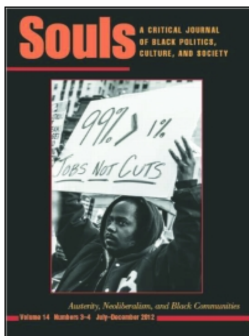

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Disruptions in Respectability: A Roundtable Discussion

Mali D. Collins-White, Ariane Cruz, Jillian Hernandez, Xavier Livermon, Kaila Story, and Jennifer Nash

What do the politics of representation present in the realm of knowledge production? This roundtable of scholars of gender, sexuality, Black, and Latino studies circle the discussion around this question by positioning politics of representation and respectability within the realm of popular culture, pornography studies, and other highly consumed forms of media. The discussion also points toward themes of intramural policing, and other forms of oppression performed within Black and Brown communities as ways to understand how respectability politics are martialed in the public sphere.

Keywords: Black studies, policing, pop culture, representation, respectability

This roundtable was curated to create an open dialogue with scholars who engage with a sort of anti-respectability politics. Anti-respectability politics is a practice that engages with material, content, or subject matter free from heteronormative or specifically Western contours of African American representation. In this sense, these scholars' critique of anti-respectability takes form intellectually, conceptually, or in the immeasurable labor they perform in their respective disciplines of Gender and Sexuality Studies, Africana Studies, and various interdisciplinary departments across the United States. I asked five scholars, Dr. Ariane Cruz, Dr. Jillian Hernandez, Dr. Jennifer Nash, Dr. Kaila Story, and Dr. Xavier Livermon to contribute to the conversation. These scholars' work directly contests the rhetoric of uplift and materialism to interrogate the ways in which Black and Brown cultures undermine respectability as a neo-colonialist measure. As I read their work in my study of Black cultural archives, I am drawn, methodologically, to the forms of violence that shape these archives toward and/or for Western motivations of categorization and classification of race, gender, and sexuality. Thus, I am exceedingly drawn to the deployment of anti-respectability as a methodology to carve new territories for Black

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and Gender Studies, respectively. This discussion centers intramural policing of sexuality and the body, pornography, and the general consideration of the role of respectability politics in our cultural archives. The contributors' work is international and transnational, and concerned with the systemization of respectability in both public and private spheres.

Part I: Intramural Policing and Generational Politics

Intramural policing is an acute form of respectability policing. More generally, it engages a level of violence that alienates Black folks from the self which informs a lifetime relationship with Blackness as an identity. But intramural respectability politics is ever changing and takes many forms. Where Black bodies may have once been shunned for certain material or social practices, Black bodies performing these practices may be acceptable contemporarily. Yet, themes of hyper-sexualization, guilt, (self-) hatred, and anti-Blackness remain steadfast. In what ways do you see the fraught history of respectability politics being played out in trans-generational relationships in both the public and private spheres? What do the concepts of place and time offer us a useful terrain to map respectability as a cultural accompaniment to white supremacy evolution?

AC: Intramural policing is a mode of respectability politics that engages a range of levels of violence—both materially and symbolically. However, I want to use the concept of the fraught history of respectability politics and how it played out in transgenerational relationships in a broader and more figurative way to think about the academy and the regulatory regimes and symbolic order(s) of Black knowledge. More specifically, I'd like to use transgenerational relationships as a frame to think about the disciplinary relationships in the academy, in particular the epistemological legacies of Black feminism in the U.S. I see this matrilineal transgenerational relationship as a terrain to map respectability as a primary technique of power and knowledge, particularly in relation to the discursive production of Black female sexuality. This kind of metaphor of the family is not to return to (re)production as a site of racial and sexual exclusion and failure, but rather to trouble reproduction and its troublesome claims of racial and sexual belonging while conveying the intimate relations we maintain with our research, and the range of affects (and allegiances) we experience as a result of the legacies and networks of scholarly production that we frame our work within and against. So I might encourage us to think about the way that our citational politics are informed by notions of respectability in ways that cite and recite hegemonic institutions of knowledge while offering opportunities to challenge and intervene in this history. The multiple meaning of the word discipline—as a branch of scholarly knowledge and a practice of regulation—signals the scholarly disciplinary terrain is as a site of policing, order, and negotiation.

I often think about my own ambivalent transgenerational relationship with a kind of U.S. Black feminist archive in the theoretical landscape of Black female sexuality and pornography. When I first began studying pornography I experienced a sort of conflict that emanated from the sociocultural and institutional policing of Black female sexuality and the influence of respectability politics on Black knowledge production. I have written about this conflict—which resonated at both the personal

and the professional levels—and my desire to almost reconcile my identification as a Black feminist scholar studying pornography who did *not* see it as wholly oppressive, inimical, and definitively oppositional to a kind of Black feminist political agenda. My leaning towards a more "pro-pornography" point of view seemed to distance me from a number of seminal Black feminist scholars—Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Jewel D. Amoah, Tracey A. Gardner, and Luisah Teish among others—whose work I hold in high regard yet who have argued (and some rather vehemently) against pornography. Such scholars have done vital work in the arena of a Black feminist critique of pornography and Black female sexuality; however, the substratum of racism, sexism, exploitation, and victimization that buttresses this body of work often prevents a more nuanced, radical analysis of the polyvalence of pornography, its vital narration of the complexities of Black female sexuality, and its productive opportunities for Black female sexual pleasure and power.

MC: What interests me about respectability practices is how it informs our pleasure centers rather than what it turns us off to, or what it promotes that we should eschew. Understanding what makes us feel good in fundamentally anti-Black economies (social, political, and economic) can provide greater insight into the inner workings of white supremacy than the things that we no longer "like" or find "socially acceptable." An example of this in the public sphere is social media, where Black folks—especially those under the age of 30—dominate almost all major media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. My work engages with cultural archives and the role that anti-Blackness takes in informing them. I find that the simultaneous permanent/ephemeral functionality of social media is what perhaps causes so much pleasure (instant gratification, affirmation of material status) and perhaps so much pain. Social media provides a fertile ground for the visibility of alternative politics and also for a certain type of culture—maybe it's not "respectable," but it sure is there. This culture promotes certain body ideals and general aesthetics that complicate the site of pleasure as also one of pain; one where Blacks perhaps need to perform or subject ourselves to scrutiny, but perhaps also inventing a social space to articulate culture politics.

JH: Much of my work is based on the community arts praxis I have engaged in with Black and Latina girls and young women in Miami, Florida for over a decade. The particular racial mapping of Miami as a site has provided an intra- and inter-racial lens through which I have observed and analyzed the gender and sexual policing of Black girls' bodies. Although the population in Miami is overwhelmingly Latin@, the girls with whom I have worked through arts outreach to various government, social service, and educational institutions, such as the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center, have primarily been Black girls. This alerted me to the ways in which Black communities in the city are much more heavily policed, with the white-identifying Latin@ population functioning as a hegemonic majority.

I found that there was a common discourse at work in these institutions that attempted to "empower" girls by training them to perform a very prescribed notion of gendered respectability—acting like "ladies." This script entailed a particularly

classed performance of sexual and gender propriety that was juxtaposed against the figures of the pregnant Black girl, the loud Black girl, the ho, the hoochie. I witnessed both Black and Latina youth serving professionals espousing this rhetoric and mode of disciplining in their roles as correction officers, program coordinators, teachers, and mental health counselors. In my book project *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* I discuss how Black girls have responded to the disciplining of their bodies through artistic authorship, namely in using their bodies to craft their own representations and performances that transgress these policing efforts. I also describe how the working-class Latina girls pejoratively labeled "chongas" in Miami are vilified due to their perceived proximity to Blackness via sartorial style. So notions of Blackness as deviant also shape how working-class Latin@ bodies are (de)valued.

Thinking historically, I have found that respectability politics have been persistently elaborated through cross-racial juxtapositions. Rather than the Black and Latina relational processes of racialization I examine (which are nevertheless framed by and for white gazes), in previous decades these dynamic tracked a more stringently Black/white colorline. One text I use often in my teaching that illustrates this is Anne Meis Knupfer's "'To Become Good, Self-Supporting Women': The State Industrial School for Delinquent Girls at Geneva, Illinois, 1900-1935," (2001),[1] in which she illustrates how white girls would be punished for sexual activity by the women who worked at this quasi-juvenile detention school when it was perceived that they were engaging with or emulating the sexuality of Black girls, who were treated as already hypersexual, incorrigible, and incapable of performing normative femininity. So, I would say that although the dynamics of respectability have evolved they are not any less insidious. In fact, I find the persistence of these values especially troubling in the face of the changing racial makeup of the United States to a soon to be majority POC [people of color] population, which should promise a more radical social landscape. Yet, rather than forming cross-racial alliances with Black communities, minoritized populations like Latin@s continue to adopt the valuation of whiteness in order to gain political privilege, which places tremendous pressure on both Black and Latina girls to embody and perform gender, class, and sexual respectability in order to avoid being perceived as social liabilities in their communities.

XL: In my own work in South Africa, I think this is a very interesting question. Particularly because intramural policing has the added burden of definitions of Africanness at a time when one important goal of the postapartheid moment is to reclaim notions of Africanness and African identity. One of the things that colonialism and apartheid did to Black communities in South Africa is that it created a particular kind of anxiety around definitions of African identity and the need for Blacks to prove themselves in relationship to these concepts, either through proximity or distance. Respectability politics during colonialism and apartheid were an important and strategic way for Blacks to make claims upon the state. But often times, these very politics obscured cultural practices and cultural formations and ways of being that could have provided a more inclusive vision of Black freedom. Linking specifically to some of my concerns regarding popular culture, we can see

how trans-generational politics reflected the contested nature of social change and propriety. So if we look at something like kwaito music for example (an electronic dance music that became popular in mid 1990s South Africa), the politics of respectability became a way to frame a whole host of other societal contestations. Hence, framing kwaito as vulgar and hypersexual became a way to dismiss alternative interpretations of the past and alternative visions of the future promulgated by young South Africans. Similarly, the non-respectability of kwaito became a way to reinscribe particular visions of heteronormative gender formations and sexuality, to proclaim certain practices that resituated heteronormative male authority as culturally traditional and authentic and so forth. While these kinds of debates were not necessarily new (we can see their corollary in jazz and Sophiatown eras of the 1950s) they took on an added urgency due to the new political realities of Black governance.

KS: I see the problematic projection of respectability politics still remaining a staple and/or measure of many intergenerational relationships. It manifests in various forms from political discourse to popular culture. Popular culture in particular is a site where some of the most pernicious forms of respectability politics flourish because they get a pass as a solely an "entertainment" art form, rather than seen as hegemonic ideology. Many folks continue to look to pop culture to see how they should behave in their relationships with others. We see this in Steve Harvey's relationship advice and we also see this in Tyler Perry's films. The problem as I see it is that most folks still look to pop culture to inform their consciousness about how to act and behave, instead of taking into account their personal lives experiences and social locations.

Part II: Respectability and Cultural Archiving

How does respectability discourse organize the legacy of Black culture work and the archives they create? Are there any culture workers or scholarly producers you see engaging in the recovery of Black sexuality that undoes or does away with respectability? What methods do they deploy in doing so? How do you see respectability politics manifesting in cultural memory? What does queer and sexuality studies more broadly offer us to recover cultural archives of the African Diaspora?

AC: Respectability discourse organizes, determines, and polices the legacy of Black culture work and the archives they create to reflect the essential relationship between knowledge and power. Respectability discourse instantiates a form of "power/knowledge," highlighting how power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and truth.[2] The politics of respectability labors in the service of the hegemonic and disciplinary regimes of "power/knowledge," networks that also regulate the discursive production of race, sexuality, and gender. The U.S. Black feminist archive has historically been one of a kind of recovery of Black female sexuality. That is, historically Black feminist discourse has maintained an investment in a critical reframing the Black female body—one that is motivated by reclamation. As Jennifer Nash's recent work has illuminated, because the Black feminist archive has historically treated representation as a site of harm—wherein the Black female body is misrepresented and

constructed as a body of difference and debasement, it remains deeply invested in "recovery work," a type of Black feminist representation that seeks to not merely interrogate the representation of Black womanhood, but to correct and reclaim the Black female body in discourse.[3] Such recuperative labor is also highly visible in the work many well known Black female visual artists (e.g., Betye Saar, Carrie Mae Weems, Renee Cox, and others), and this visibility critically reveals representation as a mode of not only trauma (i.e., wherein the Black female body is violently rendered), but also a mode of salvage (i.e., wherein the Black female body may be re-invented). Recovery signifies a return to a place of normativity from a place of deviance. It is a movement predicated on the anxious, and in need of constant shoring up, binaries of normal/deviant, and respectable/reproachable.

One important way that scholars have engaged in the recovery of Black sexuality is through the topic of pleasure, a site which has been historically policed and silenced within a Black feminist archive itself historically aligned with a project of recovery. Maybe ironically, scholarly interest in pleasure is a sort of a recovery of a recovery. For example, work from scholars like Mireille Miller-Young, Jennifer Nash, and my own has been attentive to Black female pleasure in and of pornography in ways that do not so much contest a Black feminist scholarly tradition but rather extend it. And I think this more recent scholarly interest in the question of pleasure in pornography is linked to a larger academic interest around questions of pleasure in critical race theory and queer theory, and in research on racialized sexualities more broadly in the work of scholars such as LaMonda Horton Stallings, Joan Morgan, Siobhan Brooks, Shane Lee, Lisa Thompson, Riley Snorton, Xavier Livermon, Amber Musser, and others. Still, I would like to caution that while we celebrate and realize the potentiality of pleasure, we must be wary of adopting pleasure as signifying a directional shift away from respectability and even perhaps toward a kind of sexual liberation. Pleasure is fundamentally socially constructed and hierarchies of sexual pleasure reveal the dynamic ways that sexuality operates as a technology power. Pleasure often buttresses normative sexualities and sexual hierarchies in ways that act to veil particular types of oppression and violence. I think we need to question: What subjects are entitled to experience certain types of pleasures and which are prohibited? What sexual acts are coded as normative or non-normative via pleasure? Pleasure is a performance that illuminates the ways that race, sexuality, and gender are concomitantly policed and disciplined.

MC: I am always quick to say that I do not see my project of Black culture archives and methodology development as a site for recovery. That being said, I am more intellectually interested in how African diasporic peoples can develop theoretical tools to name and understand what we do not know rather than trying to get to know common conventions of "knowledge" (especially pertaining to the African Diaspora or African diasporic histories). The knowledge is not to be "recovered" "saved," or fully "understood." I find gender and sexuality studies an incredible space to interrogate how these conventions are being dismantled, especially when we study how these rules/norms/standards are embodied.

JH: Cultural production is a site of tremendous potential for the recovery of Black sexualities outside the paradigms of respectability. Thinking about folks who have laid the groundwork for my own research, people like Mireille Miller-Young, LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Jennifer Nash—the theory and scholarship they craft is inspired variously by the performances, creative work, and theorizing of Black women and men in pornography, literature, and hip hop.

I find the hip hop production of underground Black girl hip hop artists so inspiring in expanding representations of Black sexualities! So over the last few years I have worked with my collaborators Anya Wallace and Christina Carney in documenting and archiving their work. In 2014, Anya and I co-authored an article on Pretty Taking All Fades (P.T.A.F.).[4] P.T.A.F. is an emerging performance group of young Black women from Crenshaw, Los Angeles who met and began to compose their original hip hop music in high school. They entered popular culture as teenagers through the viral circulation of their do-it-yourself music video "Boss Ass Bitch," which was posted on YouTube in May 2012 and has amassed over 13 million hits to date. Anya and I were moved by how the girls declared their sexual self-determination through explicit description of their desires, "If you use your tongue I'ma like that/Pin my arms to the bed I'ma fight back … Before you eat the pussy you gon' bite my neck/Bend me over the bed, make me soakin' wet"—in addition to their commanding rhyme delivery and performance. In the article we discuss how the girls were vilified online as grotesque and sexually depraved through comments like, "These are the type of sluts giving Blacks everywhere a bad name."

This was happening around the same time that Nicki Minaj was being attacked for her use of an image of Malcolm X in the promotion for her single "Lookin' Ass," and when she also created a remix of P.T.A.F.'s "Boss Ass Bitch"—which we theorized as an expression of women/girl of color erotic solidarity in the face of respectability and policing. When Anya and I think back to this work in a post-"Formation" moment, of how Beyoncé's nod to the Black Panthers at the 2016 Super Bowl has been celebrated by women of color feminists while Minaj's reference to Malcolm X in 2014 was overwhelmingly disparaged among them, despite the fact that "Lookin' Ass" is a song that has blatant feminist politics in speaking back to the male gaze. Although both artists are doing the work of expanding representations of Black women's erotics beyond respectability—especially in their spectacular collaborations in "Feeling Myself" and the "Flawless" remix, Beyoncé's identity as a married woman and mother ultimately afford her cultural production and race/gender politics more legitimacy and respectability than Nicki's. Anya and I are extending this work with our colleague Christina Carney in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* by looking at how the circulation of memes in social media frame Black women cultural producers like Nicki Minaj as sexually deviant and threatening to a contrived notion of "respectable" Black girlhood.

I'm also really interested in Vixen ENT, an underground all-girl hip hop group from northern California known locally and state-wide for their Jerkin' music, crafted for consumption in the club. They are lifelong friends who recognized their

talent, "we knew how to rap," and collaboratively wrote hits such as "I Need That," "I Toot My Shit," and "By the Bar," which appear to have circulated via social media and underground hip hop networks around 2009. Their lyrics celebrate their bodies, declare their sexual desires and pleasures in getting fucked up in the club, drinking, and dancing. They describe their practice as the expression of alter egos, without[5] disavowing their content as problematic, and they have the support of their families. This kind of complexity, which is often not recognized as such, is what inspires me to archive their work.

XL: Well, I think one of the things that happens with respectability discourse is the loss of so much in the archive. So when we look at archives, what is the creative work that we have to do to reclaim and reconfigure Black sexuality at its most expressive and diverse? In the South African case, I have been impressed with the labor of various different cultural practitioners to reimagine these archives and create new ways of seeing. Queer for me then offers the possibility to allow us to see differently. So that when we look at archives we might re-imagine what they reveal to us. I am thinking right now of the work of Zethu Matebeni and Jabu Perreira in their amazing collection "Rethinking Afrikan." To quote them, queer is a "critical space that pushes the boundaries of what is embraced as normative."[6] This allows them to reclaim the very notions of Africa, breaking boundaries and moving beyond fracture and disconnect[7] to a whole that is not currently represented in Africa as it has been currently defined. Of course Zanele Muholi's work would fall into this categorization as well; she literally creates new archives which force us to "see differently." I would argue this process of creating new archives of queer visuality also requires us to rethink already existent archives. It also reminds us that archives are living, breathing, and processual documents constantly being recreated and remade.

KS: I see a number of scholars and cultural workers who are at the forefront in reshaping these types of conversations around respectability, especially when it comes to Black sexuality and gender. I of course include myself in this endeavor, but some others folks who are doing this are Tamura Lomax and Aishah Simmons at the Feminist Wire, Darnell Moore, and Wade Davis. Of course E. Patrick Johnson and Marlon Bailey, as well as Dr. Brittney Cooper, Dr. Treva Lindsey, Joan Morgan, Dr. Yaba Blay, and Esther Armah are doing this in their work as well. I also think Bettina Love and Alexis Pauline Grumbs are doing this in their work as well.

JN: I think the poles of respectability and disrespectability have fundamentally organized much of the scholarly work on Black sexualities. And I think a new cohort of scholars—Amber Jamilla Musser, Uri McMillan, Ariane Cruz, Riley Snorton, Lyndon Gill, to name just a few—are advancing analytics other than respectability and disrespectability to offer us new vocabularies for theorizing Black sexualities. These analytics include liquidity, spatiality, temporality, diaspora, and flesh (to name a few) and they push us beyond a dynamic that I think has permeated the scholarship—seeking to recover the "disrespectable" and/or seeking to uncover how respectability operates to police Black pleasures.

My own work isn't interested in "recovery" as a project (in fact, recovery is something I critique in *The Black Body in Ecstasy*). I think "recovery" work can often

reproduce ideas of respectability. Let me talk about this with some degree of specificity vis-à-vis the archive I work with in that book: pornography. I argue that Black feminists have engaged in *both* tracing the violence of the visual field (racialized pornography is treated as the paradigmatic example of this violence) *and* celebrating "recovery" work, images of that Black female body that attempt to salvage the body from the imagined violence of the visual field. These "recovery" projects are often projects of self-representation which are imagined to expose and undo the dominant logics of visuality. Here, "recovery" and "respectability" can go hand-in-hand as many of the images that I discuss in the book are hailed as erotic but not necessarily pornographic.

I *do* think the idea(s) of respectability and disrespectability are incredibly useful, though, for thinking about what it means to be a scholar who works on questions of Black sexualities. What can be shown in the classroom? What does a scholar of Black sexualities want to include in (or exclude from) a tenure dossier? How does a Black scholar teach about Black sexualities at a historically white university when one's students presume that the pleasures discussed are the professor's pleasures? How does a scholar convince one's colleagues of the merit of her work when her archive is the low, the funky, the fleshy, the things that make bodies moan, groan, shudder? To me, these questions are fundamentally tied up with what kind of scholarly work is assumed to be respectable, and thus what kind of scholarly work is valued (or devalued).

Part III: Respectability Politics in the Archives

> *In what ways do you see your own scholarship upholding ideologies of respectability that you may critique in your own work? Or, how do you find respectability upheld in institutional Black knowledge production? What are your stakes in undoing respectability in the archives you work with? How do institutional modes of policing or exclusion influence the way you research Blackness?*

> **AC:** I might begin my noting that I am less interested in undoing respectability politics than in laying bare how they continue to function in dynamic ways to discipline race and sexuality, how race and sexuality operate as technologies of power, and how we, as scholars, negotiate these politics as they influence the subjects of our analysis. Nevertheless, I am acutely aware of the kind of scholarly reach of respectability politics and the effects these ideologies have on my work, which explores how Black women engage, perform, mediate, and negotiate the "unspeakable" pleasures of Blackness in the context of BDSM [bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism] and pornography—that is, pleasures in Blackness as an apparatus of racial-sexual alterity (and often violent) domination and submission.

As someone who researches not only Black female sexuality but also its representation in pornography and BDSM, I envision my work as intervening in the silence that has marked the subject of Black female sexuality. As a mode of intramural policing, the politics of respectability has historically manifested as a mode of silencing

perpetuating what Darlene Clark Hine terms the "culture of dissemblance" the politics of silence shrouding expressions of Black female sexuality.[8] In my work, I explore how performances of Black female sexual aggression, domination, humiliation, and submission in BDSM and pornography function as critical modes for and of Black women's pleasure, power, and agency. I imagine this work is engaged in deconstructing the "culture of dissemblance" to open up the dialogue surrounding Black women's diverse sexuality.[9] I am interested in the silences that convene around a particular type of unspeakable pleasures—pleasures that are positioned as not only perverse, but also often purportedly antithetical to a kind of project of racial uplift and deemed unfit for occupancy within the archives of Black culture. Yet these pleasures are, as I argue, mainstream and pervasive nonetheless. Not heeding the "don't go there" attitude that often quashes discussions of Black women, sexual violence, and sexual pleasure, my research is invested in a type of work aligned with what Hortense Spillers might call "the retrieval of mutilated bodies."[10]

My stakes in laying bare respectability politics in my own research and the archives I work with/in inform my methodology. I often use interviews to supplement my readings of various performances of Black female sexuality because I think that contextualizing sexual fantasies, desires, and performances from the viewpoint of the "actors" can be important in gaining both a more cohesive, holistic understanding of sexuality and one that has the potential to temper the moralizing force behind the purportedly perverse and disrespectable. Listening to the voices of Black women narrate their own sexual experiences of domination, submission, and erotic power exchange in BDSM and pornography—their boundaries, conflicts, pleasures, pains, fantasies, and histories—brings us closer to a more comprehensive understanding of these performances, disrupts monolithic views of Black female sexuality as anchored in a bedrock of normativity and silence, and works towards a destigmatization of varied and transgressive (and often queer) Black women's sexual pleasures such as BDSM. These voices do more than merely de-silence those of marginalized sexualities or instantiate the discursive production of sexuality, they also constitute the foundation of my claim that race is central to an understanding of BDSM and that BDSM serves as a critical paradigm for racialized sexuality.

I think a lot of this is tied to longstanding, deep-seated, and pernicious ideas of Black authenticity. In other words the problem of silence is produced from not only the lack of speaking, but also the lack of recognition of particular voices as speaking. So which voices continue to speak but remain silent? Authenticity continues to discipline Blackness and Black culture in myriad ways and this question of who has historically been allowed to "speak for" and act as representatives of Blackness and mascots of Black culture.[11] For example, illuminating how we, specifically Black intellectuals, participate in the discursive practice of racial essentialism that constructs, indeed legitimates, certain voices and bodies as authentic voices of and in the community, Dwight McBride has long unveiled the heteronormative politics of inclusion and exclusion determining such a body, and ultimately the failure of anti-racist discourse to critically intervene (in) Black homophobia.[12] Yet, I don't think we have adequately "listened." Authenticity remains problematically wedded

to heteropatriarchal and normative modes of identification as a regulatory regime that enables particular bodies—like those of Black queer women—to be violently excised, while the "radical potential of queer politics" has yet to reach its fullest realization.[13]

MC: I see my work combatted when some scholars are reluctant in the ways many scholars have called for the African Diaspora to be imagined; and some are reluctant to "imagine" it at all. A project that I am currently working on is "'Insights into the Archives': Realizing (B)Lackness through Queer Methodologies." This project addresses queer methods as anything outside of western ideological modes of "discovery," time, place, and form, and prioritizes things like hauntings and the "after-images" of slavery as Kimberly Juanita Brown and many others have called them. Most often I find that many folks are very resistant to place ideas of imagination, queerness, or anything "speculative" within diasporic African historical contexts. We seem very guarded in how we think about Black American history in particular. My work emerges into a discourse of folks like Christina Sharpe, Kimberly Juanita Brown, and Stephanie Smallwood who suggest that reorienting our conceptions of Black archives, communities, or society in general outside of just fact, figures, and artifacts offers useful ways to think about cultural archives and Black subject making.

JH: The attacks that I am subject to when I present my work on Black and Latina girls/women and sexuality are a significant motivation for my work. From being attacked by major cultural arbiters in Miami for my work on chonga girls, to the anger I am met with when I present work on P.T.A.F. and Nicki Minaj by students, fellow academics, and members of the public. At times these critiques have resulted in my being framed as an aberrant and suspicious subject with a problematic agenda. At others I've been described as potentially "disempowering" the girls I work with because of my sexual politics. Although these responses have caused me anxiety, stress, and at times have made me fear for my job security and physical safety—they remind me of what the stakes are and why this work needs to persist.

I have to say that I have not felt as much pushback institutionally as I have from fellow folks of color. I owe this institutional legitimacy to the groundwork laid by sex-positive scholars of color like Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Mireille Miller-Young, Juana María Rodríguez, José Estéban Muñoz, Jennifer Nash, LaMonda Horton Stallings, Hoang Tan Nguyen, Kobena Mercer, and others. The last fifteen years of women and queer of color scholarship has been absolutely transformative in establishing academic spaces where we can have conversations that trouble the politics of respectability. There is still much more work to be done.

XL: I think in the South African case, and perhaps the larger field of African Studies as it exists in the North American academy, we are seeing a "queer moment." For whatever reason this has become a legitimate field of study that the academy and various different NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] seem invested in. I do not always think the interest is entirely benign and I wonder to what extent much of the interest simply reproduces particular kinds of colonial tropes concerning the idea of "African Sexuality" and its supposed deviance from western normativity. That being said, there is some very critical and important work being done, and from what I can

see the academy and the prominent journals and presses in the field are making space for this work. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal of conservatism even around the discussion of heterosexuality in relation to scholarship about Africa. There is also a sense that discussion of non-normative gender and sexuality formations in the African continent is a predominantly white western and/or Afrodiasporic concern. So I do believe that in doing my scholarship I have had to work hard to undo particular assumptions about why I am doing the work and why I am making particular connections between Black experiences on the continent and Black experiences Afrodiasporically. Honestly, I feel like that has been the biggest challenge for me to bring discussions of continental African sexuality into larger conversations happening in Afrodiasporic scholarship and to convince both Afrodiasporic scholars of Black sexuality and African scholars of the importance of these kinds of connections. I can't say though, that I have done my work any differently, because for me I feel that one of the central political stakes of my work has been to make these connections. And honestly, I think that these kinds of conversations (and having someone who works on continental Africa be a part of them) are key. I am sure that there may have been fellowships, jobs, or publishing opportunities that I may have missed out on because of my research topic(s) and the ways in which I embody my research subjects. But I also feel that because of the difficult and pioneering work done by Black Feminists in the U.S. academy, the space has been created to allow me to slip in and do my work, and for that I am thankful.

Notes

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11. Dwight A. McBride, "Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Problem of Authority," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998), 364–77.
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13. Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65.

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