

# BLACK SEXUAL POLITICS

**AFRICAN AMERICANS, GENDER,  
AND THE NEW RACISM**

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

Routledge  
New York & London

## GET YOUR FREAK ON

### Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Femininity

*2001:* Established songwriter, producer, rapper, and singer Missy Elliott's smash hit "Get Your Freak On" catapults her third album to the top of the charts. Claiming that she can last 20 rounds with the "Niggahs," Missy declares that she's the "best around" because she has a "crazy style." In tribute to and in dialogue with Elliott, singer Nelly Furtado also records her version of "Get Your Freak On." Describing Elliott, Furtado sings "she's a freak and I'm a chief head banger." In case listeners might think Furtado is not as down as Elliott, Furtado sings "Who's that bitch? Me!" Elliott's song becomes so popular that a series of websites offer its mesmerizing sitar tones as ringers for cell phones. They ring in Burger King. "Get your freak on" . . . "Hello?"

*2001:* At the height of his career in 1981, the "King of Funk" Rick James hits it big with "Superfreak." Describing the kind of girls who wait backstage with their girlfriends in the hopes of landing a rock star, "Superfreak" portrays a "very kinky girl" who is "never hard to please." She's "pretty wild," he loves to "taste her," but she is not the kind of girl that he can take home to his mother. James's hit catapults the term "freak" into popular culture. Midnight Star sing "I'm Your Freakazoid, come on and wind me up." Whodini

proclaims the “freaks come out at night.” In the 1990s, M. C. Hammer samples “Superfreak” for his million-seller album *Can’t Touch This*. Ironically, by the 2001 debut of Missy Elliott’s “Get Your Freak On,” Rick James’s main claim to fame lies in his place on a comedy website titled *The Funny Pages: List of Penises*. Situated in a taxonomy of penises that includes the “American Express Penis” (don’t leave home without it), the McDonald’s Penis (over 8 billion served), and the Uncle Sam Penis (we want you), there it is—the Rick James Penis (it’s *superfreaky*).<sup>1</sup>

Missy Elliott’s “Get Your Freak On” may have appeared to come from nowhere, but the differing meanings associated with the term *freak* are situated at the crossroads of colonialism, science, and entertainment. Under colonialism, West African people’s proximity to wild animals, especially apes, raised in Western imaginations the specter of “wild” sexual practices in an uncivilized, inherently violent wilderness.<sup>2</sup> Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality. For Western sciences that were mesmerized with body politics,<sup>3</sup> White Western normality became constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imagined Black hyper-heterosexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise. The treatment of Sarah Bartmann, forced medical experimentation on slave women during gynecology’s early years, and the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment illustrate how Western sciences constructed racial difference by searching the physiology of Black people’s bodies for sexual deviance.<sup>4</sup> Entertainment contributed another strand to the fabric enfold-ing contemporary meanings of *freak*. In the nineteenth century, the term *freak* appeared in descriptions of human oddities exhibited by circuses and sideshows. Individuals who fell outside the boundaries of normality, from hairy women to giants and midgets, all were exhibited as freaks of nature for the fun and amusement of live audiences.

When Elliot sang “Get Your Freak On,” she invoked a term with sedimented historical meaning. But there’s more. During the twenty-year period spanning James’s “Superfreak” and Elliott’s “Get Your Freak On,” the term *freak* came to permeate popular culture to the point at which it is now intertwined with ideas about sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices. “Freaky” sex consists of sex outside the boundaries of normal-

ity—the kind of “kinky” sexuality invoked by Rick James and other popular artists. As boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality soften and shift, so do the meanings of *freaky* as well as the practices and people thought to engage in them. The term initially invoked a sexual promiscuity associated with Blackness, but being freaky is no longer restricted to Black people. As Whodini raps, “freaks come in all shapes, sizes and colors, but what I like about ’em most is that they’re real good lovers.” James, Elliott, and other African American artists may have led the way, but the usages of *freak* have traveled far beyond the African American experience. The term has shown a stunning resiliency, migrating onto the dance floor as a particular dance (*Le Freak*) and as a style of dancing that signaled individuality, sexual abandon, craziness, wildness, and new uses of the body. “Get your freak on” can mean many things to many people. To be labeled a freak, to be a freak, and to freak constitute different sites of race, gender, and sexuality within popular culture.

How do we make sense of the meanings, use, and speed with which the term *freak* travels in the new racism? This term is not alone. Joining *freak*, terms such as *nigger*, *bitch*, and *faggot* also reappear in everyday speech. Collectively, these terms signal a reworking of historical language of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, all played out in the spectacles offered up by contemporary mass media. On one level, *freak*, *nigger*, *bitch*, and *faggot* are just words. But on another level, these terms are situated at an ideological crossroads that both replicates and resists intersecting oppressions. Because the new racism requires new ideological justifications, these terms help shape changing social conditions. People also resist systems of oppression often by taking offensive words and changing their meaning; the case, for example, of African American men whose use of the term *nigger* challenges the derogatory usages of White America.<sup>5</sup>

What seems different today under the new racism is the changing influence of Black popular culture and mass media as sites where ideas concerning Black sexuality are reformulated and contested.<sup>6</sup> In modern America where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African American youth, in particular, can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sports teams, and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality. Mass media fills this void, especially

movies, television, and music that market Black popular culture aimed at African American consumers. With new technologies that greatly expand possibilities for information creation and dissemination, mass media needs a continuing supply of new cultural material for its growing entertainment, advertising, and news divisions. Because of its authority to shape perceptions of the world, global mass media circulates images of Black femininity and Black masculinity and, in doing so, ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

In the 1990s, Black popular culture became a hot commodity. Within mass media influenced social relations, African American culture is now photographed, recorded, and/or digitalized, and it travels to all parts of the globe. This new commodified Black culture is highly marketable and has spurred a Black culture industry, one that draws heavily from the cultural production and styles of urban Black youth. In this context, representations of African American women and African American men became increasingly important sites of struggle. The new racism requires new ideological justifications, and the controlling images of Black femininity and Black masculinity participate in creating them.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, African American women and men use these same sites within Black popular culture to resist racism, class exploitation, sexism, and/or heterosexism.

Because racial desegregation in the post-civil rights era needed new images of racial difference for a color-blind ideology, class-differentiated images of African American culture have become more prominent. In the 1980s and 1990s, historical images of Black people as poor and working-class Black became supplemented by and often contrasted with representations of Black respectability used to portray a growing Black middle class. Poor and working-class Black culture was routinely depicted as being “authentically” Black whereas middle- and upper-middle class Black culture was seen as less so. Poor and working-class Black characters were portrayed as the ones who walked, talked, and acted “Black,” and their lack of assimilation of American values justified their incarceration in urban ghettos. In contrast, because middle- and upper-middle-class African American characters lacked this authentic “Black” culture and were virtually indistinguishable from their White middle-class counterparts, assimilated, propertied Black people were shown as being ready for racial integration. This convergence of race and class also sparked changes in the treatment of gender and sexuality. Representations of poor and working-

class authenticity and middle-class respectability increasingly came in gender-specific form. As Black femininity and Black masculinity became reworked through this prism of social class, a changing constellation of images of Black femininity appeared that reconfigured Black women's sexuality and helped explain the new racism.

**"BITCHES" AND BAD (BLACK) MOTHERS:  
IMAGES OF WORKING-CLASS BLACK WOMEN**

Images of working-class Black women can be assembled around two main focal points. The controlling image of the "bitch" constitutes one representation that depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy. Increasingly applied to poor and/or working-class Black women, the representation of the "bitch" constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery. Whereas the mule was simply stubborn (passive aggressive) and needed prodding and supervision, the bitch is confrontational and actively aggressive. The term *bitch* is designed to put women in their place. Using *bitch* by itself is offensive, but in combination with other slurs, it can be deadly. Randall Kennedy reports on the actions of a 1999 New Jersey state court that removed a judge, in part, for his actions in one case. The judge had attempted to persuade the prosecutor to accept a plea bargain from four men indicted for robbing and murdering a sixty-seven-year-old African American woman. The judge told the prosecutor not to worry about the case since the victim had been just "some old nigger bitch."<sup>8</sup>

Representations of Black women as bitches abound in contemporary popular culture, and presenting Black women as bitches is designed to defeminize and demonize them. But just as young Black men within hip-hop culture have reclaimed the term *nigger* and used it for different ends, the term *bitch* and the image of Black women that it carries signals a similar contestation process. Within this representation, however, not all bitches are the same. Among African American Studies undergraduate students at the University of Cincinnati, the consensus was that "bitch" and "Bitch" referenced two distinctive types of Black female representations. All women potentially can be "bitches" with a small "b." This was the negative evaluation of "bitch." But the students also identified a positive valuation of "bitch" and argued (some, vociferously so) that only

African American women can be “Bitches” with a capital “B.” Bitches with a capital “B” or in their language, “Black Bitches,” are super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated.

They may be right. During the early 1970s, when films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* presented African American women as sexual props for the exploits of Black male heroes, Pam Grier’s films signaled the arrival of a new kind of “bitch.” As a “Black Bitch,” Grier’s performances combined beauty, sexuality, and violence. For example, in *Sheba, Baby* (1975), Grier is routinely called a “bitch” by the bad guys, a derisive appellation that does not seem to phase her. In other places in the same film when she is called a “Bitch” the term seems to signal admiration. She becomes a “Bad Bitch” (e.g., a good Black woman), when she puts her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities. By contemporary standards, the violence in most of Grier’s films seems tame. But her films did contain violence and Grier was often the one engaging in it. Despite her long hair, facial features, and full-figured body that granted her femininity under Western standards of beauty, Grier’s height made her taller than most men, a size that granted her the power of potentially dominating them. This she did in several films, from slapping her brother for capitulating to drug dealers in *Foxy Brown* (1974) to putting a headlock on a Black male gangster and stuffing his face in a bucket of flour in *Sheba, Baby*. Grier may have been called a “bitch,” but in *Sheba, Baby* and *Foxy Brown* she got revenge on the loan sharks and drug dealers that preyed upon poor and working-class African Americans. Moreover, her actions routinely drew admiration and praise from the African American men in these films, as well as those who were in the audience. Film critic Donald Bogle describes audience reaction to an especially memorable scene in *Foxy Brown* that he calls “enjoyably perverse.” Prior to the scene, Grier’s lover and brother were both killed by two drug kingpins, a corrupt White man and his White girlfriend. Grier’s Foxy Brown catches up with the man and has her boys unzip his pants. He is then castrated. Bogle describes what happened next:

Pam pays a visit to the man’s ladyfriend—carrying a jar that contains the poor man’s most valuable parts. Grier then throws the jar at the white woman; it falls on the floor, its contents apparently rolling this way and that (mercifully, the audience doesn’t see this; it’s left to the

imagination), all to the horror of the woman who, upon recognizing what is before her eyes, screams out the name of the man she has loved. It's her poor Steve! Audiences howled over this one!<sup>9</sup>

Apparently, in 1974, Black men were not intimidated by Grier's depiction of a strong Black woman, as long as she was on their side.<sup>10</sup>

Grier may have established a template for a new kind of "Black bitch," but contemporary Black popular culture's willingness to embrace patriarchy has left the "Black bitch" as a contested representation. Ironically, Black male comedians have often led the pack in reproducing derisive images of Black women as being ugly, loud "bitches." Resembling Marlon Riggs' protestations about the "sissy" and "punk" jokes targeted toward Black gay men, "bitches" are routinely mocked within contemporary Black popular culture. For example, ridiculing African American women as being like men (also, a common representation of Black lesbians) has long been a prominent subtext in the routines of Redd Foxx, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and other African American comedians. In other cases, Black male comedians dress up as African American women in order to make fun of them. Virtually all of the African American comics on the popular show *Saturday Night Live* have on occasion dressed as women to caricature Black women. Through this act of cross-dressing, Black women can be depicted as ugly women who too closely resemble men (big, Black, and short hair) and because they are aggressive like men, become stigmatized as "bitches." As Jill Nelson points out:

Whatever the genre, black women are fair game. It is a tradition among many black male comedians to dress up as black women, transforming themselves into objects of revulsion and ridicule. From Flip Wilson in the 1970s in drag playing loud, crass, unattractive 'Geraldine' . . . to the . . . situation comedy 'Martin,' starring Martin Lawrence, whose drag alter ego is an ignorant, loud, sexual predator named Sheneneh, the way to elicit a guaranteed laugh is to put on a dress and play the unattractive, dominating, sexually voracious black woman.<sup>11</sup>

Nelson then speculates why this situation exists: "Black male comedians have encased black women in a negative stereotype, the basis of which is self-hatred projected on the handiest target: black women"<sup>12</sup>



In the universe of Black popular culture, the combination of sexuality and bitchiness can be deadly. Invoking historical understandings of Black women's assumed promiscuity, some representations of the "bitch" draw upon American sexual scripts of Black women's wildness. Here, the question of who controls Black women's sexuality is paramount. One sign of a "Bitch's" power is her manipulation of her own sexuality for her own gain. Bitches control men, or at least try to, using their bodies as weapons. In her novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Sister Souljah presents one of the few book-length treatments of hip-hop culture's materialistic "bad bitch." Souljah tells the story of Winter Santiago, the oldest of four daughters of a New York City drug dealer, whose three sisters bear the names Porsche, Mercedes, and Lexus. A coming-of-age story, the novel traces Winter's grooming through her opulent adolescence to be a "bad bitch," only to learn how quickly wealth and power were stripped away when her father was put in prison. Souljah's depiction of Winter Santiago provides one of the best descriptions of a "bad bitch":

A bad bitch is a woman who handles her business without making it seem like business. Only dumb girls let love get them delirious to the point where they let things that really count go undone. For example, you see a good-looking nigga walking down the avenue, you get excited. You wet just thinking about him. You step to him, size him up, and you think, Looks good. You slide you eyes down to his zipper, check for the print. Inside you scream, Yes, it's all there! But then you realize he's not wearing a watch, ain't carrying no car keys, no jewels, and he's sporting last month's sneakers. He's broke as hell.<sup>13</sup>

Winter then continues to identify the two options that are available to a "bad bitch" faced with this situation. She can either take him home and "get her groove on just to enjoy the sex and don't get emotionally involved because he can't afford her" or she can walk away and "leave his broke ass standing right there."<sup>14</sup> Having a relationship is out.

This theme of the materialistic, sexualized Black women has become an icon within hip-hop culture. The difficulty lies in telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment. On the one hand, the public persona of rap star Lil' Kim has been compared

to that of a female hustler. Resembling representations of her male counterpart who uses women for financial and sexual gain, the public performance of Lil' Kim brings life to the fictional Winter Santiago. An exposé in *Vibe* magazine describes Kim's public face: "Lil' Kim's mythology is about pussy, really: the power, pleasure, and politics of it, the murky mixture of emotions and commerce that sex has become in popular culture. . . . She is, perhaps, the greatest public purveyor of the female hustle this side of Madonna, parlaying ghetto pain, pomp, and circumstances into mainstream fame and fortune."<sup>15</sup> But should we think that Lil' Kim is shallow, the article goes on to describe her "soft center": "Kim's reality, on the other hand is about love. It is her true currency . . . the entirety of her appeal has much to do with the fact that love—carnal, familial, self-destructive, or spiritual—is the root of who Kim is. Pussy is just the most marketable aspect of it."<sup>16</sup> What do we make of Lil' Kim? Is she the female version of misogynistic rappers? If so, her performance is what matters. To be real, she must sell sexuality as part of working-class Black female authenticity.

On the other hand, many African American women rappers identify female sexuality as part of women's freedom and independence. Being sexually open does not make a woman a tramp or a "ho." When Salt 'n Pepa engage in role reversal in their video "Most Men Are Tramps," they contest dominant notions that see as dangerous female sexuality that is not under the control of men. Lack of male domination creates immoral women. Salt 'n Pepa ask, "have you even seen a man who's stupid and rude . . . who thinks he's God's gift to women?" The rap shows a group of male dancers wearing black trench coats. As Salt 'n Pepa repeat "tramp," the men flash open their coats to reveal outfits of tiny little red G-strings. The video does not exploit the men—they are shown for just a second. Rather, the point is to use role reversal to criticize existing gender ideology.<sup>17</sup> In their raps "Let's Talk about Sex," and "It's None of Your Business," the group repeats its anthem of sexual freedom.

This issue of control becomes highly important within the universe of Black popular culture that is marketed by mass media. Some women are bitches who control their own sexuality—they "get a freak on," which remains within their control and on their own terms. Whether she "fucks men" for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass

media. In discussing this updated jezebel image, cultural critic Lisa Jones distinguishes between gold diggers/skeezers (women who screw for status) and crack hoers (women who screw for a fix).<sup>18</sup> Some women are the “hos” who trade sexual favors for jobs, money, drugs, and other material items. The female hustler, a materialistic woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants constitutes this sexualized variation of the “bitch.” This image appears with increasing frequency, especially in conjunction with trying to “catch” an African American man with money. Athletes are targets, and having a baby with an athlete is a way to garner income. Black women who are sex workers, namely, those who engage in phone sex, lap dancing, and prostitution for compensation, also populate this universe of sexualized bitches. The prostitute who hustles without a pimp and who keeps the compensation is a bitch who works for herself.

Not only do these images of sexualized Black bitches appear in global mass media, Black male artists, producers, and marketing executives participate in reproducing these images. As cultural critic Lisa Jones points out, “what might make the skeezer an even more painful thorn in your side is that, unlike its forerunners, this type is manufactured primarily by black men.”<sup>19</sup> If the cultural production of some African American male artists is any indication, Jones may be on to something.

In the early 1990s, and in conjunction with the emergence of gangsta rap, a fairly dramatic shift occurred within Black popular culture and mass media concerning how some African American artists depicted African American women. In a sense, the *celebration* of Black women’s bodies and how they handled them that had long appeared in earlier Black cultural production (for example, a song such as “Brick House” within a rhythm and blues tradition) became increasingly replaced by the *objectification* of Black women’s bodies as part of a commodified Black culture. Contemporary music videos of Black male artists in particular became increasingly populated with legions of young Black women who dance, strut, and serve as visually appealing props for the rapper in question. The women in these videos typically share two attributes—they are rarely acknowledged as individuals and they are scantily clad. One Black female body can easily replace another and all are reduced to their bodies. Ironically, displaying nameless, naked Black female bodies had a long history in Western societies, from the display of enslaved African women on the auction block under chattel slavery to representations of Black female

bodies in contemporary film and music videos. Describing the placement and use of primitive art in Western exhibits, one scholar points out, “‘namelessness’ resembles ‘nakedness’: it is a category always brought to bear by the Westerner on the ‘primitive’ and yet a phony category insofar as the namelessness and nakedness exist only from the Euro-American point of view.”<sup>20</sup>

Not only can the entire body become objectified but also parts of the body can suffer the same fate. For example, music videos for Sir Mix A Lot’s “Baby Got Back,” the film clip for “Doing Da Butt” from Spike Lee’s film *School Daze*, and the music video for 2LiveCrew’s “Pop That Coochie” all focused attention on women’s behinds generally, and Black women’s behinds in particular. All three songs seemingly celebrated Black women’s buttocks, but they also objectified them, albeit differently. “Baby Got Back” is more clearly rooted in the “Brick House” tradition of celebrating Black women’s sexuality via admiring their bodies—in his video, Sir Mix A Lot happily wanders among several booty swinging sisters, all of whom are proud to show their stuff. “Doing Da Butt” creates a different interpretive context for this fascination with the booty. In Lee’s party sequence, being able to shake the booty is a sign of authentic Blackness, with the Black woman who is shaking the biggest butt being the most authentic Black woman. In contrast, “Pop That Coochie” contains a bevy of women who simply shake their rumps for the enjoyment of the members of 2LiveCrew. Their butts are toys for the boys in the band. Ironically, whereas European men expressed fascination with the buttocks of the Hottentot Venus as a site of Black female sexuality that became central to the construction of White racism itself, contemporary Black popular culture seemingly celebrates these same signs uncritically.

Objectifying Black women’s bodies turns them into canvases that can be interchanged for a variety of purposes. Historically, this objectification had a clear racial motive. In the post-civil rights era, however, this use of Black women’s bodies also has a distinctive gender subtext in that African American men and women participate differently in this process of objectification. African American men who star in music videos construct a certain version of manhood against the backdrop of objectified nameless, quasi naked Black women who populate their stage. At the same time, African American women in these same videos often objectify their own bodies in order to be accepted within this Black male-controlled universe.

Black women now can get hair weaves, insert blue contact lenses, dye their hair blond, get silicone implants to have bigger breasts, and have ribs removed to achieve small waists (Janet Jackson) all for the purpose of appearing more “beautiful.”<sup>21</sup>

Whether Black women rappers who use the term *bitch* are participating in their own subordination or whether they are resisting these gender relations remains a subject of debate. Rap and hip-hop serve as sites to contest these same gender meanings. The language in rap has attracted considerable controversy, especially the misogyny associated with calling women “bitches” and “hos.”<sup>22</sup> First popularized within rap, these terms are now so pervasive that they have entered the realm of colloquial, everyday speech. Even White singer Nelly Furtado proudly proclaims, “Who’s that bitch? Me!” Yet because rap is a sphere of cultural production, it has space for contestation. For example, in 1994 Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” won a Grammy, a NAACP Image Award, and a Soul Train Music Award. Latifah claims that she did not write the song to win awards, but in response to the verbal and physical assaults on women that she saw around her, especially in rap music. As one line from her award-winning song states, “Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho. Trying to make a sister feel low, You know all of that’s got to go.”<sup>23</sup>

Black bitches are one thing. Black bitches that are fertile and become mothers are something else. In this regard, the term *bitch* references yet another meaning. Reminiscent of the association of Africans with animals, the term *bitch* also refers to female dogs. Via this association, the term thus invokes a web of meaning that links unregulated sexuality with uncontrolled fertility. Female dogs or bitches “fuck” and produce litters of puppies. In a context of a racial discourse that long associated people of African descent with animalistic practices, the use of the term *bitch* is noteworthy. Moreover, new technologies that place a greater emphasis on machines provide another variation on the updated *bitch*. In contrast to Black female bodies as animalistic, Black female bodies become machines built for endurance. The Black superwoman becomes a “sex machine” that in turn becomes a “baby machine.” The thinking behind these images is that unregulated sexuality results in unplanned for, unwanted, and poorly raised children.

The representation of the sexualized *bitch* leads to another cluster of representations of working-class Black femininity, namely, controlling

images of poor and working-class Black women as bad mothers. Bad Black Mothers (BBM) are those who are abusive (extremely bitchy) and/or who neglect their children either in utero or afterward. Ironically, these Bad Black Mothers are stigmatized as being inappropriately feminine because they reject the gender ideology associated with the American family ideal.<sup>24</sup> They are often single mothers, they live in poverty, they are often young, and they rely on the state to support their children. Moreover, they allegedly pass on their bad values to their children who in turn are more likely to become criminals and unwed teenaged mothers.

Reserved for poor and/or working-class Black women, or for women who have fallen into poverty and shame as a result of their bad behavior, a constellation of new images describes variations of the Bad Black Mother. The image of the crack mother illustrates how controlling images of working-class Black femininity can dovetail with punitive social policies. When crack cocaine appeared in the early 1980s, two features made it the perfect target for the Reagan administration's War on Drugs. Crack cocaine was primarily confined to Black inner-city neighborhoods, and women constituted approximately half of its users. In the late 1980s, news stories began to cover the huge increase in the number of newborns testing positive for drugs. But coverage was far from sympathetic. Addicted pregnant women became demonized as "crack mothers" whose selfishness and criminality punished their children in the womb. Fictional treatments followed soon after. For example, in the feature film *Losing Isaiah*, Academy Award-winning actress Halle Berry plays a woman on crack cocaine who is so high that she abandons her baby. A kindly White family takes Isaiah in, and they patiently deal with the host of problems he has due to his biological mother's failures.

Representations such as these contributed to a punitive climate in which the criminal justice system increasingly penalizes pregnancy by prosecuting women for exposing their babies to drugs in the womb and by imposing birth control as a condition of probation. Between 1985 and 1995, thirty states charged approximately 200 women with maternal drug use. Charges included distributing drugs to a minor, child abuse and neglect, reckless endangerment, manslaughter, and assault with a deadly weapon.<sup>25</sup> In virtually all of these cases, the women prosecuted were poor and African American. As legal scholar Dorothy Roberts points out, "prosecutors and judges see poor Black women as suitable subjects for these

reproductive penalties because society does not view these women as suitable mothers in the first place.”<sup>26</sup>

Drug use is one sure-fire indicator used to create the BBM representation, but simply being poor and accepting public assistance is sufficient. In the 1960s, when African American women successfully challenged the racially discriminatory policies that characterized social welfare programs, the generic image of the “bad Black mother” became crystallized into the racialized image of the “welfare mother.” These controlling images underwent another transformation in the 1980s as part of Reagan/Bush’s efforts to reduce social welfare funding for families. Resembling the practice of invoking the controlling image of the Black rapist via the Bush campaign’s use of Willie Horton in 1988, the Reagan/Bush administrations also realized that racializing welfare by painting it as a program that unfairly benefited Blacks was a sure-fire way to win White votes. This context created the controlling image of the “welfare queen” primarily to garner support for refusing state support for poor and working-class Black mothers and children. Poor Black women’s welfare eligibility meant that many chose to stay home and care for their children, thus emulating White middle-class mothers. But because these stay-at-home moms were African American and did not work for pay, they were deemed to be “lazy.” Ironically, gaining rights introduced a new set of controlling images. In a political economy in which the children of poor and working-class African Americans are unwanted because such children are expensive and have citizenship rights, reducing the fertility becomes critical.<sup>27</sup>

These images of bitches and bad Black mothers came at a time when African American children and youth became expendable. Simply put, in the post-civil rights era, poor Black children became superfluous as workers. Under chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation of the rural South, the need for cheap, unskilled labor and African American political powerlessness fostered population policies that encouraged Black women to have many children. Since African Americans themselves absorbed the costs attached to raising children, a large, disenfranchised, and impoverished Black population matched the perceived interest of elites. Black children cost employers little because children did unskilled labor and were ineligible for existing social welfare benefits. The post-civil rights era that required a more highly educated workforce and that increased Black children’s eligibility for social welfare benefits made them more expensive to

train and to hire. In this political and economic context, poor and working-class African American women were encouraged to have fewer children, often through punitive population control policies.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the efforts to criminalize the pregnancies of crack-addicted women, a series of public policies have been introduced that aim to shrink state and federal social welfare budgets, in part by reducing Black women's fertility.<sup>29</sup> Despite its health risks and unpleasant side effects, Norplant was marketed to poor inner-city Black teenagers.<sup>30</sup> As a coercive method of birth control, users found that they had little difficulty getting their physicians to insert the contraceptive rods into their bodies but, since only physicians were qualified to remove the rods, getting them out was far more difficult. Depo Provera as a birth control shot was also heavily marketed to women who seemingly could not control their fertility and needed medical intervention to avoid motherhood.<sup>31</sup> Finally, welfare legislation that threatens to deny benefits to additional children is designed to discourage childbearing. In a context in which safe, legal abortion is difficult for poor women to obtain, the "choice" of permanent sterilization makes sense. Representations of Bad Black Mothers help create an interpretive climate that normalizes these punitive policies.<sup>32</sup>

Controlling images of working-class Black women pervade television and film, but rap and hip-hop culture constitute one site where misogyny is freely expressed and resisted. Given this context, African American women's participation in rap and hip-hop as writers, producers, and as performers illustrates how African American women negotiate these representations. In a sense, Black female rappers who reject these representations of working-class Black women follow in the footsteps of earlier generations of Black blues women who chose to sing the "devil's music."<sup>33</sup> The 1990s witnessed the emergence of Black women who made music videos that were sites of promotion, creativity, and self-expression. For example, hip-hop artists Salt 'n Pepa, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, and Missy Elliott depict themselves as independent, strong, and self-reliant agents of their own desire. Because rap revolves around self-promotion, female rappers are able to avoid accusations of being self-centered or narcissistic when they use the form to promote Black female power. Rap thus can provide an important forum for women.<sup>34</sup>

Black women's self-representation in rap results in complex, often contradictory and multifaceted depictions of Black womanhood.<sup>35</sup> One



study of representations of Black women in popular music videos found that controlling images of Black womanhood occurred simultaneously with resistant images. On the one hand, when music videos focused on Black women's bodies, presented one-dimensional womanhood by rarely depicting motherhood, and showcased women under the aegis of a male sponsor, they did re-create controlling images of Black womanhood. On the other hand, the music videos also contained distinctive patterns of Black women's agency. First, in many videos, Blackness did not carry a negative connotation, but instead served as a basis for strength, power, and a positive self-identity. Second, despite a predominance of traditional gender roles, Black women performers were frequently depicted as active, vocal, and independent. But instead of exhibiting the physical violence and aggression found in men's videos, the music videos sampled in the study demonstrate the significance of verbal assertiveness where "speaking out and speaking one's mind are a constant theme."<sup>36</sup> Another theme concerns achieving independence—Black women may assert independence, but they look to one another for support, partnership, and sisterhood. Black women's music videos may be situated within hip-hop culture, but they reflect the tensions of negotiating representations of Black femininity: "what emerges from this combination of agency, voice, partnership, and Black context is a sense of the construction of Black woman-centered video narratives. Within these narratives, the interests, desires, and goals of women are predominant. . . . Black women are quite firmly the subjects of these narratives and are able to clearly and unequivocally express their points of view."<sup>37</sup>

Representations of Black women athletes in mass media also replicate and contest power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Because aggressiveness is needed to win, Black female athletes have more leeway in reclaiming assertiveness without enduring the ridicule routinely targeted toward the bitch. Black female athletes provide a range of images that collectively challenge not only representations of the bitch and the bad mother but are also beginning to crack the financial gender gap separating men's and women's sports. Whereas men have been able to use athletics, most recently college and professional basketball, for upward social mobility and financial security, women lacked this social mobility route until the passage of Title IX. This legislation helped generate opportunities for girls and women who wish to benefit from athletics in ways that have been long

available to boys and men. Because Black women have not typically participated in the women's sports of figure skating, gymnastics, and until the Williams sisters, women's tennis, they have not been the image of the female athlete. The entry of Black women into basketball and tennis has changed this situation. Black women athletes' bodies are muscular and athletic, attributes historically reserved for men, yet their body types also represent new forms of femininity.

Take, for example, the dilemma that the tennis world faced with the success of African American sisters Venus and Serena Williams. The achievements of the Williams sisters are unprecedented. Standing at 6-foot-1 1/2 inches and with a 127 mph serve that once set a women's world record, Venus Williams has held the Wimbledon title twice (2000 and 2001) and at the Sydney Olympics was the first woman to win a gold medal in singles and doubles (with sister Serena) since 1924. Winning 3.9 million dollars in prize money, Serena Williams surged ahead in 2002, winning three Grand Slam titles to take the number one ranking away from Venus. In 2002, the Williams sisters were ranked number one (Venus) and number two (Serena) in the world, a first ever for siblings. Unlike Althea Gibson, Zina Garrison, and other African American female tennis stars whose demeanor and style of play resembled the White women dominating the sport, the Williams sisters basically reject tennis norms. They are exceptionally strong and play power games like men. They rebuff tennis "whites" in favor of form-fitting, flashy outfits in all sorts of colors. They play with their hair fixed in beaded, African-influenced cornrows that are occasionally dyed blond. The tennis world cannot remove them because the Williams sisters win. Their working-class origins mean that they don't fit into the traditional tennis world and they express little desire to mimic their White counterparts. Yet their achievements force issues of excellence and diversity to the forefront of American politics.

The danger for Black women athletes does not lie in being deemed less feminine than White women because, historically, Black women as a group have been stigmatized in this fashion. Rather, for all female athletes and for Black women athletes in particular, the danger lies in being identified as lesbians. The stereotype of women athletes as "manly" and as being lesbians and for Black women as being more "masculine" than White women converge to provide a very different interpretive context for Black female athletes. In essence, the same qualities that are uncritically celebrated for

Black male athletes can become stumbling blocks for their Black female counterparts. Corporate profits depend on representations and images, and those of Black female athletes must be carefully managed in order to win endorsements and guarantee profitability.

With its high percentage of African American women athletes, and of non-Black athletes who identify positively with Blackness, the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) realized that its profitability might suffer if the league was perceived as dominated by lesbian ballplayers. In order to ensure that the "mannish" label applied to lesbians, female athletes, and Black women as a group would not come to characterize the WNBA, the League pursued at least two strategies.<sup>38</sup> For one, WNBA players are sexualized in the media in ways that never apply to men. Their sexuality helps sell basketball, yet it must be a certain kind of sexuality that simultaneously avoids images of the muscled woman or the sports dyke and that depicts the women as sexually attractive to men (in other words, as heterosexual). For example, during its first season in 1997, early marketing of the league featured Lisa Leslie and Rebecca Lobo, two women whose facial features, long hair, and body types (Leslie was a model) both invoked traditional images of femininity. Over the years, much was made of Lisa Leslie's modeling career. Still struggling to contain the image of women as dykes, during the 2002 season, one series of advertisements focused on individual players who each gave a vignette about her life and likes. The ads followed a common pattern—the athlete would face the camera, often holding a basketball, and would say a few words. Interspersed throughout her narrative were action shots of her playing basketball, still shots of her childhood, and other visuals that presented her accomplishments. However, the ads all shared another feature—unlike their basketball uniforms that provide more than adequate coverage for their breasts and buttocks, each woman was dressed in fitted sweat pants, and in a form-fitting top that, for some, exposed a hint of their midriffs and an occasional navel. In essence, the advertisements aimed simultaneously to celebrate and "feminize" their athleticism by showing women in action and showing their navels.

The second strategy aims to feminize the women by positioning them within traditional gender ideology concerning motherhood and the family. For example, to strengthen the association between the women players and ideas of motherhood and family, the league recruits children to its games

and routinely showcases families and children on its television coverage. Pre-taped interview segments aired during games often focus on the family life of the players. Cynthia Cooper and Sheryl Swoops, two marquee players, both have been shown in this fashion. In some cases, television shots show the male partner of the player cheering on his love interest, often babysitting their child. Another strategy lies in presenting teams themselves as “families.” Shots of teams during time-outs focus on the players’ closeness, showing an emphasis on hand holding and group hugs. These dual strategies of treating the women as sexual objects and repositioning them within domestic family settings both work to contain the lesbian sexual threat of Black female basketball players. As one critic observes, “we can read the familial narratives that populate discussions of the WNBA as more than simply attempts to recontextualize muscular women within the space of domesticity. . . . The familial discourse also helps stabilize the player’s sexuality as heterosexuality even as it locates femininity in a muscular, physically active corporeality: tough, yes; dykes, no.”<sup>39</sup>

Images of working-class Black femininity all articulate with the social class system of the post-civil rights era. Depicting African American women as bitches; the sexual use of African American women’s bodies by circulating images of Black women’s promiscuity; derogating the reproductive capacities of African American women’s bodies; and efforts to refashion images of Black female athletes in order to erase lesbianism all work to obscure the closing door of racial opportunity in the post-civil rights era. On the surface, these interconnected representations offer a plausible explanation for poor and/or working-class African American women’s class status: (1) too-strong, bitchy women are less attractive to men because they are not feminine; (2) to compensate, these less-attractive women use their sexuality to “catch” men and hopefully become pregnant so that the men will marry them; and (3) men see through this game and leave these women as single mothers who often have little recourse but to either try and “catch” another man or “hustle” the government. But on another level, when it comes to poor and working-class African American women, this constellation of representations functions as ideology to justify the new social relations of hyper-ghettoization, unfinished racial desegregation, and efforts to shrink the social welfare state. Collectively these representations construct a “natural” Black femininity that in turn is central to an “authentic” Black culture.

Aggressive African American women create problems in the imperfectly desegregated post-civil rights era, because they are less likely to accept the terms of their subordination. In this context, Black “bitches” of all kinds must be censured, especially those who complain about bad housing, poor schools, abusive partners, sexual harassment, as well as their own depiction in Black popular culture. They and their children must be depicted as unsuitable candidates for racial integration. Take, for example, the resistance to poor and working-class single mothers who aim to move into White neighborhoods. Resistance to racial housing desegregation can be palpable, primarily because poor and working-class Black children are stigmatized as being aggressive, undisciplined, unruly, and unsuitable playmates for White children of any social class. The prevailing logic suggests that, in the absence of strong fathers, their too strong mothers could not teach them properly so the children repeat the cycle of inappropriate gender behavior. In this sense, the term *bitch* becomes a way of stigmatizing poor and working-class Black women who lack middle-class passivity and submissiveness. Their undesirable, inappropriate behavior justifies the discrimination that they might experience in housing, jobs, schools, and public accommodations.

The social welfare state is not alone in punishing Black women who are deemed to be too aggressive. Within African American communities, women who fail to negotiate the slippery border that has distinguished the independent Black woman from the controlling Black bitch can find themselves ridiculed, isolated, abandoned, and often in physical danger. The 2003 murder of fifteen-year-old Sakia Gunn shows what can happen to Black women who are seen as being out of their place.<sup>40</sup> But more important, the silence of major African American organizations concerning not just media images of poor and working-class Black women but their actual treatment by government officials, the men in their lives, and strangers on the street also contributes to Black women’s oppression.

**MODERN MAMMIES, BLACK LADIES, AND “EDUCATED BITCHES”:** IMAGES OF MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK WOMEN

Images of working-class Black femininity that pivot on a Black women’s body politics of bitchiness, promiscuity, and abundant fertility also affect middle-class African American women. In essence, the controlling images

associated with poor and working-class Black women become texts of what *not* to be. To achieve middle-class status, African American women must reject this gender-specific version of authenticity in favor of a politics of respectability. They must somehow figure out a way to become Black “ladies” by avoiding these working-class traps. Doing so means negotiating the complicated politics that accompany this triad of bitchiness, promiscuity, and fertility.

Middle-class African American career women encounter a curious repackaging of the controlling images generated for poor and working-class Black femininity, now reformulated for middle-class use. Images of middle-class Black femininity demonstrate a cumbersome and often contradictory link between that of modern mammy and Black lady. The Black lady image is designed to counter claims of Black women’s promiscuity. Achieving middle-class status means that Black women have rejected the unbridled “freaky” sexuality now attributed primarily to working-class Black women. At the same time, because middle-class Black women typically need to work in order to remain middle class, they cannot achieve the status of lady by withdrawing from the workforce. Images of the Black lady are designed to resolve these contradictions.

Claire Huxtable’s role on the hugely popular 1980s *Cosby Show* (played by actress Phylicia Rashad) helped shape the contours of the middle-class Black lady.<sup>41</sup> Each week, American families tuned their sets for a glimpse into the inner workings of the upper-middle-class, African American Cosby family. The Cosby family consisted of a professional married couple, their five children, and grandparents who visited from time to time. The Huxtables lived far better than the vast majority of Americans of all racial backgrounds. Their home was filled with paintings, they demonstrated a mastery of standard American English, and they seemed deeply committed to their college alma maters. The Huxtables also escaped and provided an escape from social problems then plaguing large numbers of Americans. On *The Cosby Show*, drugs, crime, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, discrimination happened to other people. The family itself was immune.

The character of Claire Huxtable exemplifies the new Black lady invented for middle- and upper-middle-class African American women. As a wife and mother, the character of Claire Huxtable was beautiful, smart, and sensuous. No cornrows, gum chewing, cursing, miniskirts, or plunging

necklines existed for the character of Claire Huxtable. Despite the fact that she was a lawyer, the show never showed her actually at her place of employment. Doing so would introduce the theme of her sexuality into the workplace, and exploring these contradictions apparently were beyond the skills of the show's writers. Instead, she was allowed to be a sexual being, but only within the confines of heterosexual marriage and family. Occasionally, she and her husband would cuddle under the covers, until they were typically interrupted by one of their five children. Despite this commitment to hearth and home, Claire Huxtable somehow managed to make law partner in record time.<sup>42</sup> Black women's sexuality was safely contained to domestic space, and within the confines of heterosexual marriage.

More recent images of Black professional women also negotiate the slippery terrain of distancing Black women from the assumptions of aggression and sexuality attributed to working-class Black women while not making middle-class Black women unsuitable for hard work. To address this dilemma, the image of Mammy, the loyal female servant created under chattel slavery, has been resurrected and modernized as a template for middle-class Black womanhood. Maneuvering through this image of the modern mammy requires a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to White and/or male authority yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations. Aggression is acceptable, just as long as it is appropriately expressed for the benefit of others. Aggression and ambition for oneself is anathema. Modern mammies must be aggressive, especially if they expect to achieve within the male-defined ethos of corporations, government, industry, and academia. To get ahead, they must in some fashion be "bitchy," often with a capital "B." Yet because these same qualities simultaneously defeminize Black middle-class women and mark them with the trappings of working-class, authentic Blackness that is anathema in desegregated settings, middle-class Black female aggression must be carefully channeled.

The post-civil rights era has generated its share of representations of modern mammies, many of who also function as Black ladies. This combination of Black lady and modern mammy seems most evident on network television, a medium that reaches a broad audience. Unlike Claire Huxtable, who was almost always shown at home, these modern mammies are almost exclusively shown in the workplace. Many apparently either

have no family life or such lives are clearly secondary to the requirements of their jobs. These women are tough, independent, smart, and asexual. But they are also devoted to their organizations, their jobs, and, upon occasion, their White male bosses. They are team players and their participation on the team is predicated upon their willingness to lack ambition for running the team and never to put family ahead of the team.

Despite the pressures to depict undying loyalty to the job, several representations of modern mammies do manage to raise but not resolve the contradictions associated with this representation. For example, the character of Ella Farmer (eloquently played by the late actress Lynn Thigpen) on the network television show *The District*, works for the Washington, D.C. Police Department as a high-level data analyst. Ella's commitment to African Americans is clear—she takes in an orphaned nephew and displays qualities of care and competence that are refreshing after decades of traditional, familyless mammies. She is clearly a Black lady. She uses standard American English, dresses impeccably, and always has a dignified demeanor. Her character is also staunchly devoted to the “Chief,” her White boss. Ella is loyal, and this is an important quality in depictions of modern mammies. One incredible episode shows the extent of Ella's loyalty. Unlike other modern mammies who are destined to remain single, Ella not only managed to meet an available professional African American man (e.g., he had no criminal record, he had a good job, he was interested in neither men nor White women, and he had no apparent child support payments), but he asked her to marry him. The night before her wedding, Ella receives a call from the “Chief” that he and her coworkers are under quarantine because a deadly virus may have infected them. Ella leaves her groom-to-be and her orphaned nephew and rushes to headquarters. Apparently oblivious to putting her own life in danger, she tries to enter the building in order to be with the Chief and other quarantined staff members and is restrained by police officers. Even more remarkably, Ella expressed this devotion hatless in a raging snowstorm, sporting a stylish hairstyle that was freshly done in anticipation of her wedding. The message is clear: job first, marriage second.

The character of Anita Van Buren (played by S. Epatha Merkerson), a lieutenant in the New York City Police Department on the long-running show *Law and Order*, provides another image of a strong Black female professional that is developed within the strictures of the Black lady and the



modern mammy. Unlike the undying loyalty expected of a modern mammy, this character reveals the cracks in the ideology. Lieutenant Van Buren supervises two men, both of whom respect her judgment. She also has a family. They are discussed in the workplace, but this character, like virtually all of the characters on the show, is never shown at home. But Lieutenant Van Buren's troubles become apparent when she refuses to be too subservient, a problem within a police department that is patterned on the military. Her loyalty is questioned when she files a discrimination suit against the department because she has not been promoted. The characters of Ella Farmer and Lieutenant Anita Van Buren both break new ground in depicting strong Black women who are in charge. But despite the transgressive elements of their characters, neither *The District* nor *Law and Order* unseats one main criterion of modern mummies. Ella Farmer and Lieutenant Anita Van Buren both remain loyal to social institutions of law and order that are run by White men.

Despite the considerable attention paid to Anita Hill in Black feminist theorizing, Oprah Winfrey has had a far greater impact within American culture than any other living African American woman.<sup>43</sup> Oprah is one of the richest women in the world. In 2003, Winfrey became the first Black woman on *Forbes* magazine's list of billionaires, two years after Black Entertainment Television's founder Robert Johnson became the first Black billionaire. A good deal of Winfrey's success lies in her ability to market herself within the familiar realm of the mammy, not violate the tenets of being a Black lady, yet reap the benefits of her performance for herself. Following in the footsteps of Hattie McDaniel, Winfrey's career seemingly echoes McDaniel's reply to those who criticized her acceptance of stereotypical roles. McDaniel once said, "Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one!"<sup>44</sup> Winfrey constitutes the penultimate successful modern mammy whom African American and, more amazingly, White women should emulate. Winfrey markets herself in the context of the synergistic relationship among entertainment, advertising, and news that frame contemporary Black popular culture. Winfrey began in soft news reporting, a format that positioned her to assume a local Chicago talk show and learn the ropes of delivering the all-important "money shot."<sup>45</sup> Her success in Chicago grew into the hugely popular *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Winfrey's corporate power is impressive. Her show mixes a winning com-

bination of news and entertainment, or infotainment. She instructs and raises general consciousness on a list of important social issues ranging from child abuse to wife battering to rape. Almost single-handedly, Winfrey got America to read, an impressive accomplishment in a mass-media-saturated society that balks at funding libraries and public education. Having a book listed on her "Oprah's Book Club" ensured overnight success. Winfrey entertains, makes money, and instructs, a stunning fusion of entertainment, advertising, and news. Winfrey's immense success provides a stamp of endorsement to any philosophy that she might endorse that goes far beyond any expertise she might possess on any given topic.

Yet Winfrey reinforces an individualistic ideology of social change that counsels her audiences to rely solely on themselves. Change yourself and your personal problems will disappear, advises Winfrey. If we each took personal responsibility for changing ourselves, social problems in the United States would vanish. On the surface, this advice appears to reinforce the themes of a changed self and personal responsibility as constituting important criteria for Black women's arrival in the middle class. These themes are recognizable to many Black women who struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet (media figure Iyanla Vanzant also built a large following among African American women with basically the same advice). Yet Winfrey's message stops far short of linking such individual changes to the actual resources and opportunities that are needed to escape from poverty, stop an abusive spouse from battering, or avoid job discrimination. The organizational group politics that helped create the very opportunities that Winfrey herself enjoys are minimized in favor of a message of personal responsibility that resonates with the theme of "personal responsibility" used by elites to roll back social welfare programs. Even *Law and Order's* fictional Lieutenant Anita Van Buren found that individual effort was not enough to ensure her promotion on merit. When she sued, she was punished.

When African American middle-class women stray too far from the narrow confines of the Black lady and the modern mammy, the price can be high. Anita Hill's treatment during the 1992 Senate confirmation hearings of now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is instructive in this regard. Hill demonstrated all of the qualities of the assimilated, acceptable middle-class African American woman. Hill exemplified a politics of respectability—she stayed in school, got good grades, spoke standard

American English, and believed in the traditional American values of family, faith, and hard work. She never married, remained childless, and was devoted to her job. Yet because Hill was the target of sexual harassment, she was called upon to testify about her experiences years later. Virtually overnight, Hill as exemplary Black career woman became derogated as a dangerous, out of control threat to the social order. Given the lack of scandal in Hill's personal history, her demeanor as a witness, and her basic credibility, Hill's veracity was challenged. Her reliability as a witness was disputed on the grounds that she was acting out a fantasy of unrequited love for Thomas, a man who was her superior and who might be an ideal future husband who would protect her and allow her to share in his power. Thomas apparently rejected her and married a White woman, behavior that sparked a deep desire for revenge. Amazingly, this version of events actually fostered the rediscovery of *erotomania*, a medical disorder that first officially appeared 1987 as a subcategory of Delusional Disorder that was used as a political weapon against her.<sup>46</sup> In brief, Hill was accused of being crazy.

Hill's race and gender made this fabricated story plausible. Positioning Hill within the controlling image of the single, frustrated, ambitious Black woman who, unlike Mammy, did not show loyalty to her boss, contributed to the perception of Hill as crazy. Her physical appearance as a dark-skinned Black woman, one that allegedly rendered her less attractive than Thomas's White wife, also added plausibility to this diagnosis of erotomania. Hill's efforts to counter these accusations by bringing her family with her to the hearings did not prevail. Moreover, the core idea that emerged from this event was not solely that Black women can and will use false charges of sexual harassment. The barrier to success for ambitious Black men no longer consisted solely of White men (and women). A more insidious enemy had appeared, namely, Black women in close proximity to Black men who use Black men's trust to betray them.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, this theme of betrayal feeds into a broader community norm that sees independent Black women as somehow failing to support Black men. These are the women who "don't know how to treat a brother."

Hill's story illustrates the contradictions that face middle-class African American women who become judged within the confines of modern mummies and Black ladies. In Hill's case, the mammy and the lady collided head-on, with Hill herself left as the casualty. As modern mummies, such

women are expected to put everyone else's wishes ahead of their own needs; in fictional Ella Farmer's case, her own wedding and personal happiness in favor of the "Chief's" predicament and, in Hill's case, Clarence Thomas's alleged desires for sexual favors as the cost of keeping her job. But succumbing to his demands would have meant that Hill no longer fell within the equally confining image of Black ladyhood. Rejecting his demands eventually exposed Hill to the charge of aggression and bitchiness. Being the ultimate corporate, academic, or government mammy yields a lifetime of faithful service that can border on exploitation. These representations depict Black women professionals as women alone, either because their dedication to their careers has meant that they have not devoted sufficient time to their personal lives or because they have some sort of negative trait that makes them less desirable as marital partners, in Hill's case, a latent case of erotomania.

More recently, the stricture of the Black lady and the modern mammy are making room for a new image, namely, the educated Black bitch. These women have money, power, and good jobs. But they are beautiful and, in some ways, they invoke Pam Grier's persona as "Bad Bitches" that control their own bodies and sexuality. For example, in the 1992 film *Boomerang*, Marcus Graham (played by Eddie Murphy) is a young, successful marketing executive within a Black-run firm who treats women as conquests. As a ladies' man, Graham has no trouble finding women until he meets Jacqueline (Robin Givens), a powerful executive whose values concerning power, money, and sexuality closely resemble his own. Jacqueline turns the tables by treating Graham in the same way that he has treated others. By the end of the film, Jacqueline has been demonized and installed as the archetypal educated Black bitch, Graham has been humbled and humanized by her abuse, and he is then able to see the beauty in another educated Black woman (played by Halle Berry), who has supported him all along. She is educated, but, unlike Jacqueline, she is appropriately subordinate. In a more playful and muted version of the educated Black bitch representation, Vivica Fox's depiction of the memorable character Lysterine in the 1997 film *Boozy Call* also shows an educated, middle-class Black woman who is not searching for a committed relationship but who wants men for the sex they can provide. In contrast to Jacqueline, who is demoted in her job, Lysterine shows no such passion—she's in search of good booty. Both characters raise important questions about the migration of repre-

sentations of working-class “bad bitches” to the terrain of middle-class Black professional women who earned their own money.

Together, representations of Black ladies, modern mammies, and educated Black bitches help justify the continued workplace discrimination targeted toward many middle-class African American women. They lack loyalty (refuse to go out in a snowstorm in their wedding night to save their bosses), they are not ladylike enough (Anita Hill’s alleged erotomania that surfaced when Thomas rejected her advances), or they are so cutthroat and ruthless that they cannot be trusted (Jacqueline’s turning the tables and Lysterine’s values concerning the booty call). These representations also are used to explain why so many African American women fail to find committed male partners—they allegedly work too hard, do not know how to support Black men, and/or have character traits that make them unappealing to middle-class Black men. Only rarely do the families, friendships, and love relationships that African American women actually have find media validation. For example, the numbers of Black women who, through separation, divorce, or the decision to have children without male partners, live as single parents are routinely seen as having a lesser form of family life. Even more rarely are relationships that fall outside the scope of acceptable societal norms validated in mass media space. For example, with the exception of the HBO series *The Wire* that debuted in 2002, representations of Black lesbians in committed coupled relationships remain rare. This show is unusual in that, unlike the characters of Ella Farmer and Lieutenant Van Buren who also work on behalf of law and order, the character of Shakima Greggs, an African-American/Korean-American female narcotics detective (played by Sonja Sohn), is in an openly lesbian relationship. Culturally Black, Kima is shown on the job, often engaged in everyday chitchat with her male colleagues about her “woman.” She is also shown at home with all of the conflicts that were denuded from characters such as Claire Huxtable. Kima argues with her Black lesbian partner Cheryl, who fears for Kima’s safety on dangerous narcotics details and wishes that she would place more emphasis on her law school studies. Kima and Cheryl are shown in sexual situations, a rarity in mass media. On *The Wire*, the committed love relationship of this Black lesbian couple is treated as no different than any other relationship on the series. This ordinary treatment thus provides a mass media depiction of middle-class Black women that remains highly unusual.

\* \* \*

In essence, the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America. Because presenting African American culture as being indistinguishable from other cultures is not necessarily entertaining, newsworthy, or marketable, depictions of Black culture needed to be *different* from White norms, yet still supportive of them. This media constructed Blackness took class-specific forms that mirrored changes in actual social class formations among African Americans. The arrival of middle-class “Black” respectability, as evidenced by the strictures of the Black lady and the modern mammy, helped shape a discourse about racial integration and African American women’s place in it. For example, the Cosby family was definitely “Black” because they had Black cultural referents in their home (artwork, they listened to jazz, etc.), yet their values allegedly matched those of White middle-class Americans. Such images participated in an “enlightened racism” whereby Whites could claim that they were not racist, primarily because they would welcome Black families like the Cosbys as neighbors, despite data on patterns of urban migration suggesting that Whites actually preferred racially homogeneous neighborhoods.<sup>48</sup> New patterns of color-blind racism needed a few acceptable, assimilated Blacks who could meet the high standards set by the Cosby family and, for Black women, those of modern mammies and Black ladies.

Working-class Black authenticity also became reworked in the context of color-blind racism. During this same era, the allegedly authentic Black culture associated with working-class and poor African Americans also populated mass media. Working-class Black culture also depicted ideas about difference from assumed White norms using gender-specific images; only, in this case, commodified Black culture contained elements of danger and excitement. Black hip-hop culture, with its images of urban neighborhoods as wild, out-of-control, criminal havens, its rap artists as self-proclaimed gangstas, and its rejection of conservative family values via young mothers with babies and no husbands also entered American homes. Invoking historical stories of Black promiscuity, depictions of Black women’s sexuality were central to this sense of excitement and danger. Television enabled viewers to simulate the excitement and sense of adventure that prior groups of Whites accessed by going on African safari, visiting the naughty Harlem jazz clubs of the 1920s, or reading the travelogues

of survivors of these exploits. Identifying the actual “dangers” and “excitement” of working-class Black youth culture as authentic Black culture, and selling it to audiences in a global context, satisfied the demands of the global marketplace. Gender-specific images of Black bitches and bad mothers flourished in this climate.

In this context, it is important to remember that ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that produce the controlling images of Black femininity discussed here are never static. Rather, they are always internally inconsistent, reflect the experiences of the people who agree with and refute them, and thus are constantly subject to struggle.<sup>49</sup> As the work of Black female artists within rap and the broadening of images of Black professional women on television suggest, contemporary images of Black femininity reflect these contradictions. How do those of Black masculinity fit within this new racism? Moreover, how do gender-specific images of Black femininity and Black masculinity work together?

## BOOTY CALL

### Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity

*1997:* The film *Booty Call* joins the ranks of a series of Hollywood romantic comedies that explore sexuality, love, and commitment in the 1990s. By following the exploits of four African Americans on a double date, the film examines the intricacies of the booty call, namely, the act of calling or contacting a person for the sole purpose of having sex. Rushon and Bunz, two men with conflicting views on commitment, differ on how Black men should treat Black women. Bunz believes in making booty calls and sees women as good for little else. Rushon has long followed Bunz's advice. But now that Rushon has been dating Nikki, his girlfriend of seven weeks, he questions the logic of the booty call. Nikki and Lysterine, the potential sex partners of the two men, both insist upon safe sex, yet they also differ in their perceptions of sexuality, love, and commitment. Nikki's search for a commitment from Rushon before having sex is far removed from Lysterine's views that booty calls can go both ways. During the evening, Nikki's resistance softens and Lysterine becomes enamored with Bunz. The women are ready, but they will only have safe sex. Thus begins the comedy—the seemingly endless search by Rushon and Bunz for condoms that turn into one disaster after another. Will these men ever get the booty?



Virtually overnight, the term *booty* came to permeate contemporary popular culture. Jennifer Lopez's booty is such an important asset to her career that she allegedly insures her buttocks. To help women who are less well endowed, advertisements sell booty enhancement surgery. A 1992 *Newsweek* article on "Buzzwords" among teenagers identifies *punk* (bad, not hip, uncool), *White* (someone who's bad at basketball), and *booty* (sex) as widely used teenage lingo. MTV shows an hour-long documentary devoted to the history of the booty. Who can forget the impact of hip-hop artist Sisquó's "Thong Song," the soundtrack for a fashion style that had women in the early 2000s proudly showing hints of their thong underwear (covering booty cleavage) under low-cut jeans? The term *booty call* also entered popular vernacular well before the 1997 film of the same name. It is now installed on many college campuses as a term for sex. Like urban legends, stories about African American men who seek booty calls (men who use women for sex and who reject commitment) circulate among African American women. On one campus, an African American female student who worked the front desk of a large dormitory regaled her class with stories of Black men who repeatedly signed in and out on the same night, visiting different women for booty calls. Should we erroneously think that only men make booty calls, women engage in booty calls as well. In this usage, a woman will call a man to come over in the middle of the night for sex (booty).

Two sets of meanings of the term *booty* provide an interpretive context for explaining this fascination with the booty. The first set reflects ideas about property and masculinity. This strand defines booty as plunder taken from an enemy in times of war. The actual booty is a valuable prize, award, or gain that cannot be given away—it must be taken. Thus, because this usage applies to goods or property seized by force, an element of violence is part of this very definition of *booty*. Because men historically have been soldiers, this characterization reflects ideas about masculinity, property, and violence. These meanings of *booty* draw upon images of conquest, warfare, and property that install the term *booty* within a staunchly masculine frame.<sup>1</sup>

The second set of meanings of *booty* reflects ideas about sexuality and race. The 2000 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* provides the following meanings: 1. *Slang* The buttocks. 2. *Vulgar slang* a. The vulva or vagina. b. Sexual intercourse. Moreover, the

dictionary speculates on the origins of this usage of *booty*. Describing the etymology of the term, it points out that *booty* may be from African American vernacular English, from the obsolete Black English *booty*, and perhaps may be an alternation of the term *body*. What an interesting series of connections— buttocks, women's genitalia, sexual intercourse, and the body overall—all drawn from Western perceptions of Black people and culture. The constellation of terms that surround the term *booty* not only suggests that women of African descent are ground zero for the meanings associated with the term *booty* but also that historical meanings of Black promiscuity are alive and well in contemporary popular culture. A simple Google search of the term *booty* should dispel doubts—many of the websites clearly link Blackness, sexuality, and African American women.

When combined, these meanings of the term *booty* form a backdrop for contemporary mass media-generated gender ideology, with special meaning for Black masculinity.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the new racism in which miseducation and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished increasing numbers of young Black men, aggression and claiming the prizes of urban warfare gain in importance. Being tough and having street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity.<sup>3</sup> When joined to understandings of booty as sexuality, especially raw, uncivilized sexuality, women's sexuality becomes the actual spoils of war. In this context, sexual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity. For far too many Black men, all that seems to be left to them is access to the booty, and they can become depressed or dangerous if that access is denied. In this scenario, Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty.

Mass media's tendency to blur the lines between fact and fiction has important consequences for perceptions of Black culture and Black people. Images matter, and just as those of Black femininity changed in tandem with societal changes, those of Black masculinity are undergoing a similar process. As is the case for controlling images of Black femininity, representations of Black masculinity reflect a similar pattern of highlighting certain ideas, in this case, the sexuality and violence that crystallizes in the term booty, and the need to develop class-specific representations of Black masculinity that will justify the new racism. In this context, some representations of Blackness become commonsense "truths." For example,

Black men in perpetual pursuit of booty calls may appear to be more authentically “Black” than Black men who study, and the experiences of poor and working-class Black men may be established as being more authentically Black than those of middle- and upper-middle class African American men.

**ATHLETES AND CRIMINALS:  
IMAGES OF WORKING-CLASS BLACK MEN**

In 1997, professional basketball player Latrell Sprewell choked P. J. Carlesimo, his coach on the Golden State Warriors. Almost overnight, this three-time all-star became a symbol of what many saw as the worst of basketball. He instantly stood for how skewed professional sports had become, an “indictment of a generation of jocks seen not only as too black but too pampered, too lawless, too greedy.”<sup>4</sup> For many, Sprewell’s actions also symbolized the contradictions of how Western ideologies depict Black men’s bodies. The combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence has long been associated with African American men. Because Sprewell and similar “bad boy athletes” were “blackening” the sport, their behaviors reflected changing race relations in the wider society. In some ways, the Sprewell incident also marked a turning point in masculine gender politics. Influenced by a White male military model that often defined discipline in terms of the legitimate authority of father figures, Carlesimo’s coaching tradition was in decline. Sprewell was at the forefront of a generation of players who, raised on rap, “see any type of disrespect as an assault on their manhood and a stifling of their creativity.”<sup>5</sup> In short, Carlesimo was not Sprewell’s daddy, and because both were now in the pros, the father-son coaching style of college basketball no longer applied.

Sprewell, other Black basketball players, and Black people in hip-hop culture signal a reworking of historical representations of Black masculinity, ironically, by using those very same representations in new ways. Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence. The buck, brute, the rapist, and similar controlling images routinely applied to African American men all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that

routinely translates into wealth and power. Instead, relegating Black men to the work of the body was designed to keep them poor and powerless. Once embodied, Black men were seen as being limited by their racialized bodies.

In the current context of commodified Black popular culture, the value attached to physical strength, sexuality, and violence becomes reconfigured in the context of the new racism. In some cases, the physical strength, aggressiveness, and sexuality thought to reside in Black men's bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear. On the one hand, the bodies of athletes and models are admired, viewed as entertaining, and used to sell a variety of products. For example, Keith Harrison, an African American male model for the Polo clothing line, never speaks but symbolizes a Black male body that should be admired. Similarly, the hip-hop magazine *Vibe* relies heavily on Black male models and athletes to sell gym shoes, clothes, CDs, and other trappings of hip-hop culture. On the other hand, the image of the feared Black male body also reappears across entertainment, advertisement, and news. As any Black man can testify who has seen a purse-clutching White woman cross the street upon catching sight of him, his physical presence can be enough to invoke fear, regardless of his actions and intentions. This reaction to Black men's bodies emboldens police to stop motorists in search of drugs and to command Black youth to assume the position for random street searches. Racial profiling is based on this very premise—the *potential* threat caused by African American men's bodies. Across the spectrum of admiration and fear, the bodies of Black men are what matters.

In this context, the contested images of Black male athletes, especially “bad boy” Black athletes who mark the boundary between admiration and fear, speak to the tensions linking Western efforts to control Black men, and Black men's resistance to this same process. Athletics constitutes a modern version of historical practices that saw Black men's bodies as needing taming and training for practical use. Given the small numbers of Black men who actually make it to professional sports, the visibility of Black male athletes within mass media speaks to something more than the exploits of actual athletes. Instead, the intense scrutiny paid to sports in general, and to basketball players in particular, operates as a morality play about American masculinity and race relations. Black athletes, and their varying degrees of acceptance and rejection of the types of social scripts

held out by Carlesimo, become important visual stages for playing out the new racism. In essence, the myth of upward social mobility through sports represents, for poor and working-class Black men, a gender-specific social script for an honest way out of poverty. Its rules are clear—submit to White male authority in order to learn how to become a man.

Spectacle is an important component of the depiction of Black athletes, especially in the current climate of mass media entertainment and advertising.<sup>6</sup> Boxing has long provided this type of spectacle for American audiences. Black boxers in particular are seen as inherently violent and in need of “trainers” who can focus their talent toward victory in the ring. Whereas a string of seemingly violent Black men have provided brutal spectacles for boxing fans, boxer Mike Tyson elevated the image of the Black brute to new levels. Ironically, Tyson also became a hero within hip-hop, representing, according to Nelson George, “a bare-chested, powerful projection of the dreams of dominance that lay thwarted in so many hearts.”<sup>7</sup> As a result of his physical prowess in the ring and because his force and irreverence earned respect, Tyson is mentioned in scores of rap records. At the same time, Tyson’s behavior in the ring after serving a prison term (for biting off part of another boxer’s ear) makes him a suspect hero. Moreover, Tyson’s history of domestic violence and his rape conviction suggest that the spectacle Tyson provides for White and Black audiences alike may be as much about gender and sexuality as about race.<sup>8</sup>

African American professional athletes reveal varying degrees of acceptance and rejection of this morality play that constructs Black men by their physicality and then markets images of boxers, basketball players, and football lineman (less so, quarterbacks) to a seemingly insatiable public. Black male athletes in high school and college sports, especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds, often have little recourse but to follow the rules. But professional players who are the focus of media spectacles have far more options. Not only do these athletes signal changes in American race relations, superstar athletes are valuable commodities. Todd Boyd describes the new social context for superstar athletes that contributes to this new attitude of defiance:

It is important to understand that Black men, especially young Black men, are held in the highest contempt by a large segment of society. This has always been the case, and this contempt has always been

exposed through sport. Yet, in modern society, these same Black men are often entertainment for the masses. Though it is acceptable for these men to entertain, they are held in contempt for the money they make because of their entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

Black men who earn large salaries but who are deferential and appear to uphold American values are acceptable. The problems arise when players realize their value, their significance to the game, and try to capitalize on their accomplishments. Then they are often held in the highest contempt.

Black male athletes playing professional sports have worked within these politics and have used them to upset both the images themselves as well as the financial arrangements that underlie the exploitation of Black men's bodies. For example, Julius Erving played professional basketball when the NBA had an image problem. On the court, he was a model of propriety, yet his style of play legitimated Black playground ball (primarily dunking). Moreover, his acquisition of a Coca Cola bottling plant in the early 1980s established him as an entrepreneur. Following Erving's lead, Magic Johnson became an icon in the symbolic battles between the LA Lakers and his counterpart Larry Bird on the Boston Celtics. Their careers marked a rivalry that persisted into the 1980s and that set the stage for a new era in basketball.<sup>10</sup> Johnson was not just a player; he used his basketball earnings to invest in inner-city theaters and community development.

The rise of hip-hop and its relationship to basketball signals a new set of social relations concerning Black athletes and their unwillingness to put up with the political and economic arrangements of the past. Like Latrell Sprewell, Black basketball players are often described as insolent, unruly, and in need of punishment.<sup>11</sup> Sprewell has not been alone in this pantheon of African American athletes that American sports fans simultaneously admire and hate. Sprewell may have choked his coach, but his lucrative contract with the Knicks and his performance on the court bought him respect. Apparently being insolent and unruly is not a problem if a Black man can play. In some cases, the bad boy image may enhance a player's reputation. Take, for example, how Alan Iverson's career progressed after he joined the Philadelphia 76ers in 1996. To Iverson's way of thinking, he was an entertainer, and his quick crossover dribble thrilled fans and helped revitalize the sport. His image, however, made him an antihero. By retaining his cornrows and continuing to hang out with his friends from the

hood, his run-ins with the law provided much bad press. “He was . . . a walking reminder that the days of *cultural* crossover, when black stars such as Julius Erving and Michael Jordan sought and won white acceptance, were over. Iverson was leading a new generation of ballplayers, kids much less interested in acquiescing to white, mainstream taste. . . . It is a constant theme in rap music: Selling out and forgetting where you come from is anathema.”<sup>12</sup>

In this context, Black male athletes who refuse to bow down to abusive coaches unsettle prevailing norms of race and gender. They reject the family drama script that says that players should view their coaches as father figures, and that fans should emulate athletes as role models. When basketball great Charles Barkley retired from the NBA in 2000 after sixteen years of professional basketball, he left behind more than impressive statistics—more than twenty thousand points, ten thousand rebounds, and four thousand assists.<sup>13</sup> Barkley became the first athlete since Muhammad Ali and Bill Russell to question the media’s insistence on conferring role model status on Black athletes who modeled deferential behavior. Barkley advised youth not to use him as a role model, but to follow their parents and teachers instead. Breaking ranks with commonsense patriarchal beliefs that young Black men were lost without the firm hand of older men, Barkley pointed out, “My mother and grandmother were two of the hardest-working ladies in the world, and they raised me to work hard.”<sup>14</sup> Should there be any confusion, Barkley even made a Nike commercial in which he proclaimed, “I am not a role model.” In one interview, he vowed, “I’m a strong black man—I don’t have to be what you want me to be.”<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, Barkley became caught up in a media-generated morality play in which he was routinely pitted against other Black male athletes who were far more deferential to White authority. Whereas Michael Jordan refused to condemn the exploitative labor practices used to make the gym shoes that bore his image and from which he profited, Barkley routinely spoke his mind. Take, for example, his comments to the press in a Philadelphia locker room in which Barkley reputedly said: “just because you give Charles Barkley a lot of money, it doesn’t mean I’m not going to voice my opinions. Me getting twenty rebounds ain’t important. We’ve got people homeless on our streets and the media is crowding around my locker. It’s ludicrous.”<sup>16</sup> Barkley also injured his own cause by inadvertently spitting on a little girl while aiming for a courtside heckler who was yelling

racial epithets. As one writer points out, "in the soap opera narrative of sports, Barkley's 'badness' was set against Jordan's 'goodness,'" leaving little room for the complicated, multifaceted Charles Barkley.<sup>17</sup>

The father-figure thesis assumes that young Black men need tough coaches who will instill much-needed discipline in the lives of fatherless and therefore unruly Black boys. For example, an incident at Indiana University that led to the subsequent firing of coach Bobby Knight for physically attacking an African American player was not uniformly censured. Many believed that young Black players, lacking male role models in their lives, need the strong hand of a coach, even an abusive one such as Knight. The role model thesis also suggests that Black male youth in general need images of successful, professional Black male athletes as positive role models. Little mention is made of the fact that basketball and sports confine young Black boys to achievements of the body and not of the mind. Most Black American boys will never achieve the wealth and fame of their athletic role models through sports. Keeping them mesmerized with sports heroes may actually weaken their ability to pursue other avenues to success. Moreover, the role-model thesis underestimates the motivation of legions of Black boys who work hard at things for which they think they have a future. Theses of natural Black athletic ability notwithstanding, NBA players rarely get as far as they do without hard work. For example, at 6'4" Charles Barkely is short by NBA standards. He developed his skill through practice. In tenth grade he shot baskets every night, sometimes all night if he could get away with it, and mastered his leaping skills by jumping back and forth over a four-foot chain-link fence.<sup>18</sup> The summer before his senior year in college, Latrell Sprewell made himself into a perimeter shooter by, every day, taking nearly five hundred shots from twelve feet. Then he'd take five hundred shots from thirteen feet, and then fourteen feet, moving a foot at a time until he improved his three-point shooting range.<sup>19</sup>

The bottom line for professional Black athletes is that they can reject people who would reject them because their wealth enables them to do so. Todd Boyd describes the new attitude:

When you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you say, "I don't give a fuck," you then become empowered, liberated, controller of your own destiny. This is certainly the case in basketball,



because the players make enough money to be able not to give a fuck, as money is the ultimate source of liberation in capitalist America.<sup>20</sup>

For Boyd, athletes with money are in a position to critique the very system that allegedly rewards them. This is one reason why figures like Iverson, Sprewell, and Barkley are so hated and revered by Whites and Blacks alike.

Some Black men's bodies may be admired, as is the case for athletes, but other Black male bodies symbolize fear. Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images of that center on Black male bodies, namely, Black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline. The controlling image of Black men as criminals or as deviant beings encapsulates this perception of Black men as inherently violent and/or hyper-heterosexual and links this representation to poor and/or working-class African American men. Again, this representation is more often applied to poor and working-class men than to their more affluent counterparts, but all Black men are under suspicion of criminal activity or breaking rules of some sort.

This image of Black male deviancy crystallized in criminality is far from benign—the United States incarcerates more Black men than any other country. Whereas Black men constitute 8 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise approximately 50 percent of the prison population. By any measure, the size of the U.S. inmate population is enormous—the rate of incarceration in the United States is about 727 prisoners per 100,000 people. The vast majority of other countries incarcerate far fewer people. Most European countries, for example, imprison fewer than 100 people per 100,000 residents, a rate more than seven times lower than that of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

Covering up incarceration on such a mass scale requires powerful media images that reward poor and working-class Black youth who submit to White male authority by using athletics for honest upward social mobility, and punish others who do not. When it comes to representations of Black male deviance, several important variations exist. The thug or “gangsta” constitutes one contemporary controlling image. The thug is inherently physical and, unlike the athlete, his physicality is neither admired nor can it be easily exploited for White gain. The “gangsta” may be crafty, but the essence of his identity lies in the inherent violence asso-

ciated with his physicality. Media representations of African American men as thugs grew in the post-civil rights era. Alan Iverson basically took the “thug” images out of the ghetto and inserted it onto the basketball court.

Mass media marketing of thug life to African American youth diverts attention away from social policies that deny Black youth education and jobs. It also seems designed to scare Whites and African Americans alike into thinking that racial integration of seemingly poor and working-class Black boys (the allegedly authentic Blacks) is dangerous. Who wants to live next door to a thug or sit next to one in school? In this context, the phenomenon in which young African Americans seemingly celebrate elements of thug life seems counterintuitive because looking and/or acting like a thug attracts discriminatory treatment.<sup>22</sup> Yet the depiction of thug life in hip-hop remains one of the few places Black poor and working-class men can share their view of the world in public. Raps about drugs, crime, prison, prostitution, child abandonment, and early death may seem fabricated, but these social problems are also a way of life for far too many Black youth.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, the work of artists like Tupac Shakur simultaneously affirms the realities of thug life yet critiques its existence and continuation. Tupac symbolized the contradictions of the hip-hop generation. He is routinely pegged as a gangsta rapper, yet his work ranged over several genres of rap.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Tupac symbolized the tensions of an era. “What did it mean to be a child of the Black Panthers, to have a postrevolutionary childhood?” asks cultural critic Michael Dyson.<sup>25</sup> Dyson’s book-length monograph examines the complexities of Tupac’s life, his straddling of the ideals of revolutionary politics, and the materialism that forms the downside of hip-hop culture. Using Tupac’s life and death as emblematic of an era, Dyson provides a provocative analysis of the difference between thugs and revolutionaries. Arguing that Tupac lives the “tension between revolutionary ambition and thug passion,” Dyson suggests that revolutionaries and thugs alike share a worldview in which flipping the economic order is the reason for social rebellion.<sup>26</sup> They both see problems and they both want change. Yet thug logic undermines the society that the revolutionary seeks to change. “Thug ambition is unapologetically predatory, circumventing the fellow feeling and group solidarity demanded of revolutionaries,” Dyson contends.<sup>27</sup>

In the political economy of hip-hop culture, as a genre, gangsta rap reflects these tensions between actual thug life and a commodified thug persona that was marketed and sold in the global marketplace. Tupac Shakur's career came to an end when gangsta reality and representation converged. Following a Mike Tyson fight, an unknown assailant gunned him down. In contrast, other gangsta rappers keep a tight rein on separating their personal and professional lives. Take, for example, the contradictions that define the career of gangsta rapper Ice Cube. Ice Cube promoted the Nation of Islam's ideology of self-help and self-respect but also made a bundle "hustling St. Ides Malt liquor in the ghetto."<sup>28</sup> His racial politics seem inextricably linked with a dangerous gender ideology that profits from the marketability of rebellious Black masculinity. His 1990 debut solo album *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* deals with racism in law enforcement, sexual irresponsibility, and other social issues, yet the vulgarity and misogyny of his subsequent work is legendary. Despite his protestations that he only uses vulgarities to communicate with people who would otherwise tune him out, he derogates women by counseling his listeners "you can't trust no bitch."<sup>29</sup> Ironically, despite this ghetto persona, Ice Cube, actually named O'Shea Jackson, lives in a wealthy White neighborhood, in a gated home, with his wife and three children. He was raised in a two-parent family in a middle-class residential area of south central Los Angeles, has never been in prison, and graduated from the wealthiest high school in Los Angeles.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Tupac, whose childhood poverty and ongoing problems with the law exposed him not just to the representations but to the realities of his gangsta persona, apparently Ice Cube knew what a convincing gangsta performance could buy.

In a mass media context that blurs fiction and reality, the effectiveness of attempts by Tupac, Ice Cube, and other Black men to seize the power of the media in order to unsettle representations of Black criminality have come under close scrutiny. Given the potential power of mass media, the language in rap has attracted considerable controversy, especially negative reactions to the widespread use of the term *niggah*. As legal scholar Randall Kennedy points out, the term *nigger* has long been featured in African American folk humor. Before the 1970s, it rarely appeared in the routines of professional comedians and was extremely rare in shows performed before racially integrated audiences. With live shows and a string of albums, Richard Pryor changed all of this. Pryor's political humor

defied social conventions that accepted Black comedians as clowns but rejected them as satirists. Pryor opened the door for those who followed, both in comedy (Chris Rock) and the now ubiquitous use of the term *niggah* within hip-hop culture in ways that contest historical views of Black men as weak and subordinate.<sup>31</sup> In essence, many Black men aim to do with the term *nigger* what members of other oppressed groups have done with similar slurs. They throw the slur back at the oppressor by changing its meaning. They have added a “positive meaning to *nigger*, just as women, gays, lesbians, poor whites, and children born out of wedlock have defiantly appropriated and revalued such words as *bitch*, *cunt*, *queer*, *dyke*, *red-neck*, *cracker*, and *bastard*.”<sup>32</sup>

Western traditions of presenting Black men as embodied, sexualized beings foster another variation of seeing Black men’s bodies of sites of inherent deviance. Because sexuality has been such an important part of the depiction of Black masculinity, Black men’s bodies remain highly sexualized within contemporary mass media. Images of Black men often reduce them not only to bodies (the case of the athletes) but also to body parts, especially the penis. In analyzing the depiction of Black men in *Hustler* magazine, a popular periodical whose primary readership consists of working-class White men, Gail Dines found ample representations of Black male promiscuity. Dines argues that in movies and magazines that feature Black men, the focus of the camera and plot is often on the size of the Black penis and on Black men’s allegedly insatiable sexual appetite for White women. Searching for a similar pattern in *Hustler*, Dines found that Black men were most often found in cartoons in which they could be caricatured, and that a major feature of the humor presented centered on the size and deployment of the Black male penis. Using the depiction of King Kong as a frame of reference, Dines observes: “whereas the original Kong lacked a penis, the *Hustler* version had, as his main characteristic, a huge black penis that is often wrapped around the ‘man’s’ neck or sticking out of his trouser leg. The penis, whether erect or limp, visually dominates the cartoon and is the focus of humor. This huge penis is depicted as a source of great pride and as a feature that distinguishes Black men from White men.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the penis becomes the defining feature of Black men that contributes yet another piece to the commodification of Black male bodies.<sup>34</sup>

Hustlers or “players” constitute benign versions of the rule breaking associated with gangstas and objectifying Black men’s bodies as sex objects.

More refined, the hustler has one foot on either side of the law. The hustler can be a simple “player,” one who uses people to trick them out of something that he wants. Players often target women, trading sexuality for economic gain. The image of the Black male hustler works with historical notions of African American men as too lazy to work and in need of the domesticating influences of slavery, sharecropping, boot camp, and prison. Representations of hustlers suggest that African American men would rather live off of other people, very often women, than go to work. The theme of charisma is paramount here, the notion of style that a hustler brings to his endeavor. The prevalence of representations of Black men as pimps speaks to this image of Black men as sexual hustlers who use their sexual prowess to exploit women, both Black and White. Ushered in by a series of films in the Blaxploitation era, the ubiquitous Black pimp seems here to stay. Kept alive through HBO-produced quasi documentaries such as *Pimps Up, Hos Down*, African American men feature prominently in these media constructions. Professional pimps see themselves more as businessmen than as sexual predators, with slapping their sex workers around the cost of doing business. For example, the men interviewed in the documentary *American Pimp* all discuss the skills involved in being a successful pimp. One went so far as to claim that only African American men made really good pimps. Thus, the controlling image of the Black pimp combines all of the elements of the more generic hustler, namely, engaging in illegal activity, using women for economic gain, and refusing to work.

Tying the concept of Black men as sexual predators so closely with ideas about normative Black masculinity raises the stakes dramatically within Black heterosexual relationships. Despite the fact that the film *Booty Call* is a romantic comedy with likable characters, it draws upon these sedimented historical meanings by focusing on promiscuity as a defining feature of Black masculinity. Moreover, it casts the struggle to redefine Black masculinity in class-specific terms, one in which the sexual practices of the working-class character become juxtaposed to those of the middle-class character. The images of working-class Bunz and middle-class Rushon serve as touchstones for a reworking of ideas about sexuality, violence, and Black masculinity in the post-civil rights era. It's no accident that Bunz and Rushon are cast as originating in the same social class, but now belonging to different ones. Bunz wears running clothes and Rushon wears suits. When Bunz finds out that Rushon has not yet had sex with

Nikki, he criticizes Rushon for failing to score. "College has got you too sensitive," states Bunz. "Sensitive?" asks Rushon. "You ain't got no player left in you," answers Bunz. Via his ridicule, Bunz relies on dominant ideas that associate authentic Black masculinity with a hyper-heterosexuality thought to characterize working-class Black men. He uses these ideas to accuse middle-class Rushon of being less authentically Black and therefore less masculine.

*Booty Call* is situated within a specific historical moment that reflects the convergence of two meanings of booty in which men (and sometimes women) aim to capture the booty (property or spoils of war) via sexual conquest. This placement, however, does not mean that it uncritically replicates these historical meanings. On the one hand, by its very title, *Booty Call* draws upon entrenched historical meanings concerning race, gender, and sexual property. As was the case with the term *freak*, the film invokes ideas about Black promiscuity and the film would be meaningless without this history. One might ask whether this film could even be made with White American actors cast in the starring roles? But on the other hand, *Booty Call* aims to disrupt these very same historical meanings. Here, Black women take the lead in demanding a different kind of Black masculinity from their partners. Nikki, Rushon's love interest, clearly rejects the prevailing association of African American women's bodies with perceptions of Black female sexuality as wild and "freaky." She is not a sexual prude, but her demand for safe sex and commitment speaks to Black women's agency and self-determination. Nikki insists on using condoms because she realizes that "unsafe" sex might leave her with a STD and/or a baby. Although Nikki's friend Lysterine (who is Bunz's blind date) is sexually adventurous, after Nikki's prodding, she too insists upon condoms. She's sexually daring, but her classic line "no glove, no love" draws a line in the sand. These women demand a new kind of Black masculinity in which sexual norms around the booty call and around love relationships merit renegotiation.

One striking element of this film is that, despite their differences, both Black men in *Booty Call* listen to Black women. Neither tries to dominate the women and neither resorts to threats or violence. Rushon has waited seven long weeks to have sex with Nikki, but when she demands that he wear a condom, he gets dressed and goes to the convenience store in search of one. Bunz may be, in the words of Lysterine, a "hoodrat," but when she demands a condom, he joins Rushon in the middle of the night shopping

trips for these essential items. The act of booty call is not a foregone conclusion in this film. Rather, the need to renegotiate the terms of booty calls is debated. In a similar fashion, the reality of gender ideology and dominant ideas about Black masculinity is not the issue. Rather, the terms of Black masculinity are at stake.

The real drama in *Booty Call* does not lie in reconfiguring Black femininity but in challenging prevailing notions of a sexualized Black masculinity. Nikki and Lysterine symbolize versions of middle-class Black femininity of the Black Lady and the Educated Bitch. Neither character has a real internal dilemma in the course of the film. They say what they want and stick to it. However lovable, Bunz also seems incapable of change—he is the timeless, nonhistorical representation of Black male promiscuity. Rushon is the character who faces the dilemma of crafting a new form of Black masculinity that will spare him Bunz's ridicule, but that will also enable him to commit to Nikki. Thus, despite the association of the term *booty* with Black women, the core question of *Booty Call* concerns which version of Black masculinity will win out? Will the working-class version of Black authenticity symbolized by Bunz's incessant search for the booty triumph? Or will Rushon's fledgling efforts to claim a middle-class politics of respectability prevail?

Poor and working-class Black men are also depicted more often as perpetrators of violence. The use of the phrase “black-on-black” violence to describe violence within African American urban neighborhoods invokes images of poor and working-class Black men, not those respectable men from the Black middle class. The phrase also illustrates how the political economy of production, primarily the convergence of entertainment, news, and advertising, converge to produce a racial ideology that circulates in a global context. This phrase originated not in the United States but as part of the end of apartheid in South Africa.<sup>35</sup> First used in a 1986 speech to Parliament by then-president P. W. Botha who described “black-on-black” violence as being “brutal murders by radical Black people,” the term appeared in the U.S. press as a frame for reporting on the end of apartheid. In the South African press, Zulus were repeatedly described as “tribes” and the ANC with its Xhosa ethnicity (of Mandela) became redefined as another tribe. Print and broadcast media made little use of politics or economics to explain the violence, choosing instead to install a racial frame of interethnic violence. The term was picked up by the American

press, and it has been used in a similar fashion. As the authors point out, “Labeling all violence among Black people as factional, internecine, and part of ‘blood feuds’ implies a natural cohesiveness or unity among Black people because they are black. The terms used suggest a fight among family members, calling up a long-standing Western image of the tribe as a naturally occurring, familial social structure.”<sup>36</sup> “Black-on-black” violence is the site at which the U.S. news media reconstruct Black Africa as “tribal,” threatening, savage, and incapable of self-government and democracy and also Black urban neighborhoods as sites equally incapable of controlling their children and being self-governing.<sup>37</sup>

The arguments that recast Black people and violence as an inevitable outcome of either biological nature or cultural backwardness are remarkably similar in both locations. In both the South African and U.S. media, news of “black-on-black” violence centers on one type of perpetrator, typically a young, Black male. The struggle against apartheid or against a punitive urban police force, then, is reduced to a “self-perpetuating” rebellion of youth against bona fide authority.<sup>38</sup> In an interpretation of social change that sounds eerily reminiscent of how the end of slavery unleashed the controlling image of the Black rapist, within media accounts of “black-on-black” violence, it is the *end* of apartheid that has “unleashed the violence.” Within the South African discourse, Black male youth, inherently violent, moving in gangs, “schooled [by the anti-apartheid movement] only in the struggle,” are said by September 1990 to have discovered that “liberation might yield few benefits for them without the education they eschewed for the flames of revolution.”<sup>39</sup> The conditions under which they live, then, are of their own choosing and are the cause, rather than the result, of South Africa’s troubles. Black men are transformed from being victims and heroes to being—along with the anti-apartheid movement itself—the root cause of the violence.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the gangs that have taken over African American urban neighborhoods represent the outcome of Black youth freed of discipline, primarily that of the punitive father, and of strong social institutions that kept them in place. Within this interpretive context, legitimated White state violence—in the case of South Africa, the apartheid government and for the United States, an occasionally “out of control” police force—although it is often condemned in media texts as “excessive” is also redeemed by its promise to restore order.<sup>41</sup> News stories about violence are



about transgressions of social boundaries, the consequences of those transgressions, and the reestablishment of social order.

Representations that reduce Black men to the physicality of their bodies, that depict an inherent promiscuity as part of authentic Black masculinity, that highlight the predatory skills of the hustler, and that repeatedly associate young Black men in particular with violence converge in the controlling image of Black men as booty call-seeking rapists. Initially, the myth of the Black male rapist who lusted after White women emerged during postemancipation Jim Crow segregation as a tool for controlling Black men who were prematurely freed from the civilizing influences of slavery. While not as necessary to contemporary relations of rule as those during the Jim Crow era, apparently the image of the Black rapist can be revived when the need arises. For example, during the 1988 Republican presidential campaign, George Bush's campaign staff made the behavior of Willie Horton, a convicted African American male rapist who raped a White woman while participating in an early release program, central to his stance on crime. As George Cunningham points out, "George Bush's deployment of the figure of 'Willie' Horton as a black male rapist helped to manufacture the majority that elected him as heir to the conservative Ronald Reagan."<sup>42</sup> Like Gus, the archetypal Black rapist first seen in D. W. Griffith's 1915 classic film *The Birth of a Nation*, Horton came to symbolize the Black man who was freed *prematurely* not from slavery but from the necessary strictures of prison. As a result, the public needed protection from African American men like Horton whose excessive booty calls placed society at risk.<sup>43</sup>

### **SISSIES AND SIDEKICKS: IMAGES OF MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK MEN**

In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* was one of the most popular shows on American television. Bill Cosby played the role Heathcliff Huxtable, a physician and father of five children, who was married to Claire, his beautiful lawyer-wife. In the uncertainties of the 1980s, when African Americans experienced increased access to schools, jobs, and neighborhoods long reserved for Whites, Cosby offered a reassuring image to Whites. He was the Black buddy, friend, or Black sidekick that everyone wanted. Resurrecting an image of Black masculinity in service to Whites,

Cosby's image was marketable, nonthreatening, entertaining, and eminently likable. In contrast to the derogated images of working-class Black masculinity, Cosby's squeaky clean image as America's Black buddy or sidekick provided one social script for the types of African American men who would find acceptance in a desegregating America.

The image of Cosby's character set the template for middle-class Black masculinity—he was friendly and deferential; he was loyal both to dominant societal values such as law and order as well as to individuals who seemingly upheld them; he projected a safe, nonthreatening Black identity; and he was defined neither by his sexual prowess nor by any hint of violence. Collectively, each of these features of representations of the Black buddy and Black sidekick intersected with changes in American society. For one, Black buddies typically achieve acceptance through their friendly demeanors and clear deference to White authority. In this regard, Black buddies constitute representations of Black masculinity whose origins lie in that of Uncle Tom, the Negro servant who was domesticated under slavery, and in Uncle Ben, his commercial counterpart developed to sell rice and other consumer goods. Cosby's image drew upon both of these traditions. His role on *The Cosby Show* provided White families with images of a friendly African American who visited their living rooms to entertain them. If the show became too controversial, that is, too closely associated with racial issues, it could be dismissed by turning off the television. Like Uncle Tom, Black buddies are useful only if they are clearly committed to the American way of life.

Within capitalist marketplace relations, just as representations of Uncle Ben were used to sell rice, images of Bill Cosby helped sell products. Cosby was not alone. In this commodified climate, athletes who can be repackaged as Black buddies receive lucrative endorsement packages, make lots of money, and join the ranks of wealthy Americans.<sup>44</sup> Michael Jordan's clear rejection of any hint of political controversy enabled him to become one of the most successfully managed idols and icons of media culture. Through activities such as appearing with cartoon character Bugs Bunny in the 1996 film *Space Jam*, Jordan carefully constructed a kid-friendly demeanor. At one time, he was the leading candidate on a children's list of the person whom they would most want to invite to a birthday party. Golfer Tiger Woods's mixed-race background and his rejection of a "Black" identity contributed to his success as a marketable commodity.

Part of Jordan's and Woods's success in reaching so many American fans can be attributed to the path blazed by Cosby's image. Cosby's role as a spokesperson for Jello products, especially the numerous advertisements that he made with multiracial groups of children, positioned him as non-threatening and safe. Who could have guessed that one Jello ad could modernize images of Uncle Tom and Uncle Ben by repackaging historical images of Black masculinity to meet the needs of a desegregating America?

Loyalty is another characteristic feature of the controlling image of the Black buddy. As depicted in mass media, there is little danger of Black buddies stealing the silverware, reverting to Black English, or raping the wife. Instead, Black buddies are typically shown as stripped of the seemingly dangerous parts of Blackness, leaving the useful parts as sufficient markers of difference to satisfy the tastes of a multicultural America. Within Hollywood films, for example, the image of the Black sidekick, a specific rendition of the Black buddy image that characterized films in the 1980s, reflects a loyalty that resembles that depicted by the image of the modern mammy. Often portrayed within film by an African American actor whose loyalty to his White male friend rivaled that of the mythical Uncle Tom, the Black sidekick typically lacked an independent Black male identity. Instead, his sense of self stemmed from his relationship to his White friend or work partner. A series of White heroes and their Black sidekicks set the tone in television and film. From Bill Cosby's stint as Robert Culp's buddy in the television drama *I Spy* to Danny Glover playing Mel Gibson's reluctant buddy in the *Lethal Weapon* films to Eddie Murphy who served as Nick Nolte's sidekick in *48 Hours* as well as the sidekick to a cadre of White police officers in *Beverly Hills Cop*, "Hollywood . . . put what is left of the Black presence on the screen in the protective custody . . . of a White lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant, White sensibilities and expectations of what Black people should be like."<sup>45</sup>

Apparently, what "Black people should be like" is being physically Black so that racial integration can be seen but not culturally Black, for example, display any of the behaviors of an assumed authentic Blackness. Thus, being seen as being physically Black yet lacking a racial identity constitutes another feature of the Black buddy image. Michael Jordan's phenomenal success points to the lucrative benefits for those Black buddies who manage to develop personas as "raceless" individuals. Jordan became

a cultural icon and worshiped as a hero in large part because his clean-cut image was markedly different from the cornrowed, tattooed, trash-talking demeanor of “bad boy” ball players. Alan Iverson, Latrell Sprewell, Dennis Rodman, and Charles Barkley cannot be mistaken as anybody’s subordinate buddies or sidekicks—Sprewell tried to choke his coach. In the postintegration era, Black men like Cosby and Jordan are accepted with open arms as White America’s buddies precisely because they are not like the bad boy athletes, criminals, or other representations of working-class (authentic) Black masculinity. Television shows like *The Cosby Show* and sports provide mass media arenas in which these ideas about race are worked through. Race, especially Blackness, increasingly informs contemporary racial politics, yet, at the same time, race is rendered largely invisible within the fabric of film, television, and sports. Jordan’s appeal may be often defined as “raceless,” yet as a Black buddy, he projects a certain kind of race, a certain kind of Black masculinity that will be accepted.<sup>46</sup>

Another distinguishing feature of the representation of the Black buddy pivots on mechanisms of containing his sexuality. Like the character of Heathcliff Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, Black buddies are often depicted as asexual Black men. Less emphasis is placed on Black men’s bodies within representations of middle-class Black men than characterizes representations of working-class Black men. For example, on *The Cosby Show*, the ability of Cosby’s character to dance, shoot hoops, model chiseled abs, or perform in the sack was irrelevant. Moreover, Heathcliff Huxtable’s sexuality was safely contained within the sanctity of heterosexual marriage. Occasionally, the show provided shots of Heathcliff and Claire cuddling under the covers, hinting at a safe sexuality but never showing it. Because Cosby’s character was presented in a family setting, his children had a role model to emulate. The Cosby kids were not conceptualized as sexual beings either. Everyone was definitely straight.

Appearing on network television during a time of transition, Cosby’s character not only was asexual but it was also nonviolent. But if the image of masculinity is one that requires a combination of sexuality and violence for “manly” men, how can one present a film with a White hero who is masculine whose sidekick seems to be too “feminine”? Buddy films must be careful not to emasculate the Black buddy because feminizing Black male images to this degree would detract from male bonding and leave the audience wondering what the White hero saw in his Black buddy. Although

there are films in which this emasculation has occurred (Richard Pryor's stint as a "toy" for a spoiled White boy in the 1982 film *The Toy* comes to mind), most Black buddies are not emasculated to this degree. One way of resolving this dilemma is to eliminate all aspects of the Black buddy's life that would compete with the Black buddy's loyalty to his partner. Many Black buddies are depicted as not having families or any type of relationships, sexual or otherwise, that might distract them from their main purpose of being loyal to the White protagonist or to their jobs. Unlike the Cosby image of the Black buddy who was stripped of these qualities, images of these decontextualized Black buddies can be strong and virile on screen, as long as these qualities are placed in service to the needs of the White hero and, more recently, to legitimate social institutions, especially, the criminal justice system.

In this context, representations of Black buddies may render Black masculinity nonthreatening because expressions of violence and sexuality are placed under White authority. A fine line exists between using the image of the Black buddy to tame the threat of Black male promiscuity and violence and feminizing the Black male image to the point at which it cannot be respected. But how does the interracial buddy drama resolve the issue of the emotional relationships among men so that it does not transform male bonding into homoerotic relationships?

In order to resolve this tension, the Black buddy template often draws upon the family as a frame for explaining appropriate social relationships. This frame can be used in several ways. For one, showing either member of the buddy team in a heterosexual relationship with a woman, especially in a marriage with children, effectively challenges any homoerotic subtext between the two men. Having a wife and children at home takes on special meaning for the character of the Black buddy, for his ability to commit to one heterosexual relationship within a family unit is a sign of his ability to assimilate. Another use of the family frame defines the relationship between White hero and his Black buddy. Film critic Jacquie Jones suggests that, in mainstream cinema, the subordinate roles that Black buddies accept have traditionally been the province of women, children, and/or pets. Explaining these patterns, Jones suggests that many of these films replicate family relations in that "the Black male assumes the role of the boy; the Black women, the mother; and, of course, the White male, the father."<sup>47</sup> Hazel Carby takes a different view. Analyzing Danny Glover's

participation within contemporary films, Carby sees not father/son bonding, but an imagined brother-to-brother bonding created in the White male imagination. Using films in which the actor Danny Glover played Black buddies or sidekicks, Carby analyzes the nature of support that the buddy provides to his White hero. In films like *Grand Canyon* and *Lethal Weapon*, Glover acts as “father confessor and psychological counselor to white men. . . . Glover has become identified as the one who manages to persuade white men to recognize, understand, and express the truth about themselves to themselves.”<sup>48</sup> Finally, because the men enter into a fictive kin relationship as brothers, they are not sexual competitors for the same women. Here American assumptions that heterosexual relationships should occur between people of the same race effectively leave the White hero and the Black buddy confined to White and Black women, respectively. No fights over women as booty will tarnish the brotherhood. This theme of African Americans having the emotions and expressiveness to help Whites get in touch with their better selves is a recurring theme in American cinema. Typically, this emotional nurturing was done by the mammy figure, but selected men could also do this expressive caring function. Whatever the family scenario, whether they are cast as immature boys or as appropriately subordinate yet caring younger brothers, Black buddies perform the emotional labor long associated with women. This placement feminizes them.

Representations of Black buddies have been joined by yet another non-violent, asexual image of middle-class Black masculinity, namely, the “sissy.” Standing in contrast to the seemingly authentic Black masculinity of the criminal, the Black athlete, and even middle-class Black buddies (who may have been subordinate, but at least they were heterosexual), representations of Black masculinity of the “punk,” the “sissy,” or the “faggot” offer up an effeminate and derogated Black masculinity. Representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that border on ridicule. Often the representation of the gay character works to support the heterosexuality of other males. For example, *Car Wash* (1976) introduced Lindy, an openly gay character. Dramatized as a “queen,” Lindy was swishy, limp-wristed, and exhibited an exaggerated, affected feminine style. Around him, all of the other male characters were not just heterosexual, but emphatically heterosexual. To frame Black male heterosexuality, the other characters were married, had girlfriends, dated women, hired prostitutes, or flirted with the women customers. As one ana-

lyst points out, “Lindy is tolerated as part of the public world but only because he reinforces the purity of heterosexuality by presenting homosexuals as defiled and deviant.”<sup>49</sup> Black gay men depicted in feature films continue to serve as humorous foils for the exploits of other more important characters, background characters that lend “color” to the film.

Analyzing contemporary media, Marlon Riggs identifies how Black manhood has become juxtaposed to the Negro faggot in contemporary Black cultural production:

I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. My life is game for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, “Afrocentric” black man is resolutely heterosexual, not *even* bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed, it’s a testament to weakness, passivity, and the absence of real guts—balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a black gay man because, by the tenets of black macho, black gay man is a triple negation. I am consigned, by these tenets, to remain a Negro faggot. And, as such, I am game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped, and bashed, not just by illiterate homophobic thugs in the night but by black American culture’s best and brightest.”<sup>50</sup>

This “punk,” “sissy,” or “faggot” may have its roots in an emasculated Uncle Tom, but it also operates as a new representation in the post–civil rights era.

Given the virtual absence of representations of gay Black men in the past, these new representations enjoy a visibility within contemporary Black popular culture that is surprising. Representations of “sissies” and “Negro faggots” suggest a deviancy that lies not in Black male promiscuity but in a seeming emasculation that is chosen. Avowedly heterosexual African American men routinely deride gay Black men, primarily through ridicule (the running skit “Men on Film” on the popular television show *In Living Color* that poked fun at two Black male “sissies”) or through outright homophobic comments (comedic routines by Eddie Murphy and other Black male comedians that border on homophobic vitriol). A running joke throughout movies concerns the theme in which a very large Black male prisoner threatens a boy with rape. In one memorable scene from *House Party*, a 1990 feature film by African American brothers Reginald

and Warrington Huddlin, the teenaged protagonist lands in a jail cell with a big Black man who wants him to be his girlfriend. The audience is encouraged to laugh at the possibility of an adolescent boy being raped or “punked” by a Mike Tyson–esque character. Within straight Black male culture, special derision is saved for Black representations of “punks,” the males who were sexually conquered by other men.

In contrast to representations of Black gay men in contexts with Black heterosexual men, images of Black gay men in settings with African American women present a very different picture. In these films, Black gay men become surrogate women, with the benefits and liabilities that this implies. As opposed to the derogated “punks,” they become depicted as nonthreatening, lovable “sissies.” For example, African American director John Singleton’s 1993 film *Poetic Justice* contains the stereotypical gay Black male hairdresser who provides comic relief for the real heterosexual drama. This theme of gay Black buddy to women, a part that helps Black women gain insight into Black masculinity, is a recurring theme.<sup>51</sup> Placing Black gay men in female settings creates space for this stereotypical foil; the gay Black buddy/sidekick typically helps African American women and is routinely accepted by them and liked.

Because images of Black gay men as “punks” often are used to justify male violence upon identifiably gay Black men, such images do foster homophobia and hate crimes. But this is the tip of the iceberg because the impact of these representations goes further. Many Black men who are gay or bisexual hide their sexual orientation, preferring to pass as straight. There have always been Black men who passed, but what is different now is the emergence of a new subculture among Black gay men. Benoit Denizet-Lewis describes this phenomenon: “Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs and its own name: Down Low. There have always been men—black and white—who have had secret sexual lives with men. But the creation of an organized, underground subculture largely made up of black men who otherwise live straight lives is a phenomenon of the last decade.”<sup>52</sup> Most of the Black men who are on the Down Low (DL) date or marry women and engage sexually with men that they meet in bathhouses, parks, the Internet, or other anonymous settings. Most DL men do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual, but primarily as Black.



On the one hand, the sexual practices attributed to the Black “sissy” do not constitute a credible threat to White heterosexual men because the presence of Black gay sexuality constitutes a feminized and therefore non-threatening Black masculinity. Representations of Black gay sexuality operate as further evidence that Black men are “weak,” emasculated, and “feminized” in relation to White men. Black gay sexuality is depicted as reflecting male submission or capitulation, especially those men who are penetrated like women. When joined to the broader theme of the Black buddy or sidekick, “faggots,” “punks,” and “sissies” constitute the extension of the seeming symbolic emasculation of middle-class Black men associated with images of Uncle Tom and Uncle Ben. “Sissies” can be accommodated within the norms of Black assimilation because Black buddies pave the way for them.

On the other hand, Black gay sexuality might present a threat to Black heterosexual men for this exact same reason. Within the universe of Black masculinity, gay Black men pose a threat to a beleaguered Black male heterosexuality that strives to claim its place at a table dominated by representations of White-controlled masculinity. Within Black popular culture, the widespread caricature of Black gay men, thus making this sexuality visible, works to uphold constructions of authentic Black masculinity as being hyper-heterosexual. The stigma attached to Black gay sexuality is less about depicting this form of sexuality than it is in using an emasculated Black gay sexuality to establish the boundaries of both White masculinity (which is assumed to be heterosexual) and Black male heterosexuality. Thus, representing Black gay sexuality as Black male emasculation simultaneously threatens heterosexual African American men, upholds Black male hyper-masculinity (the invisibility of DL Black men and their redefinition as Black heterosexuals), and protects hegemonic White masculinity. Ironically, Black gay men can simultaneously gain acceptance, provide humor, be erased, and pose a threat.

Despite considerable pressure to use the image of the faggot or sissy for ridicule and humor, some films and television shows do dispute these representations of Black gay men. For example, the original Showtime movie *Holiday Heart* (2000) is one of the few films that try to depict gay Black men in a nonstereotypical fashion. Directed by African American director Robert Townsend, actor Ving Rhames plays the title character of Holiday—a church-loving, flamboyant gay drag queen. After Holiday’s

longtime lover passes away, Holiday is left alone and grieving. So when a homeless drug addict, Wanda (Alfre Woodard), and her young daughter, Niki (Jessika Quynn Reynolds), require Holiday's help, he moves them into the apartment next door to his own. The three form an unconventional family until Wanda brings home a new drug dealer boyfriend who changes everything for the worse. Wanda's inability to avoid drugs threatens to further break the trio apart. The character of Holiday helps heal the damaged Black family. This film moves depictions of Black gay men away from extreme stereotypes, yet it still positions Black gay sexuality within the framework of being the emotional ballast for the sufferings of others.

Some media contestations are more confrontational. For example, through comedy, the four Black and Latino gay men in the 2001 play *Punks* strive to disrupt the negative associations of the term itself. Because it is less subject to the strictures of programming for a mass audience, cable television has also broken from the stereotypical depiction of Black gay men. For example, in its 2001 season, the HBO series *Six Feet Under* introduced the character of Keith Charles (played by actor Mathew St. Patrick), a gay Black male cop whose White male lover David Fisher was one of the main characters. Resisting the temptation to portray Keith as the sexual Black "buddy" for David as White hero, the series instead focuses on their stormy relationship in negotiating different approaches to homosexuality. In addition to its depiction of a Black lesbian couple, the first season of HBO's original series *The Wire* introduced the character of Omar, a gay Black male gangsta who seeks revenge on the drug dealers who brutally murdered Brandon, his gay Black lover. Again, the treatment on *The Wire* breaks with stereotypes. Omar is dark-skinned, violent, and in no way appears to be the stereotypical "sissy." Moreover, the gay Black male relationship is between two working-class Black men, thus challenging the association of gay sexuality with Whiteness and/or with middle-class men.

As was the case for representations applied primarily to working-class and poor Black men, collectively, the representations for middle-class Black men also help justify the political economy of the new racism. All seem designed to exert political control on those African American men who do achieve middle-class status and to discourage far larger numbers of African American men from aspiring for social mobility into the middle class. The complex and narrow representational space saved for middle-class African American men speaks to the ways in which ideas about bud-

dies and sidekicks, punks and sissies coalesce within discourses of Black male assimilation in the post-civil rights era. Assimilated, middle-class Black men are somehow seen as being less manly, as subordinates. Their place is assured at the middle-class table, just as long as they recognize their place of serving the needs of White-run organizations. Moreover, the deference needed to become a Black buddy takes its cues from discourses of emasculation, the popular discourse on the sissy.

When combined, images of the buddy and the sissy both construct middle-class Black men as less manly—the former because he has been emasculated by the White world, the latter because he exhibits a sexual identity that symbolizes a chosen emasculation. When presented with this narrow frame of images by institutions of formal education, Black boys of all social class often reject school. In the universe of many African American boys, studying not only identifies them as “White-identified, sellouts,” excellent school performance is the domain of “girls” or “punks.” Masculinity is associated with use of the body, not the mind. Girls and “faggots” are the ones who submit to the will of the teacher, the principal, and avowedly heterosexual boys. In this context and without developing some alternative frameworks, the more educated Black boys become, the less manly they may feel. The alternative of becoming “bad boys” in school may seem like a more realistic option. One study of fifth and sixth grade Black boys found that many were labeled troublemakers and written off by school personnel as early as age ten.<sup>53</sup> When combined with the competing code of the street within African American working-class urban culture, staying in school and doing well is a real accomplishment.

Ironically, holding up educated African American men as role models to Black male youth may actually aggravate this situation. The thesis of role modeling assumes that young Black men lack role models that will show them their possibilities and how to behave to get there. Working-class disadvantage is routinely seen as an outcome of the absence of middle-class Black role models. But what if working-class Black boys are familiar with these representations of middle-class Black men and simply reject them?

Through Black working-class eyes, Black elected officials, businesspersons, corporate executives, and academics may resemble “academic sidekicks” or “intellectual punks.” These are the men who increasingly fail to defend African American interests because they fail to defy White male power. Instead, they tolerate and in many cases collude in reproducing the

conditions in the inner city. Staying in school and studying hard moves them closer to images of Bill Cosby selling Jello or Michael Jordan talking to Bugs Bunny or Tiger Woods refusing to claim Blackness at all. If the “academic sidekick” or “intellectual sissy” becomes seen by African American boys and young men as the price they have to pay for racial integration, it should not be surprising that increasing numbers of young Black men reject this route to success.<sup>54</sup> With a vacuum of images of Black men of whatever sexual orientation who stand up to White officials, who take principled positions on social problems that affect African Americans, and who clearly have the interests of African Americans at heart, why should poor and working-class Black boys emulate middle-class Black men? In their eyes, when Latrell Sprewell choked his coach, he stood up to White power. In Todd Boyd’s words, “When you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you say, ‘I don’t give a fuck,’ you then become empowered, liberated, controller of your own destiny.”<sup>55</sup> This stance may work for rich Black professional athletes, but it is a dangerous posture for Black boys with no degrees, no skills, and a whole lot of attitude. Charles Barkley may not be a role model, but neither are these representations of middle-class African American men.

### **CLASS-SPECIFIC GENDER IDEOLOGY AND THE NEW RACISM**

Under the new racism, these class-specific representations of Black masculinity and Black femininity serve several purposes. First, these representations speak to the importance that ideologies of class and culture now have in justifying the persistence of racial inequality. Within the universe of these representations, authentic and respectable Black people become constructed as class opposites, and their different cultures help explain why poor and working-class Black people are at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and middle-class Black people are not. Authentic Black people must be contained—their authentic culture can enter White-controlled spaces, but they cannot. Representations of athletes and criminals, bitches and bad mothers refer to the poor and/or working-class African American men and women who allegedly lack the values of hard work, marriage, school performance, religiosity, and clean living attributed to middle-class White Americans. In essence, these representations of Black

masculinity and Black femininity assail unassimilated Black people, pointing out the ways in which such poor Black people are “untamed” and in need of strict discipline. In contrast, representations of sidekicks, sissies, and modern mammies describe the space of respectability for newly accepted Black people. These Black people are different from middle-class Whites, but these representations of middle-class Black people are not a threat to power relations. Social mobility, or lack thereof, becomes recast in terms of the unwillingness of poor and/or working-class Black people to shed their Blackness and the willingness of middle-class Black people to assimilate. These respectable Black people must be denuded of Blackness—they should be seen but not necessarily heard.

Under the color-blind ideology of the new racism, Blackness must be *seen* as evidence for the alleged color blindness that seemingly characterizes contemporary economic opportunity. A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated. The total absence of Black people would signal the failure of color blindness.<sup>56</sup> At the same time that Blackness must be visible, it also must be contained and/or denuded of all meaning that threatens elites. Rejecting traditional racist discourse that sees racial difference as rooted in *biology*, these representations of criminals and bad mothers, of sidekicks and modern mammies work better in a context of desegregation in which cultural difference has grown in importance in maintaining racial boundaries. Poor and working-class African American men are not *inherently* inclined to crime, such images suggest. Rather, the *culture* in which they grow up, the authentic Black culture so commodified in the media, creates images of criminality that explains the failures of racial integration by placing the blame on the unassimilability of African Americans themselves. The joblessness, poor schools, racially segregated neighborhoods, and unequal public services that characterize American society vanish, and social class hierarchies in the United States, as well as patterns of social mobility within them, become explained solely by issues of individual values, motivation, and morals.

Second, when combined, these class-specific images create a Black gender ideology that simultaneously defines Black masculinity and Black femininity in relation to one another and that also positions Black gender ideology as the opposite of normal (White) gender ideology. Providing a mirror image for mainstream gender ideology of dominant men and submissive women, the Black gender ideology advanced by these representa-

tions depicts Black men as being inappropriately weak and Black women as being inappropriately strong. This hypothesis of weak men and strong women takes class-specific form. For example, representations of Black men reinforce ideas about Black male immaturity, irresponsibility, and, until domesticated, unsuitability for full citizenship rights, yet does so in class-specific ways. The cluster of representations for Black working-class men deems them less manly than White men and therefore weaker. Because these men do not participate appropriately in society (absent fathers, criminals, etc.), they weaken it. They are also deemed less capable of undertaking the tasks of strong men, for example, exhibiting the self-discipline to study hard in school, work in low-paying jobs, save their money, and support their children. Their strength lies in their violence and sexual prowess, but only if these qualities can be harnessed to the needs of society. In contrast to this site of weakness, representations of middle-class Black men who may be doing well but who pose little threat to White society present another dimension of weakness. Because they fail to confront the new racism, the sidekicks and sissies represent emasculated and feminized versions of Black masculinity. In contrast, class-specific images of Black femininity reinforce notions of an inappropriate, female strength. Whether working-class “bitches” who are not appropriately submissive, bad mothers who raise children without men, or “educated bitches” who act like men, this Black female strength is depicted and then stigmatized. Not even the modern mammies and Black ladies escape this frame of too-strong Black women. Such women may receive recognition for their strength on the job, but it is a strength that is placed in service to White power and authority.

This Black gender ideology constructs this thesis of weak men and strong women by drawing upon heterosexism for meaning. Representations of the Black male “sissy” that mark the boundaries of Black male heterosexuality and those of the “manly” Black lesbian that fulfills a similar function for Black female heterosexuality constitute an outer ring around the heterosexual family drama of weak men and strong women. Unless these ideas are challenged, they can aggravate homophobia within African American communities. As Harlon Dalton points out:

My suspicion is that openly gay men and lesbians evoke hostility in part because they have come to symbolize the strong female

and the weak male that slavery and Jim Crow produced. . . . Lesbians are seen as standing for the proposition that “Black men aren’t worth shit.” More than even the “no account” men who figure prominently in the repertoire of female blues singers, gay men symbolize the abandonment of Black women. Thus, in the Black community homosexuality carries more baggage than in the larger society.<sup>57</sup>

If Dalton is correct, this excess baggage of homosexuality helps explain patterns of homophobia within African American communities.

Finally, this Black gender ideology helps justify racial inequality to White Americans and suppress resistance among African Americans. Depicting and demonizing “weak men and strong women” enables White Americans to point to the damaged values and relationships among Black people as the root cause of Black social disadvantage. At the same time, when internalized by African Americans themselves, this same Black gender ideology works to erase the workings of racial discrimination by keeping Black men and Black women focused on blaming one another for problems. Within this logic, class-specific gender ideology becomes a convenient explanation both for the persistence of Black poverty and for deeply entrenched racial discrimination. By demonizing poor and working-class African Americans, these representations quell long-standing political threats that African American citizenship raises for White elites. African Americans are blamed for their poverty and powerlessness. At the same time, representations of middle-class Blacks discourage them from using their literacy, visibility, and money to support African American interests. Weak Black men who are willing to accept subordinate roles and strong Black women who place their strength in service to White-controlled institutions become the gold standard for measuring Black middle-class acceptability. Together, class-specific representations of Black masculinity and Black femininity aim to counter the threats posed by Black men and women who have too much freedom and too many opportunities in the post-civil rights era, at least, defined as such by those in power.