer young women at Pridelines often articulated misogynist judgments towards women stereotypically viewed as sexually deviant. There is no natural alliance between lesbian subjectivity and feminist consciousness. Yo Majesty's work continually expresses concern for the plight of other women, particularly those who did not fit norms of "proper" subjectivity.

Yo Majesty framed their work as stemming from their real life experiences and subjectivities as black lesbians yet their audience predominantly consisted of white "hipsters" from alternative music scenes in the United States and England. The members of Yo Majesty felt that their lack of a following among African Americans is due to the fact that they are *too* real. Shunda K has discussed how African American communities struggle with the issue of homosexuality and that it prevents them from being open to the music. This issue is touched upon in a YouTube video where Peaches interviews Yo Majesty's Shunda K and Shon B¹⁴.

Peaches:

Do you feel that you have like, different audiences. Like, your black audiences and your white audiences?

Shunda K:

Yeah we do but the music that is out there that is being promoted is appealing to the Caucasian race more so. Because black people in general are very close-minded people. You know what I'm saying? When you talk about a change those motherfuckers ain't ready.

Shunda K's frustration with the African American community's discrimination towards same-sex desire stems in part from her involvement in black religious life. The widespread rejection of queer life in African American communities was revealed in the Proposition 8 vote in California in 2008, which prompted voters to elect "yes" or "no"

14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KVJwWV89co&feature=related>

on eliminating the rights of same-sex couples to marry via constitutional amendment. In discussing the racial politics of the Proposition 8 vote in California Mignon Moore notes that,

Religious organizations are the moral, social, and political authority in black communities, and an understanding of this helps explain the African American vote on Proposition 8. Statistical analyses of a more comprehensive set of data suggest that the higher rate of “yes” votes among blacks relative to whites was due to the greater religious involvement of blacks (2010, 202).

What Moore learned through her ethnographic research in black communities in Los Angeles is that LGBT folks who participated in black religious life were able to do so by remaining silent about their sexual lives. In “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence,” black feminist scholar Evelyn Hammonds has argued that a “politics of silence” is a historical legacy shared by black women in regards to non-normative sexualities and argues that this politics of silence makes it possible for black lesbians to be cast as “traitors to the race.”

The politics of silence stemmed from black women’s challenges to stereotypes of hypersexuality that have constructed black female sexuality. Black women have understood how speaking sexuality can be used to pathologize their subjectivities. However, the resistance of the hypersexual stereotype created an attendant politics of respectability that worked to fashion an image of black female morality that in turn policed deviant black female sexualities. Hammonds writes,

And this, in turn, explains why black lesbians—whose “deviant” sexuality is framed within an already existing deviant sexuality—have been wary of embracing the status of “traitor,” and the potential loss of community such an embrace engenders (1997, 181).

Thus the religious community that gave Yo Majesty inspiration and sustenance, as was expressed in their songs, also was a site of silence and pain, as their expressions of lesbian desire made them unviable members of the community. Yo Majesty framed their musical practice as a form of “ministry” to the people. In fact, the “Majesty” in the

group's name is a reference to God. As Shunda K explains to singer Beth Ditto of the alternative rock and electro band Gossip in an interview¹⁵,

We trying to bring healing to the people man. There are so many people out there that is gay, like especially the kids and shit... The parents, they know they [their children] gay, but they don't know what the fuck to do cuz they've never dealt with a situation like that, ok? So here come Yo Majesty, we on they level, we could talk to the people, we can minister to them.

The group aims to speak their experiences as black lesbians enjoying sex and struggling with homophobia while also praising their Christian faith.

Yo Majesty's seemingly contradictory combination of raunchy queer sexuality and religiosity demonstrates how theorizations of sexuality must take the racial and spiritual positions of subjects into account. Shunda K, for example, does not exhibit the "out and proud" attitude that has become the standard expression of sexual subjectivity in many white queer communities in the U.S. For example, driven by her religious convictions and likely fear of losing community due to embodying the position of racial "traitor" Hammonds identifies, Shunda K ceased sexual relations with women and married a man for several years. Although she has since divorced her husband and entered a serious relationship with a woman, she has expressed ambivalence about her sexual identity. This issue is touched upon in the interview with Peaches:

Shunda K:

We believe in God. We believe in Jesus Christ being our Lord and Savior. We still have a relationship with him and he still uses us even though we in the club talking about rubbing on your monkey and how hot kryptonite pussy really is. God is the one making this happen for Yo Majesty.

Peaches:

God has no problem with you being total lesbians?

Shon B.:

I don't believe that. Be yourself. Love who you love and call it a day.

15 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzT7T2cCJlI>

Shunda K:

You right [to Shon B.], but I see it a different way. And I can't be nobody but who I am. But I feel like it's not the will of God for us to be gay.

Shunda K's experiences as a queer, masculine, black female performer has a genealogical connection to the career of black blues singer Gladys Bentley. After years of performing sexually explicit lyrics, openly dating women and donning men's clothing, Bentley publicized marrying a man and claimed her Christian faith late in her life (Yaeger 2009, 722). In the introduction to a special issue of the PMLA journal on "Queer Modernism" Patricia Yaeger, after discussing the ambivalence that marked Bentley's experiences as a queer black woman, situates her back into the narrative of liberated out-ness,

Bentley may have kowtowed to these [heterosexist] norms in the 1950s, but in her heyday, the era of a blues-based, lesbian-biased *ars erotica*, Bentley's lavish persona was, in itself, a polemic against heterosexual norms. In the Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s her drag identity could be loud, queer, and proud. As the foremost member of a gang of celebrity male impersonators, Gladys Bentley exemplifies the strange quotidian life of a queer modernist (ibid 724).

Here the white humanities scholar, in trying to recover the life of the black lesbian in a politically progressive narrative of queer history, silences Bentley's claims to Christianity and heterosexuality by describing them as kowtowing.

Film and sexuality studies scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu's thoughts on the vicissitudes of race-positive sexuality expressed by women of color whose sexualities have been constructed through discourses of deviance would be useful to consider here,

Acknowledging the tradition of cultural producers and critics who are women of color and who present sexuality as constitutive of their racial histories and subjectivities, "race-positive sexuality" argues for the need to acknowledge how sexuality can be pleasurable, powerful, and painful simultaneously (2007, 145).

The "speaking" done by Shunda K and Yo Majesty not only serves to make queer black lesbian subjectivities visible, but also has the effect of complicating universalized narratives about the antagonistic relationship between religion and non-normative

sexualities, in addition to celebratory notions of the emancipation of coming out of the closet and the stability of a lesbian/gay identity (Decena 2011; El-Tayeb 2012).

Yo Majesty's extremes of pleasure are accompanied by complicated feelings of confusion and pain. Their openness about the vicissitudes of their sexual and religious identities should be read as an expression of queer politics. As Cathy Cohen has noted in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," (2005) queer theory and activism needs to move beyond a hetero vs. queer framework and make alliances with other subjects who experience oppression due to heterosexism such as straight women of color whose reproduction and status as single heads of household makes them consistent targets of right wing attack. I would extend Cohen's argument to include queer subjects who suffer from sexual and gender policing while practicing religion.

Although homophobia plays a significant role in limiting Yo Majesty's audience among African American communities, I would further argue that their lack of visibility also stems from the inequalities that women experience in the music industry at large, where the most marketable female acts are conventionally sexy, pretty, and light skinned, even if African American/Latina. Despite the fact that Yo Majesty's sound is similar enough to popular Southern crunk rap that it could attract a wider audience, it is their non-normative identities as masculine black lesbians that make them ostensibly difficult to market within the profit-driven music industry. What makes this situation unfortunate is that the audience that Yo Majesty believes needs its music the most, African American queer youth, does not have access to it in the mass media via the radio, music videos, or social networking sites.

From the Church to the Strip Club: Shunda K's Solo Work

After touring with Peaches in 2009 and 2010 Shunda K released her first solo album *The Most Wanted* in 2011. The album did not get mainstream media coverage and it seems that it did not achieve any financial success, as it is now sold at a bargain prices

on the internet. The fact that information on her Facebook and Myspace pages has not been updated since 2011 makes it seem as if Shunda K is either taking a break from her career, ending it, or continuing it a very underground level.



fig 2.6, Promotional image of Shunda K *The Most Wanted* album.

Shunda K's critiques of the predictability of the music industry are laced throughout the tracks on *The Most Wanted* so I would suggest that the "failure" of the work came as no surprise to her. Despite its poor reception, the album, like the work of Yo Majesty, is a creative and powerful archive of black masculine lesbian feelings that should be commemorated and shared, especially with queer youth of color. In writing about Shunda K and Yo Majesty I articulate the perspective of a scholar and fan. Ann Cvetkovich takes the fan as a model for the archivist and writes in her book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, "The archivist of queer culture must proceed like the fan or collector whose attachment to objects is often fetishistic, idiosyncratic, or obsessional (2003, 253)." Part of what drives me to write about this music is that it uplifts, drives and sustains me. The lyrics relate to my struggles in daily life as an economically struggling woman of color, and the danceable beats provide me with corporeal pleasure and release.

Although Shunda K takes aggressive aim at the music industry and people who have betrayed her in the album, the predominant message she communicates is one of love of self, friends, partners, and God, and of enjoying life through sex, music, and dancing. Shunda K's former colleague Shon B from Yo Majesty is featured on several of the tracks and after listening to the song "I Am Yo! Majesty," where she raps about how she should have started her career solo, it seems that there was some kind of falling out with Jwl B, who was the other member of the Yo Majesty trio.

Like her previous work with Yo Majesty, the songs in *The Most Wanted* perform a ministry that affirms black masculine lesbian existence. What I find particularly provocative in the songs are her comments about God and religion. She celebrates her love of God in many of the tracks while also communicating the unique way that she theorizes the relationship between her spirituality and sexuality. For example, in the song "Rock and Roll" she states (I quote lyrics verbatim from the lyrics reproduced in the album booklet):

Shunda K, let dis penetrate cha dome, I came ah long way to be where I'm at, low self-esteem, I can't forget, no one supported my dreams, I was always told, I couldn't do dis and couldn't do dat, nobody gave ya girl respect, but now I demand, nothing less than da best cause I am to eva come, I can rearrange the whole thang, from the church to da club in His name, so let dis rock and roll ya soul, jus let go of all dis year's drama, on bac, from da first day of ya life, I know it wasn't right but know it's time to move on, time to do what you want to be free, tell da devil, no more controllin' me, and sometimes, he can be ah human being, cause most of da time, dats what it is for me, what you do believe, oh, I see, no, I'm not into religion either, da thought of it bring about a fever, jus everything about it so evil, don't get me wrong, I am ah believer in Jesus Christ, hell, I'm gay, and me He still likes, so dis ah shout out to all my dykes, fags, lawyers, and doctors cause God is Love!!!

These lyrics communicate the artist's evolving relationship with God and feelings about her sexual identity as they contrast with what she told Peaches in the interview I cited above, that it was not God's will for her to be gay. It seems that perhaps she has removed herself from religious institutions while maintaining her spiritual beliefs. What

is inspiring and politically productive about Shunda K's album is how she continually draws upon her personal struggles to compose messages of uplift and freedom for her audience, all while launching complex critiques of the music industry, religious dogma, sexism, and homophobia. Her music also celebrates women who go "from the church to da club in His name," complicating notions of proper and deviant female subjectivities.

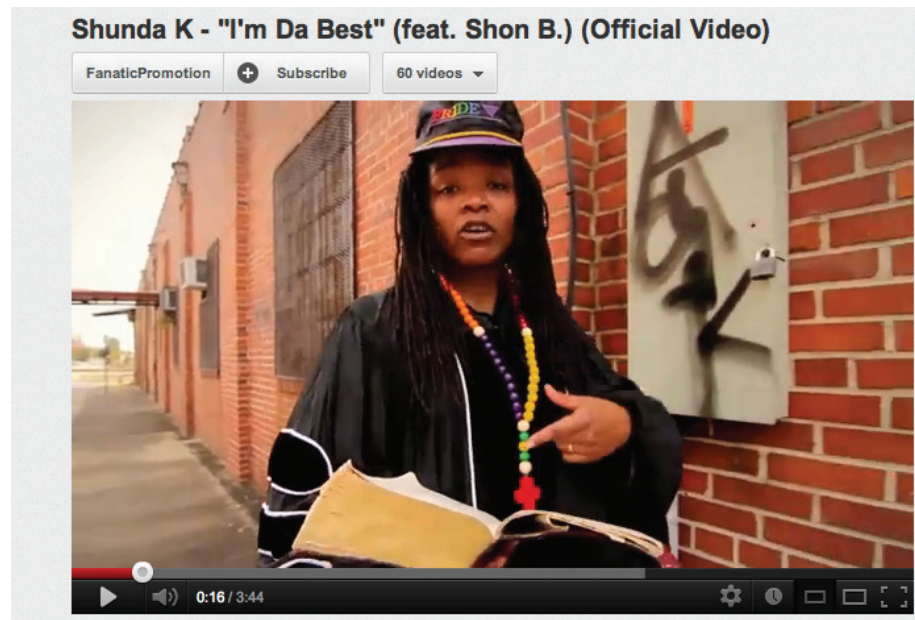


fig 2.7, Still from Shunda K *I am the Best* video.

The video for the single "I Am Da Best," like the video "Don't Let Go," expresses a message of support for a struggling woman. The video opens with a shot of Shunda K picking up and turning the pages of a bible while wearing a preacher's robe, a gay pride cap, and rainbow colored rosary. In this scene she recites the lyrics:

"And it was written in so many places of a woman's inferiority in da word, da Bible, ya'll know what I'm talkin' about, naw dis ain't no church song, dis ah PEOPLE song cause I got someum to say. Hey, my name Shunda K and I tole ya'll I wasn't playin, yeah all them religious fables got us where we at today."

After this sequence the video follows the daily routine of a black woman with a young son who is bullied by other boys. In the video we see her drop her son off at the bus station, the site of his harassment, and we later see her apply makeup and

change her clothes to work as an exotic dancer in the club Mons Venus, a popular strip club in Tampa, Florida. The scene that follows shows the male partner of the exotic dancer arguing with her in front of her son after she returns home from work. Shonda K and featured artist Shon B of Yo Majesty are dressed as royal superheroes, reciting redemptive messages of confidence and perseverance while they are flanked by anti-gay protesters holding banners with slogans like “God Hates Fags.” They frame themselves as combating discrimination and fighting for the lives of those who are mistreated. Although Shonda K talks about being the best, the primary message of her song is for all of us to embrace and celebrate ourselves, to view ourselves as “the best.”



fig 2.8, Still from Shonda K *I am the Best* video.

In addition to stories of struggle and redemption Shonda K’s songs also celebrate lesbian embodiment and its pleasures through raunchy songs that express her sexual desire for other women. In “The Most Wanted” she raps,

Shonda K has been, from da foundation of da Earth, da one sent to rock and don’t stop it, make you drop it, so now pop it, and, my heart you bout to shock it girl, I’ll hold ya purse cause you aint goin nowhere and Ion care cause ya ex-man standing ova there, shake dat phat ass some mo, like you did befo, yo go girl, I wanna kiss and tell, I’ll make ya body melt, it’s startin’ already, I see you feelin’ ya pill and da bass in da track so stacked dat you cant help but feel it, now we

blowin' up, da girl is feelin' tough, da best I only I puff, dis chic is feelin' on my stuff, she looked me dead into my eyes and said she ready to fuck!!!

These songs are just as significant as her more conventionally political works as they express queer black lesbian sexual subjectivity. The erotic scenarios she describes are still absent in mainstream hip hop discourse which continually rehearses stock narratives about black male sexual conquest with multiple, conventionally attractive women. Although Shunda K's references to dropping it and "phat ass" are similar in style to mainstream male hip hop artists, her unique perspective as a masculine lesbian generates an alternative sexual politics of butch-femme erotics.

The blues legacy of Shunda K's work is also worth noting here. Angela Davis has shown in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* that black female blue singers communicated sexual feelings that were historically significant as they heralded a new reality of African American women in a post-slavery context who were newly determining of their sexual lives. Like Shunda K and Yo Majesty, religion was also co-existent with black female blues musician's more raunchy, carnal messages. In discussing the merging of the spiritual and the secular in the blues, Davis notes,

Blues practices, as [Lawrence] Levine asserts, did tend to appropriate previously religious channels of expression, and this appropriation was associated with women's voices. Women summoned sacred responses to their messages about sexuality. During this period, religious consciousness came increasingly under the control of institutionalized churches, and male dominance over the religious process came to be taken for granted. At the same time that male ministers were becoming a professional caste, women blues singers were performing as professional artists and attracting large audiences at revival-like gatherings. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith were the most widely known of these women. They preached about sexual love, and in so doing they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed (1998, 9).

Davis provides a wider context for understanding the cultural significance of Yo Majesty's and Shunda K's work, which generates the critical co-mingling of the sexual and the spiritual. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith not only sang about sexuality but about

lesbian desires as well, and not since the early 20th century context in which they worked has there been a similar openness about black female lesbian desire in music. Shunda K's album provides women of color with a soundtrack of affirmation, truth telling, healing, and carnal delight. Shunda K herself embodies a creative black female masculinity that is vibrant and, to use a term from her lexicon, majestic.

When A Stud is Too Masculine: Pridelines Participants Respond to Black Lesbian Creative Works

I asked the young women at Pridelines if they were familiar with Yo Majesty and they said that they had never heard of them. I played the "Don't Let Go" video to the group during a Women on the Rise! class in 2013 and they watched attentively while sipping on the frappuccinos they had just bought at the Starbucks across the street. They snapped pictures of the video projection with their smart phones and tablets and posted the images on Instagram and Facebook social media websites. The video made them laugh, and they thought the protagonist of the video in the tight pink cat suit was sexy. Q enjoyed the video, and commented, "She was kinda raunchy but she was like goofy with it. You see her figure but she was so goofy with it." Ruth, a 20-year-old participant who described herself as "white/Hispanic/European descent," contrasted Yo Majesty's video with mainstream music videos in which women often portray highly affected tough and sexy attitudes. In lauding Yo Majesty's approach she said, "It was more of a turn on because she was so goofy about it."

Interested in the music that they consume, I asked the young women in the class that night who some of their favorite artists were. Q likes hip hop and neo soul, artists like Frank Ocean, Miguel, Kanye West, and Nicki Minaj. Suzie mentioned the rapper Common, Ella Fitzgerald, Little Wayne, and the soundtrack to the Lion King. Ruth said that she has been increasingly interested in the work of up and coming female rappers like Iggy Azalea and Azealia Banks. Twenty-year-old Tamyra is a fan of 1990s R&B artists like Boyz to Men and Silk. Alaika said she listens to "everything."

Their citation of artists reveal the wide range of cultural texts that they engage. Most of the artists they mentioned were male, yet, as cultural studies scholar Susan Driver has shown through her research with queer young women in the book, *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media* (2007), queer girls mediate cultural texts and negotiate their meanings to integrate them into their lives. The girls Driver conducted research with read cultural texts in ways that exceed and transgress their intended heteronormative messages and audiences.

When I asked the group if they thought an act like Yo Majesty would have a chance of entering the mainstream Tamyra and Q answered with “no,” immediately, forcefully, and in unison. Ruth disagreed, asserting, “I think so! Now with all these girls coming out? All these hardcore girls coming out.” Ruth was referring to artists like Nicki Minaj, Iggy Azalea, and Azealia Banks, contemporary “hardcore” rappers who have feminine body presentations. Suzie disagreed with Ruth saying, “Not this masculine. I think the industry right now might be ready for lesbians, just not masculine bodied lesbians.”

The group then entered into a debate about the visibility politics of queer subjects in the mainstream music industry, and figures such as Frank Ocean, a rising black celebrity in hip hop and R&B who came out as bi-sexual via a post on his Tumblr blog that described his love for another man. Ocean’s public coming out was celebrated in the media as a new moment for hip hop that would be more inclusive of queer subjects¹⁶. Ruth’s comments about the realistic possibility that a group like Yo Majesty would have a chance to enter the mainstream drew on a similar discourse.

Ruth: *But notice how these rappers like Frank Ocean came out as bi-sexual, and Aesop Rocky, the rumors have been percolating that he’s bi-sexual too. That he has more feminine traits, that’s he’s canoodling with certain men, and he’s very affectionate with men in public.*

Q: *But it’s one of those things where, especially with R&B men in particular, for some reason, it’s one of those things where they can be borderline, kind of whatever, as long as*
 16 <http://globalgrind.com/entertainment/russell-simmons-letter-to-frank-ocean-gay-bi-sexual-comes-out-photos>

they're not hard rappers. It's like, "Ok, you're R&B, you're singing soft, so you're kinda soft anyway."

Unlike Ruth, Q does not frame the acceptance of Frank Ocean's bi-sexuality as indicative of a new embrace of queerness in mainstream hip hop. Rather, she points out, and I agree, that his branding as an R&B performer, and the "soft" masculine gender performance that the genre often entails, makes his bisexuality assimilable to the existing structure of male gender presentation and sexuality in hip hop. Q also referenced the body presentations of hip hop artists like Missy Elliot, who is often thought to be a lesbian. In the conversation she and Alaika noted that Missy's butch aesthetics were often tempered by the styling of her face, which was often marked by feminine makeup.



fig 2.9, Kin4Life performers on cover of Ikons magazine.

Suzie wanted to bring the work of the group Kin4Life into our discussion, so we visited YouTube on my laptop and watched the video for their song "Makeup Girl." Kin4Life is an African American rap and R&B duo from Mount Vernon, New York whose music openly engages their lesbian sexuality. Suzie was the only person in the group who had heard of them before and explained that she learned about them through Facebook, as she is a member of many lesbian groups on the social networking site. Suzie noted that what she liked about their music is that it deals with everyday life issues.

Both artists dress in the manner of studs; however, they cross over into the category of stems at times by wearing feminine makeup. The reactions to the video among the group highlighted the ways in which they judge, construct, and theorize non-normative gender presentations.

The “Make Up Girl” video tells the story of relationship problems stemming from infidelity in the lives of the two protagonists, who are the Kin4Life emcees Nor and IQ. The first commentary made about the video centered on the makeup on the emcees, who were wearing caps, loose fitting t-shirts, and jeans in a hip hop fashion that is adopted by many studs. Their masculine dress was contrasted with their heavily made up eyes, caked with conspicuously colored eyeshadow and mascara. Their lips were pink and glossy, and their cheekbones accentuated with a rosy blush.

Ruth: *I’ve never seen a stud with a smokey eye.*

Q: *That’s true, I rarely see studs with makeup on.*

Alaika: *Yeah, just take off the makeup. The [eye] shadow is throwing me off. They would actually look way better as femmes.*

While a scene in the video played that showed one of the emcees cheating on her partner with another woman, Ruth, who dresses in casual basics that are neither feminine nor masculine said, “That’s why I don’t like studs.” Her statement set off an intense discussion about studs and male-identification, all while the video continued to play in the background. Alaika, who considers herself a stud, responded: “Excuse me?!!! These are the studs that mess it up for the rest of us.”

Ruth: *I think they [studs] step up to be like the stereotypical guy.*

I asked the group, “Do you think that studs try to construct themselves as dudes?”

Alaika: *Some.*

Q: *Not overall.*

Tammyra: *I don’t like it when studs think that they are guys. They want to be called “she,”*

but, if there is a kid in the relationship-- "I'm daddy." I'm like, "No, we're two girls, you can be mommy and I can be mommy." It can be different; you're not supposed to conform. Studs think that they are supposed to be the man in the relationship.

Tamyra was not describing her actual life situation in this comment, but playing out an imaginary scenario to make her point about the replication of heteronormative relationship structures in lesbian families in which studs parent. Tamyra, who is African American, wore no makeup that night, had her hair gathered into a ponytail, and donned a simple black tank top, black athletic pants, and sneakers. Her simple outfit contrasted with the large, feminine, and ornate finger ring she wore that was studded with colored rhinestones in a rainbow pattern that signaled her queer identity.

Suzie: *I think it's just sort of like imitating a heteronormative type of relationship for finding your place in that relationship. You choose the one [gender role] you identify with. Maybe it's the mindset of the stud to sort of emulate that subconsciously and sort of show that outwardly. So maybe they don't really know that they're kind of like being, dominating.*

Ruth: *Oh they know, believe me.*

Q: *With someone [a stud] who has a kid and there isn't a male figure around, sometimes they are looked at as the male figure. With the girl I'm with, there is not a male figure in the house, so [her partner's son] he's 12. Alex takes on the masculine role with him—she talked to him about sex, she talked to him about shaving. She took on that persona.*

Tamyra: *Why can't mommy do that?! Why does daddy have to do that? It takes away the credibility of being a woman.*

Q: *No but!*

Tamyra: *The need to emulate or want to be like a man. You're a woman! Embrace your femininity or be a trans!*

Here Tamyra was not directing her comments at Q personally, but rather addressing her comments to studs who engage in these dynamics more broadly.

Q: *It's one of those things--my brother grew up with no dad in the house, so my mom took on the male role of teaching him how to be a man for the simple fact that there was no male. My mom is as femme as can be, she's a woman's woman. But there's no man in the house, so she took on the male role. Some studs say, "I'm daddy. I'm still mom but I'm taking on this masculine role because there is no one else around to teach you how to be*

a man.”

Tamyra: *I have to become daddy because I’m acting like a man? No! Why can’t you just be masculine mommy?*

Alaika to Myra: *I get what you’re saying. It’s like a lot of studs, once they become a stud, they think like, “Ok, I’m a stud, I have to be man.” And then they think just like a man thinks. You are still a girl, you still have the body of a girl. You don’t need to put on an act for anyone; you’re putting on an act for yourself.*

This exchange revealed the complex and often paradoxical negotiations of gender performed by my students at Pridelines. Despite their dramatically divergent views, what being a “man” or “masculinity” entailed among them was a stable concept that was conflated not only with male bodies, but also with characteristics that are normatively associated with men such as infidelity, domination, and teaching boys how to become proper “men.” Even as Tamyra strived to make Q aware of the normative gender logic informing studs’ assumption of the term “daddy,” she drew on an understanding of masculine female embodiment as an “*emulation*” of an original masculinity that is the province of those with male bodies (Halberstam 1998). A similar contradiction was performed by Q, who described the manner in which her mother “fathered” her brother while presenting a femme body, while in the stud context reasoned that the term “daddy” is used to denote a male “persona,” or “role,” that is in charge of teaching boys about sex and male aesthetic practices such as shaving. “Daddy” could be used to describe a masculine mommy in a non-heteronormative way depending on the dynamics of the particular relationship. Daddy is not a term that belongs to male bodies. Q framed it as a temporal identity that the stud mother moves through at particular moments.

Alaika negatively judged studs who “think just like a man thinks,” because they ignore the fact that they have the body of a girl. “You don’t need to put on act for anyone, you’re putting on an act for yourself.” Alaika frames non-normative gender presentation that performs too close a citation of a stabilized construct of maleness, “just like a man thinks,” as a self-delusion. The stud, in her view, doesn’t fool anyone but herself

in believing that she can faithfully occupy a male subject position. Suzie's comments theorized the psychic subject formation of studs, positing that their male-identification likely develops in a subconscious way that allows for them to make sense of their dissident gendered body presentation.

Tamyra, who seemed to be the person with the most radical notion of gender fluidity in the group, expressed a cissexist notion of gender when she exclaimed that if a stud wanted to renounce her femininity and identify with men she should just become transgender. This talk among the Pridelines youth revealed the complex and contradictory ways they make sense of and critique both gender norms and gender non-conformity. One on the one hand, they want to value their identities as women over and against an idea of male domination, on the other, their valuation of femininity and conflation of gender roles with biological sex impel some of them to police the assumption of masculine embodiment, and what they view as masculine behaviors by queer girls and women.

My discussion with the young women at Pridelines about black lesbian music production revealed that most are not exposed to black lesbian created media, and that such media would not necessarily be adopted by them. They enjoyed the work of Yo Majesty, citing the positive messages and playful raunchiness in the music, but did not like the gender presentation or representation of infidelity and masculinity in the music video by Kin4Life. They also theorized the ways in which the heteronormative gender order limits the visibility of gender non-conforming women such as the artists of Yo Majesty, while celebrating the bi-sexuality of black male artists such as Frank Ocean. Through a conversation on media, we engaged in a heated debate over the unwieldy politics of non-normative gender presentation and alternative family structures. In the next chapter I will explore how a discussion of lesbian produced visual art also occasioned passionate disputes over the meanings of black female masculinity.

CHAPTER 3

Style Blues II: On Facial Hair, Stud Subjectivities, and the Fashioning of Masculine Bodies

In this chapter I discuss the manner in which the Pridelines youth I worked with responded to the work of queer activist and visual artist Zanele Muholi to tease out how they negotiate, debate, and articulate meanings of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. I also examine the gender politics that inform how my participants articulated notions of stud embodiment as expressing “ego,” and the social processes through which their masculine embodiments are enabled and constrained.

One of the Women on the Rise! lessons I presented at Pridelines in 2011 along with instructor Anya Wallace focused on black lesbian creativity. We read poems by Audre Lorde and Cheryl Clarke and discussed the work of black South African lesbian activist/artist Zanele Muholi, who documents the lives of black lesbians in South Africa through portrait photography, below are some examples of her work.



figs 3.1; 3.2, Photographs from Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* series, 2006-2007.

Muholi felt compelled to document the embodiments of black lesbians in South Africa as she witnessed first-hand the violent attacks, rapes, and deaths due to HIV/AIDS of her disenfranchised friends in the lesbian community. In the article “Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa,”

Amanda Lock Swarr describes how lesbians are the target of attacks due to their refusal of men's advances and the view that homosexuality is an un-African influence from the global North. She advances,

Equally important but less attended to are ways lesbians also expose the vulnerability of male masculinities, since putatively successful masculinity depends on men's need to control women and force them to follow gendered conventions of heterosexual conduct. Butch lesbians' relationships with straight women also both paradoxically affirm and undermine masculinities and claims to male bodies. Lesbian relationships and the violence that surrounds them point to the instability of the parameters of masculinities and men's exclusive claims to them. (2012, 962)

Thus it is not only the reality of a sexual relationship between women that causes controversy but the fact that women are taking on masculine embodiments that are perceived to be the sole purview of men. Swarr finds that there are challenging paradoxes inherent in South African lesbian masculinities. "In the expressions of masculinity found in lesbian butchness, sources of strength and power also create vulnerabilities to sexual violence, a juxtaposition that sometimes proves fatal (Ibid. 963)." It is in this context that Muholi undertakes her work of documenting these volatile embodiments and preserving them for posterity, as she understands first-hand how fleeting the lives of women who express masculinity can be.

The power of Muholi's work to agitate heteronormativity in South Africa is evidenced by the theft of hard drives from her apartment in 2012 that contained a large body of photographs and film footage. The theft hindered the artist's ability to realize an exhibition that was scheduled to open in July 2012 and the incident received little attention in the South African media¹. Muholi utilizes her activist methodology not only to record experiences of pain and struggle, but also to capture the corporeal styles that black lesbians have developed to create a historical record. She states, "With 'Faces

¹ As reported in Diva Magazine Lesbian news, "Media Ignore Theft of Photographer's Work Documenting Black Lesbian Lives," <http://www.divamag.co.uk/category/news/media-ignore-theft-of-photographer's-work-documenting-black-lesbian-live.aspx>

& Phases², I intended to show our emerging South African black aesthetics through portraiture, especially because positive images of us within the women's and queer archives are almost non-existent³.”

Muholi's attention to the politics and power of aesthetics amidst a hostile social landscape for black lesbians affirms my argument that the dressing and crafting of bodies significantly shape the everyday lives of girls and women. In South Africa and the U.S., the crafting of a masculine lesbian embodiment can make a woman a target of attack while simultaneously providing this woman with a means for expressing of her sexuality and talking back to dominant discourse. Swarr notes the creative work entailed in crafting masculine lesbian embodiments when she argues,

In South Africa's urban townships, where contemporary masculinities are produced, many lesbians identify strongly as butch. As with heterosexual masculine men, lesbian masculinities are means to assert agency, claim masculine privileges, and declare romantic desires. Yet while male masculinities inform and shape South African Lesbian's understandings of gender and their constant conversations about butchness, they are not simply copying men but are creating masculinities (Ibid. 967).

I would extend Swarr's argument to the masculinities performed and embodied by the studs in my study. Even as they draw from gender norms in producing their identities, they resignify the meanings of masculinity through their dissident staging of it.

By discussing the work of Lorde, Clarke, and Muholi, Anya and I aimed to spark a conversation with the youth at Pridelines about how race, gender, and colonial legacies inform the lives of queer black women both inside and outside of the United States. We also discussed how they have utilized creative means of raising consciousness about discrimination and black queer female sexualities and subjectivities.

As we looked at images of Muholi's work the group commented on the clothing styles of the women in the photographs, whether they liked them or disliked them, and

² “Faces & Phases” is a photographic series the artist created from 2006-2007 that consist of portraits of black lesbians that Muholi captured in their home environments.

³ Ibid. 26.

some of the young women in the group would playfully talk about being attracted to the women in the images. They were particularly taken with a woman who was wearing a tie inside-out. They admired her masculine style and thought she looked cool.

The vibe of the lively discussion sharply changed when we displayed an image Muholi captured of a black masculine woman wearing a white shirt, black sweater vest, and jeans. She was bald, her breasts were discernible beneath her clothes, and she had a small beard of wirey facial hair under her chin.



fig 3.3, Photograph from Zanele Muholi's *Faces & Phases* series, 2006-2007

Q, who in a focus group discussion articulated frustration with the rigid gender roles she found codified in the South Florida lesbian community, was the first one to negatively judge the photo. She did not like facial hair and said that it ruined the woman's otherwise well put together "stud" look. She thought this woman had crossed the line in terms of gender conformity. The idea of the stud, she explained, was to look like a masculine woman, not just like a man.

Alaika chimed in, in addition to Johnny, a young man at Pridelines who would frequently attend our workshops. Johnny was very harsh in his judgment of the woman's body and was disgusted by the facial hair. When asked why he said, "She's a woman,

and women should not have facial hair. That is something she should take care of.” To my surprise, none of the young women in the group came to the defense of Muholi’s photographic participant.

Only two queer boys in the group contradicted the overall derision toward the woman’s beard. Stanley, a Haitian American young man who always had strong and assertively argued opinions, was particularly vocal in his defense of the woman’s beard and told the group that it was not right to judge the way people express themselves with their body. Alaika, never one to pass up the opportunity for a debate, got very agitated and screamed at Stanley, asking him if it would be ok if people walked around nude in the streets. For Alaika, social acceptance of a female beard would amount to social acceptance of public nudity.

Our program liaison at Pridelines joined the discussion and tried to make the group understand how they were being discriminatory against gender con-conforming people, and Alaika subsequently walked out of the room, upset as she felt she was being attacked. We were unprepared for such an intense response and did not feel that the photograph was going to spark such a heated conversation among the group.

Our experience that night made it clear that even in spaces where youth embrace queer life there are limits to the gendered embodiments that they will accept. Even as they complain about how normative constructions of gender and sexuality restrict their lives, they also police boundaries of embodiment and sexuality. I believe that masculinity is particularly difficult for these young women not only to embody in their own lives but to figure out how to live with, and how to understand it in other women. The pressure to make their masculinity normative in some way is so strong.

In her essay “Feminine Stubble” black lesbian scholar Rachel Burgess describes how people react to the growth of hair she has under her chin in lesbian spaces she frequents. The facial hair makes her body difficult to read to others. People in queer contexts do not believe that she is a biological woman and straight people think that she

has a medical condition. She contends that the social construction of gendered bodies make men the only appropriate bearers and owners of facial hair and make women with a lot of hair seem unattractive and/or sick. She notes,

While it's natural, in lesbian culture, to have hairy legs and armpits, this naturalness, in both queer and straight cultures, does not extend to the face. But hirsute women are not aberrations; they are merely collapsing the binary of natural/unnatural (2005, 234).

As a black woman the reading of Burgess' body becomes an even more potentially volatile process.

Burgess theorizes that what makes her body so displeasing to people is that it compels them to engage with difference in a neoliberal context. She finds that the silences and glossing over of questions of difference and embodiment (in regards to race especially but also class, gender and sexuality) facilitates women's collusion in the social construction of beauty and gender. People often try to give Burgess advice on how to get rid of her "problem," pity her, or provide her with theories about what kind of medical issue might be causing it. She writes,

What I embody both brands me and keeps me hidden from the view of some heterosexual people and some in the LGBTQ community. I am visible because I am marked first as black, then as hairy. However, the *way* I am marked and how this visible, bodily performance of gender is constructed also makes me invisible. I interrupt both heteronormativity and lesbian performances. (Ibid. 232: emphasis in original)

The hirsute woman photographed by Zanele Muholi caused an interruption and eruption in our discussion of black lesbian subjectivity and creative production.

I later wondered if it was due to transphobia and cissexism. The interaction stayed with me as I continued to work on my dissertation, and I raised the issue of the reaction to the photograph in a focus group at Pridelines in 2013, held over a year after the initial conversation on Muholi's work. The group of young women at Pridelines who participated that night included Q, Alaika, Tamyra, Suzie, Ruth, and Juby. Q and Alaika

were the only ones present that day who were part of the original Muholi discussion in 2011. Q and Alaika were also the only studs in the group. Juby was dressed in a feminine style. Ruth, Tamyra, and Suzie were dressed in gender neutral casual dress such as jeans, t-shirts, basketball shorts, loose fitting work out pants, and wore no makeup.

As most of the students there that day were not present in that contentious class, I described the reaction of that group to the Muholi photograph and displayed the image on the wall through a projector hooked up to my laptop. I asked them, “Do you think that the problem with the facial hair is that it seems to be trans?” Juby said, “It’s nasty! I don’t want no man!”

***JH:** So it’s an aesthetic thing?*

***Ruth:** You play into the stereotype. It really irks me. You need to wear a tie or a vest to look like a stud?*

***Tamyra:** Exactly.*

***Alaika:** But you should see me cuz when I wear my tie I’m looking good for real, I’m just sayin.’*

***Ruth:** You play into the stereotype [of gender norms], you play to it, but it doesn’t make you who you are. Your clothes don’t make you who you are. So by wearing these clothes, what you trying to say? You’re really trying to prove a point to someone? Who wants to wear a tie all day?*

***Q and Alaika in unison:** But we’re not talking about clothes [meaning that the conversation was supposed to be centered on the facial hair in the photograph].*

***Q:** But there are people who are not Americanized, who are in Third World countries. She’s like [the woman in the image], “I have facial hair whatever, like ok. I’m masculine so I’m gonna rock my hair.” But what difference would it be if that person was feminine and had masculine hair? It’s just her chemistry.*

Q, in contrast to her negative judgment about the woman’s facial hair over a year back, articulated legitimacy for the hair through allusions to an alternative aesthetic context in Africa and to biology, citing the woman’s possible chemistry makeup. Ruth continued, “I wax my mustache. I have a mustache right now and in pictures it looks ridiculously dark.

And it's not that I'm ashamed, I just look better without my mustache.

Tamyra: *I don't think it's the way you're dressed that makes you but it's your personality shown through your dress. It's like the way I feel this [indicating her outfit] looks like a dancer. So, I dance, so—I'll put on an outfit that looks like a dancer to me. Tomorrow I'm gonna go wear an outfit that will remind me of Candy Land [an annual rave event in Miami.]*

Ruth: *You are adding to the stereotype, you are adding wood to the fire. When a woman who is a stud has the facial hair it's adding wood to the fire. Who is to say that because you're a man you have to have facial hair?*

Alaika: *It is [reinforcing the stereotype]. It's like, "Are you a male or a female?" You can be a female dressed like a male but once you start growing the facial hair and all that you start becoming the other one [male].*

Although Ruth fervently argued that studs reify stereotypes by crafting masculine bodies that draw on traditional signifiers of manhood such as ties, vests, and facial hair, she performed a similar reification of normative masculinity by describing how these elements do not belong on a female body. Ruth finds it hard to believe that anyone would choose to wear a formal article of clothing like a tie all day, as it associated with work, and Alaika retorts with a playful remark about how good she looks in them, "you should see me," she says. Although Alaika defends the stud's right to don men's attire, she agrees with Ruth that facial hair on a stud transgresses a boundary, citing the inability to read a clear-cut biological sex as the problem.

Ruth, Juby, and Alaika then diverted to a discussion about how an additional negative element of the facial hair is that it is not hygienic, remarking that beards carry odor. I asked them, "Well, you're talking about the facial hair like your problem is an aesthetic/hygienic thing but isn't your issue that you think this hair doesn't belong on a female body?"

Alaika: *You're a stud. There is nothing wrong with you being a stud, but by growing a beard you are trying to get that male role.*

JH: *Is that transphobia, or trans discrimination?*

Alaika: *It's not, I mean, it would be...*

Tamyra: *It's the inability to put this person in a box that makes people upset. It's like, "Are you a girl? Are you a guy?"*

Ruth: *What makes me upset is that you're playing to men, cuz that's what men have, men have beards, and she's trying to be masculine.*

At this point the conversation turns into a cacophony with all members of the group, with the exception of Suzie, shouting over one other to make their points. Q, raising her voice to quiet the others, aggressively asked Ruth, "Do you know her story? Do you know her story?," referring to the woman in Muholi's picture. Alaika turned to me in resignation and said, "I feel like this is a year ago to me, we are having the same argument."

Ruth to Q: *We're talking about this person [pointing to the image]. What do you see? She's trying to dress like what?*

Q: *I don't know what she's trying to dress like.*

Ruth: *What is she trying to dress like?!*

Now Juby and Alaika break the thick, electric tension growing between Ruth and Q by jokingly shouting in unison, "She's trying to dress like a man!," as they extend their arms across the room to give each other a hard high five slap, laughing.

Ruth, still serious, "Exactly, she's trying to be a man because that's what a man is supposed to look like."

Q: *Who said that's the way a man is supposed to look like? You talk about a box? There is no such thing as a box.*

Ruth: *She's adding to the stereotype.*

Q: *Ok, so tell me—what's the stereotype?*

Ruth: *That to be a man you need to have facial hair and look like that.*

Q: *I know women who have facial hair—I know women who look like that.*

Ruth: *We're talking about this woman who happens to be a lesbian. We're not talking about random straight people.*

Q: It doesn't make a difference. Then you're the one conforming to the stereotype. Because you're like, "She's a lesbian so this means this. She's masculine so she has to be this. Because she's a stud it has to be this."

I intervened at this point, as it was evident that not even the goofy antics of Juby and Alaika were going to quell the argument between Ruth and Q. I asked for the group to pause for a moment and talked to them about the history of similar conflicts among women in the 1970s, when feminists launched a critique of butch-femme aesthetics. This conversation, and the charged affects it induced, demonstrated many of the young women's alignment with cissexist attitudes. Contradictions similar to those I described among this group in the previous chapter emerged in which participants claimed to be positing a gender non-conformist position while relying on biological and cissexist constructs and valuations of stable gender identities.

The conceptual messiness and emotionality that has attended the discussion of the body of Muholi's photographic participant among Pridelines youth indicates not only the stubbornness of gender constructs, but also the complicated work of theorizing gender, its formations, and destabilizations. If, as Judith Butler has argued, "Parodying dominant norms may not be enough to displace them (1993, 84)," how can young queer women of color, or scholars, ever really know whether a body practice reifies or troubles hegemonic gender? Butler's discussion on the psychic negotiations that attend identification is useful for consideration of this question here.

Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This "being a man" and this "being a woman" are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely (Ibid. 86).

Understanding the ambivalence that attends processes of identification helps explain

why contradiction and paradox so mark the narratives of gender embodiment among my students. There are no outside gender logics for them to work from, anything they construct or resignify will be the product, or by-product, of an order that preceded them. They want to claim legitimacy for women who embody masculinities, but also value the ability for them to be able to clearly read sex/gender as male/female on the bodies of others. Some articulate a notion of innate femininity that impels them to negatively judge stud style and subjectivity for being male-identified, despite the fact that the feminine identity they refer to is a normative construct.

There were no hard feelings among the group that night as the conversation meandered to other matters—as it often does in the lively space of Pridelines. Their discussion was a sobering reminder of how little the insights of queer theory have affected the understandings and politics of gender and embodiment on the ground. However, the discussion among these queer young women of color evidenced a keen critical ability and knowledge among them, and a willingness to participate in difficult dialogues that in themselves conduct local yet significant work towards transforming the very terms they negotiate. The manner in which the creative work of masculine black lesbians such as Zanele Muholi, Yo Majesty, Shunda K, and Kin4Life elicited the engagement of queer youth also attests to the radical potential of mobilizing art in projects seeking to eliminate racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism.

Stud as Signification of Ego

The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface.

--Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id" (1923)

Inasmuch as the phallus signifies, it is also always in the process of being signified and resignified. In this sense, it is not the incipient moment or origin of a signifying chain, as Lacan would insist, but part of a reiterable signifying practice, and, hence, open to resignification: signifying in ways and in places that exceed its proper structural place within the Lacanian symbolic and contest the necessity of that place. If the phallus is a privileged signifier, it gains that privilege through being reiterated. And if the cultural

construction of sexuality compels a repetition of that signifier, there is nevertheless in the very force of repetition, understood as resignification or recirculation, the possibility of deprivileging that signifier.

--Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993)

The psychoanalytic work of Freud and Lacan, and Judith Butler's critical engagement with the implications of psychoanalytic theory for understanding and undermining normative gender regimes, have shown that established processes of gender identification are arbitrary and vulnerable to transformation, yet stubbornly durable. In the work of Freud and Lacan, identification with the powerful and privileged position of the father, or the law, is determined by the psychic processes through which one comes to have or be the phallus. The phallus in Lacan's framework being that which determines the generation of meaning in language. The phallus symbolizes the power of male domination, as those who have it control the circulation of social information. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler frames the phallus as subject to appropriation and resignification by lesbian subjects who assume it, in whatever form, to craft alternative subject positions in the normative phallic economy.

Some of the masculine body presenting young women I worked with at Pridelines talked about feeling particularly confident and powerful in their masculine dress, often drawing on the term "ego" when describing the identity that attends their masculine embodiment. I contend that these participants organically understand the politics of the social construction of gendered subjectivity, which affords the privilege of generating meaning to white, heterosexual, cisgendered males. Rather than frame their ego narratives as problematic articulations of male-identification, I suggest that their incorporation of the phallus through the donning of masculine dress undermines hegemonic gender regimes through presenting bodies and attitudes that decouple phallic power from male bodies. Instead of viewing themselves as "men," my participants compared themselves to boys, boys being subjects who are not yet fixed into a gender

identity, and for which the psychic vicissitudes of identification hold out a range of possibilities.

When I asked Wicky what her ideal look, her low-riding jeans revealing her boxer shorts, would communicate to a stranger in public about her identity she responded, “That I’m gay.”

JH: *What will let them know that you’re gay?*

Wicky: *Because, it’s basically describing what my egotistical side is which is a little boy, a tomboy.*

Q also described her look as Kevin as embodying the most confident aspect of her subjectivity, in contrast to the feminine styles she tends to wear more often. Note the contrasts she outlines and performs:

JH: *So Q, if you’re walking around as “Q” in your ideal look what would people know about you?*

Q: *The simple fact that I’m confident and I really don’t care. It’s more or less how I am now, like, when I throw on the dress, the makeup, the whole girly-ness-- it’s one of those things, people....honestly, in my head I have low self esteem, but it’s one of those things, I guess I portray confidence. Because if I feel pretty that day people are like “Oh, she’s cute” or “She has confidence.” And people walk up to me and stuff like that and I’m like, “Uh, why are you walking up to me?” and they’re like “You’re cute.” “Really?” Like in my head I’m like “Whatever.” So I just walk away. I guess I portray that confidence but in my head I’m like “Really?” ...eh.....(shrugging her shoulders)*

JH: *If you’re walking around like Kevin what do you think people will know about you?*

Q: *That I have an ego. Especially when I used to do it in the past I would always go to the mall and my friends would love it. Because I would have on my jeans, I don’t do the whole baggy thing when I do boyish—I do clean, like, you could tell I’m doing well [financially] type of look. I like to wear the button ups and the vests, so every time I used to do that I would have females walk up to me and be like “You must have a job or somethin’.” They would walk up to me because I have that confidence. I have on my hat and my braids, my braids pulled back, so I would have that swag going on and females would just love it because it seems like I was confident, and I would go up to people more easily and they would just be like “Hey, how are you doing?” It was so much easier. With me it was with ease. Because I’m already tall, I’m broad. It was one of those things where, it came out so naturally. I don’t know, it was just confidence, people saw that I was really confident. I exuded that confidence more when I was dressing boyish.*

Not only does Q say that dressing in a masculine fashion makes her feel confident, but her diction changes as she describes embodying Kevin. When discussing Kevin she talks about having “swag” and about her interactions with “females,” a term primarily used by men to describe women as sexual objects. In describing her style as the feminine Q she frames herself as passive, people come up to her, and she does not believe that they are being genuine in their complements--their attention makes her uncomfortable. As Kevin, she takes on the active role of introducing herself to other women and feels that her confidence is more genuine. There is a marked contrast between the narration of Q’s--“I guess I portray that confidence,” with Kevin’s--“I *have* that confidence.”

When I asked her what she thought other women would think about her feminine or “Q” look, she said she wasn’t sure what they would think since she often gets criticized for wearing heels, which she enjoys wearing. She explained that women are often surprised by the fact that she wears heels because she is tall, and they think that by wearing heels she makes herself stand out too much. This type of interaction makes her ignore the opinions of other women. “So, honestly, most females I really don’t notice, cuz I don’t pay attention to other females, I pay attention to gay males because that is who I’m around the majority of the time. So I will always get their reaction because I don’t care. I would take in theirs [gay male opinion] more than I would take in a female.”

Although some may critique Q for foreclosing the possibility that there is a way to possess confidence while embodying femininity, as I find that chonga girls signify, her comments suggest that perhaps the policing of normative gender is the very cause of her formation of an ego identification with masculine embodiment and style. She conveyed a notion of “naturally” exuding confidence in her stud style because she is “naturally” tall and broad. In noting the negative commentary she has been subject to regarding her donning of heels as in excess of feminine gender presentation by making her appear too tall, it seems that the social demand that Q *faithfully* repeat femininity by downplaying her height had the divergent effect of making normative femininity an illegitimate option

for her.

Q also described that what made her feel more comfortable dressing in a feminine style was losing weight. She said that when she was heavier she would cover her body more. “When I started losing the weight I was like “Oh I feel sexy”, and that’s when I started dressing more feminine, taking to “Ok, I’m a girl so I should probably...I’m able to wear this now so ok throw this on because it makes me feel sexy or whatever.” Femininity became an option to Q because she acquired a slimmer body that she felt was appropriate to the style. She felt that she did not have access or valid claim to feminine style because of her weight. She needed to have the body to go with the subjectivity that is associated with the clothes, heels, make-up, etc. She states that she feels sexy dressing in a feminine way but she does not garner pleasure from the compliments she gets from other women, which is a common construction of young women’s style practices, but by gay men, and the masculine women she is sexually attracted to.

Hearing these young women talk about the confidence they feel in masculine dress makes me think about the many girls for whom taking on a masculine embodiment is a foreclosed possibility. I have shared this research with the youth serving professionals I work with through Women on the Rise! to discuss how we can engage girls in judgment-free discussions about masculine style. Women on the Rise! provides girls with an opportunity to take on masculine embodiments through a project that is inspired by the work of local artist Crystal Pearl and contemporary artist Cindy Sherman.

These artists utilize make up and costume to document their performances of multiple female identities. Many of Cindy Sherman’s figures are drawn from and pervert stock female representations in art and film, and Crystal Pearl’s characters are inspired by the flamboyantly dressed Latinas she encounters in Miami. When the Women on the Rise! instructors and I discuss the work of Pearl and Sherman in workshops we bring bags of clothing, wigs, and accessories to the girls, which include masculine clothing items such as camouflage shirts, bubble jackets, caps, and men’s tank tops. The girls

are prompted to create and embody a character of their imagining and to document the styles they create with photographs. Although most of the girls utilize the more feminine clothing in the selection there are always several girls who craft and perform a masculine character. Often times these girls seem somewhat hesitant about utilizing these items. They eventually overcome their discomfort, don the clothing, and materialize their artistic ideas for the photographs, as in the student work below.



fig 3.4, work by Women on the Rise! participant.

My conversations with the young women at Pridelines have lead me posit that embodying masculinity is a technology that potentially affords queer girls with modes of expressing subjectivity. They make masculinity belong to them and perform it as a construct that provides them with pleasures and affirmations that they do not have access to--as their bodies are surveilled and policed by norms of femininity through which they are found wanting. As studs they can feel attractive, powerful, and significant. In the final section of this chapter I examine narratives participants shared with me about how they began dressing in masculine styles, and the factors that have restricted their ability to do so.

Assuming and Suppressing Masculinities

In the focus group at Pridelines in 2011 parents and peers were framed as influential to the participants' ability or inability to assume a masculine embodiment. Young women in the study who took part in programs at other organizations would reference masculine clothing items such as Nike Jordan's as part of their ideal look but, with the exception of Dimple, there were no other girls outside of Pridelines who described a masculine embodiment as their ideal look or who articulated lesbian or queer subjectivity. This is due to the silence around queer sexualities among the staff who work with the girls at these other organizations, which may be prompted by fear of parent complaint, lack of concern for the issues that lesbian, bi-sexual, queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming girls face, and/or homophobia or moral disapproval. This means that queer or questioning girls perhaps felt inhibited discussing these issues with the peers in their group, the staff at these organizations, the Women on the Rise! instructors, and myself, as students know that the Women on the Rise! program is hosted and evaluated by these collaborating entities.

By talking to the girls at Pridelines I learned that there are a variety of factors that constrain and enable them to embody the masculine styles they like, beyond the obvious limits of finances and market trends. Young women at Pridelines described how friends and family members played significant roles in the suppression, emergence, and solidification of their masculine styles and how they in turn hope to influence the embodiments of the younger children they care for (e.g. siblings, relatives, the children of close friends).

Wicky, who described the erotic charge of the boxer shorts that were a key part of her ideal look in the previous chapter, stated that her style was not inspired by any celebrities or by pop culture, but rather that her friend Alaika was her point of reference in crafting a masculine style.

Wicky: *It's inspired by Alaika, she made me see that no matter (pause)...she made me*

have the courage to do it [dress in boy's clothes], that's what she did.

JH: *Just by example?*

Wicky: *She led by example.*

Q to Wicky: *You're gonna give her a big head you know that right? (girls laughing)*

Wicky: *No she did that! Before I came here [Pridelines] I didn't feel comfortable doing that. Now, I'm just like whatever.*

JH: *How did you dress before?*

Wicky: *I dressed like the same but I wasn't confident about it. Don't get me wrong, I still pulled numbers.*

As Wicky's account suggests, the space of Pridelines affords girls the opportunity to meet other young women with similar experiences and becomes a site where they can experiment with styles that they otherwise would not feel comfortable wearing. Wicky's account is important to cite as so much scholarly and activist work on girls and fashion focuses on how pop culture and media are negatively influencing body image, and overlooks the ways in which girls create their own style subcultures and provide each other with support that boosts their confidence.

However, more than peers, family members were referenced as affecting the young women's ability to assume masculine fashions. Family was a big focus of Bright's comments in the focus group at Pridelines. She is a 23 year-old Jamaican American young woman who attends Florida State University. Bright has a very feminine style that is marked by bright colors and bold patterns (as her pseudonym suggests). On the night of the focus group she was wearing a medium length, black straight hair weave with blunt bangs, soft make up, pink nails, a black and white herring bone patterned hat, short denim shorts, a fringed white shirt, lots of shiny jewelry, and open-toed platform sandals. She discussed the evolution of her style from masculine to more feminine during the part of the conversation when Q was discussing her style as "Kevin."

Bright: *When I was in high school, and, you know how you dress like your favorite rapper? So Little Wayne is my favorite rapper. So back then I had locks in my hair, so I went and got some cargos and this army fatigue thermal that he had on. It was this whole thing from a picture that he had on. And I walked in the house and my mom was looking at me like I was crazy, she was like “What is this? This a new style or somethin’?” That definitely wasn’t ok—at all.*

JH: *Is that something that a lot of girls did, dress like guy rappers in high school?*

Bright: *No, it was just during spirit week. Oh no I love dressing like a girl. Would I dress like a boy if my mom accepted it? I don’t know....(pensive).*

Bright remained pensive for a while after making this statement, it seemed that in that moment she realized that she may have taken on an alternative embodiment if she felt she could. The young women at Pridelines shared stories about street harassment due to their masculine embodiments, such as people insistently calling them sir, even though they had established that they identified as women. Bright mentioned that similar occurrences happen to her when she wears sweat suits.

Bright: *I’ll be a hot boy, I’ll be a hot boy. I was a tomboy when I was in middle [school]. I was like that girl that if you saw me in a skirt you’d be like “dayum.” When we were in middle school we had to wear a uniform and it was shorts and a Polo. And I hung with boys. I had five best friends, we all hung out together. We were bad and got in trouble in school. We all hung out with the boys. So when I dressed in girl clothes for picture day everybody was like “That’s what you look like without the uniform?” But I think if my mom wasn’t strict and if she wasn’t against the whole gay lifestyle I would dress in boy clothes.*

Now my baby sister. She’s kind of like how I was in middle school. She’s 11 and I’m like let’s go get our nails done and our feet done and she’s like “No that’s too girly. No, I don’t like looking like girls. No I don’t like skirts, I don’t like dresses. And I’m like please Lord, please I hope she don’t be gay.”

JH: *[I misheard her statement and asked] You hope she’s gonna be gay?*

Bright: *No, I hope she don’t!*

Alaika: *You don’t want that, because of what you went through.*

Bright: *If my baby sister would be gay my mom would fault me for that. Cuz my baby sister is up under me all the time. You gotta have really really thick skin to be gay because you need to put up with a lot of comments. I had one of my friends, I was up in college and she was like “Um, so, I think I like girls.” And it threw me because I was like,*

“Where did this come from?” She’s Dominican, and to me Dominican people are like black people, there are gay Dominicans but it’s not accepted. Like my best friend, she’s gay and I remember she would hide it from her mom and she was talking to this girl like a dude but her mom thought it was a boy, and when it came out I was like, “I don’t wanna be in the house”. And when my friend told me that she wanted to be gay I was like it’s a lot you gotta deal with, people are gonna say stuff like, my mom is one of those people, that she’s gonna say whatever comes in her mind like, she doesn’t care. And today I was hanging out with one of my friends and she was like “When do I come in your house?” and I looked at her like, “You will never make it through my front porch.”

JH: *So your mom knows? But you just try to keep your gay friends away from your house so that you don’t have to deal with her?*

Bright: *She knows but I keep it away. That’s how I do it. A femme yeah ok come over then, but a butch or a stud are you crazy?! Oh no! I’ll be over the balcony—like—it’s not happening—its’ not happening at all.*

JH: *And why the stud because you’re mom thinks that is who you’re gonna like?*

Bright: *No because she “knows” that they’re gay. It’s more obvious.*

Here Bright articulates a view of the African American community and people of color like Latinos having little tolerance for non-heteronormative relationships and gender presentations. In another part of the conversation she discusses how her mother’s homophobia keeps her from establishing relationships with studs because she needs to keep them away from her family. So the mother’s regulation on style results also in a policing of Bright’s sexual life.

Alaika’s family also disapproves of her masculine style. She described her ideal look as, “Black jeans, kind of like shiny jeans. A blue button-up, open. Black sneakers. Gray and black checker hat. A gray t-shirt under the blue vest, the blue shirt, gray socks, gray undershirt. Tattoos. More tattoos.” When I asked Alaika what her family would think about her look she said, “They would not be happy with that.” When I inquired about why she explained that it is “because it’s not something a girl is supposed to be wearing. Quote unquote. That they see. It’s too boyish. It’s something a boy would wear, it’s not something that a girl would wear.”

When I asked Q how her family reacts to her different styles she responded, “My mother loves it when I’m more girlish because when I was younger she would try to take me shopping to do the matching outfits and I would cry. I would be like 16 years old in the mall, she took me to the mall one time and she tried to get me to put on matching cargos with a top and I completely cried and flipped out because I didn’t want it, I didn’t like anything like that so now when we go shopping I actually do grab the tights and the dresses and stuff like that and she loves it. She’s like, “Yes! I finally get the daughter that I want.” But at the same time when she sees me getting my briefs, my t-shirts or whatever, she doesn’t say anything because she still gets what she wants so she’s like, ‘Ok, I learned to accept it. You do you⁴. When you’re having your boy days that’s fine, whatever, but I love it when you’re a girl.’”

So even her mother, who seems to be the most open of the parents described by the other members of the group, as she has helped some of Q’s queer friends with support when they have been in difficult family situations, communicates to Q that it is as a gender normative girl that she most enjoys her.

Through the stories of these young lesbians of color we learn that the selection, purchasing, and wearing of styles can be a process that is heavily mediated by family, resulting also in shaping the girls’ sexual lives, as the culture of lesbians of color in Miami is highly codified by gender presentation. The styling of adolescent and young women’s bodies can be sites of struggle, as parents and guardians attempt to form the subjectivities of their children in ways that fulfill their expectations by disciplining their bodies (Foucault 1977).

Q’s story about crying while shopping in the mall with her mother for clothes conjures vivid memories of my experiences dressing and grooming myself with my mother. When I was fifteen I decided against having the traditional Quinceañera that would be customary for a Latina girl and appeased my mother’s desire for a Quinceañera portrait by having a photo session at Glamour Shots at the local mall in a simple party

dress. I felt ambivalent about the photo shoot. On the one hand I was excited about having attention lavished on me by a hair stylist and make up artist but at the same time I felt extremely awkward about it. I felt nervous while taking the pictures, being told to hold my gaze, raise and lower my chin, and hold onto tacky props without moving.

The one thing that made the process worth it for me was the hairstyle they gave me. They took my curly long hair and blow dried and flat ironed it straight. It made me look older and made me feel attractive and confident. When the stylist was finished with me my mother looked at my hair and started crying uncontrollably. She told the hair stylist that he made me look too old, that I was just a girl, he went overboard, “this is for a 15-year-old girl, not a woman!” Despite my protests she instructed the stylist to wash the style out of my hair and what resulted when dry was a frizzy, wavy halo of hair that I thought looked extremely unattractive and then I was the one crying. The Glamour Shots Quinceañera adventure became an emotional ordeal. My body being the object and subject of contention as my mother was faced with the reality of my nearing adulthood.

I am now the cause for some of these dramas with my teenage daughter. When we are out shopping and I suggest something for her that she doesn’t like I can feel the emotion well up in her. The anxiety over a potential styling failure, the “wrong” kind of shirt or shoes, can sometimes bring her to tears and develops into frustration with me. The stakes are so high when it comes to young girls and dressing, especially for girls of color, as we mediate norms of racial and gender aesthetics. In retrospect I know that part of what I liked so much about the hair style I got at Glamour Shots was the fact that it changed the texture of my hair to something I more commonly saw framed as attractive in culture, long, glossy, straight hair. When the hairstyle was removed the dry, dull, wavy hair it revealed looked shorter, and I felt that it made me look way too ethnic. When I looked at my reflection in the mirror I felt as if I was looking at a character in a Latin soap opera, and that was not the Euro-American standard of beauty I had been conditioned to adopt as a child in the U.S. Looking at the pictures now I value the way

in which my hairstyle declared my ethnicity—but at the time it was hard for me to feel confident in my hair and skin.

Conclusion

I have centered these two chapters on engaging the style blues of young masculine black lesbians. The blues is a critical and creative commingling of pleasures and pains. The sexual aesthetics of the studs in my study generate the pains of harassment, negative judgment within and without lesbian communities, and violence. The pleasures of masculine embodiment include feelings of confidence, expressions of subjectivity and economic status, and sexual gratification. Black lesbian masculinities have the powers of contesting established meanings of gender and presenting these challenges in the visual field. However, these powers are constrained and heavily policed by established heterosexist, racist, cissexist, and classist regimes. Despite this, studs have continued to fashion bodies that they find to be “fine as hell.”

Through ethnographic and cultural analysis I have found that black lesbian masculinity marks an especially precarious and regulated subject position, as it merges the threat of black male power and lesbian erotics in the social imaginary. Although masculine styles are liabilities for them to assume, some of my study participants drew upon stud looks to appropriate male privilege and fashion empowered subjectivities. Participants narrated how the crafting of stud styles entails the acquisition and studied donning of style commodities that index purchasing power. I have stressed that these practices should be framed through race-specific histories of black butch-femme experiences and representations. Study participants such as Q and Dimple used commodities to produce their identities, achieve erotic aims, and signal protest to their structural exclusion from the consumer economy. They signify the arbitrariness of class stratification by staging how class can be appropriated and consumed through sartorial practice, as they bring the white preppy labels of Perry Ellis and Polo into their wardrobes. Scholars such as Mignon Moore have shown how the masculine bodies

of black lesbians are subject to derision in black lesbian spaces due precisely to their declarations of class difference—which disrupts the classless mobility narrative of late neoliberal capitalism.

The debates among my participants over issues of lesbian male-identification and stud style revealed their paradoxical valuations of normative gender constructs, which were communicated through expressions of cissexism. Considering the perspectives of these queer young women of color helps to move activism, scholarship, and theorizing towards addressing the issues they find salient, and that they negotiate on a daily basis. I have also strived to demonstrate the political potential of black lesbian creative production for its non-normative discourse effects and open-ended modes of engaging queer youth in critical dialogues about gender, bodies, and styles.

CHAPTER 4

Crafting a Black Harajuku Barbie Body: Nicki Minaj, Race Incorporation, and Rhetorics of Corporeal Fakery

While chonga styles and woman of color masculinity come under fire for signifying class through aesthetics of racialized sexual difference, I find that the body of the popular black hip hop artist Nicki Minaj, which is freighted with signifiers of sex, wealth, hyperfemininity, and race performativity, is subject to both admiration and derision due to paradoxical valuations and critiques of neoliberal capitalism among critics. She is framed as either a semi-feminist exemplar of entrepreneurship and perseverance against sizeable odds, or as an opportunist willing to subject her body to modification in order to become a marketable product. The Barbie doll fashion cited by Minaj in crafting her style is framed by those who negatively judge her as exemplifying her lack of substance and status as a sell-out.

I contend that although Minaj overtly cites and embodies black aesthetics and hypersexuality, her mobilization of the Barbie icon, like the doll itself, obfuscates the difference and deviance that is habitually associated with sexualized, raced bodies, thus making her body a flexible image that circulates both heteronormative/neoliberal *and* feminist/antiracist/queer meanings in the arena of pop culture. Through the unique appropriation of race, or racelessness, that she performs, Nick Minaj generates status and wealth in the culture industry through embodying sexual aesthetics that would likely be subject to mockery and policing if embodied by women or girls in everyday contexts. I locate non-normative politics in the images and sounds circulated through Minaj, which I suggest express women of color subjectivity and embodiment as contingent and varying, and women of color sexuality as significantly self-determining.

In tandem with my own readings of her production and imaging, the following two chapters draw upon my study participants' discussions and theorizations of Nicki Minaj's music, career, and primarily, her body, in order to assess the cultural politics of

how her corporeality communicates and affects meanings of gender, race, class, and sex in both the macro scale of cultural discourse and the micro contexts of young women's talk. This approach is attentive to the recursive dynamics between the quotidian and mass cultural realms. What young women say about Nicki Minaj reveals the ways in which they adopt, construct, reject, and respond to racialized sexual aesthetics. My directed conversations with the girls about Nicki Minaj and observations of their independent discussions of the topic among themselves, weave in and out of the text as they inform, ground, and animate my analyses.

This chapter centers on the politics of race appropriation signified by Minaj and the ways in which a discourse of corporeal fakery permeates discussions of the entertainer among the young women of color who participated in my study. I first examine how the participants frame race appropriation as incarnated in Minaj's work and in the visual art of women artists of color. Their comments demonstrate the manner in which the categorization of images and bodies through distinctions between art and everyday practice determine the valuation and devaluation of racialized body aesthetics. The subsequent part of the chapter engages young women's negotiations of concepts such as "fake" and "natural" when they talk about Minaj's body to point to how they draw upon such constructs to mediate their consumption of the rapper and theorize the influence of the rapper's body on girls' styling practices. Narratives of bodily authenticity and artifice also reveal the ways in which my participants navigate these ideas in formulating their own styling values.

Most of the young women in my study negatively judge the bodies of young women who seem to be overtly citing and adopting racial aesthetics such as Latina chongas and Japanese ganguro girls. These girls are often derided for citing blackness in their elaborately styled bodies. The girls of color who participated in my research did not frame their problem with chonga and ganguro looks as stemming from their offense over the theft of racial attributes, but through rhetorics that framed these styles

as hypersexual, strange, and tacky. However, the girls did not negatively assess practices of racial appropriation when incarnated by cultural producers such as Nicki Minaj and contemporary artist Nikki S. Lee. Following the logic of the discursive protection of parody of raced and hypersexual embodiments, thinking about race appropriation through style as a kind of authored project that can be separated from the subjectivity of the person embodying it seems to provide the girls with a logic for its value in the realms of art and pop culture.

When discussing how artists cite racialized body markers the young women I worked with drew on notions concerning racially mixed biology, artistic creativity, and innovative fashion sense to value their work. When embodied by an artist or performer who is conducting a project for artistic or career purposes participants seemed to think that the race, gender, class, and sexual non-normativity conveyed by bodies with sexualized and race appropriating aesthetics do not pose a threat to the social order. Contrastingly, the bodies of everyday, unknown women and girls usually come under their hostile assessment. I suggest that these everyday bodies do signify a threat to the young women in this study, and to larger society, by staging the contingency of the race, gender, class, and sexual norms from which identities are crafted and policed.

I want to consider practices of race appropriation as modes of *incorporation* that are not thefts, or attempts to approximate authentic ideals, but rather work as sartorial modes that combine multiple, impure, pre-existing elements of racialized style to fashion unique bodies that communicate indifference to norms of dress and racial fixity by highlighting the constructedness of identity. The term appropriation connotes the theft of an original work, the improper use of an object or signifier without the permission of an owner. However, racial, gender, and sexual signifiers are socially constituted, and as such have no pure origin. In thinking the politics of appropriation as incorporation I attend to the ways in which racial, gender, and sexual markers do not inherently belong to particular bodies and identities. *Incorporation* stresses the ways in which the styling

practices I analyze are embodied, and also points to how pop music performers like Minaj have assumed racial signifiers for corporate ends. I find that Nicki Minaj's race incorporations claim for women of color the power to fashion selves through the culling and juxtaposition of a range of racial signifiers. Such identity play has been the privilege of white women and white entertainers for centuries.

Packaging Nicki Minaj

My readings of the images, words, and works of the artist stem from an understanding that "Nicki Minaj" is a cultural product performed by a woman who does not have sole or perhaps not even primary control of when, where, and how she is fashioned. What is known, seen, and heard of the artist is fastidiously constructed by the labor of recording industry executives, stylists, photographers, video directors, music producers, fashion editors, marketing firms, and corporate sponsors. I treat Minaj not as an author but as a hypervisible image with discourse effects that are mediating meanings of gender, race, sexuality, class, and political economy in the 21st century. In recognizing the role of these mediating factors in constructing what is known as "Nicki Minaj," I also do not wish to silence a woman of color who has some measure of influence in determining what she raps about and how she is portrayed. In consideration of this, there are moments in the text in which I attribute some authorship to her work, imaging, and words.

Minaj was born in Trinidad and raised in Jamaica, Queens—New York. She was born Onika Tanya Maraj in 1982 and moved to New York as a child. While working to make a name for herself in the rap industry in the late 2000s she appeared on various mix-tapes¹ and was eventually signed to Young Money Entertainment, which released her first mass market solo album *Pink Friday* in 2010. The term *Pink Friday*, which the artist has used for both her albums and new fragrance line, appropriates marketing rhetoric for

¹ "Mix-tape" is a term used to describe music compilations, or samplers, that often include previously unreleased or rare tracks by a single artist or group of rap artists. Emerging artists are often featured in mix-tapes in order to market test them. A successful reception via mix-tape can secure a future record deal for an up-and-coming artist.

the shopping day after Thanksgiving, “black Friday,” and conveys Minaj as a feminine, and rather unraced product ripe for frenzied consumption.

Young Money is a relatively new record label established by rap artist Lil Wayne and represents successful rap performers such as Drake. As is common in many mainstream rap practices, Minaj consistently mentions the Young Money label in her songs, as it not only promotes the brand, but also markets her as a *branded* act. Reminding your audience about the label that represents you communicates wealth via references to obtaining a record deal. The achievement of label representation is often framed in hip hop as a shift from economic struggle back in “the hood,” to more economically secure and extravagant existences that present new problems such as jealousy, public scrutiny, opportunists, and fiercer competition. These are frequent themes in Minaj’s practice as well as in the work of other popular rap artists such as Jay Z. *Pink Friday* (2010) was a music industry success and Minaj’s sophomore album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* (2012) also reached number one on the Billboard charts. Minaj is unique among many pop stars for writing her own music (often in collaboration with other writers and producers), and she cites her original contributions as an aspect of what sets her above other performers.

Prior to becoming known for her solo career Minaj rose to prominence through being a featured rapper in songs by more established rap and R&B artists such as Trey Songz. Although Minaj’s skill in delivering rhymes contributed to her success in the industry, it was the body she displayed in music videos as a featured performer that fomented her rapidly growing recognition. In stark contrast to the street-styled, baseball cap and hoody wearing woman with dark hair and little makeup that appeared in underground rap videos while she was just emerging, the Nicki that appeared in videos such as Lil Wayne’s *Knockout* was a highly affected and baroque body clad in bright pink lipstick and a light blonde wig with cotton candy blue and pink highlights. Blonde hair, pink, and girlish candy colors have become Minaj’s trademarks since her association with

Lil Wayne and his Young Money label. Even though Minaj invoked Barbie in her early career, even posing as if she were trapped inside pink Mattel packaging on the cover of her first mix-tape titled *Playtime is Over* (2007), her body post-record deal began to more directly signify white Barbie embodiment.



fig 4.1, Cover of Nicki Minaj *Playtime is Over* mix-tape

Minaj's body was a recurrent topic of discussion that emerged among the girls in Women on the Rise! classes prior to my formulation of the focus group research, and it was the frequency and intensity of their engagement with her that prompted me to address it in the popular culture section of our conversation. Although sometimes girls would recite her rhymes, most often when Minaj was invoked it was in the context of theorizing her body; what it looks like now, what it looked like before she gained celebrity, and how it is influencing other girls. The issue of Minaj's body was often framed as a narrative concerning fakery against authenticity, creativity versus marketing strategy. These conversations were animated by the girls' feelings of pride, disgust, cynicism, disappointment, wonder, confusion, and admiration of her.

Their consistent talk about Minaj led me to purchase her albums, which I listened to very many times, allowing for salient themes to emerge. I also conducted visual

analysis of images in Minaj's album art, promotional photographs, web media, and music videos. My selection of images, songs, videos, statements by, and stories on Minaj are generated by my immersion in her work and its coverage in mainstream media and internet sources such as YouTube. I did not have a hypothesis I was working to prove, but rather was curious about the meanings generated by the pop music performer who my students seemed to be obsessed with.

As I engaged with Minaj's practice I became aware of the complex imbrications of race, gender, sexuality, and class that shape her cultural production and consumption. The wide range of Minaj projects and incarnations make it impossible for me to comprehensively survey and theorize her numerous discourse effects across media in the space of these chapters. What I work to do here is center my analysis on the Minaj media that significantly relates to the discourses the young women in my study have articulated regarding the artist, and on works that I find contribute to theorizing the role of pop culture and sexual aesthetics in contemporary formations of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

I occupy the multiple positions of scholar, teacher, cultural critic, and fan in this work, as I found Minaj's music and imaging to be infectious the more I researched it. A slippage between scholarship and consumption occurred as I became an expert of all things "Minaj." I began to enjoy some of her music and would look forward to checking her website to see her most recent costumes. Google and YouTube provided me with an endless supply of media that fed and complicated my lines of inquiry. Sometimes this led to fruitful theoretical paths and at others to distraction as I clicked away at suggested videos and links to blog stories. I engage selected works as primary texts and points of analysis for building my case study on the power effects of Nicki Minaj's sexual aesthetics.

In what follows I contextualize Minaj's performance and imaging practice in relation to contemporary art, the history of black style practices, and 19th-20th century

black female performance to engage the genealogy of her bodywork and theorize its significance in shaping contemporary racial/sexual discourse. The subsequent section draws from participant observation and focus groups in theorizing how and what Minaj's body *means* to young women of color and how discussion of her body reveals how they value aesthetic practices.

Race, Sexuality, and Styles of Incorporation

Seldom given access to grooming materials and almost never allowed to bathe, slave women wore their clothes, usually issued to them once a year with little regard to size or gender, until they were rags. These African women were routinely made to do "men's work" and were forced to wear breeches while they did it. Slaveowners purposely blurred sex distinctions through clothing as a tactic to destroy the slaves' individual identities in part by denying their gender. Wearing trousers certainly allowed the freedom of movement to work, but the unrestricted movement the slaves had in their dress was symptomatic of subordination, not dominance. Withholding grooming tools also dehumanized black women in order that they could be traded as commodities and owned as property—masters often groomed their slaves for the market using the same tools they used on animals. Thus these women were "natural" as a direct consequence of their utter powerlessness and chattel status. To talk of free white women being "forced" to wear corsets by magical fashion icons, thereby becoming "slaves to fashion," seems an insensitive exaggeration in light of the physical and institutional force articulated in the black female slave's "natural" look.

--Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism*

*All these bitches is my sons
And I ain't talking 'bout Phoenix
Bitch, I get money so I do's what I pleases
I live where the motherfuckin' pools and the trees is*

*Broke bitches so crusty, disgust me
G-g-gave the bitch a ride, got the Continental dusty
Trust me, I keep a couple hundred in the duff' b'
Couple wet wipes 'case a bum try to touch me, eww*

*I-I-I'm the terminator
Bitch talk slick, I'ma have to terminate her
These little nappy headed hos need a perminator*

You my seed, I spray you with germinator

--Nicki Minaj, lyrics from *Did It On 'Em*

Black women had to contest their wholesale definition as non-beauties. In response to the exclusion of black women from dominant representations of beauty, African American women's beauty became part of the symbolic repertoire with which champions of the race sought to assert racial pride.

--Maxine Leeds Craig, *Aint I a Beauty Queen?*

Minaj's body is meticulously groomed. Her lustrous, vibrantly colored wigs, flawless, glowing makeup, manicured hands, long lacquered fingernails, and unique, customized clothing signify wealth. She has an hourglass figure marked by her small waist and large, round derrier and breasts, radiant light brown skin, and perfectly aligned, glossy white teeth. Minaj often wears boldly patterned and bright skin-tight body suits, bikinis, and form fitting dresses and pant suits. These are frequently accented with thick platform shoes, boots, or high, shiny, metallic or colored stilettos. Her lyrics often target less affluent and attractive women, who she refers to as "crusty," or "nappy headed." This hyperbolic language aims to bring her female rival down to a lower socio-economic level. The disgust of the nappy hair is not solely driven by a notion of natural black hair as less than, or racial self-hatred, but through pointing out her opponent's inability to buy a good weave².

Hip hop music developed from practices such as "battling," in which rappers would publicly compete to find out who could longest sustain a skillfully delivered "free-style," improvised rap on the spot. A hip hop lexicon based upon provoking and intimidating opponents stemmed from these practices and continue to inform the structure of hip hop compositions. Many raps are written to directly address real or imagined rivals. This style of rap also emerged from African American vernacular practices such as "ranking" and "the dozens," a humorous exchange of insults among classmates and

2 This term is used in many African American communities to denote wigs and hairpieces.

friends, that, beyond a form of play, also constitutes a form of survival whereby flaws in appearance, that could bring severe consequences in a society that violently reads black bodies, are pointed out in order to be corrected. Ranking also established the higher status of those with “better” clothes, hair, skin color, etc. Through comparing her heavily groomed and styled body to that of other women Minaj legitimates her hip hop supremacy and answers to corporeal histories that denigrated black female bodies to support notions of the more refined and desirable beauty of white women, which still largely hold sway.

Minaj’s body is a bricolage of racial codes. Barbie doll blonde is the trademark color of her wigs, which are often highlighted with bright pink and blue tones. Her gendered and working class inflected blackness is marked by her weave, long, intricately designed nails, form fitting outfits, large buttocks and brown skin. The pastel hued, girlish makeup she wears, and the clash of bright patterns in her wardrobe are inspired by the styles of trendy Japanese young women known as “Harajuku” girls. Harajuku girls are characterized by wearing hyperfeminine makeup such as light pink blush, wearing many plastic barrettes in their hair, and mixing styles culled from hip hop culture, rock, skate boarding culture, anime, and high fashion. The name developed in response to the phenomenon of trend setting Japanese youth congregating in Tokyo’s Harajuku shopping and fashion district. Harajuku style has been consumed and appropriated internationally with other U.S. pop music artists such as Gwen Stefani, a white woman, performing with backup “Harajuku girls” and even producing a line of fragrances and high end clothing featuring cartoon Harajuku girl characters. Minaj’s citation of Harajuku style is evidenced by the bright colors she wears, and the aesthetic excess of the patterns, colors, ruffles, and accessories she dons. In fact, she came to call herself a “Harajuku Barbie.”

Like chonga styles, the fashions of youth such as Harajuku girls and “ganguro”/ *kogyaru*” girls who darken their skin to craft bodies that signify black aesthetics, are derided in dominant Japanese discourse for their aesthetic excesses (Black 2009). In

assessing the race politics of young Japanese women who darken their skin as part of the ganguro fashion, which is similar in its bricolage of styles to Harajuku but has more of a hip hop inspired element, cultural studies scholar Daniel Black notes, “It [ganguro fashion] suggests a view of race that is partly about choice, and particularly choices of consumption and style (Ibid. 250).” There is a similar dynamic of race-as-choice and race-as-style also at work in the incorporations of Japanese girls’ fashion as employed by Minaj and Stefani, but this neoliberal framing of race does not, as I will show, diminish the significance of established racial regimes in defining the terms of these body crafting practices. A discussion of how race citations have been approached by women artists of color and interpreted by the girls in my focus groups help to elaborate the sexual-aesthetic politics of Minaj’s race incorporations, which I argue claim for women of color the possibilities of crafting bodies that incorporate a range of signifiers and trouble normativity.

Contemporary African American visual artist and DJ Iona Rozeal Brown has engaged the phenomenon of ganguro in her work, conducting a counter-appropriation in which she fashions images of Japanese women in traditional 16th through 19th century ukiyo-e style and dresses them in black skin and contemporary hip hop fashions. The race performativity she conveys in her paintings is staged by the conspicuous blackface of the figures in the images, which are primarily women. The black paint on their faces is revealed to be an artificial skin color due to the edges of the “natural” skin that remain visible. In the early millennium she created a series of paintings titled *a3 blackface*. *a3* is an acronym the artist created for the term “afro-asiatic allegory.” The images are naturalistic yet highly stylized portraits featuring single subjects, or small groupings of two or three bodies. The lines are executed in the clean, flowing style of ukiyo-e woodblock prints and Brown works with a restrained color palette of earth tones.

Shading is minimal and the paint is applied to appear flat, thus there is not much dimension in the images, which pose bodies against empty beige backgrounds. As in

Luis Gispert's *Cheerleader* images, depictions of chongas in *The New Times*, and Victor Patricio Landaluze's series of prints depicting Cuban "types," Brown employs the blank background composition in an ethnographic mode of staging a body to be read for style, a style that evinces a kind of novel cultural phenomenon, or curiosity.



fig 4.2, Iona Rozeal Brown, *a3 blackface #50*, 2003

In an article on Brown's work in *The New York Times*, the artist describes her reaction to learning about the ganguro trend through a visit to Japan, where hip hop has been growing in popularity over the last two decades, "Being African American, I'm flattered that our music and style is so influential. But I have to say that I find the ganguro obsession with blackness pretty weird, and a little offensive. My paintings come of out trying to make sense of this appropriation³." Thus the assumed blackness of the ganguro style is disdained in Japan, where race politics have valorized light skin (Black 2009), and by Brown, who finds the practice queer, and offensive. For Brown the concept of appropriation seems to denote a kind of theft. What the artist does not adequately take into account in the interview is the manner in which aspects of Asian culture have also

³ "Art: For Japanese Girls, Black is Beautiful," Benjamin Genocchio, *The New York Times*, April 4, 2004.

been incorporated into hip hop and wider African American popular culture, beginning in the early 1970s in tandem with the rise of Bruce Lee. The popularity of Bruce Lee in African American culture led to the production of films such as *The Last Dragon* in 1985, a blaxploitation film that centered on a black martial artist named Bruce Leroy, which has become a cult classic. Another example is the formation of the iconic hip hop group from New York City Wu Tang Clan in the early 1990s, whose co-founder the RZA released a mass market Kung Fu film titled *The Man With the Iron Fists* in 2012.

The Studio Museum in Harlem devoted an exhibition to citations of Asian culture in the work of artists who engage blackness titled *Black Belt*, which was on view in 2004⁴. In the catalogue curator Christine Y. Kim elaborates how Brown makes sense of ganguro in her work by forming a parallel between the imagery of sexual pleasure and wealth that marked depictions of geishas and courtesans in the ukiyo-e style of the late Edo period, and the staging of consumption and hypersexuality in the visual culture of contemporary mainstream hip hop (Kim 2004, 30). The corporeal and cultural appropriations mobilized in ganguro and hip hop bring the imbrications of race that are operative in sexual representation and consumption to the fore.

In order to engage the girls in my focus groups in a conversation about style and race citation, as the issue runs through this study in the practices of cultural workers such as Nikki S. Lee and Minaj, I showed participants a selection of images of ganguro girls, Brown's *a3* paintings, and Nikki S. Lee's photographs. The image of ganguro style that I shared with the girls, which I found on the internet via Google search of the term "ganguro," captures two young women with dark orange skin that seems to have been the result of wearing sunless tanner. They wear cakey white lipstick and makeup that makes their eyes appear larger and rounded. Although ganguro is inspired by hip hop and black embodiment the style does not attempt to emulate racial authenticity, as the girls

⁴ The exhibition also included an installation work by Luis Gispert titled *Enter My 37th Chamber* (2002). The section in the *Black Belt* exhibition catalogue that discussed this work also included an image from the *Cheerleader* series, even though it had no direct relation to the exhibition theme, thus reasserting the chongaesque body as emblematic of his practice.

in the image have bright pink and orange wigs on, in addition to Harajuku style outfits that are a mélange of accessories and colors. When I asked the girls what they thought about the ganguro style embodied by the young women in the photograph they generally articulated negative judgments such as “They look like a hot mess.”; “They look fake, they don’t look good.”; “That’s too much makeup, see, you won’t see me do that.”; and, “To me, it’s not cute, it’s too much, they went overboard.” Dimple, the Latina lesbian girl I discussed in the masculinity chapter, responded to the image by saying, “I wouldn’t go up to [as in pick up] none of them,” finding them patently unattractive. However, when I showed her an image of Nicki Minaj Dimple said, “She sexy.” Some of the girls thought the ganguro girls’ outfits were “cute,” but often added that they did not like the artificial look of the skin and makeup.



fig 4.3, Image of ganguro girls.

When responding to my question about whether they thought the race citation of ganguro was offensive, few girls stated that they thought so. Many others said the ganguro girls were just “crazy,” and one African American girl stated, “I think it’s ok, I don’t find it offensive. I think it’s cute that they’re trying to be like us.” K Baby, a 16-

year old Haitian girl from my Women on the Rise! class in Coconut Grove who cited Nicki Minaj as an inspiration for her colorful style of dress, was one of the participants who was offended stating, “It’s disturbing, the fact they’re trying too hard to look like us, it don’t work like that.” When I asked the girls in the Coconut Grove group how they think people would respond to ganguro girls if they appeared in Miami and how the ganguro girls would respond to the city, in turn, Kia said, “If they are trying to look hip hop, stereotypically wise, nobody looks like that, if you really think about it. I guess cuz they’re surrounded by what their ideal is. When they really come and see the real thing they’ll feel ridiculous and want to change out of that quick.” Thus the girls, like Iona Rozeal Brown, articulate a notion of racial authenticity that is measured against attempts at emulation.

Several participants compared the ganguro girls to the women on the MTV television show and pop culture phenomenon *Jersey Shore*, whose cast is often ridiculed in mass media for their hyperethnic Italian American style of artificially tanned skin and revealing clothing. Thus, both in Japan and in the U.S., aesthetic excesses of style, and particularly styles such as chonga and ganguro that stage race and signal sexuality, agitate the visual field through presenting bodies that highlight the constructedness of race, gender, and class. Sexuality is the frame through which these “fake,” “overboard,” body presentations are organized, and is marked by aesthetic excess. The disdain the girls in my focus groups had for the race imitation and excess style of ganguro was echoed in statements some made concerning the chonga’s failed and problematic citations of blackness.

The black lesbian-identified young women in my focus group at Pridelines viewed the ganguro girls in the photograph as hypersexual. I displayed the image with no preface and asked them where they thought the girls were from. The tongue-in-cheek responses they gave included, “A brothel,” and, “I think she’s from a whorehouse.” Although they were making hyperbolic statements they thought were funny, they did try

to narrate a view that ganguro style made the young women appear “too” sexual. One of my African American participants at Urgent, Inc. who gave herself the pseudonym Corey Anna Hall, gazed at the image projected on the wall for a moment and said “They look like prostitutes,” and another girl quickly affirmed her reading with, “Yes, they do.” When I asked them what makes them look like prostitutes Corey Anna said, “Just their appearance. You could see them on 79th street.” Her friend Lenniyah added, “They look a mess, their hair, it doesn’t look like it’s done professionally. That’s how a prostitute looks like, just real tired and messy.”

Interested in finding out in what part of Miami they have seen prostitutes, I asked Corey Anna where specifically on 79th street she was referring to and she replied, “Like Miami. You can ride between 79th street and 7th avenue, this avenue right here. You ride all the way up, in Liberty City, nothing but prostitutes.” Her comments indicated that sexual traffic was taking place in close proximity to the Booker T. Washington Senior High where I met with the girls for Women on the Rise! workshops after school. The area of Miami-Dade County the girls referenced is marked by poverty and populated by recent immigrants. This part of the city is riddled with cheap motels and small strip clubs.

It seems that the focus group participants were performing a racialized reading of the ganguro girls framed by the ascription of sexuality in excess to Asian/American female bodies (Shimizu 2007). The girls’ sexualized interpretation of ganguro style is also buttressed by a class reading of their body practices, as their hair looked to them as if it was not done professionally. Their statements also made me aware of the manner in which sexualized female bodies appear in the girls’ social landscape, particularly for these black girls living in low-income areas of Miami where prostitution is rather openly practiced. These girls bring their experiences of seeing the aesthetically excessive bodies of prostitutes, in a very unglamorous way tinged with poverty and struggle, to bear in their readings of racialized female body presentation in visual culture, which may determine how they come to deride styles such as chonga and ganguro. Their

sexual aesthetic judgment is connected to class performance. Note how they describe the ganguro girls' as "tired and messy," a phrase that connotes hard and unpleasant work.

In citing Asian/American female bodies through Harajuku style Minaj heightens the sexual charge of her body, which is already imbued with the sexual excess of working class blackness. Although Minaj did come under attack among many girls in my focus groups for embodying hypersexuality, which I will attend to in more detail in another section of this chapter, their judgments of ganguro girls were much harsher in this aspect. Minaj was never compared to a prostitute, a figure that many of the girls I work with in *Women on the Rise!* often frame as constituting the worst possible female subject position.

In almost every focus group Minaj emerged as a comparison with the ganguro girls. When I asked a participant why she felt there was a similarity she stated, "The pink hair, the makeup, the lipstick, all that." Tashell Shakur of the Urgent, Inc. group said, "Yeah, it looks like Nicki Minaj, not something you wear in public, or like, you are going to a parade or somethin', like, Halloween or Mardi Gras." Many girls said that they think Nicki Minaj tries to look "Chinese," or "Japanese," and they sometimes articulated a notion that perhaps she is mixed race, as there is a range of racial intermingling in Trinidad. Whereas the racial appropriation of the ganguro girls is rejected by the girls due to an artificial aesthetic excess, they find Nicki Minaj's citation of Harajuku as more legitimate, and supported by either her biological makeup or keen fashion sense.

The girls did not have much to say about Iona Rozeal Brown's *a3* series, it seems that perhaps the artist's approach to engaging the ganguro phenomenon was too straightforward in its counter-appropriation. Their comments on the *a3* paintings consisted mostly of noting the variety of the hip hop styles that Brown dressed the geisha-like women in. Some compared the figures to pop stars like Beyoncé and others to more Afro-centric, "earth mother" type performers like Erykah Badu. Like Studio Museum in Harlem curator Christine Y. Kim, Q from Pridelines formed a similar comparison

between the sexuality of prostitutes and courtesans in early and pre modern times to contemporary sexualized body presentations, she said,

It's one of those things where the old timers had their prostitutes but it was kind of more of a hush-hush thing, where you were still a lady. Well nowadays it's just ok, we know what you are and she [the woman in the Iona Rozeal Brown painting] has no problem showing who she is. She's kind of like whatever, I'm good, I'm chillin' I'm petting my cat. I know what I do but I have no shame.

Thus where Q finds that the sexuality of geishas in the Edo period was depicted in a somewhat subdued and respectful way, the aesthetic excess and leisure of the black women Brown fashions reflects a more open signaling of sexual availability.

When I followed the *a3* series in the slide show with images from Korea-born, New York-based Nikki S. Lee's *The Hispanic Project* and *The Hip Hop Project*, they delighted in seeing how the artist crafted her body to fit into these cultures. Most did not articulate the negative judgments aimed at the ganguro girls, and, instead of posing her as a fake, valued Lee's race appropriations through discourses of multiculturalism and creative innovation. When I showed them images from Lee's *The Hispanic Project*, many of the girls compared the women in the series to chongas, and they felt that she blended in with Latinas rather well. Girls compared Lee to Puerto Ricans and one African American girl stated that she found the bodies of the women in *The Hispanic Project* reflected, "The gang girls, you know, how Mexicans look. They look like that." The term "ghetto" was mobilized in many of their comments, thus positioning Lee's carefully crafted body in a highly racialized and classed register.

The images that spurred the most expressive responses by the girls were the photographs from *The Hip Hop Project* (2001) in which Lee, in a manner similar to the ganguro girls, utilized tanning and hair braiding to fashion a body that cites blackness. In the series she is shown riding in a limo with the members of the hip hop group Mob Deep, who suggestively hold her by the waist, posing for a picture in a bar with a group of African American women dressed up for a night on the town, hip hop dancing in a

studio, and on the streets accompanied by black men.



fig 4.4; fig 4.5, Nikki S. Lee, from *Projects* 1997-2001, *The Hip Hop Project*.

When I moved from *The Hispanic Project* to *The Hip Hop Project* in the slide show the girls played a form of “Where’s Waldo?” in trying to locate Lee’s transformed body, and when they did, it typically prompted laughter. One African American girl told the group in loud excitement, “You see how she fit in?! She looks black right there, ghetto like, she’s in a gang, the braids!” In another focus group a girl said, “She got a stank look like, she ready to fight somebody.” One young woman commented that in *The Hip Hop Project* Lee looks like someone who would work at a strip club⁵. The girls found Lee’s performances of blackness clever and comical, only one girl out of 61 participants stated that she thought Lee was stereotyping.

I prefaced the slide show of her work with an explanation of the *Projects* series of works, which Lee described as an exercise in exploring American culture. It seems that knowing that Lee purposefully crafted these “ghetto” bodies shielded the artist from the girls’ negative judgments, judgments they usually reserve for quotidian ghetto figures like chongas. Lee’s shifting embodiments are understood by the girls as a parody similar to the manner in which the *Chongalicious* video is read—as a visual work that is comical and fun to consume, but drawing on a body that would not be viable or desirable to occupy in “real life.” The girls’ responses to Lee’s images, and the manner in which they made similar associations of violence and ghetto life in both *The Hispanic Project*

⁵ Lee performs as a stripper in *The Exotic Dancers Project*, however, she does not alter her body to assume another race, instead framing herself an exotic Asian/American amid the other white strippers she poses with.

and *The Hip Hop Project*, evinces the limited, typological meanings of race that Lee's photographs generate.

The *Projects* series references quotidian photographic practices through the digital orange time stamps that appears on the edges of the images. They are meant to appear as snapshots, not art photography. I asked the girls why, given this, they thought Lee gained international attention and acclaim in the art world for producing pictures that are not unlike those captured by everyday people. Wicky, the 17-year-old Jamaican American girl from the Pridelines group posited, "I think it's because she fits in with so many different people, she attracts a variety of people, like people from whatever culture. You're fitting in with my culture so I might as well look at the work you're doing." The girls in the Coconut Grove group said that her work deserves attention because it's unique and no one has really made artwork that way before, "They [art viewers] keep wanting to see what she's gonna do next." The girls would frequently say that what made Lee's work valuable was that it's "different," meaning creative or novel, but they did not attribute this originality to the styles crafted by ganguro girls.

When I prompted the girls to compare Nikki S. Lee's mode of race incorporation with that of ganguro girls many stated that the primary difference is that Lee attempts to make her images appear "real," in contrast to the artificiality of the ganguro girls. Zayan drew on a discourse of racial authenticity when she responded,

I think it's different [Lee's work when compared to ganguro] cuz she actually took the time to come down here [to the U.S.] and figure out what they [blacks and Latin@s] look like. Where the other one [ganguro], they just doing it—they see one thing and they put it all together.

Other participants drew on a more multicultural discourse in assessing Lee's practice, making statements such as, "You don't have to live in a box, you can blend in.", and "Because it shows her in different ways. There would be nothing wrong with being Latino, black, whateva." Corey Anna offered a hypothetical biographical argument for Lee's practice over ganguro stating,

It could have been like typically she's from Korea, from Japan, whatever; but so it happens that when she was a baby her parents moved her and they had no choice but to go to the ghetto or whatever. She could have naturally have been raised up with the people and just normally with them as friends or whatever. Just because she's Chinese doesn't mean she has to be with Chinese people so she's proving a point, cultures mix all the time.

Corey Anna's statement stresses terms such as "natural" and "normal" to legitimate the artist's race incorporations. Lee's body seems to be naturalized enough in appearance, despite her Asian/American features that are subject to racialized reading (Palumbo-Liu 1999), to be granted value through discourses of innovation, normativity, and multiculturalism. In contrast, the race fluidity embodied by ganguro girls and chongas are derided for crafting bodies that are aesthetically excessive and fake, judgments that many of the girls in the focus groups made of Minaj, but not due to her racial appropriations. Rather, as I will show further below, because of her physical form, and its imagined construction via plastic surgery post record deal.

In explaining the coining of her phrase "Harajuku Barbie" in a YouTube video posted in 2009, prior to the release of her first album *Pink Friday*, Minaj explains,

One day I just woke up and put the two words together because I love the Harajuku culture cuz the way they dress is the way I am on the inside. Like free spirited, girls just wanna have fun. Kick ass like, pop, rock n'roll, whatever the fuck you wanna do—hip hop. That's how I feel and that's the way the music is gonna feel like when I do my album⁶.

Minaj associates herself with Harajuku culture due to their practices of bricolage and she creates a further racial hybrid by joining the term Harajuku with the icon Barbie. She parallels her multi-genre approach to crafting music to the combinatory crafting of her body.

Although black women's corporeal citations of whiteness are often understood as attempts to coming inline with dominant Euro American beauty ideals (Craig 2002),

6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkL2r2x6EFg>

performance scholar Jayna Brown has demonstrated how black female performers in the late 19th century and early 20th century signified upon the tropes of whiteness and Orientalism they were often scripted to embody on the cabaret and popular variety stage. Brown posits that these performers challenged constructs of racial hierarchy through subtle satire and creative innovation. Her book *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* examines how black female performers such as chorus girls shaped notions of modernity through innovating new forms of movement and aesthetics that became associated with urban modern life and the “new woman.”

One finds a precedent to Minaj’s raced citation of Japanese aesthetics in burlesque shows of the late 19th century U.S., in which black women performed roles of exotic Egyptian and Japanese beauties in productions such as *Oriental America* of 1896. Brown notes,

These acts both celebrated and called into question the boundaries between colony and metropole and drew parallels between geographies of imperial annexation and the sexualized, racialized zoning of city spaces, the lines of which were being drawn at the same time (2008, 95).

Brown links Orientalist aesthetics on the variety stage with U.S. imperial agendas in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Phillipines, and Hawaii. The sexual and sensory excesses of burlesque theatre trafficked in the exchange of ethnic and racial signifiers upon both white and black female bodies. Brown argues that burlesque performance signaled a new mode of being in modernity that centered on consumption, pleasure, and self-gratification in contrast to Victorian era thrift and self-restraint. Minaj’s assumption of Japanese style marks her as sartorially cosmopolitan, “in the know,” as a post-modern subject that not only symbolizes fashion consumption but, to a significant extent, shapes her own body as a raced hybrid for consumption. In assessing the aesthetic politics of the body of Josephine Baker, literary theorist Anne Anlin Cheng has noted the various ways in which black and Asian’s women’s bodies have been historically framed when she writes,

...the primitive black woman is all about exposed nakedness, while the “Oriental” woman is all about sartorial excess, the excessive covering and ornamentation that supposedly symptomizes the East’s overly developed, effeminized, corrupt, declining civilization (2011, 150).

The imbrication of both Orientalist sartorial excess and primitive nakedness in Minaj formulates a powerful incarnation that eschews notions of racial or genre purity and destabilizes aesthetic hierarchies. She embraces the flow of corporeal signifiers and global capitalism for both creative and business purposes.

Incorporating Whiteness

The racial appropriation that is the most visible on Minaj’s body is her signature blonde wig, and the whiteness signaled by the Barbie icon that she so often invokes. It is likely that Minaj consumed Barbie as a child, and in associating herself with the doll, which epitomizes normative white femininity and body politics, she positions a light skinned, Trinidadian-American with a thick, voluptuous body in that exalted corporeal space. The Barbie doll aesthetics that Minaj embodies are a stark contrast to the hard-hitting, chauvinistic, and belligerent intensity of her rap style. However, the style does reflect the pop femininity of her ballads, and dance songs such as *Starships*.

In the cover art for her debut album *Pink Friday* we see Minaj seated stiffly on the floor, staring blankly at the camera, posed against a plain pink backdrop. She wears an elaborate pink and silver gown that resembles the dresses worn by the more glamorous, formally dressed iterations of Barbie dolls. Rather than an image that would communicate a sense of the rapper’s personality, the photograph presents Minaj as more body than persona, more doll than human, more pretty than hardcore—however, what I argue is that what Minaj carefully stages through her style is *the body as persona* and *pretty as hardcore*, which by extension portrays gender, race, sexuality, and class as corporeal performatives. Hyperbolic body display has primarily generated the meanings of Minaj as she has more successfully penetrated the mainstream. Presenting herself as a doll not

only makes her an easier product to consume, but frames black female embodiment as a performative amalgam of appropriations, not a fixed mark of race. This Barbie code could be understood as enabling a reprieve from authenticity, a strategy for the body of Onika Tanya Maraj to survive the vicissitudes of mass-market publicity and branding (Berlant 2008). Black femininity becomes a bit more pliable, albeit commodified, in Minaj's visual and sonic lexicon.



fig 4.6, Cover of Nicki Minaj's *Pink Friday* album

Neither the masculine tone of many of her raps nor the soulfulness of her singing in songs such as *Moment for Life*, are communicated or contained by Minaj's body display. She draws from a range of genres in her music, with sweet, longing love songs coexisting on albums with tracks such as *Roman's Revenge*, in which she asserts, "I'm a bad bitch, I'm a cunt, and I'll kick that ho, punt." The juxtapositions her varying music styles generate when posed against and through her hyperfeminine body, stake out unwieldy spaces for contemporary articulations of black female subjectivity as aesthetically bold, strong, desirable, and rather unfixed.

Minaj highlights this contingent aspect of her persona by creating alter egos such as Roman Zalinsky, who she describes as an angry gay boy, his British mother Martha, and Harajuku Barbie, among others. Roman is an irate character through which Minaj delivers many of her violent rhymes. She has explained that Roman is able to say things

that she feels inhibited communicating, and has described how the creation of alter egos stemmed from the turmoil of her family life⁷. Her father's substance abuse often led to violent conflict with her mother, and to her desire for psychic escape. Minaj frames Roman as a subject diagnosed with mental disorders, as his mother Martha, who she performs with a British accent, pleads in *Roman Holiday* that he take his medication to achieve normativity. In the song Minaj as Martha urges,

*Take your medication, Roman
Take a short vacation, Roman
You'll be okay
You need to know your station, Roman
Some alterations on your clothes and your brain
Take a little break, little break
From your silencing
There is so much you can take, you can take
I know how bad you need a Roman holiday, Roman holiday, a Roman holiday*

In performing as an angry gay boy, and the proper British mother that works to police him, it seems that Minaj has needed “Roman holidays,” breaks from the burdens of being an angry black woman whose clothes reveal that she does not know her “station” and is in need of alteration. The politics of empire tinge Minaj's performance as Martha, as a white authority figure trying to regulate an unstable Trinidadian subject. Minaj, rather than emulate whiteness, occupies and agitates it.



(L) fig 4.7, Florence Mills; (R) fig 4.8, Nicki Minaj

Like early 20th century black female performers who were popular in the U.S. and Europe such as Florence Mills, who also often wore blonde wigs, Minaj masterfully blends grace and the grotesque (Brown 2008, 246). Mill's donning of blonde wigs likely made her body more consumable, but her appropriation of white female embodiment did not hinder her from making racial critiques. In fact, Brown notes that Mills consistently claimed her black identity, through, for example, making public statements such as, "We [black folks] do not seek white people's society, and we are a happy family, although a large one. In America we have our own restaurants and cabarets and theatres, and your people come to see our shows (Ibid. 245)." Similarly, Minaj often shouts out her "West Indian people" in concerts and interviews, and has called out racism. There was entertainment news coverage on Minaj's claim that Steven Tyler, the leader of the rock band Aerosmith and former judge on the panel of the hit television show *American Idol*, made a racist statement when he said that she was not a good addition to the *American Idol* panel. Tyler draws upon a discourse of fakery in his contention that if a contemporary, undiscovered Bob Dylan-like performer were to be a contestant on the show, "Nicki Minaj would have had him sent to the cornfield! These [contestants], they just got out of a car from the Midwest somewhere, and they're in New York City, they're scared to death... [They need] to be judged by people that [are] honest, true⁸." Tyler not only frames Minaj as fraudulent but portrays Midwestern (read white) subjects as beings who, in a racially diverse space such as New York City, would be further threatened by a troubling black female presence like her. Through her Twitter account Minaj responded,

You assume that I wouldn't have liked Bob Dylan??? Why? black? rapper? what? Go fuck yourself and worry about yourself babe. I understand you really wanted to keep your job [on *Idol*] but take that up with the producers. I would have sent Bob Dylan to a cornfield??? Steven, you haven't seen me judge one single solitary contestant yet! ... That's a racist comment ... Lets make [Steven] a shirt that says "No Coloreds Allowed" then escort him down 2 Barbara Walters so he can tell [her] how he was threatened w/guns (Ibid.).

In a neoliberal society that advocates color blindness and benign multiculturalism, the

8 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/28/nicki-minaj-steven-tyler-american-idol>

black Barbie brings race into discourse. She also calls out class attitudes. Her reference to Barabara Walters and guns in the comment above concerns rumors spread by fellow American Idol judge Mariah Carey following a verbal altercation with Minaj during a taping of the show. In the grainy footage of the row⁹, which also has bad audio, it seems as though Minaj was fed up with Carey and she references the glamorous, normatively dressed pop music giant as “her fucking highness.” Minaj and Carey cut very different figures in the video. Carey wears simple makeup, an elegant dress with a “tasteful” v-neckline and her long, wavy brown tresses rest on her shoulders. Minaj donned bright pink lipstick and a short, flamingo pink wig, shiny pink boots, and a short, girlish, tight fitting baby blue dress with puffed sleeves. Minaj is also much louder, expressive, and aggressive than Carey. One can sense from the footage that the cast and crew were eager to contain her. Though Minaj has light brown skin, which affords her visibility in the U.S. racial economy and media, the aesthetic excess of her style, despite the wealth it signals, positions her as black female body associated with more “ghetto” style vernaculars when compared to the bodies of other light skinned performers of color such as Mariah Carey and Alicia Keys, who are framed as more glamorous and “classy.”

Jayna Brown describes how American burlesque shows of the late 19th century referenced working class female bodies through racial signifiers, as they were modeled on minstrel shows. She notes how the robust, sexually expressive, and energetic bodies of burlesque women drew on fantasies about the new working woman’s body, and symbolized aspects of working class female existence that were out of bounds for more respectable, middle class women (Ibid. 99). The trafficking of racial and class signifiers in burlesque performance resulted in white women wearing cork in addition to blonde wigs. Brown writes, “The blonde wig became a recognizable icon for the minstrel show folded into the burlesque; white and black women performers would wear them well into the 1930s (Ibid.).” Thus the blonde wigs provided a means for corporeal transformation

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2012/oct/03/nicki-minaj-mariah-carey-american-idol>

for both white and black women. Blonde wigs probably functioned to highlight the darkness of staged black female bodies, yet, troubling this intention, they fashioned black female bodies that incarnated new forms of beauty and body aesthetics that exceeded the racist tropes of these performance texts.

The artificial and decorative embodiments of burlesque performers drew from emerging working class styles, "...representing a forced access to the kind of leisure the wealthy enjoyed (Ibid.)." I suggest that the association with Barbie that Minaj established from the outset of her career, indebted to these corporeal histories whether she is aware of them or not, was employed for her to achieve class mobility while also marking her working class blackness precisely through posing it against white, hyperfeminine signifiers. However, and perhaps due to this, rather than being recognized for her innovation, she is often compared to white female performer Lady Gaga because of her dramatic mode of dress.

A reporter of UK's *The Guardian* asked Minaj about the influence of pop star Lady Gaga's experimental approach to style on her album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*, and suggested that she bore a resemblance to Gaga on the album art. Irritated with the question, as she is often prompted to comment on this comparison, Minaj responded, "You think that looks like Gaga? Absolutely not. I have no idea what you're talking about...Maybe little black kids shouldn't wear blonde hair¹⁰?" It seems that Minaj's commercially successful and unique incorporation of white signifiers subjects her to body to discipline, to submit to the originating genius of a white female pop star. In thinking of this comparison I recall Brown's examination of the racial mimicry of black performance by white women. She notes,

Popular urban stages were key sites where changing notions of the self were given shape. "New women" embraced black expressive forms, adopting racialized gestural vocabularies [such as the "shimmy" and the "Charleston"] to shape and redefine their own bodies as modern. Yet black women performers are seldom recognized as agents of these new physical vocabularies (Ibid. 3: emphasis added).

10 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/apr/27/nicki-minaj-bigger-balls-than-the-boys>

Nicki Minaj cuts a paradoxically consumable and intolerable figure in neoliberal society, as she exhibits the “free” flow of racial signifiers and capital that mark political economy in the millennium while simultaneously politicizing public discourse through her candid responses to racist rhetoric, which are often framed in the press as forms of spectacle. In ironically asking whether black children should not attempt to possess blonde hair, Minaj questions the legitimacy of racial hierarchies, appropriation, and embodiment. Her own body, like those of black women performers in the late 19th and early 20th century, is also reshaping constructs of black female embodiment and identity.

Minaj’s rhetoric recalls anthropologist Elizabeth Chin’s description of poor black girls’ play with dolls that have blonde hair, and the manner in which they make the toys resemble them through crafting black styles for their dolls such as cornrow braids. Chin shows how their play articulates notions of racial embodiment that are transgressive in their organic understanding of race as a construct. In a postmodern context Minaj paves a way for black youth, and girls in particular, to practice the racial fluidity and play that has for so long been a privilege for white folks from Elvis to Eminem.

Blonde wigs repeatedly appear in the work of contemporary Rotterdam and New York based artist Ellen Gallagher, whose work was also included in the *Black Belt* exhibition along with that of Iona Rozeal Brown and Luis Gispert. Gallagher was born to an African American father and Irish American mother, and her work engages issues of race citation and embodiment with unique formal and theoretical complexity. Her acclaimed series of works titled *eXcelento* (2004) and *De Luxe* (2004-2005) are large-scale grid compositions consisting of pre-civil rights era wig and beauty advertisements from magazines such as *Ebony*, *Our World*, and *Sepia*. The artist manipulates these source materials to create collages by cutting and embellishing them with media ranging from hair products, such as pomade, to tattoo ink and plasticine clay.

Rather than articulate the stereotype critique that one might assume a bi-racial woman would level at these advertisements, which sold Euro American beauty ideals to

African Americans, Gallagher is interested instead in focusing on the manner in which adding and subtracting racialized markers in the ads generate new possibilities for embodiment. Gallagher's practice does not articulate a valuation of race authenticity, as is evidenced by the manner in which she whites out the eyes of the figures in her images, making them unknowable.



fig 4.9, Ellen Gallagher, *Wiglette*, detail from *DeLuxe*, 2004-2005

The mid twentieth century beauty regime that devalued black skin color, hair texture, and facial features does not succeed in corporeally disciplining the subjects in Gallagher's collages. In the piece *Wiglette* from the *De Luxe* series, a magazine advertisement is transformed into a group portrait of women whose wigs have been supplanted by clay forms. The helmet-like objects Gallagher fashioned for them are both organic and severe. Some mimic conventional hairstyles while others appear armor-like and cover the entire head and face of the figures. The bright yellow color of the wigs references the blonde hair that has been the idealized standard but the yellow used in this image, however, is intensely vibrant and anything but “natural”. Instead of framing the

yellow headpieces as attempts at assimilation into American culture, they are unruly, and resist notions of racial essentialism.

The figures in many of Gallagher's works are enclosed in rigid grid compositions that contrast with the organic, whimsical, and futuristic life of their wigs. In the essay, "The Grid as Playground or the Creativity of Limits," curator Catherine De Zegher, drawing on Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, discusses the role of identity play in Gallagher's work,

Gallagher equates masks with wigs and describes them as anti-essentialist. For the artist, the wigs, imitations of straight fair hair or not, although they add to the body as a cultural sign, give the possibility of a corporeal project of invention, game, and fantasy in disobedience to a historically delimited possibility...(2001, 62).

I suggest that the raced bricolage of Minaj's body signals a similar disobedience. I see this disobedience performed in the imagery of Minaj's body in the art for her *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* album. In the photographs she is shown wearing only nude colored underwear and a blonde wig. Her body is situated in a solid white space that is splattered with different colors of paint that also mark her body. The paint blends Minaj's form into the white background and her skin looks iridescent and pearlesque. Instead of beige or brown skin color it is more sheen than anything else. Her facial expressions are highly performative and somewhat grotesque. She appears as something other than human, and other than animal. She looks like a doll and also resembles an abstract painting a la Jackson Pollock. Minaj makes race a work of art through her body crafting, and I find the imagery in *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* as staging an incorporation of the unmarked, abstract personhood that, as literary theorist Lauren Berlant has argued (2008) has been the privilege of decorporealized white capitalist patriarchy.

When I bought the album and saw the art I thought about Destiny, one of my black Women on the Rise! students, who in a discussion we had about Saartjie Baartman that was related to the work of artist Shoshanna Weinberger that I will discuss in another

chapter, passionately critiqued how only black people are considered to be raced while white bodies are never perceived as being “colored.” She said, “The only time you hear white people talking about color is when they stay in the sun too long. They only like to be colored when they get a tan.” In the workshop based on Weinberger I prompt the girls to paint female bodies that reflect their thoughts and responses to the history of Saartjie Baartman. I was struck by how rather than portray a body this student instead created an abstract composition consisting solely of blocks of red, purple, blue, green, yellow, brown, black, and orange colors that covered the entire surface of the watercolor paper in interlocking rectangular shapes. Her poetic, abstract composition substituted bodies for intricate interplays of color that evoke the complexity of raced existence. While she worked on her painting she sang the Nicki Minaj song, *Beez in the Trap*, along with her friends seated at the table. At the close of the session Destiny shared with the class how her work was about how everyone has a color, not just black people.



fig 4.10, *Roman Reloaded* album art.

My conversations with girls of color about the race citations employed by Minaj, contemporary artists, and ganguro girls revealed that they value these practices when they conceive of them as stemming from mixed biological makeup, celebrations of multiculturalism, and/or as projects undertaken by cultural producers. However, when

such criteria are absent, and race citations are performed by everyday ganguro or chonga girls who are not artists or celebrities, they mobilize rhetorics of sexual-aesthetic excess to denigrate their racial incorporations. These dynamics indicate the extent to which notions of racial authenticity and fixity structure their understandings of embodiment and how the hegemonic cultural discourses that vilify bodies that stage the contingency of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape young women's policing of other girls' bodies. Rather than question the politics of women who build careers and wealth from their race incorporations, the young women in my study instead centered their negative judgments on girls whose body citations constitute forms of self-fashioning. The manner in which chonga and ganguro styles likely reflect the bodies of prostitutes and poor young women that they encounter in their neighborhoods partly explain their denigration, and perhaps the knowledge that women such as Nikki S. Lee and Nicki Minaj could mobilize similar aesthetics for their elite and popular work impel them to assess these bodies through a different set of aesthetic values.

I would not argue that racial incorporation is always a non-normative political project. In cases such as those of Nikki S. Lee and Iona Rozeal Brown we find that at times racial incorporation in fact replicates the tropes of racialized fixity that mark the bodies of women of color. I do locate non-normative politics in racial incorporations such as those crafted by artists such as Ellen Gallagher and Nicki Minaj, whose merging of racial signifiers compel engagement with the constructedness of identity.

Young Women of Color Theorizing Minaj's Body

Discussion of Nicki Minaj's body in my focus groups was often met by participants with fervent engagement and debate. There was a sense of authority and investment in the subject of her body that I observed among them before I had even formulated the focus group, and it prompted me to include Minaj in the research design. Analyzing the girls' discourse on Minaj's body provides insights into the meanings

of gender, race, class, and sexuality that they glean from her and show how they conceptualize female body presentation more broadly.

Take for example the interactions that followed my question about whether participants liked or disliked Minaj in my focus group with Latina girls from the working and middle class Sweetwater area of Southwest Miami as we sat around a table eating chocolate chip cookies,

Big Bird: *I love her.*

JH: *What do you like about her?*

Ariel: *Well, she's very confident about herself, like, she doesn't care what people think of her, like, the way she dresses.*

(Girls in group chime in): *Yeah, that's true.*

Big Bird: *Is she a real person?*

JH: *What do you mean?*

Big Bird: *Yeah, cuz, when you see her she's plastic ok? Cuz they say that she's plastic, that's what I've heard.*

The group laughed after 11-year old Big Bird, a light skinned Latina girl who appeared younger than her age, revealed that she believed that perhaps Nicki Minaj was not really human. The laughter was broken by Terezi who in a high-pitched and whiney voice exclaimed,

Terezi: *I don't like her she's too fake! And I don't like fake people!*

JH: *So what makes you think she's fake?*

Terezi: *In one of her videos I remember watching with my friend, you could see her butt and it was like bigger than her head and it was like horrible! All of this was popping out...(gesturing to her breasts and buttocks).*

JH: *Is what you don't like about her that she shows her body?*

Terezi: *She's like, over exposed.*

Big Bird's comments about Minaj's plastic body reference rumors regarding Minaj's plastic surgery enhanced derrière, which came up in almost every one of my focus groups. Terezi's description of her viewing a Nicki Minaj video frames the artist's buttocks as symbolizing a kind of grotesque body exposure. 13-year old Terezi described her ideal look as; "I would have black hair with red at the tips. I would wear a big hoodie and jeans, with red Converse. I wouldn't wear makeup or too much jewelry because that isn't my natural self." Terezi's construction of her body, which she articulates through a discourse of "natural," and which is rather gender neutral as well, is a stark contrast to the hyperfeminine body aesthetics of Nicki Minaj, who she judges as fake both in body and personality.

Other girls came to the defense of Minaj after Terezi's comment. Ariel, a 14-year old girl that had painted each of her nails a different color, and described her trendy and provocative ideal look as, "High-waisted shorts, hipster shirt, bracelets, makeup, combat boots, my hair would be straight and long," highlighted Minaj's experimentations with style as part of what she admires,

Ariel: *I love Nicki Minaj.*

JH: *Why?*

Ariel: *I think she is amazing. I know that sometimes she dresses...like that [nonverbally indicating the earlier comment about body exposure by Terezi]. That's what she actually wanted.*

Big Bird: *I love her but she copied Lady Gaga.*

Ariel: *No, but Lady Gaga doesn't wear clothes like that. I think Nicki Minaj has fun, like, she's always changing her hair. Her hair is cool, she has lots of wigs.*

Ariel withholds judgment of Minaj for the manner in which she reveals her body because she attributes agency on Minaj's part in crafting it and having "fun" with her appearance. When I asked this group what their parents would think if they dressed like Minaj they responded with statements like, "My mom wouldn't like it."; "No they wouldn't.," citing

Minaj's sexualized body as posing the problem.

Discussion of Minaj's "fake" and "plastic" body was often narrated through a comparison between her body when she was first emerging in hip hop and how it looks now after her visibility in the mainstream, particularly among the black girls in my study. The girls often connected the changes in Minaj's body to her marketing strategy. C. Kold Blooded said that she "got a lot of *that* done," as in had plastic surgery, and that, "Lil Wayne paid for it so that she can look like Barbie. She was real cute how she was, she looks plastic." Corey Anna, who is African American, also compared Minaj to an earlier iteration of her body in discussing its counterfeit,

She looked pretty how she was. Her normal black hair. She's kind of Chinese or something, she looked pretty. Like you know how the West Indies, they have a lot of mixture or whatever? She looked pretty how she was but then she got her butt done, her breasts done, her nose done, she started wearing colors, all type of like...I mean, it helps her get recognized and it helps get her famous.

Corey Anna seemed exhausted by the task of describing Minaj's elaborate body.

While she bemoans it, she also comes around to accepting it through framing the body modification as a marketing tactic. Women on the Rise! instructor Anya Wallace asked Corey Anna what she thought made Minaj look good before the fame and she replied,

Her natural self. She had like natural black hair. She had curly hair then. And um, she used to not wear the crazy outfits. When she first came out I remember her first video she had on like a plain t-shirt you know? How ladies wear a nice shirt with skinny jeans and heels? That's what she first had on. And she didn't have on no heels, she looked like a tomboy.

In her first video when she was first coming out and stuff, and then after she got signed and I think she released her mixtape it went good but it didn't go as good as they expected and then she changed up everything, like, her body. I guess cuz I watch so much stuff, like documentaries or whatever. She had got her butt done, she got like the stomach, everything perfect—that's not what it's all about. She work out. She didn't really have all that when she first came out, she was normal. She had braids like everybody else, normal, dressed like a girl, she wasn't crazy.

I could feel a sense loss expressed in Corey Anna's comments, as if a figure she had once

looked up to disappointed her. Her repetitive use of the words “normal” and “natural,” and affirmations of Minaj’s former “prettiness” articulate a notion of the unnecessary nature of the change in her body. It seems as though part of what Corey Anna critiques is Minaj’s removal of racial markers such as her black hair and braids, which she may see as distancing the pop star from the black community.

Like C. Kold Blooded, Corey Anna also links Minaj’s transforming body with the conditions of her career in the music industry. Both assume that the artist’s body shifted in an attempt to reach the mainstream, and reveal their understanding that body crafting is partly determined by market forces, which are largely determined by men like Lil Wayne. My focus group participants laud Minaj for making lots of money and showing that she can rap better than men, but are disappointed that her participation in the market, they believe, required a transformation of her body into an ideal. I could not find data to support the notion that Lil Wayne paid for Minaj’s plastic surgery, or even that she has had surgery at all. It seems that interviewers refrain from, or are instructed to refrain, from asking her about that subject, and it is unclear where the discourse emerged from. However, I did find many references to her plastic surgery from unofficial fan, or “hater,” sources, which include a YouTube video that compares her body from early in her career to today¹¹.

When Minaj was emerging she wore her black hair either straightened or curly, and would don hooded sweaters, jeans, Doc Marten boots, and fitted white “baby” t-shirts for women. Although her body crafting was feminized through makeup and at times accentuation of her cleavage, it was not as hyperfeminine as it is today, prompting participants to use terms like “tomboy” and “stud” to describe her former corporeality.

Minaj has affirmed her formerly masculine approach to dress in a *Vogue* interview that narrates her revolution from a poor inner city girl to an emerging fashion icon,

I was dressing in Tommy Hilfiger baggy shirts and Boss jeans, but then I met a person who dressed like a tiny lady—pantsuits, heels, lots of makeup. I thought

11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLh5IBsase0>

she was larger than life. She once did my makeup—I had never seen myself made up before. I didn't want to wash it off; I felt like I had to one day live this fantasy of being a glamour girl¹².



fig 4.11, Image of Nicki Minaj from early in her career.

Minaj troubles frameworks of femininity as signaling weakness in her description of the imposing presence of an alluring and heavily made up “tiny lady.” She has since come to adopt the position of a glamour girl and specifically the hairstyle of Marilyn Monroe. Minaj titled a song after the film icon, and it describes her struggles in a romantic relationship resulting from fame, signing, “Must be how Marilyn Monroe felt.” Instead of viewing the change in Minaj’s form as an incorporation of glamour and its raced whiteness as an expression of power, it was understood by many of the girls as moving Minaj into a realm of nonnormativity, the term “crazy” was often used to define her.

Minaj seems to be an unwieldy figure for the girls to negotiate, particularly when parents and other authority figures, such as myself, mediate their consumption of her. There were instances in the focus groups in which some participants adopted, and then later negatively judged her body. In the first part of the focus group discussion in which girls described their ideal looks, several told me that the styles they crafted were inspired

12 Yeager, Lynn, “True Colors,” *Vogue* magazine, March 2012, p. 546.

by Nicki Minaj. A 13-year old Haitian girl who gave herself the pseudonym Betty Boo pointed to drawings she had created of geometrically patterned and neon colored outfits when it was time to share with the group. She described the drawing she made of a girl wearing a purple striped, form fitting shirt and short shorts as, “Like a Halloween costume. I like the shorts and that shirt.” When she pointed to another drawing of a florescent green striped dress with a tight bodice and short bouncy, skirt, she said, “And this is Nicki Minaj [to imply, and this style was inspired by Nicki Minaj].” When I asked Betty how the outfit would make her feel she said “good.” Betty Boo, a play on the vintage cartoon character Betty Boop, is a popular icon among women of color in Miami, who place Betty Boop stickers on their cars, or wear Betty Boop t-shirts.



fig 4.12, Drawing created in focus group by Betty Boop.

Betty Boop’s sexy style is similar to the modes of dress of many working class black and Latina women who admire her body’s voluptuous aesthetic excess. Some girls in focus groups expressed wanting Betty Boop tattoos or having older female family members, often “aunties,” that collect Betty Boop paraphernalia or have Betty Boop tattoos of their own. Nicki Minaj shares a representational affinity with the figure of

Betty Boop, who is also Marilyn Monroe-esque. In her critique of pop icon Madonna's male identification and collusion with white capitalist patriarchy through her "Blonde Ambition" embodiment, bell hooks argues, "Indeed her willingness to assume the Marilyn Monroe persona affirms her investment in a cultural vision of white that is tied to imperialism and colonial domination (1993, 76-77)." But what about the hundreds of women and girls of color on the ground who admire Betty Boop and Marilyn Monroe, should they be understood as victims of imperial beauty politics?

Women of color connect to figures such as Boop and Monroe due to a valuation of their highly mannered and sexualized glamour. In a *Women on the Rise!* workshop my lesbian Latina student Dimple showed me a recent tattoo she had done on her forearm of Marilyn Monroe's face signing with music notes swirling around her. The portrait tattoo was executed in black and grey tones and only the lips were inked in red. She said that she thinks Monroe is really "sexy," a thought she shared with me about Minaj as well.

16-year old Haitian girl K Baby described her Minaj inspired outfit as comprising of, "A half belly shirt with shorts for a summer day. Colorful, it has to be colorful. Braids with plaits in my hair, sandals, little pretty sandals that I'll go out with. A whole bunch of colorful bracelets that match the outfit and earrings." K Baby related her look to Minaj's style through the short shorts and vibrant color palette. Betty Boo and K Baby did not express reluctance in relating their citation of Nicki Minaj's style during the embodiment discussion but when it came to the subsequent part of the focus group in which I displayed images of Minaj for the girls to respond to, they made statements such as, "She be wearing half clothes like, if her titties not showing her butt showing, if her butt not showing her stomach showing," and, "She directing little girls the wrong way because everything on her is fake."

Reluctant to make the girls feel defensive, I did not raise the contradiction of their previous avowal of her body and its inspiration of their own. A decision that I am still ambivalent about. What occasioned this dramatic shift in perspective? My posing of what

the girls may think I believe is a “bad” image? I think the girls might have felt pressure to vilify Nicki Minaj’s embodiment because I presented it to them, whereas earlier in the focus group they did not anticipate that I would bring her up.

Many focus group participants stated that they believe Minaj is influencing young girls’ styling practices, from purchasing and wearing necklaces with the Barbie logo, to putting pink highlights in their hair. Only one participant, Bright, seemed to be overtly citing Minaj’s style by wearing pink clothes, pink nail polish, and pink highlights in her hair. However, she resisted this comparison, stating that she had been solely wearing pink clothes before Nicki Minaj became popular. In answering my question about whether Nicki Minaj is a positive or negative influence on girls Corey Anna said, “Both. It was positive because I guess people picked what they thought was pretty or whatever and they just went with it. But it was kind of negative because it shows how weak everybody is. Everybody gotta be like her, instead of being like theyself.” Corey Anna’s comment expresses an understanding of how Minaj’s inspiration of girls’ body practices could have afforded them creative new ways of looking “pretty,” not just through copying Minaj but by poaching some aspects of her look and then “going with it,” but also laments the force with which popular culture determines girls’ styling practices, and limits their ability to perhaps present more imaginative embodiments that have not been branded in the fashion or culture industry.

After the girls at Urgent, Inc. had told me that many people criticize Minaj and I asked them why, Tashell stated flatly, “her [fake] butt.,” and others referenced how she only dresses like Barbie and has the alter egos “to get attention.” Zayan came to the defense of Minaj saying, “[People say that] She gets so much male attention, that she is trying too hard. But she’s just doing what she’s good at, and the attention just go along with it. People take it wrong and think that what she is doing is for the attention but it’s not, it just comes with it.” Zayan articulates a less cynical view of Minaj’s body than many of my other participants.

What I have noticed through working with hundreds of girls a year via Women on the Rise! is that negative critique seems to be one of the few modes of analysis that is acceptable for girls to engage in, both of themselves, of each other, and of cultural products. There is a lack of modes for girls to express pride in their appearance or talent without appearing threatening to other girls. Over and over again I would hear girls respond to compliments with “No, I’m ugly,” or “It’s not really that good,” when applauded for their styling or artwork. Although these might just be performances of modesty masking greater self-esteem, they nonetheless replicate the notion that it is not good for girls to “brag,” or seem “conceited.” These modes of relating among girls limit their ability to express pleasure in their work or bodies, and foment insecurities that often result in rivalry over support among them. Just like Minaj insults the bodies of her rap rivals in songs to bring them down, the girls seems to perform a similar ranking of Minaj.

When the Women on the Rise! instructors and I once asked a group of Latina and African American girls we work with why so many girls judge Minaj’s body so harshly a student responded that girls look up to her, but don’t want her to portray herself in a way that their parents would disapprove of. They want their parents to be ok with them liking Nicki Minaj. This was a revelatory statement, which could explain why the girls so dramatically frame Minaj’s body transformation from her early career through today. When Minaj was starting out she was subverting gender scripts while still wearing styles that they could relate to, and which were less sexualized and more economically accessible to them. Parents may be shaping how and why the girls narrate derision of her body.

Sexual Embodiment, Gender, and Cultural (Re)Production in Hip Hop

In a recent Women on the Rise! workshop I noticed that instead of drawing from the still life the class had collaboratively assembled of deformed soft sculpture female bodies, a Women on the Rise! student at the Miami Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center I will refer to as Flow here was drawing music notes, microphones, and an image

of a woman's face with her mouth open wide as if she was singing. The face was a simple outline drawn with a brush and black ink on newsprint. The woman she depicted had long hair in simple braids similar to her own, full lips and eyes closed tight in the effort of vocalizing depicted by the wide open mouth and carefully rendered lines of exertion on the face. The microphone was drawn in close proximity to the figure's mouth, but there were no arms or body. The entire surface of the large newsprint paper was patterned with floating music notes and microphones, which Flow took care in fashioning. Curious about the concept she was exploring in her drawing, I asked Flow if she was into singing and she told me that she wanted to be a rapper, that she writes rhymes. I asked who her favorite rapper was and she said Rick Ross. Ross is a famous recording artist from Miami whose work is similar to other mainstream male rappers in its references to sexual exploits with women and conspicuous consumption.

Flow asked me if I knew about any film making workshops that she could take, as she has her own camera, and also asked if I knew of any music producers who I could share her mixtape with when she was released from detention. She had a warm and humble personality, but you could also sense the seriousness with which she took her rap practice when she asked practical questions such as these, which could aide her with producing music videos and promoting her music. I could tell that she had asked similar questions to adults before, and she sought specific details about where and how to sign up for the film classes offered after school at MOCA. This was not just a teenage fancy.

I did not have enough time during the class to talk to her one on one about her music, and I am not sure that I will see her again given that the population of girls in detention fluctuates often as girls' cases move through the juvenile justice system, but I gave her my card and encouraged her to come to the Women on the Rise! afterschool program at the museum, as she seemed to enjoy making art. I was cheered by her passion and creativity, and kept thinking about our interaction after the workshop had ended. Hearing another aspiring female rapper refer to a male rapper as her primary inspiration

was a reminder of how the hip hop industry continues to be male dominated.

This is also evidenced in videos of Nicki Minaj on YouTube from several years back, when she was just coming up, in which she shouts out the names of all the men in the hip hop industry who she needs to promote and give due to for their support of her career. This practice has not abetted since her mainstream success, and the last words she utters on her second album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* are “I am the female Weezy,” referencing Lil Wayne, and articulating her identity through him. These are lyrics from the song *Stupid Hoe*, which closes her album and is directed at a female hater, which one could assume to be Lil Kim, who was one of the few popular female hip hop artists of the 1990s.



fig. 4.13, Cover of Lil Kim's *Black Friday* mix-tape.

Lil Kim's career has declined since the millennium, and in a radio show she claims that Minaj has talked badly about her and took her ideas to use in a song¹³. Rumors about the hostilities between Lil Kim and Minaj have spread via broadcast media and the internet, and it is a topic often mentioned by the girls. In *Stupid Hoe* Minaj writes,

13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfwGuA3h99U>

me, then she could have probably come back.” The discourse of competition between rappers such as Minaj and Lil Kim shows how difficult it is for female rappers to achieve publicity let alone coexist or support each other in the male dominated rap industry. Even as she furthers the feud, Minaj’s lyric points to the fact that if Lil Kim would have made an alliance with her she could have probably revived her career.

Girls in my focus groups believed that the song *Roman’s Revenge*, from Minaj’s debut album *Pink Friday*, was an attack directed to Lil Kim, to which Lil Kim responded with a mix-tape released a year later in 2011 titled *Black Friday*. The cover of *Black Friday* is a comic book style illustration of Lil Kim in a tight black catsuit posing in front of a decapitated Nicki Minaj wearing the Barbie-esque outfit from *Pink Friday*. I wonder if Minaj writes so many songs directed at Kim because she feels slighted by a woman she once looked up to.

For a girl like Flow to make it to the mainstream, if that is her goal, would entail having to work through various male producers and promoters, who she would then need to shout out, and at some point she would be likely be faced with the decision of whether to sexualize her image in order to make a name herself, although, as it works under male domination, it would be a name that would always fall under the name of a father. In fact, the transformation of Onika Tanya Maraj to Nicki *Minaj* was made by one of her early male producers¹⁴.

Although Flow was in a detention center uniform, given the manner in which she wore a large shirt tucked out of her loose fitting pants it seems that she does not have a feminine body aesthetic. Rappers with body presentations that are not feminine and sexualized such as Bahamdia and Shunda K, for example, do not break into the mainstream. Although they may have underground followings they still are marginal within those more alternative hip hop spaces that are also male dominated.

Given that Minaj and Lil Kim “hate on” each other, and that Minaj references herself as “the female Weezy,” why would a girl like Flow want to look to any of them

14 <http://www.out.com/entertainment/music/2010/09/12/curious-case-nicki-minaj?page=0,0>

for inspiration in pursuing her hip hop practice? Many of the girls who discussed Minaj with me in focus groups and Women on the Rise! classes expressed the respect they have for Minaj's skill in rapping, and they often stated that they think she is better than the men she collaborates with in many cases. When they bemoan the change in Minaj's body there seems to be a distancing that occurs. As Minaj's body becomes more polished, culturally valued, and Barbie doll like, the girls are presented with a figure that is not only signifying economic status out of the realm of their own, but a physical form that would take considerable effort in approximating. It is not so much Minaj's hypersexual representation that is an issue for the girls but rather the physical attributes of her body such as her large breasts, small waist, and big buttocks which draws disdain from the girls, and occludes the raps they like to hear her deliver with a hypervisible body that they disavow through a discourse of fakery.

CHAPTER 5

The Black Female Body as Luxury Brand:

Nicki Minaj, Rococo Aesthetics, and Neoliberal Discourse

How is it that Nicki Minaj gains cultural and material capital for embodying racial, sexual, and aesthetic excess while subjects such as chongas and masculine body presenting girls of color are disciplined and denigrated for it? This chapter examines the rhetorics, embodiments, and images that I argue facilitate the visibility of Minaj's body in mainstream popular culture. I pay particular attention to the modes through which Minaj mobilizes discourse that could be considered neoliberal in her music and interviews with the press, and tie this into an analysis of images of her body that are crafted for consumption in high fashion magazines. The chapter draws from my conversations with research participants, and raises questions regarding the politics of embracing neoliberalism for gendered, racialized, and sexualized figures like Minaj, and the possible cultural stakes involved in this avowal for women and girls of color more broadly.

Beez in the Trap: Minaj as Neoliberal Barbie

*Hit the Hot Topic, Nicki Minaj hoodies
I'm a brand bitch, I'm a brand
Got to Harlem, and get Cam
It's dipset, get your dick wet
Boarded the big jet and got a big check
Now you tell me, who the fuck is winning*

--Nicki Minaj, *I Am Your Leader*

I want to show girls that the possibilities are endless. That's my goal—to not only do it for myself, but to show them I can do whatever I put my mind to. I don't give a damn if I was born poor, I can come out of this shit with something to offer my children and grandchildren¹. —Nicki Minaj

Yo, yo, I remember when I couldn't buy my mother a couch

1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/apr/27/nicki-minaj-bigger-balls-than-the-boys>

*Now I'm sitting at the closing, bought my mother a house.
 You could never understand why I grind like I do.
 Makiah and Julani why I grind² like I do.
 Cause even when my daddy was on crack I was crack
 Now the whole album's cracked you ain't gotta skip a track.
 I ain't gotta get a plaque, I ain't gotta get awards
 I just walk up out the door, all the girls will applaud.
 All the girls will come in as long as they understand,
 That I'm fighting for the girls that never thought they could win.
 Cause before they could begin you told them it was the end,
 But I am here to reverse the curse that they live in.*

--Nicki Minaj, "I'm the Best"

In the YouTube video where she defines her term "Harajuku Barbie" Nicki Minaj frames girls' identification with Barbie as stemming not only from their desire to look attractive but as also reflecting their hopes for career success. In interviews she often cites her family's economic struggles as a major part of what drives her work and in the quote above she rejects notions of social constraint, "I don't give a damn if I was born poor," in determining access to wealth. This attitude is reflective of and produced by neoliberal discourses of social mobility whereby hard work and determination are positioned as vehicles for responsibilized subjects to overcome given social circumstances and achieve financial autonomy without the aid of the state. In reifying this ideology Minaj's mobilization of the Barbie icon is quite fitting. What interests me here is the manner in which Minaj's discourse of business prowess is served by Barbie iconography, how Mattel has utilized Minaj's body for its own brand work, and the manner in which Minaj's "incorporation" of Barbie generates scripts of sexual-aesthetic excess that are accessible to and adopted by a large body of girls.

I contend that these sexual-aesthetic scripts would likely be more heavily policed were it not for the aura of unraced Barbie normativity and neoliberal rhetoric that attends Minaj's practice. We can think of Minaj's mobilization of the term "grind" in the lyrics above as having multiple meanings that invoke the imbrications of sex and labor for

2 "Grind," is a slang term for work.

black women, whose visibility in the context of strip club culture has become increasingly more prominent in hip hop (Hunter 2011; Brooks 2010; Miller-Young 2008). On the one hand, the term is slang for work, “the grind.” The word is also used to describe the gyration of women’s hips and buttocks, or of very close and sexually charged dancing-grinding. Minaj grinds, works, and shakes her ass, in order to provide for her family in the narrative of the song.

In the book *Barbie’s Queer Accessories*, visual culture scholar Erica Rand demonstrates how Barbie is an emblem of neoliberal political economy, and describes how a range of consumers shift and queer Barbie’s meanings through forms of play and appropriation that exceed the racist and heteronormative discourse laid out by the Mattel corporation that produces her. Rand shows how in an effort to avoid negative critiques of Barbie from parents that could stem from her history as a spin off of a fetishized German sex toy, and of the various problems that could arise in formulating too specific a story about who Barbie *is*, since the mid-1960s, Mattel has constrained the articulation of narratives concerning Barbie as a persona in favor of circulating discourses about the “infinite possibilities” embodied by the doll through her various career and clothing options. Rand notes,

In other words, Barbie’s infinite possibility is the infinite possibility of hegemonic discourse. It reinforces hegemonic discourse predominant in the United States at large, which describe freedom in ways that benefit rather than challenge people in power. It suggests that all “we girls” can be anything today with little more than self-confidence, determination, and some luck and without necessitating economic or social change; white people, men, and capitalists can stay where they are (1995, 85).

Thus the feminism of equal opportunity articulated by Minaj in several songs and many interviews, like that of Barbie, is a neoliberal discourse that speaks out for “girls” while also buttressing late capitalist political economy.

In a *Vogue* interview Minaj stated that she is planning to establish a foundation for girls, stating, “The Nicki Minaj girl is a fun, artsy girl who can become a fierce force

to be reckoned with on Wall Street! They [her girl fans] hang on my every word so I tell them, go to school, be ambitious. The worst position is to be financially dependent on a man³.” This rhetoric has been consumed by many of my study participants, who in the discussion of Bratz versus Barbie dolls in the focus group section that was related to Minaj and chongas, cited Barbie’s career possibilities as more valuable and desirable against the raced sexual-aesthetic excess of Bratz embodiment, despite the many ways that Barbie’s body also signals sex. When we were comparing Barbies to Bratz in the focus group at Pridelines Q recalled how she viewed Barbie as a child,

When I was a girl Barbie was that girl that could be anything. If she wanted to be a doctor she could be a doctor, if she wanted to be a mom she could be a mom, if she wanted to be a mermaid she could be a mermaid. Barbie has always been an icon, where if you’re a woman you can be anything even if the figure proportion is wrong, you can be anything. Where these Bratz girls, not to say you need to be pretty, yes, Barbie is pretty, but with these girls they accentuate that you need to look a certain way. Where with Barbie she has her thing but she’s playing in a sense. With these girls [Bratz dolls] it’s like if you’re black you have to have the plump lips or look a certain way, where with Barbie you just have jeans and a top and whatever.

Q defends Barbie’s idealized body and “prettiness” through a discourse of racially unmarked whiteness as opportunity that she reads against what she finds to be a too specific and stereotypical embodiment of race in Bratz dolls of color. Barbie’s whiteness and emphasis on “being anything” makes possible the mass-market consumption of her sexual and race specific body.

I argue that what Minaj incorporates is not white embodiment, but Barbie-style neoliberal discourse and visual branding. This facilitates her attainment of mainstream visibility while she continues to craft songs that embrace racialized hypersexuality, deviate from gender norms, and disturb heteronormativity. The focus group participants helped me realize this when they noted, “I don’t think she’s trying to be a white Barbie doll. She’s just taking her style.” And, “I don’t think she’s trying to be a white Barbie--

3 Yaeger, Lynn, “True Colors,” *Vogue* magazine, Marc 2012, p. 546.

she's just trying to be *a* Barbie." Barbie manages to escape racial and sexual marking. The girls in my study view her iconography as mobile, open for assumption by a range of subjects. It seems that no Barbie is a "white" Barbie.

Although Mattel has created Barbie products such as the African American Shani dolls and the Latina version embodied by Teresa, they have not been branded as "Barbies," but rather, as Barbie's friends, diverse supplements to the primary white figure of Barbie. Through producing these supplementary dolls Mattel has attempted to embrace multiculturalism and evade charges of racism. In a more recent line of "Dolls of the World," Mattel created multi-racial versions of Barbies, called "Barbies," that represent nations such as Chile, France, Mexico, and the Philippines. These doll bodies are raced through the transformation of their skin color and facial features--eyes are slanted, skin appears darker, hair becomes brown. The physical form of the doll itself, however, maintains its classic shape. On the website⁴ for the "Dolls of the World" line that is designed for use by children, the standard white Barbie stands before a world map, holds a passport, and guides children through her jet setting adventures across the globe where they can encounter her transnational iterations. The unmarked white Barbie is framed as in control of her global adventure.

It is Barbie's unmarked whiteness that in fact makes these travels and assumption of raced bodies possible. Untethered to race, she is able to slip raced embodiments on and off like so many outfits. In embracing transnationalism Mattel does not restructure the embodiment and meanings of Barbie but rather reiterates neoliberal valuations of multiculturalism through the framework of exotic tourist consumption, making it possible for middle and upper class children with internet access and economically secure families to travel the globe through their online play and purchase of the toys. As Inderpal Grewal notes in her article "Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationality and New Consumer Subjects," which discusses the marketing of a white, "traditionally" dressed Barbie donning a sari in India, "The doll suggests that difference, as homogenized national

4 <http://www.barbie.com/dolls-of-the-world/>

stereotype, could be recovered by multinational corporations, that the national could exist in this global economy (1999, 800).” The ultimately unraced, malleable, neoliberal Barbie body shields Nicki Minaj from the critiques that would conventionally attend the sexual meanings of her work.

Minaj’s lyrics in songs such as *Stupid Ho* and *Beez in the Trap* communicate carnal attraction to other women’s bodies, she signs the cleavage of female fans in the manner of male pop stars (she signs men’s chests as well), and men perform with her wearing the same feminine wigs, high heels, and outfits as her female dancers. These bodies are subtle queer presences in concerts and works such as the video for her song *Superbass*.

Minaj’s body is also subject to queer desires. As I was viewing footage of her giving a lap dance to a male fan at one of her 2011 concerts I heard a female fan, who is not shown in the frame, expressing her disappointment to a friend that Minaj was only calling for “boys” when recruiting a fan to give a lap dance to⁵. Such responses may have come to Minaj’s attention, as she has since given lap dances to women in her concerts. Minaj’s queer valences may primarily serve to grow and titillate audiences, however, regardless of their possible marketing tactics, fashion images and performances that expand the representational possibilities for women in hip hop, which has for so long rehearsed heteronormative tropes that center on women pleasuring men.

Killing Them Off: Girls Reading Minaj’s Performance Persona

Minaj’s music expresses aggression, sweetness, sexuality, emotional turmoil, personal reflection, and queer desires. Tashell Shakur supposes that Minaj is purposefully working to attract queer audiences through her alter ego Roman, “Roman is like, an angry gay boy, and that’s what makes gay people like her. A lot of gay people like her. And she’s trying to make it [her music] like them.” Q’s comments on Roman recalls the manner in which some young women in my Pridelines focus group articulated

5 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=nPfASqcN5Bs>

that embodying a masculine or “boy” gender performance signals having an “ego.”

Q understands Minaj’s shifting alter egos as evidence of a similar form of gender performativity,

If you hear the song Roman’s Revenge, that’s when she’s more or less hardcore instead of being like when she does the song with Drake, Moment for Life, that would be her being more Nicki, more feminine, where in Roman’s Revenge she’s pretty much outing Little Kim, she’s more hardcore, that’s her boy persona, she’s more hard than she would be if she was Nicki.

Q can relate to Minaj’s shifting gender performance through her own negotiation of feminine embodiment as Q, and her stud alter ego Kevin. Many of the young women I worked with understood Minaj’s subjectivity as similarly fractured and performative, understanding Roman as an organizing principle or outlet for the masculine aspects that Minaj would otherwise be under pressure to constrain due to hegemonic scripts of gender. Yet, the more counter-cultural aspects of Minaj’s practice, such as the gender performance of her various alter egos, are articulated through a commodified style of rap that draws on often misogynist rhetorics of sexual braggadocio that were developed and codified by male performers. Still, the manner in which Minaj mobilizes alter egos in tandem with the Barbie icon in performance presents a unique form of rap practice and pop culture embodiment.

Minaj’s body and sonic work produces complicated meanings about black womanhood that both sustain and queer the mainstream in terms of race, gender, and sexual politics. This is made possible in large measure through her feminine embodiment, as Yo Majesty and Shunda K have similar skills and approaches to rap but are excluded from the mainstream hip hop culture industry due to their masculine, openly lesbian, and hyper-raced bodies. Through framing her feminine body via the unmarked racedness of Barbie, and adding to that signifier the Harajuku style that epitomizes cultural bricolage, perhaps Minaj has created and occupies a position, not of a post-racial subject, but of polymorphic and perverse black femininity. In mobilizing the terms polymorphic and

perverse, I index not only Minaj's various corporeal iterations, but also the multiple subject positions and sexual excesses she performs in her work.

Although racist and sexist constructs of black female perversity have been previously established through histories of hypersexual representation (Willis and Williams 2002; Collins 2004), Minaj has emerged as an unruly product of the coupling between black female sexual inscription and neoliberal politics. Her body troubles attempts to assess with certainty the dangers and pleasures of racialized sexual presentation/representation in the market and augurs innovative modes of being and theorizing woman of color sexuality. Can racialized women find ways to practice greater determination in crafting their bodies through the incorporation, consumption, and manipulation of mass-market icons? The potential of the discourse effects of Minaj's body to promote less racist, classist, sexist, and heteronormative embodied existences for women and girls are tempered, though not diminished, however, by the weight of history and political economy in determining how she crafts and brands this body.

Minaj's work ethic, and the manner in which she has achieved her success in a male-dominated rap industry, was framed by many of the young women in my study as an important part of what makes her worthy of mass media visibility. Many of the girls expressed their valuation of her work through references to Minaj's transgression of gender scripts. In the focus group at Urgent, Inc. girls made statements such as, "She's trying to be a girly girl but then again she tryna show that girls can be in the rap game too." When I asked how they think she's trying to prove that she can achieve the same success as male artists Tashell said, "She kills them--OFF! Just like, the stuff she says, people be like, 'Wow, a girl said that.'" Tashell's voice rose when she said this, one could sense her pride in Minaj's skills. What the girls believe to be Minaj's superior performance of rap skills over established male artist generates pleasure in their listening.

In the focus group at Pridelines Q played Minaj's song *Roman's Revenge* from her smartphone so that everyone would be familiar with it, since Roman had emerged as a

topic of conversation. When I asked Q why she liked Minaj she responded,

One, because of the label she's in and she does have some good flow. She does have good beats and some good music. Not all of them, some of them are just like, I wanna kill her... but when I honestly gained respect for her was when she did Monster with Kanye [West] and Jay Z. She pretty much killed Jay Z, which is one of the top ones in the game. I love it because she was the last one, you had Kanye first and then Jay Z. They did their thing and then she came in and just completely killed it. In my point of view, and I don't really like that many female rappers, she does know how to do some good rhymes, some of them are kind of whatever at times but on certain tracks she does really well and she just really stands out.

Q notes that despite the fact that Minaj is represented by a brand that she is loyal to, she thinks the rapper *does* have talent. By stating that she does not like many female rappers, Q frames Minaj as exceptional in her abilities and herself as a serious listener of rap music who does not *just* like music by women because she is a woman. It seems as though diminishing the significance of female rappers makes female consumers of hip hop music such as Q feel more “hardcore” or “real,” in a culture industry that positions men as the standard bearers. Hearing Q cite the Young Money label as the primary reason for her consumption of Minaj’s music demonstrates how the hip hop industry is shifting branding practices to promote labels in the manner that individual artists are marketed. This approach facilitates the adoption of up and coming acts through associating them with more established performers with significant fan bases. Q’s commentary also highlights the gender politics of the structure of the song *Monster*. She posits that Minaj’s place at the end of the song was partly to do with gender hierarchy, and enjoys hearing Minaj blow Kanye West and Jay Z out of the water.

The music video for *Monster* traffics in dramatic, gothic imagery of dead female bodies with model physiques, white and of color, that are stylistically posed around the male performers of the song like so many decorations. The video, which is directed to look like a horror film, was criticized as misogynist for the large number of victimized women’s bodies it featured, prompting West to add a disclaimer at the opening of the video stating that it is not intended to be *interpreted* as misogynistic. By framing the

video as “art” in the disclaimer⁶ the rapper attempts to deflect critique of the gendered meanings it generates.



fig. 5.1, Still from *Monster* video

In a dungeon-like room tucked in a dark hallway, away from the beautiful dead female bodies that populate the elegant mansion where the video is staged, Minaj as Roman is dressed as a dominatrix with long curly black hair, a tight black cat suit, and tall black platform boots. Roman barks his rhymes at Harajuku Barbie, who alternates rapping with Roman in a sweet, high-pitched voice, as she is tightly strapped onto a chair with rope while Roman menacingly circles around her brandishing a whip. Harajuku Barbie’s embodiment contrasts starkly with Roman’s, she has pink straight hair and a white, feminine dress on. The lyrics respond to growing rumors that Minaj is “fake.” She has been criticized for making strange, exaggerated faces in videos, and when being photographed, and, as I noted in the previous chapter, is rumored to have had substantial plastic surgery.

Minaj responds to the rumors with references to her wealth in the lyrics to her part of the *Monster* track, such as, “*Roman*: And I’m all up, all up, all up in the bank with the funny face. And if I’m fake I ain’t notice cuz my money aint...*Harajuku Barbie*: Forget Barbie fuck Nicki cuz she’s fake...she’s on a diet but her pockets eating cheesecake.” The

⁶ The full text of the disclaimer reads, “The following content is in no way to be interpreted as misogynistic or negative towards any groups of people. It is an art piece and it shall be taken as such,” <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/kanye-west-finally-releases-monster-video-20110606>

scene of bondage between Minaj's alter egos is surreal and provocative, more imaginative than the masses of sexed up dead bodies that are posed throughout the remainder of the video. Minaj's alter egos respond to the surveillance and negative judgments aimed at the rapper by referencing her financial success, injury is performatively deflected and framed as an ugly part of her lucrative job, as she laughs her way to the bank.

Many of the girls appreciate that Minaj outperforms male rappers while presenting a hyperfeminine body. Poca Hantist, a 17-year old girl from my group at Urgent, Inc. who described herself as black, "Indian," and Dominican, said, "I think she's going against males. It's like, I'm dressed like Barbie and I'm still getting attention. She's showing girls that girls can rap too." It appears that the girls expect for female rappers to be restricted in their ability to appear feminine while performing "masculine" raps. Yet, I wonder if they would critique performers such as Yo Majesty and Shunda K for embodying masculinity? Would they view them as mere imitators of men? Although many feel that Minaj is uniquely able to enter the rap industry with her femininity intact, statements such as "girls can rap *too*" express an understanding of the dominant construction of rap as a male dominated expressive form. Minaj's lyrics and delivery highly mimic the musical forms and meanings of male rappers.

In suggesting that Minaj manages to gain attention despite her Barbie body, Poca Hantist articulates an understanding of the devaluation of femininity and girlhood consumption as embodiments and practices that signify vanity and leisure over productivity and skill, weakness over strength. Several girls resolved the conflicting gender meanings produced by Minaj by describing her as a "hardcore Barbie." In our continued conversation about the gender politics of Minaj at Pridelines, Q connected Minaj's shameless approach to crafting her body, communication of sexual desire, and defiance of gender scripts as enabled by her financial success,

You listen to her music and she's like I fuck, but I got more bank than you. You don't have to take care of me, I could do my own. I don't have to worry about the bullshit, I can do what the fuck I want and not give three flying fucks. That's her

attitude. Yes, I can dress however I want because I don't care. I got bank—I can do what I want. She's not like these other females who are under different rappers because they still need to get their fame or whatever. Nicki has her spot in Cash Money⁷ she doesn't need to worry about that so she's like I'm gonna just do me.

Q's narration of Minaj's "I don't give a fuck attitude," reflects a posture that the artist repeatedly articulates in her songs. It's a semi-feminist (financial independence from men), post-feminist (I did it on my own) discourse that equates the subversion of sexism with purchasing power (Arthurs 2003). I am loathe to suggest that this rhetoric is indicative of a radical politics, but in thinking of the gendered meanings that circulate in the media that girls, particularly poor and working class girls of color, consume, the messages that are *accessible* to them—there may be room to find political potential for girls in such a neoliberal discourse. Adopting and reciting Minaj's lyrics may afford young women of color fleeting moments in which they assume similar stances, making them feel powerful, strong, and in control of their sexuality. The girls I worked with did not express disappointment with the fact that their status as poor and working class did not seem immanently surmountable, despite Minaj's celebration of girls' ability to "make" it. Their lack of cynicism regarding these messages exposes the obscuring of the structural dimensions class exclusions effected by neoliberal discourses as circulated in the music of mainstream hip hop artists such as Nicki Minaj and Jay Z.

In the Women on the Rise! lesson⁸ based on the work of artist Shoshanna Weinberger, who explores the legacy of representations of Saartje Baartmann on contemporary imaging of black female sexuality, I show girls a clip from the Nicki Minaj video for the song *Stupid Hoe*, as I prompt them to make connections between 19th century Euro-American constructs of black female sexuality and contemporary images that reflect and reframe their genealogy. The video screening led to a conversation among the girls relating to Nicki Minaj's work ethic.

⁷ Cash Money is the parent company of the Young Money label that represents Minaj.

⁸ The lesson plan was conceived by artist and Women on the Rise! instructor Crystal Pearl and collaboratively developed with instructor Anya Wallace and myself.

Most of the students in this particular class were black girls that were about 13 years old. After we concluded our discussion about the video's relation to Weinberger's art, which I will discuss in the following chapter, several of the girls began reciting Minaj's song *Beez in the Trap*, from her album *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*, which was recently released at the time. The chorus of the song is: "Bitches aint shit and they aint sayin nothing, a hundred muthafuckas can't tell me nothing, I Beez in the trap, bee-beez in the trap; I Beez in the trap, bee-beez in the trap." The bridge follows with, "Damn, damn what they say about me? I don't know man, fuck is on your biscuit? If I get hits, swingin on a big bitch. I don't know man I'm shittin on your whole life."

I told the girls that I had seen the video for that song recently, and was unclear about Minaj's meaning in the phrase "beez in the trap," even after listening to the song many times. My student Destiny, who had made the abstract painting I discussed in the previous chapter, explained to me with a measure of pride that what Minaj is referencing with "beez in the trap," is the time she puts in working at the recording studio. "Trap" is slang for the location where drug deals takes place, and Nicki "beez"/is, as in "I be/I am," in slang, in the site where she labors.

Minaj is not captured rehearsing in the studio in the music video for the song, as she is shown in the *Moment for Life* MTV documentary that was created early in her career, which introduced her as a hard worker to a national public. Rather, the *Beez in the Trap* video situates Minaj lounging in a strip club along with other women of color. She holds and displays stacks of money, dons four finger rings on each hand that read "Beez"/"Trap," and gives cash to the black female exotic dancers. Minaj is framed holding court in the "trap" where black female bodies perform sexual labor, which she consumes with pleasure. Black female buttocks are central images in the video and there is a particular moment that strikes me as capturing the queer pleasure that can attend black female performances of raced hypersexuality for each other.

In this sequence Minaj stands in between two female dancers in tight clothing

who erotically move against her body in a space that consists of only a grey backdrop. In the scene Minaj surveys the body of the woman in front of her who wears a very tight and short dress. Minaj lays her hands on the woman's voluptuous ass as she stares at it in delight of her skillful, popping movements. As she looks, Minaj nods her head in affirmation of her partner's booty work.



fig. 5.2, Still from *Beez in the Trap* video

Booty work cannot be adequately interpreted through a straightforward desire to please and perform for men, it exceeds these aims and produces corporeal *jouissance*, which I see enacted in the booty play of my young black female students, for whom these movements constitute a form of homosocial relation. In fact, the antiracist, feminist space for girls in Urbana-Champaign Illinois *SOLHOT* (Saving Our Lives Hearing Our Truths), includes booty dancing, or what they term, batty dance, in Jamaican vernacular, as one of their activities that celebrate black girlhood⁹. Strip club dancing has also inspired the work of the African American lesbian rap group Yo Majesty. Siobhan Brooks's research has found that Girlielicious, a strip club in Oakland, California featuring female dancers of color that caters to queer black women, serves as a significant space for building community, especially for those who remain in the closet to preserve their family and social ties (2010). In *The Hypersexuality of Race* Celine Shimizu narrates her pleasure in consuming performances in which Asian/American women hypersexualize themselves in pornography and cultural texts such as *Miss Saigon*. Shimizu does not frame this

9 <http://solhot.weebly.com/>

pleasure as homoerotic, but rather, as race-positive, as she finds that such performances “enable a more autonomous subject formation for Asian women (2007, 4).” These cases illustrate how the performance of raced, hypersexual sexualities that appear to conform to hegemonic heteromale desires, such as booty dancing or exotic dancing, do not uniformly uphold these sexual, and often racist, regimes.

Selling Nicki Minaj

Destiny conveyed her admiration of Minaj for the manner in which she frames herself as a hardcore business woman who puts in the time, making it possible for her to take down her opponents, to swing and hit on a “big bitch.” The neoliberal message of the song has been received not only by the young women of color I work with but in the media as well. In a story titled, “Nicki Minaj’s song ‘Beez in the Trap’ Teaches American Values of Hard Work and Dedication,” published in the online political policy blog *Policymic*, writer Ethan Lane extols the politics of Minaj when he states,

For a generation of millennials displaced by the economy and looking for a way to achieve the success that was promised to us, Nicki teaches us to keep a self-confident and positive outlook. As her newest single reminds us, success doesn’t come overnight. You must *beez in the trap* if you want to get anywhere¹⁰.

Rather than critique global capitalism for the rapidly vanishing job opportunities for youth, even those who are college educated, the writer instead lauds Minaj for providing a soundtrack of uplift, personal responsibility, and hard work to get folks through the contemporary economic malaise. Beyond this one, rather obscure blog story, has Minaj been able to successfully mobilize neoliberal discourse in imbuing her radical racially/sexually styled body with commodity value that secures her position in the mainstream?

Yes and no. On the one hand, Minaj’s discourse of hard work and girl power has presented a discourse that has been adopted in mass media, promoted her as a hip hop mogul, and facilitated her crossover from underground hip hop to the Billboard charts,

¹⁰ <http://www.policymic.com/articles/13166/nicki-minaj-s-song-beez-in-the-trap-teaches-american-values-of-hard-work-and-dedication> (emphasis in original).

American Idol judging, major corporate endorsements with Pepsi and MAC cosmetics, and now her own fragrance line, *Pink Friday*. However, her admittance to this sphere is measured by a consistent framing of her as an innovatively styled hyper-racial/sexual body, something of an aesthetically pleasing curiosity.



fig. 5.3, Nicki Minaj Barbie

For example, rather than produce a line of Nicki Minaj dolls to be sold in large quantities and marketed to girls around the world, the Mattel corporation produced a limited edition Nicki Minaj Barbie that was auctioned at a Beverly Hills charity gala that benefited an HIV/AIDS non profit and was estimated to value \$15,000¹¹. The doll is crafted in the image of Minaj from the cover of her debut album *Pink Friday*, but with a less voluptuous frame. The historical resonances of auctioning light skinned black women's bodies resound here.

In discussing the history of the “fancy” girl trade, the sexual trafficking of light skinned black women in the U.S., and its framing of early 20th century performances that centered on “creole” beauties, Jayna Brown notes,

Their [black women on the burlesque stage] rigorous and suggestive acts carried the memory of the fancy girl slave auctions, very public rituals of bodily exposure

11 I have been unable to find data regarding how much the doll eventually sold for.

and surveillance that their recent ancestors had endured... The ritual marketing of black women's sexuality and the involuntary sexual labor of slavery stood at the nexus of flesh and commodity. Sex, as profane desire and as means to proliferate slave bodies, was here in its most complete moment of commodification (Ibid. 106).

Minaj's body as Barbie is only marketable for Mattel as a one-of-a-kind, Creole rarity. The sexual-aesthetic excess of her body, and the race and class difference it signals, is not fit for mass consumption by girls, and is instead made available to bidders with deep pockets.

In her song *Roman Reloaded* Minaj references the Mattel auction, "Yes, I really do mean that it's Barbie bitch/Ask Mattel, they auctioned my Barbie bitch/Raggedy Ann could never be a Barbie bitch." Minaj spun the Barbie auction as evidence of her secure position in the mainstream. In an interview with Billboard she described the creation of the Nicki Minaj Barbie as a landmark moment in her career, stating,

It's just a one of a kind, limited edition for charity, and so I never thought Mattel would even pay attention to me. For me this is a very major moment, because it just shows that you can come from nothing and still be a force in the main world, a business woman, and hopefully a mogul one day¹².

Through their limited endorsement of Minaj's embodiment, Mattel gains positive publicity from a discourse that credits them with supporting the mobility and success, the "infinite possibilities," of a woman of color who came from poverty.

Girls Consuming Minaj Sexuality on Ellen

From staging black female embodiment as menacing monstrosity, and portraying queer pleasures in raced hypersexual performance, Minaj articulates a perversity that would seem to make her anathema as an icon for young girls to consume, but her neoliberal aura of unmarked, Barbie embodiment screens the more radical aspects of her persona. An episode of the talk show *Ellen* staged a surprise meeting between Minaj and

12 <http://www.billboard.com/news/nicki-minaj-barbie-doll-a-very-major-moment-1005603722.story#/news/nicki-minaj-barbie-doll-a-very-major-moment-1005603722.story>

two young British cousins, eight-year-old Sophia and five-year-old Rosie, whose family taped them performing her song *Superbass* and posted it online. The video became viral and Sophia Grace became a celebrity due to the fearless performance of Minaj's song she presented in contrast to her shy, younger cousin. On the show the girls perform a version of *Superbass* that does not include the original lyrics in which Minaj describes her lover, "And he ill¹³, he real, he might got a deal—He pop bottles and he got the right kind of build—He cold, he dope, he might sell coke.—He always in the air—but he never fly coach."

While Ellen asks the girls why they love Minaj, the rapper emerges from behind a curtain and Sophia immediately jumps onto and hugs her. Minaj tightly holds Sophia for a while against her neck and appears emotional. The camera then pans to her parents and the predominantly white audience members, who all have tears in their eyes. They seem overcome by witnessing the dream of these little white girls, both dressed in pink princess crowns and costumes, to meet their idol. Minaj said that Sophia's performance, which is notable for its rapid and skillful rap delivery, powerful singing, and attitude, blew her away. Minaj repeatedly told the girls that even though they love music they should stay in school. When Sophia asked for a copy of her album, Minaj said she would give her a clean version and promised them a shopping spree.

This conversation took place while the girls were engaged in playing Nicki Minaj dress-up with the artist, who helped them fasten pink and blonde wigs to their heads. When Sophia put on her blonde afro wig she said, "I'm the second Nicki Minaj!," to audience applause. I doubt that my black Women on the Rise! girls, who do not have the means through which to display neoliberal success on their raced bodies with luxury goods, stylists, and a publicity machine, would have stirred as much emotion and encouragement if they were to booty dance with Minaj on a television show like Ellen. Such a scene would likely be read as racist and inappropriate, damaging for girls. Yet Minaj's body and rhetoric allows for the sidestepping of issues such as the overtly

13 "Ill" is slang for being cool.

sexual lyrics the girls consumed prior to their appearance on Ellen, which mention drug dealing and how Minaj's "panties come off" when her man gives her *that* look. Ignoring the racialized sexual scripting that these white British girls perform, the show instead highlights Minaj exhorting the girls to stay in school and taking them shopping. Mattel benefited from Minaj's appearance on the show as the footage capturing the girls' shopping trip, which Minaj did not attend, consisted of shots of them dumping loads of pink Mattel toy packages into their shopping carts in a follow up segment.

Understanding the relation between Minaj's body, its Barbie iconography, and neoliberal discourses points to how hypersexual images and performances by women of color can be granted admittance to the mainstream under conditions that promote capitalism and narratives of mobility. Minaj has carefully worked to temper her radical public image with documentation of her doing good for people. In the MTV documentary on her early career, *Moment for Life*, she is shown taking her economically struggling family shopping, she gave away turkeys for Thanksgiving in New York City in 2012, has rapped about sending money to Haiti, and the money her limited edition Barbie was worth went to charity.

Minaj may have intended to conduct these works for solely personal purposes, but they nonetheless soften her hardcore persona, making her more viable for consumption by young girls like Sophia Grace. The mainstream culture industry expects financially lucrative black women, such as Oprah Winfrey and Nicki Minaj, to appear less threatening through philanthropic acts. The Nicki Minaj product crafts styles, songs, and brands that strategically shift to achieve business ends that may or may not reflect the creative and personal desires of Onika Tanya Maraj. The manner in which the Minaj persona has traveled in the culture industry through the rhetoric of her neoliberal body lays out tactics for women of color to craft imaginative body styles and achieve publicity. However, such opportunities would be mediated by regimes of race, sexuality, and gender that would require feminine body presentation and form, light skin, and a queerness that

titillates, rather than threatens, the heteronormative order.

Rococo Creole, The Power of Pink, and (Mungo) Minaj (Macaroni)

“It’s interesting that people have more negative things to say about me saying ‘I’m Barbie’ than me saying ‘I’m a bad bitch,’ she says, getting a bit heated. ‘So you can call yourself a female dog because that’s cool in our community. But if you call yourself a Barbie, that’s fake.’”

--Nicki Minaj in interview with *OUT* magazine

*Bitches ain’t serious, man these bitches delirious
All these bitches inferiors, I just pimp my interiors
I just pick up and go, might pick up a hoe
Might give conversation, if you kick up the dough
Never mind my money; never mind my stacks
Every bitch wanna be me, you can find ‘em in Saks
“Pink Friday” two milli, Super Bass triple plat
When you see me on Ellen, just admit that I’m winning
Do a show for Versace, they request me by name
And if they don’t get Nicki, it just won’t be the same
When I’m sitting with Anna, I’m really sitting with Anna
Ain’t a metaphor punchline, I’m really sitting with Anna!!
Front row at Oscar de la Renta posture
Ain’t a bitch that could do it, not even my impostor*

--Nicki Minaj lyrics from *Come on a Cone*

Over the last several years Minaj’s body has been adopted by the high fashion industry. In the lyrics to her song *Come on a Cone* that I quote above, Minaj cites her endorsement by fashion labels such as Versace and Oscar de la Renta as evidencing her primacy in the culture industry. When she raps, “When I’m sitting with Anna, I’m really sitting with Anna,” she refers to Anna Wintour, the long time editor of *Vogue* magazine who is a major arbiter of the fashion world. Wintour has invited Minaj to several fashion shows and magazines have printed images of Wintour seated alongside Minaj, who cuts a contrastingly raced and elaborately styled figure against Wintour’s restrained style and manner. In closing this chapter I analyze images of Minaj that have appeared in fashion

media to assess the politics of how rococo style has been mobilized to bring her body into high fashion culture, and how this style, and the “pink” that so often marks it, stem from visual histories that trouble gender and class hierarchies. I will argue that Minaj’s *Creole* rococo, in the 21st century, furthers the representational destabilization engendered by pink to disturb hierarchies of race and sexuality as well.



fig. 5.4, Nicki Minaj and Anna Wintour at runway show

The discourse of fakery that hails Minaj is rebutted in the *Vogue* interview titled *True Colors*, that tells the story of how the rapper is not the hardcore persona she appears to be, and highlights her challenging experiences growing up, and commitment to being charitable. *Vogue*, like the Mattel Corporation, limits its endorsement of Minaj by only featuring her in a one-page photo spread, with a one-page interview story. Despite the fact that Minaj and Wintour have attended several fashion shows together, the interview is placed in the back of the massive March 2012 spring issue.

Vogue, as Mattel, presented Minaj’s body as a rarity. In the photo that accompanies the interview her skin is painted in a metallic turquoise color and she is shown seated frontally on a chair that she grips with her hands and arms wrapped in long, red, satiny gloves that pass her elbows. She wears a low cut, form fitting vermilion dress that is accented by a thick black belt, and sexy thigh high tights. The skirt of her dress is pulled back to reveal her thighs and she wears a shoulder length, powder pink wig shaped into tight, springy curls.

Her face, accentuated by the pink lips that contrast with the turquoise skin, makes an expression that is part come-hither and part sneer. She is represented as something of an otherworldly Marilyn Monroe-esque creature, both visually pleasing, and threatening. This body is suitable for the back pages of *Vogue*, not the glamour of more normatively styled black female performers like Beyoncé, who has been featured on the cover.



fig. 5.5, Nicki Minaj in Vogue magazine.

Minaj has appeared on the cover of the less widely available, but reputable fashion magazine *W*, in which she is styled by contemporary Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli. Vezzoli gained attention in the art world by appropriating canonical works by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Sandro Botticelli and replacing the original figures with the faces of celebrities. The artist is interested in the cultural obsession with celebrity, and the iconic status of female stars in particular. In a 2011 show in New York's high powered Gagosian gallery, he exhibited a series of Madonna and child themed paintings that replaced the visage of the Virgin Mary with faces of supermodels such as Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford, whose bodies were ubiquitous in the

cultural landscape of the 1990s. Vezzoli embellished the paintings with long, oddly shaped needlepoint tears sewn onto the model's faces that give the images a surreal and disquieting effect. He fastened a similar embroidered tear on Minaj's face on the cover of the November 2011 issue of *W*, which gives her elegantly styled portrait an air of craft and macabre. A disembodied image of an eye dangles from the red string that is observably affixed by hand onto the flat photograph, giving her a third eye which deflects the gaze back to the viewer.



fig. 5.6, Nicki Minaj on cover of *W* magazine.

Like Minaj, Vezzoli has been framed as something of a fake—an artist whose work has too intimate a relation with the market. In the interview of Vezzoli that accompanies the photographs of Minaj in *W*, Klaus Biesenbach, curator of the Museum of Modern Art's PS1 contemporary art center in Long Island City New York, a major international art world tastemaker, directs rather aggressive questions to Vezzoli regarding the notion that he has sold out to art dealers and the art market, in contrast to what Biesenbach terms his earlier, more “challenging” work as a performance artist.

The critique of any contemporary artist selling out reifies a euphemistic discourse of separation between market and art, which obscures the many ways that wealthy collectors, major foundations, and influential funders shape what gets shown and how in museums and galleries. The work of Vezzoli, like that of rococo artist François Boucher, is devalued through a rhetoric of inauthenticity that stems from his association with “vain,” feminine women. In other projects Vezzoli has worked with figures such as Lady Gaga and Natalie Portman.

The spread by Vezzoli styles Minaj as an 18th century courtesan in French rococo style. Art historian Melissa Hyde writes,

Rococo painting tends to prettiness, to a palette of light, sparkling colors—pinks, pale blues, and greens predominate—and to opulent and copiously filled surfaces, often highly finished and detailed, all rendered with the appearance of great painterly ease and facility (2006, 11).

In her book *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics*, she describes how the vilification of the rococo style, and of artist François Boucher in particular, that emerged in the late 18th century in tandem with early enlightenment discourse, articulated a rhetoric that sought to police the gender and class transgressions that were signaled by the aesthetic excess of rococo style, which came to symbolize for critics the moral and material decadence of the French aristocracy. The hyperdecorative style of rococo, and its indulgence in “declarative artificiality,” is framed by Hyde as crafting transgressive representations of class, gender, and queer desires. Hyde analyzes how the politics of adornment signaled the subversion of social hierarchies in 18th century France, and how this subversion was symbolized by the body practices of women—namely the practice of applying makeup, or rouge, to the face. She writes,

Distinguishing between a made-up woman with arriviste social ambitions and a made-up woman of ancient noble lineage is no longer a matter of reading fixed signs on the surface of the body. Instead, social identity has become a contested field in which identity can, quite literally, be made up. Cosmetics have become a matter of artifices, false charms, and pretenses. Moreover, through the use of

makeup, women have become ciphers for the instability of social identity (Ibid. 97).

Courtesans such as Madame de Pompadour, who was a patron of Boucher and performed her application of makeup in the public company of the court, where rouge was a practice in politics, became a target of criticism for embodying feminine deceit and social climbing. Such judgments are echoed in the discourses surrounding Nicki Minaj's "fake" body/booty, and the manner in which she allegedly modified it for the market.

In the context of the aesthetic debates that attended rococo art production, which established Enlightenment aesthetic hierarchies that traveled to the U.S. from Europe, and formed the bases for contemporary derisions of sexual-aesthetic excess, I find Minaj's consistent mobilization of pink provocative. François Boucher was disparaged for his "over-use" of the color in his paintings. Hyde notes how for critics, the color indexed the decline of art practice that was brought about through the growing participation of women in the art world through their commissioning of portraits that reduced serious male painters to lowly "make up artists." Pink evoked the bodies of women that were framed as surface and no substance, and whose excessive approaches to body crafting reflected those of sexually deviant female prostitutes. Pink tarnished the macho, naturalistic veneer of history painting, which eventually replaced rococo in the Enlightenment and revolutionary era through the clean, ordered aesthetics of neoclassical painting emblemized by artists such as Jacques-Louis David.

Through using "pink" in her visual lexicon and branding, the Minaj brand evokes this aesthetic history, and races it. Along with the subversion of class (hardcore black woman as mogul), sexuality, and gender she performs, pink also highlights the queering of race that is articulated through her incorporations of racial signifiers. Not black, not white, not Asian, but pink.

Pink has also signaled aesthetic dissidence in the images of chongas that appeared in the *Miami New Times*, in the MTV Euro Awards promotional video that situates a

chola Selena Gomez in a rococo styled, powder pink bedroom, and in the outfits of the Cuban mulattas depicted by Spanish artist Victor Patricio Landaluze I discussed in chapter one. Pink avows corporeal indulgence and hyperfemininity. I posit that pink can be mobilized to disturb the visual field with corporeal and pictorial stagings of gender, race, sexual, and class performativity.

Minaj embodies racial performativity while affirming blackness through her style, music, and public statements, much like her predecessor, performer Florence Mills, who was described as “rococo Creole” (Brown 2008, 245). Pink does not index a radical politics, but rather a decadent politics, often colluding with the market, that takes consumption and body practice to perverse ends that place unruly subjects in positions of influence that affirm capitalism while fashioning new positions for women and people of color. Think the iconicity and perverse neoliberalism of a figure like Tony Montana in the film *Scarface* (1983), whose motto is “the world is yours.” Montana’s Cuban rococo aesthetics marked his decadence, and set the stage for his violent downfall. The world may not belong to people of color yet, but changing demographics and the increasing influence of black and Latino/a trendsetters in culture are transforming notions of what constitutes viable, successful bodies and cultural capital.

Rococo aesthetics, their attendant fakery, and critique, all find life in Nicki Minaj’s practice, highly exemplified in the colors and femininity that marks her style, which is presented through a rococo lens in the *Stupid Hoe* music video. In fact, the rapid, choppy editing of the video can be compared to *papillotage*, a term used to describe a blinking, flickering treatment of light in paintings by rococo artists, which also denoted feminine coquetry and frivolity (Hyde 2006, 94-95). The video portrays hypersexual black bodies through a blinking pink tableaux, a blank background composition. The *Stupid Hoe* video, directed by popular hip hop video director Hype Williams, is composed through a vibrant *Minaj* palette of pink and blue. Its rapid, choppy editing follows the thumping of the high-pitched, police siren-like beats of the track—which the

Minaj brand crafted to be hyperbolic in content, tone, and, in collaboration with Williams, visual representation as well.

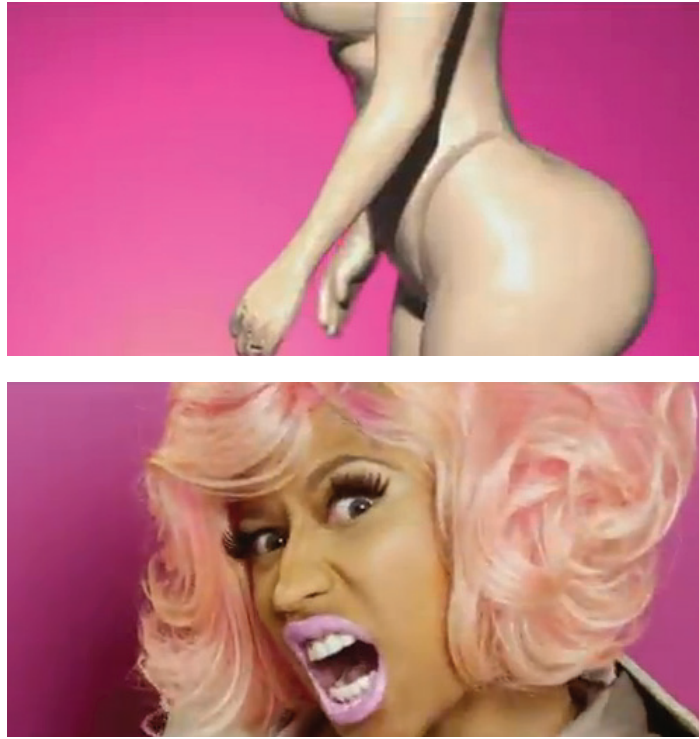


fig. 5.7; 5.8, Stills from *Stupid Hoe* video

In the sequence that serves as the primal scene of the video, an image of a nude, light brown skinned woman's body is superimposed over footage of Minaj making dramatic contortions of her face. The image of the doll-like body appears and disappears from the frame in time intervals so short the screen appears to move more rapidly than a blink, creating a strobe like effect. The body looks doll-like; cold, plastic, stiff, and lifeless. The camera crops the body in the frame from the shoulder area to the upper thighs, thus obscuring the head, legs, and feet. The form is positioned in profile, as in many historical images of Hottentot women, and is set against a Barbie pink background. The body does not resemble the standard Barbie doll form, despite the messaging of the pink. The figure has large, protruding round buttocks that starkly contrast with the form's flat stomach. A styled steatopygia, this is Barbie as Baartman.

The still of the body alternates with moving images of Minaj's face donning a

glamorously styled, short and pink wig. The passivity of the still body is juxtaposed against the warrior like faces of Minaj that are framed at close range from the shoulders up. Minaj functions as the missing, and very animated head of the inert black Venus. She makes an exaggerated facial expression with eyes open wide as if enraged. History is haunted by Minaj as Roman.

Minaj warned on Twitter that the video would not be released on network TV, stating that she did not want her art to be tampered with. Rumors spread in the media about the banning of the video by Black Entertainment Television (BET), and the video was subject to critiques concerning representations of hypersexuality, sexism, and racism. In composing his critique of the *Stupid Hoe* video, MTV blog writer Sam Lansky wrote an open letter to Minaj in which he expresses his disappointment with her for poaching Lady Gaga's aesthetics and for the sexual excess conveyed by the "big ol' bouncing booties" in the video. Chastising her for not knowing better, he rhetorically asks,

Were you [Nicki Minaj] trying to make this video feel sort of grimly mechanical in its blatant sexiness (which at times starts to feel sexist)? I want to give you the benefit of the doubt and say that all that nasty grinding was intended to parody artists who exploit their sexuality to sell records...But when a parody of something is virtually indistinguishable from the thing being parodied, the whole point has a way of getting lost, and everything ends up just self-cannibalizing (emphasis in original)¹⁴.

Perhaps Minaj aimed to make the video feel "grimly mechanical" and "blatant" in its framing of sexuality. The primary critique of the video is that the sexual signals conveyed by shaking buttocks and gyrating bodies do not carry a promise of emotional investment, or at least physical pleasure. The mechanical nature of the conventional black female sexuality staged in the video appears too empty and objectifying for Lansky, who draws on the hyperbolic and raced rhetoric of self-cannibalization to refer to the harm Minaj inflicts upon herself through signifying this joyless sex. His viewing was unpleasant, and I suggest that the Minaj brand crafted the video to be.

14 <http://buzzworthy.mtv.com/2012/01/23/nicki-minaj-stupid-hoe-video/>

Maybe it was all those crazy faces she was making that ruined what would typically be an enjoyable mainstream hip hop video, which traffics in women's shaking bootys. It is the absence of parody, and possibility that Minaj is knowingly utilizing her body for career success that make the video troubling to the critic. Neoliberal discourse eschews terms such as exploitation, and perhaps the image of Minaj working black female bodies for the market in such an explicit fashion raised an unwelcome specter of raced sexual-economic exchange, the grotesque kind that contemporary artist Kara Walker daringly portrays in her perverse tableaux of the antebellum South. The discourse of parody protects bodies that could signify sexual-aesthetic excess by performing a distancing between body presentation and sexual subjectivity—as was played out in chonga discourse.

The video was also derided on the feminist blog *Jezebel* by a writer who titled her piece, “Nicki Minaj’s Stupid Ho Video Features Writhing, Disappointment.” It seems that the image of black women writhing their bodies for its own sake irritates, and shatters respectability. Writer Dodia Stewart wrote,

Most unfortunate are the shots of Nicki Minaj in a cage, a la Shakira. We have discussed black women in cages before — most notably Amber Rose and Grace Jones. It’s a tired, troubling visual. In this context, we’re supposed to see Nicki as threatening, wild, dangerous. But the objectification and exoticization of black women is steeped in racism. Our history includes centuries of slavery in which black people were chained, shackled, muzzled, and yes, caged. Nicki placing herself there doesn’t invoke terror, and not just because she’s popping her booty. Male rappers telegraph menace through threats of violence, brandishing guns or boasting of assaults and drive-bys. Is there a good way for a black woman to show she’s a force to be reckoned with, without reverting to ancient stereotypes of the sexualized beast, the predatory Jezebel? Absolutely. But Nicki hasn’t found it yet¹⁵.

As race theorists such as Jennifer C. Nash (2008) and Anne Anlin Cheng (2011) have shown, the history of the Hottentot Venus has critically overdetermined readings of black female embodiment, sexuality, and performance. I see Saartjie Baartmann in the *Stupid Hoe* video, but I also see Minaj perverting and exorcising the historical script.

15 <http://jezebel.com/5878769/nicki-minajs-stupid-hoe-video-features-writhing-disappointment>

The *Jezebel* writer, who seems to be articulating a feminist position, values the rote, hypermasculine brandishing of guns by male rappers over the more imaginative and provocative imagery created by figures such as Grace Jones and Minaj—who present monstrous images of black female sexuality that, while colluding with fantasies about their bestial sexuality to varying extents, nonetheless present indigestible (Cheng 2011) and hostile bodies for consumption.

Many of the young girls in *Women on the Rise!* enjoy shaking their “bootys” and they would sometimes perform quick booty dances in front of each other for kicks while the other instructors and I were distracted. *Women on the Rise!* instructor Crystal Pearl showed the girls one of her video works titled *Booty Sandwich with Bass* as part of the lesson based on her work. The video features Pearl and a group of friends comically booty dancing to music by Two Live Crew¹⁶. This footage is juxtaposed via split screen with images of the group making Cuban sandwiches, articulating a connection between racialized forms of corporeal pleasure in food and sex. Pearl discussed with the girls how the video explores her negotiation of music and food culture in Miami in the 1990s, which communicated conflicting meanings to her about sexuality and “ideal” embodiment at a young age. Women of color were expected to perform sexual respectability and present a voluptuous, but not “over-weight” body, while being provoked to indulge in hypersexual cultural forms like booty dancing and consume high fat ethnic foods.

The girls enjoyed Pearl’s video, which they found tremendously humorous, and would begin demonstrating their different booty dances, singing booty songs for each other to move to, and discussed how much they love to booty dance with us. An 11-year-old *Women on the Rise!* student wrote in her program evaluation that she was trying to look like Nicki Minaj in her photography project inspired by Crystal Pearl’s work, and also stated that she would like for the program to incorporate booty

¹⁶ Two Live Crew’s sexually explicit work became the target of censorship and controversy in the early 1990s.

dancing in the future. Rather than frame the girls' "booty work" as a troubling form of sexual scripting that evidences their objectification, my interactions with the girls lead me to suggest that, although booty dancing is articulated through a narrative of body movement for male visual and carnal pleasure, that it also constitutes a form of cultural production and homosociality through which the girls relate to each other, enjoy their bodies, and creatively develop and share movements and music that are produced in their communities.

RISE!
THE
ON
WOMEN

Name: Secory Age: 12

Do you feel you learned new things in Women on the Rise! classes? ☒ Yes ☐ No

What are some of the things you learned?
That ladies are not supposed to be heard they are supposed to be seen. I also learned that we can do whatever we want to do. I say what ever we desire to do.

What projects did you enjoy working on the most?
I enjoyed the dress up project and I was trying to be NICKI MINAJ.

Did Women on the Rise! classes make you more interested in making art?
It made me more into art then what I was before then that means yes.

Did Women on the Rise! make you more interested in learning about women artists?
Yes it made me more then I was ever interested.

What topics/artists did you enjoy talking about the most during Women on the Rise! classes? Why?
I loved when we had to dress up I liked when we had to express ourselves.

Have you ever had a class like Women on the Rise! before? If not, what makes it different?
No, I never had a class like this before.

How do you feel about the art you made during Women on the Rise! workshops?
I feel I good because I express my feelings.

Any other thoughts you want to share with us about the program?
No Thank-you

What would you like to do in Women on the Rise! next year?
Booty dancing!!

fig. 5.9, Women on the Rise! participant feedback.

Vezzoli cited Minaj's embodiment of hypersexuality as what prompted him to draw on rococo style in executing his portraits of the rapper¹⁷. He fashioned her in the image of influential women of the French court who obtained their positions in significant part through the adornment and sexual capital of their bodies. These women were known for their indulgence in opulent clothes and the power they wielded behind the scenes. Women such as the Marquise de Pompadour utilized their economic access to commission portraits that buttressed their legitimacy, often highlighting their learnedness, penchants for literature or crafting, while also foregrounding the sartorial staging of their bodies. In contrast to the more "humble" French women who achieved respectability

17 Biesenbach, Klaus, "Agents Provocateurs," *W*, November (2011), 164.

through conformity with 18th century gender roles, these courtesans, although vilified in critical and political discourse at the time, have nonetheless haunted aesthetic politics through the portraits that remain. Their fleeting excess was given permanence.



(L) fig. 5.10, Francesco Vezzoli, *Rococo Portrait of Minaj as Françoise Athénaïs de Rochechourat de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan*, 2011;
(R) fig 5.11, Francesco Vezzoli, *Rococo Portrait of Minaj as Jeanne Bécu, Contesse du Barry*, 2011

Vezzoli's photographs situate Minaj in black and brown blank background compositions, and the dramatic lighting highlights her face and shoulders. The light gives Minaj an otherworldly glow that makes her skin appear light, golden, and quasi immaterial. Her body is swathed in complicated, feminine dresses constructed from lustrous fabrics festooned with bows, tulle, and ribbons. She is posed among objects such as heavy, silky curtains, flowers, books, and classical sculptures. Heavily ornamented gilded frames accent the photographs and cite rococo painting display. In the images, Minaj's facial expressions range from subdued to dramatic, consisting of intense stares, looks away, and awkward half smiles. Although the photographs mark her body through a femininity that is softer and more digestible than the visual chaos of her Harajuku Barbie styles, she does not appear more "real" or approachable. This woman is just

an unknowable as her alter egos. Her identity in these portraits, as in her performance practice, is constituted through staging her body as a commodity, and through references to her acquisition of luxurious commodified objects, she is a fetish among fetishes.



(L) fig 5.12, caption, Francesco Vezzoli, *Rococo Portrait of Nicki Minaj as Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour*, 2011; (R) fig 5.13, caption François Boucher, *Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour*, 1756

In *Rococo Portrait of Minaj as Françoise Athénaïs de Rochechourat de Mortemart, Marquise de Montespan* (fig. 5.10 , above), she stands in profile in an elaborate lavender dress while gripping a brownish gold curtain with both hands. The curtain runs snakelike down the length of her body, framing its sensuous contours and drawing the eye to her buoyant and accented décolletage. Minaj's delicate, yet firm hold on the curtain appears to strangle it, a phallus in crisis. Her makeup and well coiffed black hair are naturalistic and soft, contrasting with her wide open eyes, revealing the whites. Minaj's face in the photograph is similar to the expression she makes when embodying Roman, giving her a possessed and menacing appearance.

Minaj is seated frontally in an intricately embroidered and beaded white gown in *Rococo Portrait of Minaj as Jeanne Bécu, Comtesse du Barry* (fig. 5.11 , above). She wears a grey wig gathered into a tight, orderly bun on the side of her head and looks out

at the viewer in defiance, holding a lyre in one hand and a wreath of roses in the other. At her feet are a palette, paints, brushes and an embroidery frame enclosing Vezzoli's initials. The image serves as a collaborative self-portrait, the lyre representing Minaj's musical work and the needlepoint and paints at her feet indexing the tools of Vezzoli's trade. Minaj's position in the chair indicates that her legs are open wide underneath her voluminous gown, out from which a foot enclosed in a dainty, ornately patterned shoe emerges. At her feet are not only Vezzoli's craft materials, but the broken, classically styled white marble bust of a female figure. At her feet and under legs, the aesthetics of white femininity, and the labor of a white male European artist, come under her staged and stoic command. One finds not lack, but signs of generation and destruction.



fig. 5.14, François Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour at Her Toilette*, 1758

It is fitting that Vezzoli would craft Minaj in the image of Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour, a major patron of François Boucher. Vezzoli's photograph (fig. 5.12) is a direct citation of Boucher's 1756 painting *Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour* (fig. 5.13). As Minaj finds a predecessor in Florence Mill's Creole rococo, Vezzoli finds a rococo progenitor in Boucher, the artist accused of selling out and celebrity worship. In framing Boucher's landmark painting, *Madame de*

Pompadour at Her Toilette (1758), as a portrait of Boucher and an allegory of painting, Hyde posits that the painting “roundly declares that Boucher—and his famous sitter—embraced their status as makeup artists (Ibid.138).”

A similar partnership through aesthetic deviance is articulated by Minaj and Vezzoli. The symbols of creative work and authorship that conspicuously appear in Vezzoli’s portrait of Minaj on the cover of *W* reference the practices of them both, indicating their alliance. Hyde elaborates in reference to Boucher,

By figuring Pompadour as the author of her own appearance and identity [as she is shown preparing to apply makeup], this painting declares that an image of a woman could be more than an image of a made-up identity; it declares that a woman could make up her own identity. What is more, the painting suggests that the toilette of the woman always precedes the more durable art of the painter. As de Plies had maintained, there is not art before makeup; makeup is not only the surface of representation but also its prerequisite foundation.

Understood as an image that alludes to Pompadour looking at and representing herself, *Madame de Pompadour at Her Toilette* undercuts traditional notions of authorship and it conflates the categories of woman as object and male painter as subject (Ibid. 128).

What does it mean for a black woman as object to be conflated with a white male painter as subject?

Although framed as an exotic, Minaj uses Vezzoli as he uses her, and he makes possible the trafficking of her raced body in both high art and high fashion registers. The black female body has been persistently excluded from these realms save for common tropes of primitivism and exotic otherness. But, in thinking further about the race politics of Minaj’s rococo embodiment, I find it useful to imagine Minaj as a female dandy, the “madame” as dandy. In her book *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, literary theorist Monica L. Miller examines how the figure of the black male dandy signifies the complex nexus of gender and race that attends black styling practices, particularly by men. I want to draw on Miller to theorize the black Barbie Minaj as *Mungo Minaj Macaroni*.



fig. 5.15, Illustration of Mungo Macaroni.

Miller discusses the figure Mungo from the play *The Padlock*, which features a witty, back-talking slave in elaborate dress, and was popular in England in the 18th century. Cutting both a stereotypical and oppositional figure, the character of Mungo was also marked by pink, a pink and white striped suit being a typical costume for the role. The ostentatious style of Mungo was echoed in the outfits of “pet” slaves, fastidiously dressed young black boys that served as luxury items for the elite. Rather than perform hard labor, these boys were dressed in the latest fashions and accompanied rich white folk during their leisure time and attendance at various social gatherings to see and be seen. The clothing given to these boys were meant to convey the wealth and disposable income of their masters. At the time, the term “vogue” was used to describe the popularity of the practice of acquiring pet slaves. I find resonances of this history in Minaj’s flamboyant body posed against that of Ana Wintour at high fashion runway shows. Is she partner, or pet?

Miller describes how the term *Mungo Macaroni* was eventually applied to Julius Soubise, a freed slave who was the consort of an English noblewoman in the 18th century. Soubise was known for his radical style, marked by his diamond buckled, red-heeled shoes. He was named after Charles de Rohan, prince de Soubise, a courtier to Madame

Pompadour. Soubise became a trendsetter and talk of the town in London, and was quickly sent away to India in 1777 after his popularity became a source of racial unease, and he was accused of sexually assaulting a white woman.

A print made of Soubise in 1772, which depicts his smartly dressed body in a blank background composition, defines him as “A Mungo Macaroni,” to connote a black macaroni. The “macaroni” was a vernacular figure of an 18th century male Londoner obsessed with appearance and prone to sartorial excess and performative, artificial, and feminine behavior. The macaroni was a forerunner to the dandy, whose style came to signify modernity, and which has been appropriated by black artists, intellectuals, and everyday subjects who have claimed access to power through the styling of their bodies. Miller writes,

Dandyism is...a sometimes subtle, sometimes entirely obvious, but always fabulous appropriation and revision of fancy clothes that is less a ‘hidden transcript’ with which African Americans preserve a sense of themselves, than a highly readable performative text that is subject to interpretation and translation and more often than not functions as a challenge (2009:16).

Actor Jamie Fox plays the role of a freed slave on a quest to rescue his wife from a plantation in Quentin Tarantino’s film *Django Unchained* (2012). There is a scene in the film in which Django selects and dresses himself in an elegant blue outfit worthy of Soubise. Django, like Minaj, is also a 21st century Mungo Macaroni. The film stages Django’s choosing of his outfit as a significant performance of agency, and he dons this fancy attire as he exacts revenge upon white slave owners. The styling of his dress seems to be inspired by British artist Thomas Gainsborough’s 18th century painting *The Blue Boy*.

Minaj’s appropriation of fancy high fashion clothes is the method through which her gender subversion is articulated. The masculinity in her music is expressed through a hyperfeminine embodiment that engages the attentiveness of dandy self-fashioning. Miller’s cogent and provocative work in *Slaves to Fashion* focuses specifically on

male bodies to understand how dandyism embodies the construction and challenging of black masculinity, however, her emphasis on biological males reifies the equation of masculinity with male bodies, and ignores the black dandyism that has been embodied by black women such as Gladys Bentley, for example.

In thinking Minaj as pink, rococo, mungo macaroni--we can assess the stakes of her incorporations, not only of style, but of race as well. The body crafted by Minaj, which scrambles stable signifiers of wealth, working class existence, blackness, whiteness, Asianness, sex, beauty, and the grotesque, is the product and conduit of 21st century re-workings of identity through the marketplace, and of shifting demographics and cultural capital. Hip hop is pop and Minaj is brand, promotion, and mogul. Although colluding with the market, she is a figure who expands the potential for women of color to craft complex embodiments and representations and circulate them to mass audiences. The discourses concerning Minaj's body and career articulated by cultural critics and the young women in my study paradoxically laud and denigrate her for lucrative marketing tactics. On the one hand she is viewed as a symbol of the breaking of barriers in the rap industry for women, a hardcore woman and budding media mogul who can do good through her charity work. On the other, she is framed as a sellout and fake, fashioning her body through plastic in order to achieve mainstream visibility, exploiting black female sexuality for attention, and reifying stereotypes.

Minaj's inauthenticity, however, instead of being understood as a form of racial betrayal, can be considered instead as a technique for determining, to a significant though not total extent, the manner in which the meanings of her practice and her body are articulated. Yet instead of inspiring possibility, her body has fomented envy among many of the girls of color in my study who find Minaj's brand of identity play and embodiment economically and corporeally out of their reach—and yet, she fascinates and consumes them, even in their derision. As anthropologist Louisa Schein has shown, the envy fomented by late capitalism for products out of the reach of most consumers incites

rather than frustrates the desire for them (2001). For other girls, Minaj inspires pride in her performance of superior rap skill over men and attainment of wealth. Time will tell if young aspiring female rappers of color will come to draw from her practice and the rhetorical and imaging strategies she has mobilized, as male rappers continue to serve as the standard for all that is hot and worthy in rap. Minaj's fake, shifting, sexual and sartorially excessive body serves as a porous, yet thick skin between her subjectivity and market iconography.

She is currently affecting the crafting of bodies through inspiring the donning of bright clothes and hair highlights, the purchase and use of Minaj-endorsed Opi nail polish and MAC cosmetic lines, and in the new *Pink Friday* fragrance that aims to make women's bodies smell appealing. Anne Anlin Cheng has noted how perfume has served as a fetish that serves to mask the scent of women (Ibid. 139). I am compelled to link the gold, armor-like body that serves as the packaging for the *Pink Friday* fragrance to the gilded body of Josephine Baker interpreted by Cheng in her book *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*.



(L) fig 5.16, Jamie Fox in *Django Unchained*;
(R) fig 5.17, Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, c. 1770

Cheng conducts a close reading of a scene from the film *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), in which Baker plays Alwina, a Tunisian ingénue who is brought to Paris by Max, a

frustrated French writer. Cheng centers on the climax of the film, the moment in which Alwina reveals her savagery by ripping off her fashionable gold dress to reveal a simpler, black, less restrictive dress underneath. Alwina performs this stripping while disrupting a choreographed dance at a high society function when she hears the sound of thumping drums, unable to contain the primitive urgings of her body. Cheng writes,

5.16, Jamie Fox in *Django Unchained*; caption for 5.17, Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, c. 1770 French civilization, like the perfumed woman, is shown in the end to be a fragile coating not because it cannot impart its lessons to the primitive other, but because civilization exists *as* veneer. Civilization is style itself. And, as such, it is what enables the transformation of nothing into value, dross into gold. As the character Alwina moves from glitter to filth, she dramatizes the profound intimacy, rather than difference, between the golden and the blackened (Ibid.161: emphasis in original).



fig. 5.18, Nicki Minaj *Pink Friday* perfume container.

The packaging of Minaj's body, symbolized by the gilded faced, pink wig-wearing figure of her fragrance line, meshes the gold and the blackened to craft a quasi-armor. Cheng's assessment of the politics of Baker's body are applicable to that of Minaj because she, like Baker, "collapses the difference between persona and representation and, in doing so, critiques the assumption of authenticity and embodiment utilized by *both* liberal criticism and colonial racism (Ibid: emphasis in original)." It is through her fake body and booty, and the pink that marks it, where we can locate the possibilities Minaj has generated for the elaboration of more imaginative ways of being and embodying for women and girls of color.

CHAPTER 6

Critical Excesses: Artists and Girls Crafting Grotesque Bodies

In this closing chapter, I conduct a comparative analysis of work by contemporary women artists who fashion grotesque images of female bodies. I argue that these works present creative challenges to normative depictions of black, white, and racially mixed female sexualities and subjectivities. The aesthetics of corporeal grotesquerie I engage here provoke critical reimaginings of female sexual embodiment, and raise complicated questions concerning the politics of sexually explicit and racialized imagery, and the representational legacies of modernism. My readings of these works stem from visual analysis in addition to interviews, informal conversations, and studio visits I conducted as an independent curator with Wangechi Mutu, Shoshanna Weinberger, Heather Benjamin, and Rachel Lachowicz throughout 2008—2013.

In addition to examining the practices of these artists, I draw on my experiences working with girls as an instructor of the Women on the Rise! program to discuss how engaging young women of color in discussions about the grotesque racialized and sexualized body can provide spaces for them to interrogate, critique, and/or affirm representations of female bodies in art and popular culture. I focus specifically on the manner in which Women on the Rise! participants responded to the work of artist Shoshanna Weinberger and the history of Saartje Baartman. Workshops based on Weinberger's practice became sites in which girls theorized male sexual visibility, articulated righteous anger over the exploitation of the black female body, exhibited shame when viewing images of sexualized female bodies, and expressed pleasure in crafting paintings and sculptures of grotesque female bodies.

Figuring Grotesque Ambivalence in The Ark Collection

“Everybody’s tryna be red with good hair.”

--Women on the Rise! Student

Wangechi Mutu: *My uniform in school was a blue skirt, red sweater, and white shirt, and when it got very warm, I remember when we were much younger, we would take our red sweaters off and put them on our heads and we would pretend to have Caucasian hair.*

JH: *Oh, so it would look like you had red hair?*

Mutu: *Not even the color but more so just the way it moves. And, when I finally remembered that we used to do this, I asked my mom, I was like, “Why did you let us do that? That was so sad for us!” You know, these little African girls in private school running around pretending they were Farah Fawcett or whatever the hell it was we were watching on T.V. Those are the things that inform the work, and they stay there, and they are returning in their other forms.*

The work of contemporary women artists such as Kenya-born, New York-based artist Wangechi Mutu, who critique normative representations of the raced, gendered, and sexualized female body, is often shaped by experiences such as the one she described above in an interview I conducted with her in 2008. Childhood experiences of body crafting make their way into later artistic projects. Her narration of African girls wearing red sweaters on their heads to emulate white female embodiment echoed the statement made by one of my African American Women on the Rise! participants when we discussed the work of artist Shoshanna Weinberger, who explores the representational legacy of images of Saartjie Baartman on contemporary imagings of black female sexuality: “everybody’s tryna be red with good hair.” Meaning, all the black girls are trying to have light skin and straight hair.

Instead of evoking the racial injury of African girls donning red sweaters on their heads to emulate whiteness, might not the scene described by Mutu, recalling Elizabeth Chin’s discussion of black girls playing with white dolls, be read as an incorporation of whiteness that stages race as a form of play? Perhaps a form of play providing a complex form of pleasure in racialized existence for those black girls? Could we imagine that, as in the cases of Nicki Minaj and Japanese “ganguro” girls, this form of play claims for

racialized subjects a mode of self-fashioning in which they are the critical bricoleurs who understand that race is an invention?

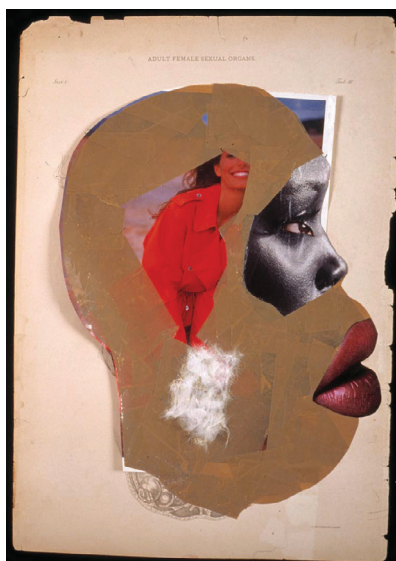


fig. 6.1, Wangechi Mutu, *Adult Female Sexual Organs*, 2005.

Mutu did not recognize this injury until later in life, so, was that younger girl indeed harmed¹? Perhaps her mother did not have cause to intervene in the girls' uniform play, which in itself is freighted with codes of deviating from order. Mutu conceded this as we discussed an image from her series of works titled *Female Sexual Organs* (2004-2005), in which she creates collages of grotesque, mask-like faces by juxtaposing 19th century gynecological illustrations with images from women's fashion magazines. I had come across a reading of the image above, which posited that the white woman

¹ Kobena Mercer's work on ambivalence informs many of the readings of raced corporeal aesthetics in this dissertation. In "Black Hair/Style Politics" (1994), he argues for an understanding of the ambivalence and syncretism that attends the appropriation and incorporation of raced corporeal styles as they travel through Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. In the essay, Mercer analyzes the manner in which Malcolm X described experiences of hair straightening in his autobiography (Ibid. 115-118). I draw from Mercer's analysis of this narration in my reading of Mutu's description of the hair play she conducted along with the girls in her school. Mercer notes how, when remembering a painful hot-comb session, Malcolm X's narration emphasizes the moment as one of pride and pleasure in his well-crafted conk. "In his autobiographical narrative the voice then shifts immediately from past to present, wherein Malcolm sees the conk as 'my first really big step towards self-degradation.' No attempt is made to address this mixture of feeling: pleasure and pride in the past, shame and self-denigration in the present (Ibid.)." Mercer argues that X's narrative sidesteps the social context of which the conk was a part, and further ignores the meanings the conk held for him at the time. Mercer's work seeks to complicate rhetorics that ascribe "bad racial politics" to corporeal fashions that appear to bear a relation to whiteness by highlighting the ways in which the historical contexts of black life generated syncretic expressive and corporeal modes.

positioned inside the head of the black woman was in control of her mind (Kerr 2004). I instead interpreted it as the formation of a postmodern hybrid, evoking the historical trans-sexual inscription of black and white female bodies in the visual culture of the 19th century as examined by Sander Gilman (1985).

I asked Mutu how she conceptualized the racial dynamics in the work and she said that she choose the image of the white woman in the magazine not because she was white, but because she wanted to place a bright, red, open wound-like color in that area of the collage, and that image happened to be around. The color of the model's jacket was just right. As we looked at the piece together, hung high on a wall in her Brooklyn studio, she noted how, in regards to the reading I cited, such a chance artistic decision can become "this incredibly big, other thing in the process." The complexity of this race issue reminded her of growing up, and engaging in the uniform hair play. In concluding her thoughts on the article I mentioned she stated, "I don't think it's as simple and vicious, and clear, as 'the white woman is controlling the brain.'"

Although the violent histories that have forged the valuation of white embodiment in Africa and the U.S. cannot be ignored (Hartman 1997), I want to loosen the tether that tends to have a stranglehold on raced girls' and women's bodies in relation to this history, suggesting that the tethering is in part an artifact of its relentless reproduction in contemporary body valuations imbued with moral and political certainties. I work to trouble the seemingly self evident politics of embodiment that values "natural," racially "authentic" bodies over cosmetically worked, modified, and racially unruly ones. Too often, critiques of hegemonic body politics draw from a widely accepted, yet rarely acknowledged assumption that it is possible to "know" what an "empowered" or "free" female subject looks like, what subjectivity and objectification looks like. In moving beyond the problematic and unproductive binary of subject/object, the analyses I present here build from assessments of ambivalence.

I contend that Mutu's work *The Ark Collection* (2006) conducts critical work

through its open-ended engagement with the vicissitudes of raced, gendered, and sexualized embodiment. The Ark Collection presents complicated readings of sexualized representation that contrast with Mutu's rather sex-negative views about pornographic representations of women of color. I suggest that her critiques of pornography stem from her class-blind framing of black female sex workers as patently abjected. In other words, the artist's discomfort with pornographic images is tied up with the low and working class aesthetics embodied by them. Nonetheless, the images in Mutu's work perform a politics of race-positive sexuality (Shimizu 2007) that escape some of her intentions, and I advance a grotesque-ambivalent strategy to interpreting her collage practice. Shimizu's insights are helpful in framing the work I consider in this chapter. In *The Hypersexuality of Race: Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, the author describes race-positive sexuality as stemming from

...the cultural production of Asian/American feminists who present pleasure, pain, and trauma simultaneously in ways that embrace the liberating possibilities of sexuality while also acknowledging the risks of reifying perversity and pathology traditionally ascribed to women of color in popular culture (2007, 25.)

Like the projects of the Asian/American cultural producers Shimizu centers on, Mutu portrays explicitly sexualized and raced bodies in ways that affirm the unwieldiness of the erotic, while being attentive to the histories and contemporary social realities that delimit them.

Wangechi Mutu's collage work entered the art world about fifteen years after the contentious debates surrounding the cultural politics of the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) 1984 exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, organized by William Rubin. Commentators such as Hal Foster (1985), James Clifford (1988), and Simon Gikandi (2003), have noted how the exhibition, in an attempt to preserve the narrative of progressive, formal, modernist avant-garde innovation, conscripted non-Western objects to functioning as evidence of conceptual inspiration, but not as examples of formal innovation in their own right (Gikandi 2003, 471).

The manner in which the objects were exhibited in the museum and discussed in most of the essays in the catalogue, although articulating a liberal, progressive approach by mobilizing the notion of “affinity”, of like, between non-Western objects and modernist master-pieces, suppressed the complicated discourse of difference in order to preserve the *raison d’être* of MOMA as an institution. MOMA is invested in preserving the Euro-American canon of modernist visual art production. The racial politics of this mission is evidenced by, among other things, the fact that the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), a painting depicting primitivized prostitutes that stages the “primal scene” of Picasso’s troubling encounter with gender, racial, and cultural difference, is a definitive object in its collection (Chave 1994; Foster 1985).



fig. 6.2, Pablo Picasso, *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907

What Clifford and his interlocutors have noted is that, although featuring work by contemporary artists working with “primitivist” tropes such as Robert Smithson, the exhibition did not include modern and contemporary work by non-Western artists, as this had the potential to disrupt the argument of the exhibition. The non-Western works on display at MOMA, much like the African objects in Picasso’s studio, functioned as “witnesses” (Gikandi 2003, 468) to the modernist narrative being revised and reasserted in the exhibition. The authorless objects could not contest the structure of their display. If they could it might very well have hindered the undertaking of Primitivism in 20th Century Art as a cultural project. What if other artists, craft workers, and tribal members,

like the Zuni Native American people who did not allow MOMA to exhibit images of their war god, make similar assertions of power (Clifford 1988, 247)?

As the product of a black, female, transnational African subject vigorously engaging with the canon of modernism, Wangechi Mutu's work "talks back" to (hooks 1989; Kobena 2007) and complicates the narrative of modernist primitivism. Mutu's The Ark Collection series of collages were created in 2006, 100 years after Picasso's (in) famous visit to the Trocadéro museum in Paris where he encountered African art objects and 10 years after white South African artist Candice Breitz created the Rainbow Series collages that sparked critical debate concerning representations of blackness in post Apartheid South African art. The Ark Collection is comprised of small-scale collages that combine National Geographic style ethnographic images of African women with images of black women found in pornographic magazines. The postcard-size collages, sixteen in total, are exhibited in glass vitrines. This work is enmeshed in a variety of aesthetic, cultural, and historical discourses concerning modern/postmodern artistic practice, race, sexuality, and gender. I examine how The Ark Collection presents ambivalent readings of race, gender, and pornography that are articulated through a grotesque visual strategy.



fig. 6.3., Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006.

Race, Sex, and Ambivalence

Kobena Mercer's analyses of Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Males* publication of 1982 demonstrate the usefulness of an ambivalent reading approach to racialized sexual imagery. *Black Males* features classically styled photographs of black men in blank background compositions that center on their muscular bodies and genitalia. In "Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race" (2000), Mercer explains how he had initially expressed his criticism of the work in "Imaging the Black Man's Sex" (1986), where he argued that the images reinforced the racist fetishism of the hypersexual black male body defined solely through the penis.

Utilizing feminist theories of the gaze, Mercer drew attention to the problematic racial politics of the work that was created by a white male subject, as the hypersexual black "buck" is the product of a hegemonic white male imaginary. Later, troubled by the calls for censorship from feminist anti-porn activists that attended the traveling retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work in 1990, Mercer performs a re-reading that couches Mapplethorpe's work within the context of the artist's death from AIDS in 1989, Jesse Helm's attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, and the then burgeoning alliance between anti-pornography feminists and conservative politicians.

As a black male subject Mercer identified with the men being "objectified" in *Black Males* upon his initial encounter with the work. However, his subject position also proliferated other registers of meaning. As a queer black subject, Mercer concedes that his reaction(s) to the work could include jealousy, rivalry, and envy (2000, 470). In describing the contradictory nature of his engagement with Mapplethorpe's work he states,

In revising my views, I have sought to open the question of ambivalence, because rather than simply project it on to the author (by asking whether he either perpetuates or challenges racism) one needs to take into account how different readers derive different readings not only about race, but also about sexuality and desire, in Mapplethorpe's work (ibid. 471).

Interpreting artworks that deal with contentious issues of race, gender, and sexuality

through the lens of ambivalence allows for readings that are open ended enough to facilitate (difficult) dialogue without foreclosing discussion or limiting readings of artwork to questions of whether or not they are “racist”, “sexist”, etc., as Mercer demonstrates how the subject positions of the artist and viewer(s) destabilize the authority of any one reading.

Ambivalence is also privileged in the theorizing of artist and film scholar Nguyen Tan Hoang, who in his essay “I Got This Way from Eating Race: Gay Asian Documentary and the Reeducation of Desire,” complicates the racial/sexual politics of documentaries by gay Asian men that frame Asian male desire for white partners as a product and symptom of racial injury. These films work to complicate the racialized typification of gay Asian men in porn men as feminized, perpetually relegated to the position of the bottom. “I Got This Way From Eating Rice” mobilizes the term *counterpornography* to describe the work of cultural producers who generate sexually explicit material that is “self-consciously performative,” and works to trouble standard (mis)representations in pornography (2012, 243). The formulation of counterpornography is useful for engaging visual production that traffics in sexually explicit imagery while elaborating various forms of politics, such as that produced by the artists I discuss here.

Hoang describes how the documentaries *China Dolls* (1997), *The Queens Cantonese* (1998), and *Slanted Vision* (1996), depict Asian-on-Asian sex as “hot” and race positive, while foreclosing

...a politics that enables a multiplicity of desires and identifications, including those that insist on fixity rather than on mobility. For certain subjects, dwelling in the abject space of bottomhood and femininity can be a mode of critical resistance (Ibid. 243-244).

Hoang highlights how he stages ambivalent articulations of corporeal desire in his video *7 Steps to Sticky Heaven* (1995), which juxtaposes scenes of the artist sucking the cock of a fellow Asian with footage depicting him stuffing rice in his mouth. The artist queries, “...do these actions signify insatiable hunger or a force-feeding? (Ibid. 252)”

Hoang problematizes the disciplining of desire by refusing to reconcile these raced erotic entanglements².

In addition to calling for an ambivalent approach to grappling with issues of race and sexuality in art, Mercer also points out how black perspectives were relatively absent from the feminist sex debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s that centered on pornography. This situation has significantly changed since the publication of “Just Looking for Trouble,” black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and artists such as Wangechi Mutu have voiced their objections to sexually explicit representations of black women as many reproduce racist stereotypes about their innate hypersexuality. Mutu discussed *The Ark Collection* in the MOMA Feminist Futures symposium in 2007, a year prior to our interview. In describing representations of women in “ethnic” pornography, particularly of black female subjects, she stated that they are images that “only a gynecologist should be looking at.” The artist framed the “obscene” images as representative of a no-holds-barred hyperpornography that forgoes aesthetizing Photoshop treatments and focuses on women’s splayed vaginas. In contrast to the more professional appearing photographs in pornographic magazines featuring white women that serve as Mutu’s point of reference, such as *Penthouse*, the images of racialized women in porn are too amateurish, too crafty.

I posit, however, that Mutu’s palpable and intense disgust with the display of these women’s bodies stem from her discomfort with their low and working class aesthetic associations: the “tasteless” cheap spandex clothes, conspicuous makeup, body hair, long acrylic nails, and weave. Cultural studies scholar Laura Kipnis theorizes the class politics of feminist disgust with porn in her essay “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*,” in which she analyzes how the pornographic magazine *Hustler* levels critiques at bourgeois moralism and propriety through depicting grotesque bodies that are the antithesis of the glamorized figures in magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, which

² A similar avowal of seemingly problematic inter-racial sex is performed by queer black British filmmaker and artist Isaac Julien, who theorizes his desire for white sexual partners in the provocative essay “Confessions of a Snow Queen: notes on the making of *The Attendant*” (1994).

seem to be the standards against which Mutu assesses the images in the women of color centered publications *Black Tail* and *Pictorial*. Kipnis writes,

So perhaps it becomes a bit more difficult to see feminist disgust in isolation, and disgust at pornography as simply a gender issue, for any gesture of disgust is not without a history and not without a class character. And whatever else we may say about feminist arguments about the proper or improper representation of women's bodies—and I don't intend to imply that my discussion is exhaustive of the issue—bourgeois disgust, even as mobilized against a sense of violation and violence to the female body, is not without a function in relation to class hegemony, and more than problematic in the context of what purports to be a radical social movement (1992, 378).

In another portion of the MOMA talk, Mutu described her practice of appropriating, disassembling, and reassembling typological depictions of black women in ethnographic imagery, a form of cultural porn, as “exorcisms.” Her invocation of the word recalls Picasso's description of how he came to conceive of *Les Femmes d'Alger*:

All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. *Les Femmes d'Alger* must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my very first exorcism painting—yes absolutely! (Malraux 1974, 11)

Picasso protests too much in disavowing the “forms” that had no influence “at all” in his conception of the painting. To acknowledge so would be to avow a cross-penetration of the African into the European, a cultural miscegenation signified by the hybrid figures of his angular prostitutes. What is it about female bodies openly displaying and splaying their flesh, prostitutes and porn mag models, that so drives this desire for purification and banishment?

One possible answer: the absence of shame (Stein 2006). This absence is signaled by the arms posed suggestively behind the heads of the figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger* and in the spread pussies of the black and brown models in the porn magazines that serve as Mutu's source material. Such seemingly willing submissions to the penetrations of hungry racial, sexual, and gendered gazes conveys a perverse and troubling abdication of power and subjectivity upon a normative gaze (Bersani 2010).

Where Picasso's anxiety stems from a troubling encounter with racial difference, Mutu's bears signs of class distinctions. As an upper class African sister, the artist seems to want to salvage these "victimized" women, and restore their respectability. The artist has allowed her own body to be photographed for circulation in popular culture. She has appeared in Vogue magazine twice (June 2006; April 2009), most recently posing as a majestic "African mother" displaying her pregnant belly. The story, which was shot by celebrated photographer Annie Leibovitz was titled, "A Fertile Mind." The image and its context differ significantly from the spread eagle pussies in the porn mags, which highlights the manner in which the traffic of racialized bodies in the realms of elite visual production, such as the glossy high fashion magazine catering to fantasies of luxury consumption, and the race-positive porn magazine at the corner bodega, shapes discrepant valuations of these bodies through rhetorics of sexual aesthetics. Although Mutu has made her position that pornographic representations of women of color are "obscene" very clear, the *grotesque ambivalence* of her work elicits alternative readings.



fig. 6.4, Wangechi Mutu in Vogue magazine, April 2009.

In the introduction to the edited volume *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, art historian Frances Connelly notes how "Given the prominent role of the grotesque in modern image culture [e.g. romanticism, surrealism], there are surprisingly few significant studies on these issues, a failure that reveals a blind spot in art-historical

theory and practice (2003, 2; emphasis added).” Beyond a systematic analysis of grotesque imagery in modern art, Connelly is concerned with the “subversive”, boundary-crossing politics of the grotesque that privileges abjection and undermines the “modernist narrative, bringing into focus those subjects, styles, and theoretical viewpoints

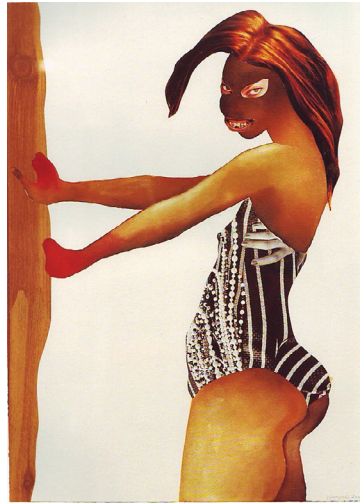


fig 6.5, Wangechi Mutu, *Pin-Up*, 2001

marginalized by the discipline’s Enlightenment foundations” (ibid. 16). Recalling the aesthetic theories of Loos and Le Corbusier, the grotesque has often been associated with ornamental or “excessive” aesthetic approaches that do not fit the canon of formal modernist development. As Connelly writes:

Images gathered under the grotesque rubric include those that combine unlike things in order to challenge established realities or construct new ones; those that deform or decompose things; and those that are metamorphic (ibid. 2).

Mutu’s visual approach lends itself to analysis through the framework of the grotesque. Art and visual culture scholars Jared Richardson (2012) and Bettina Papenburg (2013) have engaged Mutu’s work via concepts of the grotesque, but I diverge from their projects here in centering the ambivalent politics of race, class, and the sexually explicit.

The collages that comprise *The Ark Collection* exhibit the boundary-crossing and combinatory elements of the grotesque. The way the artist approaches the background/foreground relationship of the picture plane in *The Ark Collection* makes it a unique

project in her oeuvre. In previous collage work, such as the *Pin-Up* series (2001) and *I Put a Spell on You* (2005), Mutu uses images from fashion, pornographic and ethnographic publications to create fantastical hybrid women. Usually attached to pieces of paper or Mylar, the disparate fragments she culls merge to create discrete bodies and faces. In most works there is ample negative space on the picture plane, usually in the form of painted abstractions that frame these playful and monstrous creatures.



fig.6.6, Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006.

There is virtually no negative space in the images that comprise *The Ark Collection*, no respite for the eye. The source materials are constitutive of the entire collage; there is no outside of representation, as it were. The ethnographic and pornographic fragments do not form recognizable faces or bodies. They are borderless. Human body parts and tribal/ pornographic backdrops co-mingle and become almost indiscernible, the antithesis of blank background compositions.



fig.6.7, Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006.

Mutu arranges the materials in such a way as to invite the viewer to “complete” or make sense of the collages, but to no avail. The eye is continually led on. In most of the pieces Mutu utilizes the body of a woman from a pornographic photograph as a framing device, or outline. The artist fills the counters of the pornographic body within each collage with fragments from *Women of the African Ark*, a popular postcard book containing images of “tribal” African women captured by white female photographers Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith. Mutu often veils the sexualized figures in *The Ark Collection* in order to destabilize the desiring, exoticizing gaze.



fig. 6.8, Installation view of *The Ark Collection*

For example, the promise of the spread eagle pose indicated by the woman’s open legs is thwarted in the detail above, as the ornaments of a “tribal” woman become her skin. Legs donning lacy hosiery anchor the picture plane in the work below (fig. 6.7), and contrast with the rough straw and wood of the village depicted in the background. The bodies of the village women in the collage are agitated and caressed by the long and lacquered nails of the porn models—embraces signaling an uneasy representational sisterhood. *The Ark Collection* performs a pleasurable, heavy and restless troubling. Instead of depicting disfigured, combinatory bodies, the collages, which destabilize the

relationship between figure and ground, *are* such grotesques. As such, they undermine assumptions of realism and authenticity while simultaneously establishing space for black female pleasure in some instances.

It was mostly bringing it back to this language of collecting and artifacts and un-true-facts. --Wangechi Mutu, interview with author.

Working as a team for more than 25 years, Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith are in a race to photograph and document sacred tribal ceremonies across Africa before the ancient ways are lost in the vast cultural melting pot.

--National Geographic Speakers Bureau Webpage³

Collecting—at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible—implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss. The collection contains what ‘deserves’ to be kept, remembered, and treasured. Artifacts and customs are saved out of time.—James Clifford (1988)

But the postcard is also one of the illustrated forms of colonialist discourse, its chatty and self-satisfied imagery. In and of itself, it does not speak (it is a photograph of unrelieved flatness, completely summed up by, and in, its surface): it is spoken. It’s meaning resides elsewhere; it comes from outside itself. It pre-exists the postcard, but the card gives it a form (the elementary image) that extends it. What it says in its idiom (that of the icon) has already been said by other means, much more brutal and more concrete: the means of operative colonialism.

--Malek Alloula (2000)

JH: *One thing I noticed about the series [The Ark Collection] was that you put them in vitrines. What made you think about using the vitrine and how did that stage how the viewer was going to interact with the work? It feels like you are creating a barrier—something protective that they couldn’t access.*

WM: *I didn’t think about them so much as a barrier. I thought about the objectification of them and the object-ness of them. I wanted these vessels to be a framework around which you were forced to look at them really closely. And I thought about the Ark, the idea of them being an Ark because they are in pairs two by two by two.*

The manner in which Mutu displayed the images in the vitrine and titled the series *The Ark Collection* evokes the “salvage paradigm” of Western collecting, as James Clifford terms it (1987), and the salvage narrative of the biblical story of Noah and the Ark. The title of the work and the structure of its presentation indeed connote collection,

3 <http://events.nationalgeographic.com/events/speakers-bureau/speaker/beckwith-fisher/>

preservation, objectification, salvaging. Yet what, exactly, is being salvaged in these vitrines? Is Mutu trying to rescue the African woman from representational violence?



fig.6.9, Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006.

On the one hand, yes. The artist's class-blind, sex-negative rhetoric articulates a notion of black women in pornography as completely abject, and ignores the ways in which the women in the images could be seen as generating pleasure from their presentation, and how the images did not portray their beauty as inferior. By encasing them in vitrines and emphasizing their objecthood, Mutu rejects the notion that such images could articulate forms of subjectivity. Through placing the collages of *The Ark Collection* in the glass case she attempts to contain their unwieldiness.

However, the salvage paradigm works from a conception of and investment in authenticity. Throughout our interview Mutu not only questioned the authenticity of the ethnographic images we looked at but also troubled conceptions of her own subjectivity as a transnational subject, describing herself to me as a character who shifts her subjectivity on a day-to-day basis.

During my visit to her studio, Mutu opened the drawers of a folio cabinet and retrieved the *Women of the African Ark* postcard book, most of the cards were by then torn out and used in *The Ark Collection*. Wangechi then went to a shelf and took down a large coffee table book, *Africa Adorned*, which also features Angela Fisher's photography. She told me that some of the images were probably staged. Flipping quickly

through the pages she noted: “They probably made sure not to photograph anyone in the village who was wearing jeans.” The photographs depicted a timeless, static, decorative “African” culture, yet upon Mutu’s gaze, the realities that extend beyond the frame were ever present. Despite the problematic nature of constructing this cultural “authenticity,” Mutu described how the images were aesthetically pleasing nonetheless. Moving to another set of drawers, she showed me images culled from *Black Tail* and *Pictorial* porn magazines that center on women of color, black and Latina predominantly. I was not able to see any of these images in their “pure” form in the studio. There were only fragments of pages remaining, removed from the body of the magazine. The artist had cut out legs, heads, and other body parts to use in the collages.



fig 6.10, Cover of *Black Tail* magazine.

Curious about what the visuals in the magazine look like in context, I borrowed an issue of *Black Tail* from a friend, a young, heterosexual, woman of color in her 20s who purchased it because she was also interested in the images therein. When I was discussing my work on Mutu with her she informed me that the magazines are widely available in corner grocery stores, “bodegas,” throughout New York City. The fact that she owned one of these magazines complicated my ideas about who was consuming this pornographic text and how it was circulating.

What immediately struck me about the photographs in *Black Tail*, which the artist framed in her MOMA talk as obscene, is the manner in which men are completely absent in the images. The photos depict light and dark skinned women of color posing on beds,

house interiors, or outdoor backdrops displaying their breasts, buttocks, and vaginas. They are often captured in the act of pleasing themselves through touching their clits or inserting dildos into their vaginas. In comparison to much contemporary hardcore porn imagery in video, these photographs do not privilege male pleasure, feature “money shots,” or depict eroticized violence. Rather, they center on images of women staging enjoyment of their own bodies for an imagined male audience.

The explicit imagery in *Black Tail* appears to acknowledge black female sexual pleasure. Its sex-positive position, however, remains largely underanalyzed by scholars in ethnic, race, and sexuality studies. In “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism,” critical race and sexualities scholar Jennifer C. Nash describes how sex-negative, feminist antipornography discourses have merged with black feminist theorizing on the exploitation and objectification of the black female body in the visual field, creating an analytical blind spot that leaves unexamined the ways in which sexually explicit representation can be affirming to black subjects. Advancing a visual reading practice she terms “racial iconography,” Nash argues,

In examining pornography’s strategic use of black women’s bodies in particular historical and technological moments, racial iconography asks new questions about the pleasures racialized pornography can produce for minoritarian viewers, carving out representational space for black spectators to view themselves and each other as sexual subjects (2008, 54).

“Strange Bedfellows” points out that antipornography and black feminisms frame the black female body as “overexposed,” and subject to a racist white male spectator’s gaze, which implicitly pathologizes interracial erotics (Ibid. 58; Hoang 2012; Julien 1994). Nash notes how in terms of pornographic film production in the U.S., the black female body has in fact been *underexposed* until the 1970s Golden Age of mainstream porn productions that mimicked Hollywood film genres.

In addressing questions framed as politically “unthinkable” under the terms of black and antipornography feminisms, Nash reads films like *Lialeh* and *Sexworld*, and

finds that they are texts in which the black female body is represented as beautiful, black women express pleasure in their blackness and alliance with the black community, and interracial sex is framed as gratifying, rather than demeaning. She writes that

Racial iconography is a critical hermeneutic, attentive to the nonracist meaning-making work that black women's bodies perform in pornography and to the historical contingency of racialized pornographic texts (Ibid. 64).

I draw from Nash in analyzing the sexual images I discuss in this chapter, as she provokes multivalent interpretations that would assess how the images in *Black Tail* figure portrayals of black female corporeal jouissance. This jouissance is notably depicted in one of Mutu's collages. The piece is unique in *The Ark Collection* for being a sexually explicit image minimally modified by the artist. This moment of erotically charged intimacy between black women figures as a counterpornographic portrayal, on Hoang's terms, that stages the existence of queer black female sexualities that are usually performed for male titillation in heteronormative pornography or invisibilized in black feminist theorizing and queer of color critique (Holland 2012).

I asked Mutu if such magazines as *Black Tail* and *Pictorial* circulated in Africa, to which she said that in Kenya pornographic publications are illegal. Consequently, there is a dearth of scholarship on the topic of pornographic production in Kenya. I consulted with Dillon Mahoney, an anthropologist at Rutgers University who conducts fieldwork on the curio trade in Kenya, to get a sense of the contemporary discourse on pornography there. He indicated that despite occasional raids, pornographic materials are widely available on the black market. He also noted that the definition of "pornography" in Kenya is rather incongruous, as postcards of topless African women in suggestive poses are openly sold in the "tourist section" of many shops.

In *The Colonial Harem* literary critic Malek Alloula collects and critically reads erotic picture postcards of Algerian women produced and circulated by the French in Algeria in the early 20th century. He states,

The postcard...becomes the poor man's phantasm: for a few pennies, display

racks full of dreams. The postcard is everywhere, covering all the colonial space, immediately available to the tourist, the soldier, the colonialist. It is at once their poetry and their glory captured for the ages; it is also the pseudoknowledge of the colony. It produces stereotypes in the manner of great seabirds producing guano. It is the fertilizer of the colonial vision (1986: 4).

Alloula's astute, grotesque, and passionately argued critique echoes that of Mutu. In our conversation, the artist said,

For me it [*The Ark Collection*] was about the images that we consume and look at and are ok with of Africa are these incredibly traditional, sort of, specific rural woman who lives within a very orthodox type of community that is far from anything urban, close to and found in areas where nature surrounds, this notion of "that is where Africans are" is still being sold as the truth, so that's what is interesting to me. And on the other end of things, I think that what happens on this side of the Atlantic is that black women are still seen as hypersexualized, they are seen still as quite a lesser standard of beauty than white women.



fig 6.11, Wangechi Mutu, *The Ark Collection* (detail), 2006

While Mutu's assessment of the stock representations of African women as stuck in time and black women as hypersexual beings who are less beautiful than white women are significant, however, what I saw in *Black Tail* was a valuation of black womanhood as beautiful and black female sexuality as pleasurable. Although the artist does not recognize this polyvalence—the works in *The Ark Collection* nevertheless signify it.

Mutu's acknowledgement of the problematic power relations that undergird the production and consumption of ethnographic and pornographic images of black women (in both the Feminist Futures Symposium and the interview) suggests that she

wants to make an intervention into these representations. However, she does not posit a formula for “good” representations, nor does she frame her work as such. In another portion of her MOMA talk, Mutu described how Josephine Baker, who is often framed as a compromised black female subjectivity playing to European conceptions of the “primitive,” could be read as model of a politically aware complicity that works for survival.

If *The Ark Collection* preserves anything it is pleasure and play. Pleasure is not antithetical to pain, and the images vacillate between both affective realms—the simultaneous aesthetic pleasures and political problems the artist associates with the images. The pleasure she provides for the viewer, however, is complicated. It is not the cultural pleasure of an ethnographic image of an authentic other representing an entire culture, nor is it the sexual pleasure offered by the ever-available hypersexualized black female body. It is a pleasure drawn from boundary troubling.

Mutu’s grotesque approach to collage stems from these ambivalent relationships. In “The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources”, a chapter from *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin engages in a systematic criticism of German scholar G. Schneegans’ *The History of Grotesque Satire* (1894), which centers on the work of Rabelais, in order to perform his own theorization. Bakhtin takes issue with how Schneegans defines grotesque imagery as employed in the service of satire, thereby failing to take into account the “deep ambivalence” of the grotesque (Bakhtin 1984, 304). Bakhtin contests that interpretation, as he argues that the grotesque eventually loses hold of, or becomes “forgetful of its initial satirical goal” (ibid. 307). The grotesque cannot be contained by the narrow moral confines of satire.

Schneegans is forced to admit that even with considerable effort it is impossible to find the satirical orientation in all of Rabelais’ exaggeration. He explains this by the very nature of exaggeration, which always tends to transgress its own limits; the author of the grotesque [Wangechi Mutu] is carried away, is “drunk” with hyperbole, at times forgetting the true role of exaggeration and losing [...her] grip on satire (ibid; emphasis added).

The image of the author of the grotesque overcome by the hyperbole he or she instigates is a productive narrative for considering Mutu's practice. One can envision the artist in her studio, working from her wide, long table littered with pages upon pages of images culled from pornographic and ethnographic sources, snipping and slicing them until they are barely recognizable—making them even more perverse. Although Mutu frames her work through an antiporn position of satire, I suggest that the grotesque compositions she ultimately produces can provoke the avowal of black female hypersexuality as race-positive.



fig 6.12, Candice Breitz, *Rainbow Series #12*, 1996

Black Bodies/White Bodies Redux

Unlike Wangechi Mutu, whose projects examining pornographic representations of women of color have been critically acclaimed, the work of white South African artist Candice Breitz, who also created images blending pictures from ethnographic and pornographic sources in her *Rainbow Series* collages of 1996, has stirred critical consternation. In *Rainbow Series #12* (above), Breitz places the torso and arms of a black “tribal woman” atop a money shot of white breasts smothered with semen. The head of a white woman crowns the hybrid figure. She is shown extending her tongue in order to service her partner and titillate the viewer. The artist adds a surrealist dimension to

the collage by removing one of the hands of the African woman and attaching a pair of feet to the breasts. A white woman on all fours displaying her buttocks and vagina as if anticipating or inviting penetration is the centerpiece of *Rainbow Series #7*. The head



fig 6.13, Candice Breitz, *Rainbow Series #13*, 1996

affixed to this body is an image of an adorned African woman.

The title of Breitz's work is a reference to the "Rainbow Nation" rhetoric that circulated in South Africa in the late 1990s in an effort to ease racial tensions among its citizens. The selection of *Rainbow Series* as the title of the work and the manner in which Breitz's figures, despite the juxtapositions performed by the artist, dramatically fail to reconcile into a whole, point to the problematics of attempting to seal over the racial violence that enabled the formation of the nation. As with Mutu's *Ark Collection*, Breitz's selection of source materials underscores the limited forms that representations of black and white women take, and similarly collapses ethnographic and pornographic image production, thereby bringing the culturally legitimized practice of ethnography into intimate relation with the corporealities of porn. Both Mutu and Breitz point attention to how forms of racial and sexual knowledge become imbricated in politics, the cultural stakes of education and titillation.

In his examination of how images of black African bodies were deployed in the wake of the establishment of post-apartheid South Africa critic and curator Okwui Enwezor utilized Breitz's *Rainbow Series* as an example of how the post-Apartheid

artistic practices of white artists failed to recognize the black spectator as an active viewer who could ethically question and reject artists' representations of them. Enwezor describes how a black South African woman described the experience of viewing the exhibition of the *Rainbow Series* as making her feel ashamed of her body (1997, 36). I have yet to find a similar critique leveled at Mutu's *The Ark Collection* for its utilization of ethnographic/pornographic sources.

In citing the viewer's shame without contextualizing the histories and discourses of gender, racial, and sexual representation operative in South Africa that would have shaped such a response, Enwezor implicitly leveled the blame at the "inherently" harmful effects of pornographic imagery crafted by a white woman on black female subjectivity. The construction of identity politics in Enwezor's provocative essay is uncomfortably stable, articulating a view that frames images of blackness and images of sexualized bodies as improper visual texts for use by a white woman, and viewing for black women. In our interview Mutu also expressed that she found the *Rainbow Series* work problematic, taking particular issue with the fact that Breitz did not merge the images of the white women in porn with "traditional" images of white women, a white version of the "tribal" Khoisan.

But for Breitz to have remained within the parameters of "proper" racial homogeneity and authenticity would have undermined the critique of the post-racial rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation. I propose that the critical discomfort occasioned by the viewing of the work could be understood as engendering a visceral reminder of the body politics that undergird regimes of racism that continue to be operative in South Africa today. I would argue that the *Rainbow Series* does not articulate a conflation of black and white African female bodies as similarly disciplined, but as racialized bodies that have been mobilized at various cultural moments to buttress discourses that value white femininity over black femininity, fix Africans as primitive in contrast to their modern Euro-American counterparts, and frame white female hypersexuality through proximity

to blackness.

Like Mutu's visual production, the *Rainbow Series* conducts feminist and antiracist work through its grotesque and improper juxtapositions. *Rainbow Series # 12* (fig. 6.12) undermines the exalted femininity of white womanhood by staging a hybrid body in a blank background composition that highlights the rote figurations of mainstream pornography. Although the head of the white woman is "on top," supported by a decapitated and dismembered black female body, her facial expression, the tongue extended with effort, and wide, expectant eyes, which in the pornographic context is viewed as arousing, looks ridiculous in the collage. Exalted beauty and desire is disfigured into absurd caricature.

The most highly charged element of the work is the point at which the arm and hand of the black woman makes contact with a pair of disembodied, white, semen soiled breasts, signaling the lewd carnal intimacies and horrors of colonialism (Stoler 2002). In *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (2007), Amy Lyford argues that the aesthetics of bodily dismemberment fashioned by surrealist artists stemmed from their confrontation with the wounded bodies of soldiers, which signaled the vulnerability of masculinity. Lyford's work facilitates an assessment of Breitz's grotesque aesthetics of dismemberment as a gendered response to the violence that has attended the construction and reconstruction of the South African nation.

I would not suggest that Mutu, as a black Kenyan artist, provides "better," or more "authentic" representations of black subjects than white South African Candice Breitz. I would not ignore the colonial histories that make questions of race, imaging, and authorship so vexing. However, rather than frame Breitz as trying to "get away with" the co-optation and replication of representational violence towards black Africans, I find that the manner in which she frames the images in the *Rainbow Series* as exposing precisely the *failure* of the country to grapple with racial divisions and violences as evidence of

her criticality. The artist's use of pornographic imagery serves that critical end. In an interview, Breitz makes this point, specifically in connection with her perceptions on feminism:

Brenda Atkinson: I find it interesting that the harshest criticism of your work has come from feminists, since you yourself articulate a strong feminist agenda. It seems that, to come back to this point, the nature of representation is the highly contested centre of any number of feminisms. Would you align yourself with any one feminism (1996, 8)?

Candice Breitz: Certain feminisms assume that women are innocent in relation to the representation of sex and violence as it occurs in a genre like pornography, and that "we" as feminists, should articulate a language separate and opposed to such genres. But pornography is a messy issue—and because fantasy, pleasure, provocation, desire, obsession, and, sometimes, pathology, are so ambiguously imbricated in the mess, I don't feel I can really get "outside," and cast some light on it as a self-righteous feminist super-hero. I can't save women from porn's allegedly deleterious effects. Although we're focusing our conversation on gender here, I think the discussion must be extended to other struggles around identity, for example, race or class or ethnicity. A feminism that does not take these struggles into account is not going to have any real power. We all experience multiple forms of identification, and our identity position is never exclusively "male" or "female" or "black" or "white."

While Mutu's images are framed as feminist, antiracist, woman of color responses to ethnographic and pornographic inscriptions, Breitz is viewed as reproducing the harms of pornography. It could be posited that Breitz's images were perhaps not *grotesque* enough, that the source images were not sufficiently mediated or transgressed by the artist. However, I find that the juxtaposition staged in the work produces a fruitful, ambivalent, and grotesque tension that evokes the imbrications of black and white female corporeal inscription, and their haunting continuities.

White Girl Grotesque: Heather Benjamin's Punk Pornographies

The work of young, New York-based artist Heather Benjamin, who designs posters and t-shirts for the punk music scene, acknowledges the myth status of women's "innocence" in relation to pornography that Breitz noted in the interview above. In this

part of the chapter I explore how Benjamin's appropriations of pornographic imagery uniquely mine the messiness of the physical and emotional pleasures and pains that shape



fig 6.14, Cover of *Sad People Sex* #8 by Heather Benjamin

sexual subjectivities.

Often framed as a site in which women are devoid of emotional life, in Benjamin's work, the pornographic moment is one in which the vicissitudes of corporeal desire, emotion, and affect are powerfully rendered. Benjamin stages these grotesque ambivalences in a self-published zine titled *Sad People Sex (SPS)*, which is distributed by the artist and sold in independent book stores specializing in art texts and artist's books such as Printed Matter in New York City. I came across an issue of *SPS* at Printed Matter while I was purchasing a book there. The zines were stacked in a simple cardboard box near the cash register and I picked one up. As a sexualities and visual culture scholar, it was impossible to ignore an image of intertwined bodies under the heading "Sad People



fig 6.15, detail from *Sad People Sex*

Sex.”

The images inside the black and white photocopied zine engrossed and troubled me. Schematic, graphically drawn male and female couples were shown in a range of elaborate sex positions. Yet, these couplings were not garnering them pleasure, as thick, long, heavy streams of tears poured from the eyes of the sexing subjects, falling and forming pools of liquid on their frenzied bodies. In figuring sex as an emotional grotesque, Benjamin foregrounds the ways in which sexuality does not realize its promise of unmitigated pleasure—which is the assurance of pornography, or the lie that pornography fastidiously works to conceal through its rote, and sometimes comical narrations. In *Sad People Sex* I found a visual articulation of Michel Foucault’s insight that,

By creating the imaginary element that is “sex,” the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted “sex” itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex (1978, 157).

The dark shimmer of sex, the manner in which we have come to believe that it reveals, expresses, and contains our truth, is the discourse that feeds Benjamin’s drawing practice. Although Foucault’s insights have been widely adopted in sexuality studies, have we adequately interrogated the ways in which we, as embodied, emotional subjects, despite our celebration of *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, continue to be seduced by this “dark shimmer”? These are the questions provoked by Benjamin’s zines.

I bring the work of Bretiz, Benjamin, and later, of Shoshanna Weinberger, and Rachel Lachowicz into the fold of this chapter as I acknowledge that racialization and sexual inscription are processes that variously affect white, Latina, Asian/American,

black, and multi-racial subjects. In “Strange Bedfellows” Jennifer Nash critiques antipornography and black feminisms for treating the dissimilar representations of black and white women in porn as differences in kind, rather than differences of degree (Ibid. 55). The texts that Nash engages ignore the range of genres and depictions of women from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds in pornographic production. Nash underscores the ways in which the black/white binary fails to account for the varied racial figurations in pornography, such as the punk white body that contrasts with white bourgeois bodies.

The female figures in Benjamin’s drawings embody a dissident white femininity



fig. 6.16, Heather Benjamin, detail from *Sad People Sex*

coded through punk aesthetics. Their bodies are usually roughly sketched, with hairy legs and leaky orifices—the antithesis of the hygienic feminine bourgeois body. Their conventionally attractive figures invite the gaze to consume scenes pregnant with fear, macabre carnality, and emotional excess. These bodies cannot confer pleasure, they are too wrapped up in their own shit.

Benjamin’s work does not take issue with the porn industry, rather, the do-it-yourself, hand drawn, photo copied, graphic and grotesque approach to her imagery disturbs the dominant framings in culture of sex as always desirable, pleasurable, emotionally lite, and ending in a climactic release. It is important to note that Benjamin does not critique pornography as a genre, nor does she celebrate it, rather, it is a mode of visual production that she finds ridiculous, compelling, seductive, comical, and sexist, all

at the same time. Her punk aesthetics trouble the clean-shaven, sculpted, idealized body presentations of both men and women in porn as she *adds* body hair to the figures and radically distorts their forms. The women in her work are not ready-to-fuck Barbie like white girls. They embody sexuality in excess of the normative construction of heterosexual male desire: their pussies leak, nipples tear off, tears stream from their eyes, and they



fig 6.17, Heather Benjamin, detail from *Sad People Sex*.

sometimes violently pierce the dicks they suck through their heads.

Often framed as a realm of extreme carnal desire devoid of “feeling,” Benjamin saturates the pornographic images she appropriates from magazines and online porn with a glut of sorrow. The figures in her work often confess insecurities and desires that are unspeakable in the realms of mass media representations of romance, the everyday, and even in the realms of mainstream porn. Take for example, the drawing below, in which a hirsute woman masturbating in a public bathroom admits, “I masturbate thinking about your boyfriend. I’m sorry. I would never do anything about it.”

During my visit to Benjamin’s shared Brooklyn apartment, where she works on a drafting table, she told me that she began making the *Sad People Sex* drawings soon after a romantic relationship ended. The excess of feeling Benjamin was processing found a mode of representability in the unlikely form of bodies engaged in pornographic stagings

of sex. These messy, interlocked, orgiastic, onanistic, masochistic bodies depict what Leo Bersani has identified as the anti-communal and anti-loving aspects of sex, the forms of sex in which bodies come together and subjectivities tear apart. He writes:

The self is a practical convenience; promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, it is a sanction for violence. If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings together people only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence (Ibid 30: Emphasis in original).

While Bersani celebrates the manner in which sex troubles conventional notions of personhood, which he argues undergird the pathologization of non-normative sex and subjects in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” In our discussion, Benjamin framed the images in *Sad People Sex* as the result of her complex negotiations of sex, subjectivity, memory, and emotion. I find that they do the critical work of throwing our ideas and pretenses

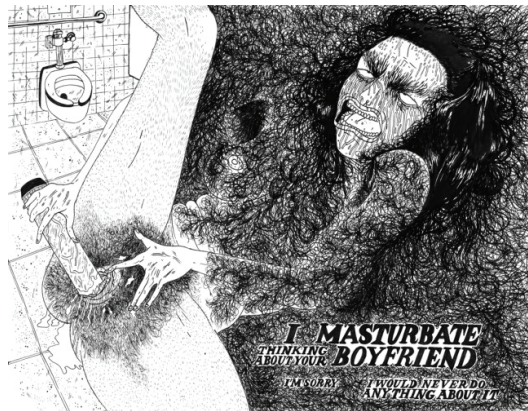


fig 6.18, detail from *Sad People Sex*.

about sexuality, representation, and relationship into ecstatically grotesque crisis.

Strange Fruits

While Benjamin’s subjects exceed the parameters of normative whiteness, Shoshanna Weinberger’s exposes the perversions of dominant constructs of woman of color beauty and sexuality. A Newark, New Jersey based artist raised in Kingston, Jamaica and Montclair, New Jersey by a white, Jewish father and black Jamaican mother, Weinberger frames her work through a complex racial perspective. She playfully refers

to herself as a “strange fruit,” purposefully evoking the dense racial affect of Billie Holiday’s “protest” song. Fragmented images of mules in her work also symbolize her bi-racial identity. *Zulu Jew* (below), is a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait of the artist which combines the various racial and ethnic semiotics of her body, the black and white stripes of the zebra print juxtaposed with the soft, billowy puffs of her brown hair. In this section of the chapter I further my discussion on the utilization of grotesque aesthetics by women artists engaging issues of sexual representation, and describe the ways in which Women on the Rise! students have responded to images of Weinberger’s work and the narrative of Saartjie’s Baartman’s life. Their varying responses and art works reveal how



fig 6.19, Shoshanna Weinberger, *Zulu Jew*, 2004.

they interpret and craft images of female sexuality.

In his article “Attack of the Boogeywoman: Visualizing Black Women’s Grotesquerie in Afrofuturism,” which discusses the image work of Nicki Minaj, Wangechi Mutu, Kara Walker, and Weinberger, art historian Jared Richardson asks, “What kind of power does the grotesque offer to black women in relation to their monstrous representation?” (2012, 20). He argues that “the representation of black women’s grotesquerie affronts issues of propriety by negotiating between several extremes: hypervisibility versus unsightliness and essentialism versus fluidity” (Ibid. 22). Weinberger depicts black female fluidity precisely through the image that epitomizes black female essentialism, that of Saartjie Baartman. Baartman’s body figures

prominently not only in black feminist theorizing, but in women of color art production as well. Wangechi Mutu also touched upon the representation of Baartman's body in the MOMA *Feminist Futures* talk I referenced earlier in the chapter. In "Strange Bedfellows" Nash argues that,

...in mobilizing the Hottentot Venus to critique dominant representations of black women's bodies, black feminism has permitted a pernicious sexual conservatism, wearing the guise of racial progressivism, to seep into its analytic framework. By sexual conservatism, I refer to black feminism's tendency to foreground examinations of black women's sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury at the expense of analyses attentive to black women's sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity (Ibid. 52).

Weinberger has said that she is "inspired and appalled" by the life of Saartjie Baartman. Instead of articulating the kind of woman of color feminism centering on black female pain that Nash critiques, however, Weinberger gives the icon of the Hottentot Venus a



(L) fig 6.20, Shoshanna Weinberger, *Sweet Thing*, 2011,
(R) fig 6.21, Shoshanna Weinberger, *Breadfruit*, 2012.

futuristic life as an otherworldly grotesque.

The bodies in her work, many of which are rendered in silhouettes that evoke 19th century images of the Hottentot Venus, are incarnations of excess. Masses of flesh are tied into shape by thick gold chains, headless bodies with lots of breasts and asses are clad in tight, metallic bras, their straps binding the bulging skin into one corpus. In many of Weinberger's works, the static outline of the black female body is on the

verge of collapsing into formlessness, if a line, chain, or bra strap becomes undone they would signify nothing but heavy, amorphous mass. This tension is achieved through her uniquely excessive and simultaneously economical form of image making. The paintings are at once simple and ornate, direct and vague, representational and abstract, beautiful and ugly. Although bound by history Weinberger's grotesques survive, and evoke radical



fig. 6.22, Shoshanna Weinberger, *Wandering Hatchling*, 2012.

corporeal futures through their perverse hyperboles of beauty and sexuality.

This futurity is anticipated in pieces such as *Wandering Hatchling* (above). The painting centers on a headless black female body rendered in a silhouette against a blank background composition. The black outline of the figure starkly contrasts with the off-white paper. Gold chains are wrapped around the body, framing its torso, waist, and five breasts. They dangle between her thighs and recede into the empty background she seems to be tethered to. The body stands in profile, cutting a mutated, yet strangely attractive figure. Raising a high-heeled foot commandingly above the ground, the body appears to be in the process of walking out of the picture—out of our sight.

Pedagogies of the Grotesque

Women on the Rise! instructor and artist Crystal Pearl had worked with Shoshanna Weinberger on installing an exhibition of her work at Carol Jazaar Gallery in Miami. She came up with the idea of developing a lesson plan in which we would present

Weinberger's work to the girls to discuss issues of black female representation. The Shoshanna Weinberger lesson, which the Women on the Rise! instructors developed collaboratively in response to Crystal's proposal, consisted of a slide show discussion in which we showed students images of Weinberger's work, gave them an overview of the history of the Hottentot Venus, and displayed images of contemporary women of color performers such as Nicki Minaj, Little Kim, and Jennifer Lopez, whose sexualized staging of their bodies is a constitutive element of their performance and imaging. Our aim was to engage the girls in an open-ended, potentially sex-positive, discussion about representation, and provide them access to a black female history that they do not learn in

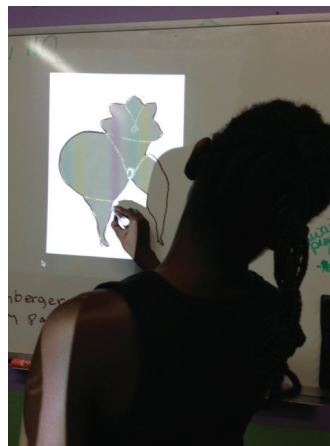


fig 6.23, Women on the Rise! participant in Shoshanna Weinberger based workshop.
Photo by Nereida Garcia Ferraz.

school.

The hands-on art projects we developed as part of the Weinberger workshop consisted of a water color project in which they were instructed to respond to the discussion on black female embodiment in anyway they wished using paints. We let them know that drawing body parts would be ok and that they did not have to worry about us critiquing them for depicting sexual content. The second Weinberger activity, which we would conduct in a subsequent Women on the Rise! session, was a three-dimensional project in which students were prompted to create 3-D versions of Shoshanna Weinberger-esque female forms.

Crystal created headless, soft sculpture female bodies that the girls were able to dress and manipulate with bras, panties, and plastic gold beaded chains that she bought from discount stores in Miami catering to people who visit Cuba and bring large amounts of clothes and other commodities to their families. We would also bring along girdles and butt pads that the girls were free to stuff with batting to create their own sculpture bodies. The dynamic interactions we had with the girls as part of this lesson, and the range of images they produced, communicated the shame that many of them feel about the sexualized female body, and their modes of expressing empathy, social critique, and pleasure.

One of the issues that Weinberger addresses in her work is the manner in which women survey each other as men do by implicitly adopting a male perspective. In my discussions with the artist she has noted how women read each other's bodies in order to size them up, identify shortcomings, or attractive features that make them feel superior, threatened, and/or envious. These dynamics often played out in *Women on the Rise!* sessions, where girls would rank on each other for purported styling failures, or talk negatively about the bodies of women in pop culture, such as Nicki Minaj. As instructors our own bodies became ensnared in these dynamics at times. I recall a class in which I met a group of new girls, and within five minutes, one of them was sarcastically asking me if my shoes were uncomfortable because I wasn't walking properly in them. When discussing this issue of intra-gender body surveillance, a *Women on the Rise!* student mentioned how some people criticized Angela Basset for her muscular figure in the Tina Turner biopic *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993), which deviates from ideals of female embodiment.

Some *Women on the Rise!* participants negatively judged the artist for rendering "nasty" nude bodies. One African American student, Julia, suggested that the artist needed some kind of psychological intervention that would help her stop crafting such disturbing sexual images. A girl once asked us if Shoshanna had a husband. When the

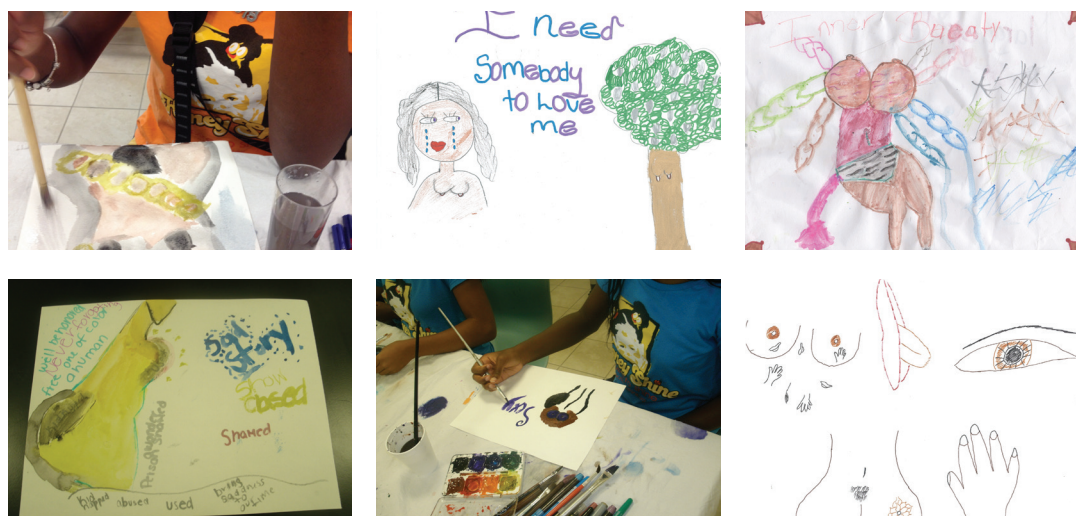
instructors and I asked why she said that she imagines it would be weird for him to have those images of naked women lying around the house. She thought that it would also be weird for Weinberger, as he would likely be sexually aroused by those images. We asked the girls if, given the fact that Weinberger's paintings are much more grotesque than the titillating sexual images in mainstream hip hop, they *really* thought that a man would find the images erotic, and many of them chimed in, answering that "he's a man," and would not be able to help himself. This particular class consisted of about 15 African American teenage girls.

Many of the girls' comments relating to Weinberger's work conveyed their notion of men's gendered hypersexuality. For example, while we were displaying a 19th century cartoon depicting the Hottentot Venus on display surrounded by a throng of Europeans both awed and disgusted, a girl joked that one of the men was saying to Saartje, "Let me get that number though." Another followed with, "I wanna grab that booty." Our students consistently articulated a notion of male visuality as sexually driven, violating, insatiable, compulsory, pathological, insensitive, and objectifying. Perhaps this is how they imagine their own bodies are surveilled by men. How would this affect the manner in which they assess and create sexual images and bodies?

We found that many Women on the Rise! participants felt anxious, and somewhat ashamed by Weinberger's conspicuous bodies. Some would avert their eyes from the screen projection, others would laugh. There was a feeling that representing bodies in such an open way was dangerous and deviant. Girls often mentioned prostitutes in our discussion of Weinberger's practice, particularly when we viewed the *Freak Show* series of paintings, which figure grotesque, faceless female bodies donning feather boas, high heel shoes, and devil horns. Unlike the blank background compositions of many of her other works, the bodies in *Freak Show* are framed by fancy curtains, signaling their performance and display.

In addition to sexuality, girls also engaged in discussions of race and beauty incited

by Weinberger's images. In the first Nicki Minaj chapter I mention Destiny, the Women on the Rise! student who critiqued the dominant representation of whiteness as unmarked, and who sang Minaj's song *Beez in the Trap* while painting an abstract composition that explored the dynamics of racialization in poetic form. Some felt an affinity to the artist due to their own identity as bi-racial. One mixed-race girl said that she connects to Weinberger because she has a mix of white and black hair. "It's too hard to manage so I just end up getting a perm." Another wrote on her Women on the Rise! program feedback form that she enjoyed the Weinberger lesson because as a bi-racial girl the artist "understands my struggles." When we talked to a class of African American teenage girls from the Honey Shine Mentoring program about the racist Euro-American beauty standards that have been hegemonic in the U.S., one of our students, a dark-skinned girl with long, thick black braids who wore no makeup said, "Everybody's tryna be red with good hair," meaning that black people want to be light-skinned and have smooth, straight



figs. 6.24; 6.25; 6.26; 6.27; 6.28; 6.29,
Women on the Rise! student work created in Shoshanna Weinberger based workshops.

hair.

The complexity and depth of our discussions found physical form in the work girls created for the Shoshanna Weinberger project. Some expressed their sadness about and empathy with Saartjie Baartman through paintings that depicted images of black nude

women crying, or of fragmented black female bodies in chains (figs. 6.24 and 6.25). Some expressed their outrage through text, writing words and phrases on the watercolor paper like “shamed”; “show closed”; “abused”; “never forgetting”: free one color of a human”: “bring sadness to our times (fig. 6.27).” Others wrote sex-positive and affirming messages like “sexy power” (fig. 6.28) and “inner beauty” (fig. 6.26). Q from Pridelines depicted images of female sexual pleasure, lips and tongues and pussies carefully rendered and voluptuous (fig. 6.29).

The Shoshanna Weinberger class became a space where varying articulations of black female pains and pleasures intermingled and resounded. It was a space of racial, gender, and sexual critique, but also a site in which articulations of what Celine Parreñas Shimizu terms “race-positive sexuality” were also in circulation. A discussion on Weinberger’s work in a class of 13-14 year old African American and Latina girls was punctuated by Savannah, a multi-racial girl who, when we displayed an image of Little Kim photographed nude with Louis Vuittons logos branded on her body in our discussion of Baartman’s representational legacy, raised her hand, and asserted to the instructors that she would refuse to participate in any bashing of Little Kim due to the fact that she shows her body. Savannah’s critical intervention sparked a lively debate among the students about stripping as a legitimate possibility for women’s social mobility.

For many of the younger, 11-12 year old girls, the images of sexed female bodies they created in the classroom became taboo, tainted objects, and they would rarely take the paintings home. When *Women on the Rise!* instructors took photographs documenting their work they often moved away from the worktable, in order to avoid being pictured with it. There was also a phenomenon the *Women on the Rise!* instructors and I playfully termed “last minute boob” amongst ourselves. We noticed that when girls who refrained from painting nude female bodies realized that class time was about to end, they would furiously add groupings of breasts to their works, relishing what they could of a space in which such an aesthetic transgression would go unpoliced.

Students seemed to enjoy the three-dimensional Shoshanna Weinberger project more than the watercolor painting. When we arrived at our classes with the soft sculpture bodies, bras, panties, batting, girdles, and fake gold chains, the girls would giddily construct Hans Bellmer like, monstrous bodies with multiple, enormous breasts, buttocks overflowing with stuffing from their bikini underwear, and conspicuous displays of jewelry. These initial experiments often resulted in the girls eventually realizing that they could create sculptures out of their own bodies, and they would furiously begin to fasten bras and slip layers of panties on over their pants and shorts, stuffing them with batting to



figs. 6.30; 6.31; 6.32,
Women on the Rise! participants working on Shoshanna Weinberger inspired body sculptures.

create distorted silhouettes.

They would crack up as they helped each other stuff bras to create cleavage or panties to simulate huge bootys. Cell phones were routinely brought out by the girls to capture their grotesqueries. Through manipulating these socially overdetermined and sexually charged body parts and undergarments with their hands, and collaboratively fashioning them with other girls, the project seemed to elicit the feeling of a measure of control for them in the construction of their bodies.

The elated raucousness that would ensue among the girls as we worked on this project sometimes caused discomfort in our program partners. At one institution, we were asked not to let the girls leave the classroom and for no one to be allowed in, as important donors were visiting, and the administration did not want them to be seen wearing ridiculously huge breasts and asses over their uniforms. A staff member was ordered to remain in front of the door to prevent this from happening. Engaging girls of color with

Shoshanna Weinberger's work and the history of Saartje Baartman demonstrated the possibility for powerful expressions of woman of color pleasure, pain, criticality, and whimsy, to co-exist in relation to history but not fully determined by it. Like the figure in Weinberger's *Wondering Hatchling*, they are chained, but capable of walking off the stage.

Josephine Baker and Modernist Ambivalence

In more recent works, the figure of early 20th century black performer Josephine Baker has been the point of departure for Weinberger's imagery. When I visited her studio in 2012 I was struck by the new compositions of her paintings, which feature bodies that are much more abstracted and in dynamic movement. Consisting of striped black and white legs attached to braids and large, round, billowy puffs of black hair, *Afro Jungle Madness Striped Prey* (2013, fig. 6.33) depicts a frenzied scene of escape. The black female body in Weinberger's visual lexicon appears generic, androgynous, and less



fig. 6.33, Shoshanna Weinberger, *Afro Jungle Madness Striped Prey*, 2013

knowable.

This fugitive figure reminded me of Anne Anlin Cheng's work in *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, in which she elaborates new theorizations of Baker embodiment that complicate stock narratives that frame the performer as an

over-exposed, exploited subject whose body merely reified the primitivist fantasies of European racial fetishism. Cheng asks,

So what exactly is the nature of Baker exhibitionism? We know that Baker's theatrical idiom (with its multiple and persistent modes of staged nakedness) is heavily reliant on the trope of the peep show, on the structural opposition between inside and outside. It is, after all, the *mise-en-scène* of this dichotomy that normally allows any striptease to be effective. Yet contrary to this expectation, Baker's particular brand of exhibitionism actually relies on the layered conflation of concealment and exposure, of essence and performance, of flesh and skin. Indeed, Baker's famous nakedness begins to look less and less apparent upon close analysis. When one looks at her "nudity," what one finds is not what one expects. She was known for exploiting her nudity, but key moments of exposure in her films and photographs often involve elaborate engagement with both literal and symbolic veils. It turns out that this "fugitive" (as French critic Pierre de Régnier called Baker) is an escape artist, one who is particularly good at outrunning scopic regimes (2011, 58).

In her analysis of films such as *Sirène des tropiques* of 1927 and *Princess Tam Tam* of 1935, Cheng finds that Baker strategically moves in and out of various costumes and coverings, frustrating the attempts of characters in the films to find and fix her. In addition to evoking movement, the body in Weinberger's painting also signifies deviance through the semiotics of black and white stripes. These stripes also have a relationship to Baker.

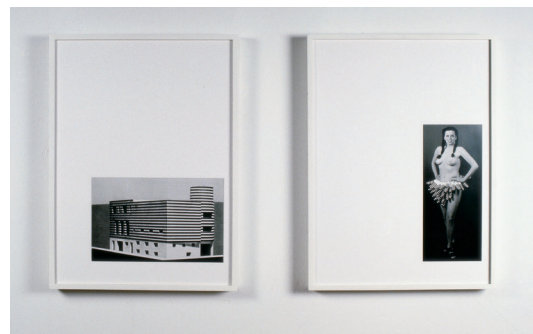
Viennese architect Adolf Loos, who framed indulgence in ornamentation as a form of criminality, utilized black and white stripes in his design of a house for Josephine Baker that he conceived after a chance meeting with her in 1926. Baker never wrote about the project, nor seemed to play any role in its development. Despite the fact that the project was never realized, the Baker house has been a subject of theoretical engagement interrogating questions of style and race. Cheng describes how the house has been framed as anomalous in Loos's oeuvre. Critics have compared the stripes on the house's façade to tattoos, markings that Loos abhorred due to their connection with primitive bodies.

Cheng notes that black and white patterns are found in many of Loos's structures and challenges the view that the house is a straightforward symbolization of Loos's fetishization of Baker by placing her in a prison-like, "primitive" structure. Instead,

Cheng argues that the house signifies the ambivalence of modernism and of Loos's own desires. Stripes do not only convey animality, they are also rather mechanical, and ordered. While modernism worked to banish the marks of the primitive in favor of clean, unadorned line, it has been continually haunted by notions of the animality of the human. Cheng elaborates,

It is not that the zebra pattern could connote the animal as well as the mechanical, but that these categories *speak through one another*: a synchronicity. Thus the use of black and white patterns in Loos's work signifies simultaneously the simplicity of modernity and the ornamentalness of Moorish antiquity. Let us be explicit: why do the first modern bathing suits look like prisoners' outfits? Because the possibility of a modern, newly liberated, streamlined body, facilitated by innovations in synthetic textile fibers that act like a second skin on the flesh, is an *extension of*, not an antithesis to, the idea of the atavistic, unruly, mobile body born out of primitivized animality (Ibid. 77: emphasis in original).

The implications of Cheng's argument lead us to find that rather than work to contain Baker as a fetishized other; the house indeed symbolizes Baker as an icon of this modern ambivalence, as she embodies both the atavistic carnality of primitivism and the kinetic movement of the modern. "The engagement with the 'primitive' in the Josephine Baker House is instructive, not at the level of how it labels Baker, but at the level of what it tells us about Loos's—and by extension, Modernism's—Janus-faced aesthetics" (Ibid. 67). Rather than a structure meant to fix a racialized woman, the house expresses Loos's



figs. 6.34 and 6.35, Rachel Lachowicz,
Was Its Loos, a Realization of Adolf Loos' House for Josephine Baker, 1995

unwieldy attempts to negotiate raced seeing, subjectivity, and embodiment.

Los Angeles based contemporary artist Rachel Lachowicz, like Shoshanna Weinberger, has also invoked Baker in her work. In *Was Its Loos, a Realization of Adolf Loos' House for Josephine Baker* (above, 1995), Lachowicz, like Weinberger, gives physical form to Cheng's insights. More than a project about Josephine Baker, the house staged Loos's engagement with himself, a kind of phallogentric "self-affection" that French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray frames as the solipsism of male subjectivity (1985). The project is an installation consisting of a diptych and floor sculpture. The diptych juxtaposes a reproduction of Loos's design for the Josephine Baker house with a photograph of Lachowicz topless, wearing nothing but an extremely short skirt that substitutes Baker's bananas for phallic, black and white striped, soft sculpture forms. In *Second Skin*, Cheng provocatively suggests that

With the sleek marble surface of the Baker House, it is as if Loos denudes Baker (of her feathers and paints) in order to modernize rather than to primitivize her, but to say so is also to acknowledge the possibility that he is also dressing her (and himself) in the very nude façade that is profoundly nostalgic for the cover of borrowed skins. If the façade of the Baker House is at all tattooed, it is marked not by the inscription of masculinist desire but by the very traces of its struggles, perhaps even its relinquishment (Ibid. 81).

In our discussion about the piece, Lachowicz told me that she was struck by Baker's silence about the project, and framed it as an indication that in terms of the relation between Baker and Loos, the performer was clearly the one in control.

Unable to realize his project, Loos's complicated desires and identificatory longings were frustrated. The phallic, striped, single-person tent Lachowicz constructed provides a skin for Loos, but it is not the primitive skin that Cheng suggests he longs for. In patterning the tent with black and white stripes, Lachowicz marks *him* as the deviant, signifying the animality of his desire. The artist provides him with a modest shelter in which he can continue his onanistic fantasizing. In placing herself in the position of Baker in the diptych photograph, Lachowicz thwarts his hungry gaze for brown skin.

Lachowicz's project brings together the various aesthetic conversations I have been threading in this chapter: The politics of black, white, and bi-racial female embodiment and representation, primitivism and modernity.

In our conversation Lachowicz told me that what compelled her to figure herself nude was to make explicit her position as a white woman commenting on the Josephine Baker house. Rather than a mockery of Baker, the joke was aimed squarely at Loos. In dressing herself in Loosian stripes the artist marks her body as the deviant white prostitute to Baker's Hottentot, a figure who provoked anxiety and desire in the modern European male imaginary. Lachowicz told me that what led her to the project was coming across a reading that described the manner in which Loos denigrated architects who crafted ornamental designs as lowly "dress makers." Lachowicz's work is a sustained critique of this gendered devaluation of feminine aesthetics in modernism⁴.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the various ways in which women artists and girls have employed grotesque aesthetics to engage questions of female sexuality and representation. Wangechi Mutu's *The Ark Collection* communicates ambivalent views concerning the aesthetic and corporeal pleasures that attend pornographic and ethnographic imagings of black women that stem from histories of colonialism and gender oppression. Despite the class-biased, sex-negative views of the artist that frame pornography as a particularly harmful mode of representation for black women, the grotesque style of her collages allows for the works to signify critique while also eliciting open-ended readings and re-imaginings of black female erotics. The images both incite and frustrate the desire for the tribal and sexualized black female body through their distorted juxtapositions.

Race complicates the reception of works that engage issues of pornographic and ethnographic visual production. White South African artist Candice Breitz's

⁴ I discuss how Lachowicz's work complicates phallogentric discourses of modernism, gender, and cosmetic body politics in "Makeup on the Face of the Father: Recent Work by Rachel Lachowicz" (2013).

appropriations of pornographic and ethnographic depictions of black and white women fomented disgust in viewers, and negative assessments by critics who framed her work as racist and problematic, inattentive to the positionalities of black viewing subjects. This response exposes the ways in which the context in which artworks are consumed, and the knowledge of an artist's race/gender identity, which is not always available or visible to viewers, makes the reading of images unwieldy and unpredictable processes, despite the intentions of their producers.

Bretiz's *Rainbow Series* raises provocative questions concerning the fraught relations between black and white South African women. Working to complicate notions that frame black female subjects as always overexposed in relation to an idealized white femininity, I brought the grotesque punk aesthetics of Heather Benjamin into this discussion. Benjamin's *Sad People Sex* series of 'zines portray dissident white femininities that are fashioned through vernaculars of pain and bodily excess. The artist's approach to resignifying print and web pornographic imagery works to trouble notions of sex as always pleasurable, desirable, and as the location of the truth of subjectivity. Her images signal the anti-communal and anti-loving aspects of sex identified by Leo Bersani, but insist upon our stubborn investments in the erotic as a technology of emotion, affect, self-discovery, and relationality.

Shoshanna Weinberger's work is framed through her perspective as a bi-racial subject commenting upon the representation of woman of color embodiment and sexuality. Although she takes the historical, stock representation of Saartjie Baartman as a point of departure for her imagery—she unhinges this figure from historical inscription through grotesque and fantastical disfigurations of form. The engagement of young women of color with Weinberger's work revealed their framing of male visuality as insensitive, objectifying, and sexually compulsive. They also communicated uneasiness with Weinberger's approach to fashioning grotesque female forms that are hyperbolized incarnations of normative sexuality, with their copious breasts and hyper-voluptuous

shapes. Despite their negative responses to the images, the classes based on Weinberger's work became spaces in which girls critiqued racist valuations of white female embodiment, and where they articulated sex-positive framings of contemporary black women's sexual self-presentations in visual culture.

In the watercolor painting project related to Weinberger's work, girls expressed anger and pain in response to learning about the life story of Saartje Baartman, but also created images that celebrate black female erotics. The sculptural project that was part of the Weinberger lesson resulted in the girls' crafting monstrous female forms that mock conventional representations of female beauty and desirability, and they collaboratively worked to transform their own bodies into wild grotesques. The aim of the project was not to inspire the girls to reject big butts and breasts in order to fashion alternative aesthetics, but rather, to reveal the narrowness of dominant aesthetics by hypervisualizing what they abject. These projects resulted in creative, critical, and pleasurable engagements with the politics and history of black female embodiment and sexuality.

Moving from the work of Shoshanna Weinberger to the practice of Rachel Lachowicz, I furthered my investigation of how discourses of primitivism and modernist aesthetics continue to inform the valuation and devaluation of female bodies, and the manner in which artists such as Mutu, Weinberger, and Lachowicz address the gender and race politics of modernism in their work. Centering on the figures of Josephine Baker and Adolf Loos, Rachel Lachowicz's parodic realization of the Josephine Baker house exposed the Viennese architect's frustrated racial and erotic longings. Lachowicz's installation, like Candice Bretiz's *Rainbow Series*, is a project through which a white feminist addresses questions concerning the dynamics of white and black female representation, and their complicated connections and dissonances.

The images created by the unlikely grouping of artists and young women I have assembled in this chapter point to fruitful and imaginative ways in which grotesque aesthetics can serve to trouble powerful discourses that circumscribe the bodies and

aesthetic modes of women and girls. I would like to return us to Loosian black and white stripes as we close. The stripes that signal deviance can also be read as the mark of modernist crisis (Cheng 2011), the crises of categories, as Marjorie Garber has termed it in the context of cross-dressing (1991).

Modernism's inability to fix difference drives the policing of non-normative bodies. Many of the women artists I discuss in this study have brought stripes into their visual lexicons and figurations of bodies. These bodies convey the erotics of power that can flourish within imposing structures. We can think of them as expressing the form of refusal that Dick Hebdige described as, "just so much graffiti on a prison wall...graffiti can make fascinating reading...an expression of both impotence and power...the power to disfigure (1979, 3)." I contend that these corporeal disfigurations should be considered in our theories of social transformation.



(clockwise) fig 6.36, Still from Nicki Minaj video *Super Bass*; fig 6.37, Work by Wangechi Mutu; fig 6.38, Detail from Heather Benjamin's *Sad People Sex*

CONCLUSION

Invoking the Powers of “Bad” Aesthetics

In *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* I have worked to identify the modes through which normative readings of the bodies of racialized poor and working class women and girls produce their disciplining as racially, sexually, and aesthetically excessive. I posit that the discursive regulation of these bodies works to contain the ways in which they reveal class disparity in a contemporary neoliberal context. These practices of regulation are not abstract inventions created by an academic.

In October 2012 I organized a lectures series at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami in partnership with Florida International University’s Women’s Studies Center, English Department, and Latin American and Caribbean Studies Center titled *Latina Women and the Body*. The aim of the lecture series was to spark community dialogue about how images of Latinas in visual culture shape notions regarding their identity, beauty, and sexuality. The museum, where I worked part time as director of the Women on the Rise! program, was handling the promotion of the event and I choose an image by one of the speakers, Miami artist Crystal Pearl, as the artwork for the lecture postcard and electronic invitation. The image, titled *Habana Riveria* (2011, below), juxtaposes an archival photograph of the artist’s mother, Sonia Perla Gil, who was a successful model and dancer in Cuba in the early 1960s, with a portrait of the artist.

The image on the right hand side of the diptych is Crystal Pearl’s re-creation of the archival photograph of Sonia. The work is part of a series titled *Then Again*, in which Pearl remakes modeling photographs of her mother. The artist has described how these photos enveloped her childhood with nostalgic imaginings about Cuba, and her mother’s glamorous life. It is this experience that drove her to travel to Cuba to create the work.



fig. 7.1, Crystal Pearl, *Habana Rivera*, 2011

Both women are photographed from behind and wear one-piece bathing suits that accentuate their curvaceous forms. In the artwork the artist literally measures herself up to the embodiment of her mother, and provocatively positions the viewer as the judge. The resulting juxtaposition prompts the viewer to survey and compare the figures, who are framed by an architectural background that connotes leisure, pleasure, the tropical, the exotic. I thought the image effectively evoked the historical and cultural analysis on body image, sexuality, and beauty engaged by the speakers, who included feminist scholars and artists of color Dionne Stephens, Myra Mendible, Crystal Pearl, Anya Wallace, and myself.

I did not anticipate the negative responses I received in regards to the image. A white male Latino Facebook user bitterly commented that the first time the museum engaged with issues concerning Latinas it only focused on how “fine their asses are.” I was then instructed by the FIU Women’s Studies Center Director to respond to complaints by administration that the lecture series invitation had “insulting and degrading photos” of women wearing “ill fitting” bathing suits. The mobilization of the slighting term “ill-fitting” revealed how Pearl’s body was read as transgressing the bounds of taste through a bourgeois, upper class perspective.

This reaction was relatively subdued, when compared to the angry protest against the lecture series and the invitation image by influential, Miami-based Cuban American contemporary art collector Rosa de la Cruz, who called the museum and shouted that she was insulted by the image. de la Cruz stated that she was going to cease funding the museum and encourage other donors to do the same. She warned that she would spread word in the community about MOCA's racist depiction of "Hispanic" women and pointed out that the danger the invitation posed to Latina "image" was not only in the representation of the bodies in Pearl's photograph, but that these bodies were being distributed through a "mass mailing," thus circulating widely and becoming subject to a public gaze.

The backlash surrounding the lecture series drew me into its sweep, as the Latino visual artist William Cordova, after having attended the panel discussion led by Crystal Pearl, Anya Wallace, and myself titled "Making Art Out of Excess: Exploring Latina Styles and Sexualities," sent an e-mail to Professor Stephens asking for an audience with her through which he could share his concerns about the potentially "disempowering" effect my work, and my body (as he noted in the e-mail that I played with my hair several times during the presentation) could pose to girls of color.

These responses were a sobering reminder of just how contentious discussions of Latinas and body image can be, and of the considerable stakes involved in representing them, especially in a city like Miami, where white-identifying Cubans in particular, have established power which they seek to hold on to as growing populations of Central and South Americans move to the city. The fact that the women formulating the programming and promotion of the lecture series were feminist women of color and Latinas did not prevent or assuage these responses. We had somehow crossed a line we were not aware of.

What was the problem with the image? Was the issue that they were photographed from the rear? That their bodies were not conforming to a Euro-American ideal due to

their curves and cellulite? Would the airbrushed and whitewashed image of a Latina celebrity like Jennifer Lopez have been more palatable? It seems that this may have been the case, as the multi-page spread of the celebratory story on the lecture series that appeared in *The Miami Herald* did not include a single image by Crystal Pearl, despite my having provided them, but instead featured stock images of actresses Salma Hayek and Sofia Vergara, who were not subjects of the lectures.

I posit that Pearl's image was too *crafty* to be adopted by this major newspaper, or by Latin@s invested in positive representation. I draw on "crafty" here to contrast Pearl's subtly subversive, self-produced artistic production with the meticulously worked, aesthetically valued bodies consumed in celebrity culture, particularly the visibility in *Habana Rivera* of what would be considered bodily imperfections in dominant beauty discourse. Pearl's refusal to smooth them over resulted in the devaluation of the image. This fallout demonstrates the urgent need for new, more imaginative, and expansive approaches to engaging with images of racialized women that move beyond stereotype critique to engage with the unwieldy multivalence of images and embodiments.

This dissertation has highlighted how modes of signaling race are imbricated with sexual signification. The reading and attendant interpellation of bodies through their sexual signifiers is performed in significant part through the "fashion police," whose acts of hailing form the racialized subject (hoochie, chonga, white trash). The sexual self-presentations and styles of Latina and black women and girls are often the targets of negative judgments in dominant culture precisely because they signify race in ways that exceed neoliberal multicultural discourse. Their intricate hairstyles, conspicuous jewelry, and form fitting clothing, which often expose bodies that in hegemonic discourse would be subject to concealment and/or dieting due to their size, index difference in a threatening way. For these racial/sexual signifiers code poor and working class lives and practices that trouble myths of social mobility, and form the constitutive outside of a "successful" life that is held out as a possibility for all in the United States. Racially and

sexually marked bodies such as that of Nicki Minaj achieve publicity by fashioning an undisruptive difference that is consonant with neoliberal discourses. *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* reveals the cultural politics of contradictions like these.

I show how the mockery of the chonga girl, rather than signal her innocuousness, in fact indexes the threat she poses - through the politics of her style - to normative conceptions of ethnicity, sexuality, race, and class. Similar dynamics can be seen in the manner through which queer girls of color embody and theorize masculinities and perform purchasing power, fulfill their erotic desires, and express subjectivity; the ways that hip hop artist Nicki Minaj mobilizes neoliberal discourse to support the visibility and branding of her hyperraced and sexualized body in mainstream popular culture, and the creative and pedagogical work conducted by grotesque aesthetics in reframing standard depictions of race, gender, and sexuality in the work of girls of color, Wangechi Mutu, Shoshanna Weinberger, Heather Benjamin, and Rachel Lachowicz.

These case studies open new paths for research on gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and race by transgressing the boundaries between queer and heteronormative sexualities, ethnography and cultural analysis, fine art, popular culture, and the politics of the everyday, the affective and the corporeal. *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* calls for an art history that engages youth as readers and consumers of art, and that examines how the cultural capital of art shapes visual politics on a social scale. The present work demonstrates how new questions and insights concerning aesthetics and embodiment emerge when the black/white binary is exceeded to examine the manner in which Asian/American, African American, Latina/o, black non-Latina/Caribbean, and white racializations are coimbricated.

By refusing to ghettoize the experiences of queer girls, this project also highlights how normative and non-normative sexualities are co-constitutive. *The Power of Sexual Aesthetics* augurs a grounded queer theory engaged with youth, and queer of color critique that takes the body crafting practices and subjectivities of racialized queer

women and girls into account. It also puts pressure on the field of girls' studies to initiate dialogues concerning the racialized and queer girls of color that it often abjects through its moral panic discourse on sexuality and consistent focus on white middle class girls.

Politically, this project seeks to expand analytical recognition of the modes of creative and corporeal expression available to racialized subjects such as my manicurist Sonia, a recent Cuban immigrant. Sonia is white-identified, and works in a small beauty shop run by Vietnamese immigrants in North Miami, an area of Miami-Dade County that has a large population of Haitian immigrants. Knowing that I appreciate intricate nail designs, every time I see her for an appointment she shows me new styles she has developed or learned through photographs of her client's hands that she has captured with her smart phone. The semiotics of these elaborate designs position my middle class, light-brown skinned Latina body in relation to working class Latinidad and blackness, as I have often overheard older, upper class white Latin@s in Miami deride such styles for being gaudy and associated with "negras" or vulgar, "low-class," chusmas. Beyond an expression of my aesthetic taste, I purposefully have my nails crafted in this way to express difference in the spaces of the academy and art world.

One day, as Sonia was applying topcoat to my nails to gloss and seal the flower designs she had crafted in black polish to stand out against the bright yellow of the base color, she sighed, and told me that she wished she could experiment with her nails as I did. Sonia explained that her husband, who is also a white Cuban, associates bright color nail polish and complicated nail designs with the black Haitian women who frequent the beauty shop.

He does not approve of her wearing such styles because of this racial association. He urges her to be more natural, and classy. Sonia's position in the aesthetic and political economy of gendered body practice is mediated by constructs of race and class. Her husband wishes to dissociate his light-skinned Cuban wife from the sexual-aesthetic excess of black female bodies and she is in the position of complying with his wishes due

to her dependency on his income, as hers is a low paying, culturally devalued aesthetic job. The politics of race value Cuban immigrants racialized as white over Haitian immigrants imagined through blackness, which results in the affording of asylum and citizenship to Cubans, while Haitian refugees face racism, detention, and deportation.

Sonia's story reminds us that the practices of body crafting that constitute a form of elite art production for artists like Nikki S. Lee, parody for the *Chongalicious* performers, publicity strategy for Nicki Minaj, and self-expression for middle class subjects like myself, are enabled through privileges afforded by the abjection of bodies, like those of queer masculine body presenting young women of color, otherized by neoliberal discourse, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Working class immigrant women like Sonia are foreclosed from certain modes of self-fashioning due to their class position, and the girls and women who are able to embody styles crafted and valued in their communities do so under the peril of negative social judgment, decreased employment opportunities, and even physical harm. It is these discrepant regimes of value, congealed under conditions of neoliberalism, that this dissertation has worked to expose and trouble. The case studies presented here call for scholarship that takes body politics seriously, while relishing and engaging in the poetics of excessive aesthetics.

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