Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz
Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop
Pornography

Abstract

Hip-hop pornography propels the conventions of the nearly soft-core hip-hop video to the extreme, the explicit, the hard-core. The convergence of the outlaw cultures of hip-hop and pornography offers a compelling narrative about how black sexual subjects define authority, legitimacy, legibility, and power. Hip-hop porn provides black women and men an arena for labor and accumulation as well as self-presentation, mediation, and mobility. As a space for work, survival, consumption, and identity-formation, the genre proffers an opportunity to explore the gendering of black (post)modern desires, as well as the potential to think through historical echoes of the current controversies and debates around exactly what constitutes “appropriate” black sexuality. Even as it offers a venue for acts of self-presentation, pleasure, and exchange, hip-hop porn’s brand of eroticism raises important questions about contemporary black gender and sexual politics. Within the space of hip-hop porn, these gender and sexual politics are produced within a sexual economy of illicit eroticism. The “illicit erotic” challenges ideas that fix the hypersexuality of the black body as always already repugnant, by using fetishized hypersexuality to strategically work with and through modern capitalism. This essay is primarily concerned with exploring how black sexual subjects engage illicit erotic economies as sites to self-fashion themselves according to the values and practices of “radical consumerism,” “play-labor,” and self- or counter-fetishization.

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From *Hot Chocolate* (1984) to *Desperate Blackwives* (2005), during the last twenty years black sexuality has been increasingly incorporated into the production of modern hard-core pornography in the United States. The pornography business began to appropriate black culture and black bodies in the late nineteenth century in the secret trade of erotic photography and “stag” films, but the modern adult entertainment industry has used hip-hop culture as a primary tool for the development of a specialized fetish market for black sexuality in hard-core video since the 1990s. Meanwhile, the hip-hop industry has also become increasingly interested in exploiting pornographic codes and accessing the pornography industry’s broad marketing of subsersive sexualities to consumers at revenues of ten to fourteen billion dollars a year (O’Toole 1999; Rich 2001; Business Wire 2005; Free Speech Coalition 2006).

From the hip-hop-influenced adult video series *My Baby Got Back* to the recent celebrity-focused hip-hop porn productions, such as Snoop Dog’s *Doggystyle* and *Hustlaz: Diary of a Pimp*, hip-hop and pornography have partnered to commodify black sexuality in a new genre form, employing black women’s bodies as the hard currency of exchange. The result has been a lucrative synthesis that has brought fans of both media together as consumers, while lining the pockets of music and adult industry businessmen. They have observed the coming together of genres, as well as the broader “pornification” of hip-hop and the mainstreaming and “diversification” of pornography, with the glee of robber barons. As one adult industry critic observed: “Hip Hop and porn are a natural marriage; from underground traditions and celebrating outlaw lifestyles, they have both become the source of eye-popping profits for savvy investors” (Weasels n.d.).

Hip-hop music videos, as advertisements for hip-hop artists or entertainers, have been the principal location for a growing pornographic sensibility that functions to market black bodies, aesthetics, and culture to a global consumer audience. These commercials-to-a-beat have been essential for the expansive financial success of corporate television media, including Viacom’s MTV, VH1, and BET, “bling” lifestyle products and brands (De Beers, General Motors, Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy—LVMH), and for quite a few rappers as well as others in the industry such as music video directors, producers, agents, designers, stylists, and film crews. Yet the tremendous wealth produced for all these “players” in the hip-hop “game” rests largely on the pornographic performance of the “video
model,” sometimes known as the “video ho.” She is the “eye candy” that sells the rapper, the products of his supposed “lifestyle,” and finally, the song, with every wiggle of her body, sway of her hips, and glisten of her skin. Indeed, there is a widely shared consensus that “many hip-hop videos are very nearly soft-core porn already, and they wouldn’t be the same without the everpresent [sic] background of rump-shakin’, booty-quakin’ honeys” (Weasels n.d.).

Hip-hop porn propels the conventions of the “nearly soft-core” hip-hop video to the extreme, the explicit, the hard-core. If porn and hip-hop are both, as the critic above stated, “underground traditions” and “outlaw cultures,” the convergence of these forms offers a compelling narrative about authority, legitimacy, legibility, and power. Hip-hop porn provides black women and men an arena for labor and accumulation as well as self-presentation, mediation, and mobility. As a space for work, survival, consumption, and identity-formation, the genre proffers an opportunity to explore the gendering of black (post)modern desires, as well as the potential to think through historical echoes of the current controversies and debates around what exactly constitutes “appropriate” black sexuality. In addition, even as it offers a venue for acts of self-representation and exchange, hip-hop porn’s brand of eroticism raises important questions about contemporary black gender and sexual politics.

Hip-hop femininities and masculinities are subject to market concerns of white supremacist, patriarchal, multinational, corporate capitalism and are positioned as marginal to the means of material production and institutional political power. It is thus the close attention to the race-gender-sex-class reconstitution of hip-hop identities that makes the genre form of hip-hop pornography legible. Yet what also needs to be teased out is how these hip-hop identities are defined as well by black cultural investments in authentic, ever subversive, and pleasure-giving performances, visualities, and soundscapes (Kelley 1994; Rose 1994). How do we account for the ways in which pleasure intersects with politics, identity, and power?

The convergence of hip-hop and porn illuminates the constructions and fissures of black femininity, but also black masculinity, as it engages the myths and fascinations of black sexual deviance (Crenshaw 1991; Rose 2001). Particularly revealing is the productive dependence on black women, specifically their sexualized bodies, by black men in authenticating their
claims and representations of manhood. Black women’s excessive and accessible heterosexuality as performed in hard-core and soft-core hip-hop acts as a signifier that undergirds the performance of black hypermasculinity (Sharpley-Whiting 2007). At the same time, black video models and sex workers mobilize their sexualities in the marketplace of desire for their own interests of access, opportunity, mobility, and fame (Hopkinson and Moore 2006). Within the space of hip-hop porn, these gender politics are produced within what I argue is a sexual economy of illicit eroticism.

The illicit erotic economy symbolically and strategically produces gender identities through the commodification and manipulation of private (sex) acts. These identities are reflective of the historical engagement by African Americans with underground, illegal, and quasi-legal economies—from gambling to prostitution and beyond—which offered marginalized ways to survive and prosper within the U.S. political economy (Harley 2002). But more than a continuation of survival skills, illicit eroticism is an attempt to refigure the racial logic of sexual respectability and normativity.

In this essay I outline how both mainstream and African American hetero-patriarchal discourses have been mediated by the hybrid medium of hip-hop porn, and pose questions as to what extent the representations and labor politics of this emergent genre expand the tradition of fetishizing black sexuality as a site of desire and disgust, expression and exploitation, subjectivity and objectification. As hip-hop porn is an emerging genre that is still in flux, its meanings and characteristics still undetermined, I offer notes toward a theory of how hip-hop and porn intersect and interact and what they mean for black sexual politics in this contemporary moment.

Considering the global dominance of hip-hop music and culture in the current moment (in 2006, hip-hop music earned $1.3 billion, 11.4% of the music market), how does capital’s circulations of black culture impact the currency of black masculinities and femininities? Moreover, how does hip-hop porn, in its production and reception, violate taboos in black communities about sexual disclosure that are rooted in discourses of heteronormative bourgeois respectability? This project challenges what Mattie Udora Richardson describes as “[t]he tradition of representing black people as decent and moral historical agents,” as it has “meant the erasure of the broad array of black sexuality and gendered being in favor of a static heterosexual narrative” (Richardson 2003, 64).
Anxieties

There is a profound anxiety within “the black community” over the moral and political value of contemporary mainstream hip-hop cultural production. This anxiety is reflective of a tendency toward viewing certain youth subcultures in the African diaspora, including hip-hop but also dancehall, soukous, kwantao, and parkour, as dangerous, immoral, even pathological. David Scott’s discussion of dancehall, which, like American hip-hop, is seen by some as a “disturbing mirror of contemporary Jamaican society,” is insightful. Like hip-hop, dancehall constitutes, Scott argues, “simultaneously a social site and an ensemble of cultural practices that circulate around music and dance; it is at once a venue (where the popular is constituted and performed) and a style of (sartorial and linguistic) self-fashioning” (Scott 1999, 191-92).

Moreover, according to Scott, dancehall in Jamaica is perceived to embody “debased values—values that openly embrace materialism, hedonism, and violence,” instead of those of the church, the family, and other institutions that have “lost their moral authority” (Scott 1999, 192). Like dancehall in Jamaica, hip-hop in the U.S. context is a deeply contested social site for music and dance (among other cultural expressions like graffiti art). Perceived to embrace “materialism, hedonism, and violence,” hip-hop proffers a space where the self is constantly refashioned and performed in ways that subvert bourgeois values or responsibility, sexual propriety, and decency. Referencing Foucault, Scott argues that this self-fashioning is a “practice of freedom,” whereby “the subject deliberately acts upon the self in an effort to alter the dimensions already imposed upon it, to reconstitute the energies already shaped by existing relations of power” (Scott 1999, 213-14; see also Foucault 1986). Reading hip-hop through Scott and Foucault, one can understand the culture as a space where participants radically recuperate subjectivities that are both at odds with and shaped by hegemonic power.

What exactly are the anxieties that hip-hop and porn provoke in this contemporary moment? Is the black middle-class establishment anxious over its inability to discipline the bodies of hip-hop hustlers and ho’s into a “patriarchal model of the bourgeois family as the cornerstone for [African American and] U.S. social, economic, and political progress” of which Daniel Patrick Moynihan would be proud (Ross 1998, 603)? Are the unseen,
border sexualities of the hip-hop porn world frighteningly unobservant of the dangers to black bodies, such as the pandemic of HIV/AIDS as it ravages the black population throughout the African Diaspora? Do the apparent misogyny and violence against women, represented in much of contemporary hip-hop media, subsume the possibilities for non-coercive consent and even pleasure by the women in such productions?

Not a simple story of domination or liberation, hard-core hip-hop practitioners and black pornography workers both challenge and are constituted by the racialized, gendered, and sexualized terms of representation in pornography and hip-hop, as they negotiate ways to strategically re-present themselves as subjects of fetishistic desire. Nonetheless, can the exploitations of fetishization and commodification be subverted through the politics of self-fashioning and counter-fetishization (or what I view as self-authored fetishization) by black sexual subjects? Could the hip-hop porn genre be critically conceived as a productive space of pleasure and desire attempting to transgress or problematize what Celine Parreñas Shimizu terms the “bind of representation?” “To assume that sexuality gives bad impressions of racial subjects,” Parreñas Shimizu suggests, “keeps us from looking at how these images critique normative subjectivities” (Parreñas Shimizu 2005, 248). How do hip-hop porn representations critique normativity and respectability in black sexual politics, even as they perhaps comply with hegemonic codifications? Can our analyses “move beyond a one-dimensional understanding of sexual representation as always already injurious, dangerous, and damaging” while taking stock of the ways in which hip-hop has been accountable for the iconographic and material sexual abuse of black women (Parreñas Shimizu 2005, 248)?

Sexual Revolutions

Historically, the pornography industry has been both a venue for the production of sexual culture and for the mobilization of sexual labor. Pornography acts as a racialized economy of desire that is intensely policed and regulated by state and social apparatuses, but that is also widely consumed by all Americans, especially white middle-class men, as well as men of color. A powerful fascination with racial difference as sexual performance underlines how pornography acts as, Laura Kipnis points out, acts as a form of “political theater” where social and cultural ideolo-
gies of desire and taboo are staged and manipulated, as sexual norms and categories are simultaneously upheld and transgressed (Kipnis 1999, 164). Because pornography functions as a “festival of social infractions,” its “allegories of transgression reveal, in the most visceral ways, not only our culture’s edges, but how intricately our own identities are bound up in all of these quite unspoken, but relentless, cultural dictates” (Kipnis 1999, 167). The fascination with racial difference penetrates and organizes multiple levels of power in ways that are at once subtle and extreme, covert and overt, and thoroughly bound to a historical imaginary of black sexuality as inevitably the marker of deviance and the problematic of interracial desire (Williams 2004).

Within this context of the creation and management of racialized desire as both transgressive and policed, pornography has excelled at the production, marketing, and dissemination of categories of difference as special subgenres and fetishes in a form of “racialized political theater.” Empowered by technological innovations such as video, camcorders, cable, satellite, digital broadband, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and the internet, the pornography business has exploited new media technology in the creation of a range of specialized sexual commodities that are consumed in the privacy of the home. The reorientation of pornography as consumed in male-only spaces during the early “stag” film era and public theatrical venues during the “golden era” of film pornography in the 1970s to the private consumption of the video and digital eras prompted the profound transformation of the political economy of the adult entertainment industry (Williams 1999; Slade 2000). Moreover, domestic consumption allowed the massive industrialization of racial fetishism in hard-core, including black and interracial heterosexual porn, because it vitally transformed the viewer’s relationship to taboo sites of desire and fantasy. As a result of these technological developments, according to feminist film and pornography theorist Constance Penley, viewers could “find out what their own fantasies [were] and what [were] the limits of their fantasies” (“Part 5” 1999). Hence, technology enabled spectators of hard-core to explore the limits and boundaries of their desires, at precisely the point where taboo fantasies of interracial sex acts were situated in the American mass psychic imaginary.

Black performers, who have been depicted in pornographic media for over one hundred years, began to be professionalized as porn actors in the 1980s.
with the creation of black and interracial porn as specialized economies within hard-core. In hard-core fantasies of race, they were marginalized within the productive visual and political economies of the industry, and were featured only as actors, rather than as directors, producers, manufacturers, distributors, or retailers. Generally not employed in the mainstream and primarily white pornography genre of “features”—defined by more complicated plot schemes and higher production values—black performers were usually segregated into more marginal black and interracial video genres. Because the black and interracial genres were treated as a sideline to the industry, the producers did not mind cheapening many facets of the production—including the time for filming, crew, set design, equipment, and support and funding for the cast. Therefore the growth in available jobs for black women and men in the black and interracial fetish market was tempered by the broad racial segregation and devaluation of the videos. Hip-hop porn has allowed more opportunities for black performers in pornography to gain work opportunities, including in acting and filmmaking; nevertheless, the now popular genre sustains the segregation of the performers from the mainstream, more lucrative and dominant segment of the adult industry. Hence the representation of black and interracial sexualities and bodies continues to exist in a somewhat separate sphere than normative white sexual economies in hard-core, and as a consequence, these sexualities maintain the emblem of racial difference as a border, outlaw, and deviant economy of desire.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s pornography began to infiltrate mainstream media representations and sexual culture, and so did hip-hop. In fact, popular media’s appropriation of hip-hop music inspired the adult industry to seize upon the currency of the urban black cultural movement. Video Team, one of the most successful black and interracial film production companies (now owned by Vivid), was probably the first company to capitalize on the mainstreaming of hip-hop with In Loving Color (1990), an interracial sex spoof based on the popular Wayans Brothers’ hip-hop-influenced comedy television show In Living Color. Video Team followed the video’s success with the all-black genre series My Baby Got Back (1992–2007), named after the controversial Sir Mix-a-Lot rap song Baby Got Back (1991). As Sir Mix-a-Lot raps, “I like big butts,” the song celebrates black women’s voluptuous butts as symbols of desirability and beauty, a radical revision of the historical representation of black women’s butts as loci of their deviance and
hypersexuality vis à vis the trope of the “Hottentot Venus.” The music video provides an alternative iconography, where the round posteriors of black women dancers and enormous sculptures of brown butts are figured both as trumping normative (white) beauty standards and as sites of intense desire from black and white men alike (Hobson 2003, 95–96).

Since both pornography and hip-hop elicit complex responses of desire and disgust, pleasure and danger, and as illicit erotic economies embrace deviance, transgression, and subversion of sexual codes of decency, they have been similarly policed and regulated by the state. Nevertheless, both have been eagerly consumed in public and private contexts alike. The massive appeal of hip-hop as a subversive, urban, youth-oriented cultural form attracted pornographers interested in expanding their markets—historically focused mainly on white men—to urban men of color. Christian Mann, former president of Video Team, explained his interest in engaging hip-hop in the development of black pornography:

I came up with a video called My Baby Got Back. Just a slight variation on the [original song] title. And it was going to be about butt worship! And the video went through the roof! We had a front box cover that was similar to the photograph that 2 Live Crew used for their Nasty as They Want to Be CD. It was really the first intersection of hip-hop marketing and pornography, I believe. (Mann 2002)

With the rise to popularity of rap music in the early 1990s, Mann, among other producers, tapped into the frenzy by marketing hip-hop-oriented porn to a growing urban black and Latino consumer base. Mann references 2 Live Crew, a rap group that garnered intense controversy when their album As Nasty as They Want to Be and live performances were prosecuted for obscenity in 1990. 2 Live Crew also sparked a national debate, including among black intellectuals, as to whether the music constituted unadulterated misogyny against black women, as charged by black feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, or the cultural signifying of black men as a vernacular tradition, as argued by black literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 61–63). That Video Team’s My Baby Got Back video series was inspired by the likes of Sir Mix-a-Lot and 2 Live Crew with their ultra-popular and lucrative exploitations of black women’s bodies, specifically their derrières, is not surprising, given the widespread popularity, controversy, and salaciousness of these rappers at the time.
White pornographers were acutely interested in how black men consumed images of black women—how they fetishized them in popular culture—so that they could expand their market beyond the standard white male consumers who generally purchased adult tapes featuring black sexuality. Christian Mann argues that the hip-hop-oriented black porn genre that he was instrumental in developing was fashioned to cater to the specific libidinal desires of black male consumers:

I believed this interest in black women with large butts was something that was being fueled by black men’s interest and was about black men wanting to see black women. . . . I didn’t think it made sense to have these women with white guys. . . . All-black video is marketed to black consumers. Interracial video is more likely marketed to white men who like black women. (Mann 2002)

Mann’s comment underscores how significant hip-hop’s counter-fetishization of black women’s butts is to this story. Long a symbol of deviant, repulsive, and grotesque black sexuality and black womanhood (recall the “Hottentot Venus”), black women’s rear ends became newly fetishized through hip-hop music in ways that sought to recognize, reclaim, and reify their bodies as desirable, natural, and attractive. Mann also points to the ways in which black women’s bodies featured in hard-core functioned to define markets for white and black male consumers. Reflecting the dominant belief in the adult business that men prefer to identify with male performers of their own race in hard-core movies, we begin to see how hip-hop became an effective tool for white pornographers to create a separate and parallel economy for “all-black” sexualities. This process occurred over time, whereas in the early 1990s, even hip-hop-influenced racialized titles like Girlz in Da Hood 1 (1991), Booty Ho (1993), Booty in the House (1994), and Booty By Nature (1994) were all interracial (black–white) videos that not only included white men, but also white women. However, during the late 1990s it seems that much more segregation emerged, where such titles as Ghetto Girlz (1996), Bootylicious 10: Ghetto Booty (1996), Girlz in Da Hood 7 (1997), and Booty Talk 1 (1998), demarcated films where black women were the primary attraction.

During this period, commercial hip-hop came under the influence of west coast gangsta rap, with the enormous popularity of artists like N.W.A., Ice T, and Snoop Doggy Dogg. The adult entertainment industry,
located just miles from the black working-class post-industrial landscape of south central Los Angeles, was influenced by the trend. Adult companies like Video Team and Heatwave exploited the gangster trend and produced a sub-genre often referred to as “ghetto porn.” Ghetto porn was hip-hop-influenced hard-core that glamorized representations of the inner city, poverty, gangsta life, pimping, and whores. The tapes, like South Central Hookers (1997–2002), usually posed black women performers as prostitutes and constructed sets to romanticize the “hood,” with bars on the windows, graffiti walls, trash-strewn concrete floors, and garbage cans arranged decoratively around a profusion of black women’s butts. This ghetto fantasy signifies white production companies’ attempts to authenticate black sexuality on screen for black, but also presumably white, male audiences, with seeming icons of the ghetto, including black women as street prostitutes.

The desire to maintain and legitimize the hyperaccessibility of black women’s bodies to the sexual needs of men, while simultaneously iconographically devaluing those bodies, is illustrated in the cooption of hip-hop as a space for the articulation and visualization of black sexualities. Black men in these videos are often gangsters, and white men the businessmen or pornographers who go to and then find in the ghetto experienced prostitutes or young unassuming women (portrayed by professional porn actresses) for sexual encounters. Sometimes guns are used as props, and there is conflict or violence invoked (though never actuated on the women; it’s usually between men) to charge the scene and mark the fantasy as authentic and “ghetto.” However, the performance of violent hip-hop masculinities and degraded femininities is marked by its mimetic, voyeuristic quality—it’s a poor, even comedic, imitation by bad actors. Yet what it does is reveal the scopic desires of pornographers and consumers for “the ‘ghetto’ [as] a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom” (Kelley 1994, 181).

Pimp/Stud: Performing Black Masculinity

Hip-hop is the main form of legibility for black American culture in this contemporary moment, one that has diasporic and global effects. The massive popularity of mainstream hip-hop, which celebrates an anti-
establishment, outlaw aesthetic, and largely defines itself as a masculinist, commodified terrain of cultural production, has prompted porn companies to go further than merely referencing the form. They noticed the hypersexualization of hip-hop videos and the intense controversy the form has continued to garner, and as a result set their eyes on acquiring actual rappers for an emergent genre of celebrity hip-hop hard-core videos. Of course, the rappers were also looking to hard-core for an opportunity to expand their entrepreneurial interests and illicit erotic desires. Rappers like Tupac Shakur, whose 1996 soft-core music video “How Do You Want It” featured legendary porn stars Heather Hunter, Angel Kelly, Jeannie Pepper, and Nina Hartley, were willing to collaborate and cross over into the new realm of hip-hop celebrity pornification. In the raunchy, largely misogynist tradition of rappers like Luke Campbell of 2 Live Crew (who once owned a black hard-core magazine called Black Gold, and had an interest in strip clubs of the same name in Miami), Larry Flynt’s Hustler Productions collaborated with west coast rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg to make Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle, the highest selling hard-core video of 2001 (Salomon 2001; Edlund 2004).

“Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle is a prime example of how adult oriented erotic entertainment is crossing over into the mainstream,” asserts Scott Schalin, former president of the (now defunct) adult internet company Interactive Gallery. Snoop’s first video sold over 100,000 copies (outstanding by porn industry standards, where 4,000 copies sold is considered a success), and his second video, Hustlaz: Diary of a Pimp (2002), nearly matched that sales figure (Salomon 2001; Edlund 2004). Both won best-selling video awards from Adult Video News (AVN), the main adult industry trade publication, which suggests that the appeal was huge among white consumers as well as people of color, men and women (and is remarkable because so few “ethnic themed” videos win AVN awards). Hustler founder and publisher Larry Flynt revealed how pornographers identified and appreciated the outlaw nature of commercial hip-hop, which they also saw as an ideal cash cow: “The rappers have this ‘don’t give a damn’ attitude which is great. They don’t care who criticizes them for what. So it’s been a pleasure working for Snoop and it’s been a successful relationship for both of us” (Majors 2003).

Following the overwhelming success of the Snoop and Hustler Video collaboration, other companies like Video Team, Metro, and Heatwave jumped on the bandwagon, producing videos for Lil’ Jon, Mystikal, Digital
Underground, and G-Unit. Like ghetto porn productions of the all-black video genre, these celebrity-oriented videos purported to highlight raw, uneroticized sex, but with a hip-hop celebrity, hypercapitalist twist. They were situated within the fantastical lifestyle of famous rappers as they perform on the road or have raucous parties with a harem of sex workers—mostly real-life black women exotic dancers and porn stars—at multimillion-dollar estates. In fact, Snoop’s Doggystyle was filmed at his home, lending a feel of authenticity to his claims for luxuriously authoritative player status. At the same time, his pimp/player performance is fraught with the impossibility of this fantasy; we know that this is not “real” life, at least of the everyday for these men (Shock G 2004). Yet the emphasis of these videos on the sexual bacchanal—as seen in the final orgy scene in Hustlaz: Diary of a Pimp, or the “Sex Olympics” scene in Digital Underground’s Sex and the Studio (2003)—illuminates the contemporary significance of sexuality, specifically an abundant, unrestrained, and commodified sexuality, to black hypermasculinity as it is articulated through illicit eroticism.

The assumption of hip-hop performers’ “celebrity lifestyles” as always already hard-core porn organizes the genre. The form is invested in the repetition of symbols and practices that reflect a kind of self-rendering by black men—specifically the rappers as co-producers of the videos—that engages hypermasculinity and illicit eroticism. Interestingly, the rappers conduct the show by playing “host” to the sexual narrative and sexual labor, but they do not perform sex acts within it. The rappers thus perform as pimps or players directing the sex workers; black male porn actors are “studs” and women (including women of color and white women, but primarily black women) are the “ho’s.” Therefore, the rappers in hip-hop porn objectify the bodies of black men and women in their self-representations of black masculine authority. Through their performances these men mobilize deviance as well as illicit eroticism to construct themselves through, and against, dominant discourses of black masculinity that render black men powerless in relation to white patriarchal hegemony (Gray 1995; Perry 2004).

The performance of hip-hop celebrity/pimp/player is a self-articulation that makes use of black men’s outsider status and reframes it as an oppositional and autonomous masculinity that is defined by a consciously chosen hypersexuality. This complicated process of subject-formation actually participates in the historical use of the pimp, player, hustler, and
badman figures as vernacular sites of identification and legibility for African American men (Kelley 1994; Perry 2004). According to Eithne Quinn, the pimp’s symbolic lifestyle is very much about “impression management”:

The affluent “pimp daddy” is preoccupied with the conspicuous display of material wealth . . . the commodification of women . . . by the supersexual pimp is recounted in the lewd vernacular. The dandified spectacle foregrounds the importance of impression management: naming . . . reputation . . . and recognition. (Quinn 2000, 121-22)

Here black masculinity is invested in “conspicuous display” as a mode of sexual self-rendering and self-recognition. These rappers define their sexual agency in ways that diverge from the traditional black middle-class adherence to respectability as the only path to access, opportunity, and citizenship. Of course, this self-construction is tied to the performance of fantasy: fantasies of entrepreneurial empowerment, of sexual prowess, and of power over women and other men.

In hard-core pornography, rappers mobilize an illicit or “counter-public” site of self-definition, recognition, and desire in very public and lucrative ways (Cohen 2004). Lil’ Jon, describing his Lil’ Jon and the Eastside Boyz Worldwide Sex Tour (2004) reveals how the performance of celebrity lifestyle is tied to claims of hypersexual authenticity:

Our shit is different because it’s kind of like our lifestyle, like you are hanging out with us for the duration of the tape. You are hanging out with us, partying, wiling out, doing crazy shit, it’s funny. And you got some good sex on the tape . . . . I mean sex is a part of every man’s lifestyle nowadays. I’m just happy to be an entertainer. So I get more sex thrown at me than the average. (Lil’ Jon 2004)

These cultural productions reflect the ways in which we may view black masculinity as always performative, and as a mythology that is impossible for men to achieve (Johnson 2003). Rappers perform a kind of hypersexual black manhood, but cannot really “perform” as studs, because doing so means living up to an impossible “standard” (at least ten inches long) that very few men can achieve. These rappers prefer to perform the pimp or player, therefore, because performing the stud would open their performances up to critique and vulnerability.
Compulsory heterosexuality, fear of homoeroticism, and homophobia disallow desire to be gauged on their bodies (arousal of the phallus) and exposed. Hegemonic white masculinity defines black masculinities as non-normative, monstrous, dangerous, and feminized; these performances of hypermasculinity thus attempt to subvert such constructions by embracing them on one’s own terms. This self-fashioning produces new spaces for desire and pleasure through counter-fetishization. Yet with regard to the notion of self-care in the Foucauldian sense, what are the implications of this for the community and for women?

While hip-hop porn rappers prefer not to perform the sexual labor on screen, black male sex workers are called upon to fill the role of stud. Proud descendants of Sweetback (the cocksman vigilante of Melvin Van Peeble’s 1971 film Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song), black men working in the pornography industry benefit from the fetishization of black masculine sexuality in popular culture, which has translated into a demand for their sexual labor in hard-core (Guerrero 1993). More successful at gaining investors and distribution contracts than black women sex workers, many of these actors have directed their own videos and video series and have started production companies, which address the desires of black male consumers and white male voyeurs of interracial genre video.5

The adult entertainment industry has taken on increasing significance for modern black life. As a space for labor, consumption, networking, leisure, and sociality, the strip club has also become a particularly significant site of late, and this has been reflected in hip-hop music, cultural production, and music videos (Sharpley-Whiting 2007). Nelly’s controversial music video5 for “Tipdrill” represents the fluidity of pornography, strip club, and rap video conventions. Set in a sprawling mansion and filled with more than fifty black women exotic dancers in bikinis, the video, like most rap videos that signify the benefits of heterosexist playerdom, proffers a sense of luxury, abundance, and sexual possibility that is consciously figured within a sexual marketplace. Yet this is a marketplace over which these rappers believe that they have authority. The most compelling moment in the video happens as Nelly swipes a credit card through a dancer’s butt and then smiles into the camera. Is this a gesture of possession, the black woman as both currency and a device of exchange in the flow of capital and masculinity? And what does the woman in the video get out of this configuration?
Can the Ho’ Speak?

Here, I would like to follow the lead of Northwestern University Professor Dwight A. McBride’s work, specifically his essay titled “Can the Queen Speak?,” itself an allusion to Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” My section title, “Can the Ho’ Speak?” intends to explore the question of how racial essentialism “legitimates and qualifies certain racial subjects to speak for (represent) ‘the race’ and excludes others from that very possibility” (McBride 1998, 364). McBride’s work analyzes and critiques how African American gays and lesbians are so often written out of discourses about “the black community”; they are understood as discursively separate from and outside of whatever constitutes authentic (read normative, heterosexual) blackness.

In a similar way racial essentialism defines black “ho’s” (normatively lumped together, they include video models, street prostitutes, private escorts, exotic dancers, phone-sex workers, skeezers, freaks, chickenheads, goldiggers, and others) as existing outside of black moral respectability. Black ho’s are not as invisible as gays and lesbians in homophobic black intellectual discourses of “the black community”—often because of their symbolic power to represent multiple crises (black matriarchy, the black family, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, welfare, the materialism of black youth culture, the limits of black feminism, etc.)—but they are similarly derided (Collins 2000). They are often constructed as between, not entirely powerless victims and blameworthy agents of false consciousness. For many, it’s better to be a “bitch” than a “ho.” Ho’s are embarrassing and retrograde to the black progress narrative; they lend legitimacy to negative stereotypes about black women, and they make the “real” black community look bad.

Not only does the figure of the black whore exist as an outcast—part outlaw, part victim—she is dangerously positioned in relationship to material and discursive abuse. This point brings me to the second part of McBride’s essay that I find so useful: it is critical that we take hip-hop to task for its sexism and misogyny and homophobia. Following Kimberlé Crenshaw’s feminist intervention in critiquing the ways in which acts like 2 Live Crew do more than signify in a vernacular about black manhood, McBride agrees that sexist and homophobic cultural productions “legitimate—if not engender” gender and sexual violence in black communities (McBride 1998,
367). So by exploring the ways in which black manhood is trying to find expression through the fetishization and commodification of black women’s bodies and the mobilization of self-representations of hypermasculinity, I do not intend to offer a “political apologia” or rationale for black sexism, abuse, or misogyny (Zook 1995; Carbado 1998). At the same time, I argue here and elsewhere that, although sexism and misogyny exist in much of pornography, this does not mean that it is present in the entire media form. Nor can we consider the women involved in the productions hapless victims or traitors to the race (Miller-Young 2007).

Additionally, because there is so much diversity in porn subjects and subjective spectatorship, possibilities and potentials exist within the form that I believe should exclude it from being written off as only productive of discrimination, violence, and abuse. Significantly, we do not know enough about pornography and adult entertainment—the industry has been taboo even for researchers to explore—and much of the work written by black feminist cultural critics about the images of black women in pornography has not included the voices of women, sustained analyses of women’s participation as labor, or their own productions within pornographic media. Because black women “whores” have been written out of discourses of “the black community” or have been focused on only as the problems of contemporary black femininity, we are missing an opportunity to understand and illuminate the choices and self-articulations young black women today are making about their sexualities.

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s Pimps Up, Ho’s Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women (2007) is a new work that productively advances the discussion of black women’s sexuality in relation to hip-hop culture. In considering how second-wave feminism and the civil rights and black power movements have contributed to the ways in which young black men and women of the hip-hop generation experience sex within our consumer-oriented media culture, Sharpley-Whiting unpacks how the “twin myths”—“hypersexuality and easy accessibility”—about black women shape the terrain of their lives and render them “too hot to be bothered.” She questions how the women’s movement has allowed black women to pursue sexual autonomy, yet the trafficking of their sexuality within the corporate, transnational hip-hop industry functions to reproduce them as stereotypical objects “rendered fair game for rape and sexual assault” (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 58):
The sad irony about the notion of “choice” and “autonomy” for us black women who choose to appropriate and project the twin myths whether as rap artists, “video ho’s” or Jane Does . . . is that the choice is never fully ours, and thus the sexual freedom is illusory. . . . Black women’s sexuality in the marketplace of hip hop—in this instance, the supine or prostrate variety—is then devalued and heavily discounted. (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, 66)

Sharpley-Whiting’s work helpfully elucidates the complexity of black women’s sexual subjectivities in light of the many powerful economic, political, and social influences of hip-hop and contemporary black sexual politics. Black women’s sexual choices and self-articulations within contemporary hip-hop cultural production are complicated by the multiple stigmas and abuses that devalue, commodify, appropriate, mystify, and violate black women’s sexual integrity.

I agree that the ways in which black women are constructed through representation as hypersexual, accessible, and devalued contributes to their subjugation. I also believe that the fact that so many women still engage the media and culture, and find it engaging, compelling, and even instrumental to their subject-formation (or as preferred spaces of labor), means that we have to look carefully at how we as cultural critics, in naming the desires of others as illusory or somehow false, contributes to the assumption of representation, consumption, and desire as good versus bad or other binary valuations. That is to say, representation is an encounter with history and power that unleashes pain and horror as well as recognition and seduction. If we concentrate on how some representations are injurious and damaging to our sense of progress or integrity, we might miss reading the unreliability, unknowability, and ambiguity of black women’s complex sexual desires, fantasies, and pleasures (Parreñas Shimizu 2007). This is not to discount in any way the structural issues of sexism and violence as they are reproduced constantly in hip-hop and pornography; it is to propose that we take seriously how and why black people are finding their own legibility in these forms, and how they self-fashion themselves through and against hypersexuality. I suggest that even though black women are stereotyped, and indeed in many ways mistreated, this does not mean that we need to call into question their power for sexual choice, autonomy, or freedom. And if we do, do we not risk denying them the very agency we seek to provide?
If we turn again to hip-hop porn and the question of how black women negotiate sexuality within the genre, we see that black women's position in relation to the powerful gendered and racialized influences of corporate media is shaped by what Sharpley-Whiting (2007) calls the “twin myths” of their hypersexuality and super-accessibility. The adult industry’s interest in appropriating black urban youth culture, in its most heterosexist and masculinist forms, has had important implications for black women performers. Hip-hop porn has brought about increased work opportunities for black sex workers, but has also continued the often racially exploitative and sexist roles for black women that have been prevalent since pornography’s inception. Black women’s appearance in a variety of high- and low-budget films with an increasingly “ghetto culture” theme signifies their general ghettoization within the representational economy of hardcore as well as within the political economy of the adult industry as sex workers. Yet more black women than ever have gravitated to the sex industry as a site of labor and sexual expression—why?

During the 1970s there were fewer than five professional black and Latina porn actresses—including the famed Vanessa Del Rio, and the less well-known Desiree West. During the 1980s there were fewer than twenty black women performers, but during the 1990s, hundreds, if not thousands, of black women chose to appear in hard-core films, as well as in erotic magazines and websites. In other sectors of the sex industry, black women, who have traditionally participated in sex work as a labor option, have increasingly sought to make livelihoods in the fields of exotic dance, street prostitution, private escorting, and phone sex. With the growing incorporation of black actresses into an increasingly profitable and mainstream adult industry, how have black women performers perceived their participation in pornography? Why have black women chosen pornography as a labor option? While these questions are too complex to fully investigate here, I think it is important to point out that the stigma of sex work has elided a conversation over the productive aspects of women’s labor in the sex industries, including the pornography industry, within black feminist cultural criticism. Considering the marginalization of black women’s labor in low-level service sector jobs, and the feminization of work and poverty in the late twentieth century (Woody 1992), we should begin to ask to what extent does their labor in the sexual economy represent a broader strategy of black women’s attempts at survival and mobility? What are the specific motivations behind black
women’s choice of sex work as a labor option? How has the mainstreaming of pornography impacted young women’s ambitions to be the “video ho”?

Through my research on black women in the adult video industry, I found that these women are also seeking access, recognition, mobility, independence, and sexual pleasure as they practice an everyday politics of survival. They are aspiring actresses trying to gain access to the entertainment industry; mothers attempting to have more work flexibility and income so they can raise their children; students trying to pay rent, tuition, and fees; young women desperate to leave home and be independent; sex radicals exploring exhibitionism and polyamorous sex; budding entrepreneurs hoping to control the means of production; and much more. Coming from a variety of class and social contexts, sex workers in porn, like those in other areas of the sex industry, are sometimes casual laborers in it for the short term and sometimes professionals carefully constructing a career with an eye on the long-term, big picture. Their everyday negotiations are punctuated by moments of both defiance and complicity within the limits of the racialized sexual economy that figure as dangerous black women who engage in sexual labor and construct non-normative sexual autonomy (Hammonds 1997). Black women in hard-core engage in the illicit erotics of sexual economy. Through illicit eroticism they mobilize deviant, outlaw racialized sexuality as vehicles of consumption and labor, as well as of contestation and consent.

Though they strategically utilize non-normative sexualities deemed dangerous, they are also critical of the structural and symbolic limits to their sexual autonomy as they are articulated in hard-core, including hip-hop hard-core. Sasha Brabuster, a beautiful 44KK busty model and performer, chooses to avoid working in hip-hop-oriented pornography, preferring to appear in the BBW (Big Beautiful/Black/Busty Women) genres. Identifying hip-hop porn as problematic because of its narrow racial and gender stereotyping, Sasha told me that she mainly works in interracial BBW videos in order to protect herself from the kinds of limited representations that narrowly define black women in the hip-hop genre. “I choose movies that put me in a positive light,” she says, “that will market me in all positive ways” (Brabuster 2005). Sierra, a former professional exotic dancer and porn star from Atlanta, shared Sasha’s concerns about the misogyny in hip-hop, including music videos and adult videos. Sierra turned down many opportunities to work in both and shared with me why:
It’s sickening. It is sickening! That’s why I won’t do [music] video work. People have tried to get me to do rap videos. No, sorry, I’m not going to sit there and let you call me a bitch. I’m not having it ... I just refuse to be called that and smile. Sorry, someone has to put their foot down. Why can’t it be “See this pretty girl over here? Watch her do this” . . . Sex is a beautiful thing. It’s not something you should use to degrade people with. (Sierra 2003)

While Sierra was critical of how hip-hop pornographic production abused black women by attacking them as “bitches” and the like, she also discussed its growing influence in the hard-core industry. This presented a double bind: while hip-hop encouraged the industry to produce even more films highlighting black and interracial sex—and thus provided more opportunities for black women to work in the videos—more of the roles were explicitly “ghettoizing” black women, literally and symbolically. Although she was critical of the genre, Sierra also worked in several hip-hop-themed porn videos, which reveals the primacy of the genre for black women working in hard-core.

Sinnammon Love, a savvy adult performer and illicit erotic businesswoman with more than fourteen years in the industry, exposes the complexity of this issue. She has appeared in numerous videos with hip-hop themes—Snoop Dogg’s Doggystyle (2000), South Central Hookers 10 (1995), Black Jack City (1995)—and is critical of the problematic nature of ghettoizing black women’s sexuality. At the same time, she sees the production of black women’s sexuality as assimilative to whiteness as also limiting. Nevertheless, she underscores that as the adult industry is being run by men for men’s interests, if she is to survive and achieve success, she must commodify her sexuality in ways that maintain her own interests:

It’s almost as if companies are saying that men of color or white men, either have interest in seeing black women who either look extremely ghetto, or are assimilative to their own [white]. It’s gotta be one or the other, there is no in-between. The girl has to be either in a mansion setting or she has to be “Ghetto Bitches in the Hood vol. 17.” It’s as if the companies think or feel that there is no middle-class market, there is no market to see just an average black girl that has a nice body, that is pretty, that also likes to have down and dirty and nasty sex. It either has to be pimps and hoes or [assimilation] . . . well, when it comes down to
the girls, the guys is a different story . . . the companies really only care
what the last movie was she spread her ass in. They don’t, because this
is a male run industry. I recognize that my power in the business comes
from the core. The core being your center [presses her two hands down
towards vagina] and if women don’t realize how much power they have
between their legs . . . I feel like if I have to continue to present myself in
a way that they, they being the companies, and company owners, will
dee m [acceptable] in order to get what I want, then that’s what I’m
going to do, because I’m gonna get what I want. (Love 2002)

Love’s testimony reveals the complicated negotiations that are part of
the everyday strategies of survival and mobility for black women in adult
entertainment. She illuminates how one can be both critical of the
normative limits of representation as they structure the labor options and
experiences of sex workers in pornography and can still choose to engage
sexual expression within that space. She also argues compellingly for the
need for women to understand their sexual power—which she articulates
as their “core”—as they navigate an industry that does not necessarily have
their best interests in mind. She is clear about her desire to mobilize her
sexuality—including a pleasure in “down and dirty nasty sex”—in the
marketplace of desire for her own interests of access, opportunity, mobil-
ity, and fame. While I can’t explore further the complexities of these
testimonies in this context, I want to situate the experiences of these
women, and their illicit erotic labor, in further discussion about commodi-
fication and racial/sexual subjectivity.

The policing of women’s sexual autonomy within the black community
means that, despite the fact that sexual exploration is an important moti-
vating factor for many young black women to enter the sex industries, such
sexual self-fashioning remains taboo, especially because commodification is
equated with objectification rather than subjectivity. Implicit critiques of
these women are bound up in assumptions that it is, first, morally wrong for
a woman to use her sexuality as a commodity (because it is sacred or only to
be given as a “gift” in the context of love, romance, or heterosexual mar-
riage, for example) and, second, that because of the history of racialized
sexual coercion of black women by legal and economic institutions in the
Americas, black women should protect their sexualities from the exploita-
tions of the marketplace. Discussions of sexual self-commodification often
ignore the ways in which even hetero-normative relationships in the context of marriage are bound up with monetary or commodity exchange (Zelizer 2005). In addition, the act of fetishizing oneself as a consumable commodity in order to gain access to other kinds of consumptions for self-care is not unique to sex work. As Luise White (1990) suggests, sex work is not a capitalist social relationship because capitalism has commodified sex, but because it has commodified all labor. Moreover, we often ignore that sex work is “family labor” in that as women participate in the sexual economy, they “reproduce” themselves and their families (White 1990, 2).

Self-commodification and reproductive labor enables consumption. Deborah Thomas’s work on working-class Jamaican youth culture suggests the concept of “radical consumerism” as a way to understand how for some minoritarian subjects “consumption is a creative and potentially liberatory process” that works through rather than against capitalism (Thomas 2002, 43):

However, taking “radical consumerism” seriously may reveal that the lower-class black Jamaican man driving a “Bimma” has more on his mind than individualist conspicuous consumption. Instead, he is refashioning selfhood and reshaping stereotypical assumptions about racial possibilities through—rather than outside—capitalism. (Thomas 2002, 44–45)

Thompson underscores how subjects may selectively appropriate, as well as creatively redefine, aspects of the capitalist ethos as a way to survive economic crises or as a path to social mobility. Robin D. G. Kelley’s work (1997) underscores the ways in which selective appropriation of self-commodification is both strategic and creative in its engagement with capitalism. African Americans have mobilized self-commodification through the form of “play”—that is, the transformation of leisure, pleasure, and creative expression into labor. This “play-labor” is not necessarily resistant to hegemonic institutions of power, nor is it meant to be. It is one strategy by which young people, women, minoritarian subjects, the working class, and others may navigate the political economy by using their corporeal resources (Kelley 1997, 45–46). Black women sex workers transform “labor not associated with wage work—sexual play and intercourse—into income” (Kelley 1997, 73).

Yet these women’s labor may not necessarily be about getting paid cold hard
cash. As Joan Morgan points out about music video models, “Very, very, very few women make any money doing music videos” (Carpenter 2006b). This leads us to wonder if there are other engagements at play as women participate in the sexual economy—be it soft-core music videos or hard-core porn videos.

The question is intricately bound to the issue of how black women should use their sexualities in the marketplace in light of the perceived misogyny and abuses of much of contemporary commercial hip-hop culture as it reproduces the historical violence against black womanhood. This issue intersects with what Darlene Clark Hine (1989) has described as black women’s “culture of dissemblance,” or self-imposed silences about issues of sexuality. A necessary strategy of self-protection from abuse, the “culture of dissemblance” has tended to deny sexualities that might provoke further stigmatization. As it became a dominant articulation and identification for black women in post-slavery America, it coincided with black women’s attempts to define themselves as citizens deserving of equal rights, including the right to be protected from abuse.

Black women embraced what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) has described as a “politics of respectability,” or a radical form of discursive self-representation that refigured black women as strategically conforming to hegemonic manners and morals around gender and sexual propriety as an attempt to access social power and legitimacy. A weapon against racist discourse that rendered black women as sexual monsters, the politics of respectability, supported by the culture of dissemblance, actually functioned to limit notions of acceptable sexual behavior among black communities to the realm of conservative hetero-normativity. Although the porn actresses seem to agree with the prevailing black feminist criticism that hip-hop pornography can only be oppressive to black women—even when they, like Sinnamon Love, attempt to explore sexual self-fashioning within the genre precisely because it offers an alternative to white normative hard-core fantasies—what is also expressed is a pressing need for a liberatory space where the imaginary for black female sexuality transcends the dominant sexual economy in which black women continue to “give birth to white wealth” (Davis 2002). To that end, black women’s continued reliance on the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance in the public sphere does little to advance counter-discourses on their sexual expressions and representations.
Deviance vs. Defiance: Concluding Thoughts

Questions of the policing of sexual expressions, including the illicit erotic, may be theorized through the lens of the historical disciplining of urban youth sexualities as discussed by Hazel Carby: “The dance hall and cabaret . . . are the most frequently referenced landscapes in which Black female promiscuity and sexual degeneracy were described” (Carby 1992, 750). Referencing the 1927 sociologist William Jones, Carby posits that dance halls were perceived to encourage a “quick intimacy,” potentially giving rise to crime and working-class pathologies among youth, and that Jones sought to mobilize social disapproval of the black middle class in order to frame dance-hall culture as undermining the moral health and progress of the black community. Like the dance hall and cabaret of the early twentieth century, the strip club, dance club, party, music video, and porn set are all seen as spaces of the illicit erotic economy that actually threaten the moral health (and physical—as the inhabitants are seen as vectors of disease) of the black (middle-class) community. Can we defy or move beyond the stigma of the illicit erotic to explore other terrains of possibility?

This cultural work of non-conformity to normalizing and oppressive social structures must be analyzed as daily tactics of agency and autonomy, through which pleasure is a political act of reclamation in the context of social annihilation. Here, pleasure may be a way to disidentify with dominant regimes that police black bodies (Muñoz 2000). Cathy Cohen argues that we must queer black studies in order to understand how the most “deviant” groups (such as poor single mothers, the incarcerated, queer and transgender people of color, HIV+, and I would add sex-worker populations) seek out the “basic human goals of pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect” as they live “counternormative behaviors” (Cohen 2004, 30).

Within our scholarly traditions of focusing on formal political movements and the social politics of respectability, we have elided and actually re-pathologized the lived experiences and political culture of the deviant, and missed out on conceptualizing the “full range of political acts of resistance.” Cohen suggests:

Through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals, new identities, communities, and politics emerge where seemingly deviant,
unconnected behavior can be transformed into conscious acts of resistance that serve as a basis for a mobilized politics of deviance. (Cohen 2004, 43)

Cohen’s understanding of the utility of deviance parallels Celine Parreñas Shimizu’s concept of “productive perversity” as a way to redefine perverse, non-normative hypersexuality “in order to create new morphologies in representation and in history” (Parreñas Shimizu 2007, 26).

The celebration of the corporeal grotesqueries of hip-hop pornography is perhaps a useful example of mobilizing this politics of deviance, best understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's paradigm (1993) of the carnivalesque as an expressive politics of the public, collective, and common body. Within the carnivalesque revelry of the explicit, exposed, sensual spectacle of black sexuality, perhaps hip-hop pornography offers a new morphology or legibility of the black body as a site of counter-fetishized desire. This self-fetishization or counter-fetishization allows black sexual subjects in the public sphere to create a dialectical tension with the historical politics of respectability. This visual body remains firmly wedded to the pains and exploitations of hetero-patriarchal capital, yet is also framed within a discourse of pleasure and possibility authored by hip-hop subjectivities.

Can pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, become an anti-racist and anti-sexist platform in the way that pain and struggle has become for black communities? Moreover, in the context of the “new racism” (Collins 2004), late capitalism, neo-liberalism, and global cultural distribution of hip-hop, are our definitions of hip-hop culture as a counter-culture still relevant? Finally, are there other possibilities for black women, including queer spectatorship, in the new hip-hop pornography?

I raise these questions in the interest of challenging ideas that fix hypersexuality of the black body as always already repugnant. Perhaps we can read these oversexed bodies in another way. The realm of sexuality embeds complex power relations in which the subaltern subject is often conquered and colonized. However, sexual practices and representations are rich with possibilities for self-actualization and empowerment. Exploring illicit erotic economies is one way we can better understand how black sexual subjects self-fashion and refigure themselves according to the values and practices of radical consumerism, play-labor, and counter-fetishization. In light of dominant markets perpetuating white suprema-
cist, capitalist, and hetero-patriarchal narratives of black sexuality, it is imperative that we create black sexual subjectivities that move beyond respectability politics and the culture of dissemblance to recuperate a radical sexual counter-public.

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NOTES
1. Railton and Watson argue that “the display of the sexualised body and the potential for that body to be figured as an object of desire or fantasy are crucial to the economies of both pleasure and profit in the pop music video” (Railton and Watson 2005, 52). This observation includes the conventions of hip-hop music videos. Furthermore, the authors rightly point out that “despite the problematic nature of some of the imagery, pop music videos provide one of the, still very few, mainstream cultural spaces where there are a significant number of representations of black women.” (Railton and Watson 2005, 52)
2. According to the Recording Industry Association of America 2006 Consumer Profile, hip-hop/rap has fluctuated at between 9.7% and 13.8% of the overall music industry during the years 1997–2006. This figure does not include hip-hop-influenced R&B music, which has been between 9.7% and 12.8% of the music market during the same period. R&B music videos often use similar conventions as hip-hop music videos, including the fetishization of consumer products and the bodies of women of color. Rap/hip-hop has been the second or third most popular music genre behind rock, and in competition with country music.
3. Here I’m interested in complicating the often reductionist use of “the black community” that is used within popular culture as well as among black intellectuals. According to Dwight McBride (1998), the term often leaves out black lesbians and gay men, and I would argue, other sexual minorities including sex workers and transsexuals.
4. The “How Do You Want It” music video was directed by former black adult
actor Ron Hightower. Two versions of the video were shot, one that included partial nudity and one that was filmed with no nudity due to censorship (Pepper 2002).

5. Whereas black men were treated as marginal and mildly threatening to masculine dominance in porn of the 1970s and 80s (performers such as Johnny Keyes, Ray Victory, Jack Baker, and Billie Dee), the popularization of black and interracial genres and the appropriation of hip-hop themes in the 90s meant increased opportunities for work. The growing demand for extreme sex acts, cheaply made reality-based (or “gonzo”) productions, and interracial performances (which in porn primarily means black men with white women) also centralized the roles of black male performers like Sean Michaels, Lexington Steele, Mr. Marcus, Jake Steed, and Byron Long. These men appropriated the role of the hypersexual stud as they mobilized their sexualities for labor and pleasure, opening up representational and labor space for a new cadre of black male porn actors to follow. Taking advantage of being in demand within the adult industry—and they are, somewhat, just as or more popular than the leading white male performers like Rocco Siffredi and Evan Stone—black male sex workers in porn counter-fetishized the representation of black men as sexual beasts with gigantic genitals through their performances and creations of hard-core productions. Jake Steed’s series Little White Chicks and Big Black Monster Dicks (1999–2003) is one example of how these men fetishize their own sexualities while recognizing and exploiting the market’s demand for certain types of illicit erotic performances by black men.

6. For fascinating insight into the black feminist critique of the music video, see Carpenter 2006a.

7. Black feminist cultural critics have been very critical of pornography as a field of media and representation, arguing that it constitutes the abuse of women and is especially abusive for black women. See, for example, Gardner 1980; Collins 2000, 2004; and Walker 1980, 2000.

8. There were few black and Latina women in golden-age hard-core films of the 1970s, but according to my research there were thousands who appeared in other erotic venues such as magazines like Players, Playboy, and Eros in the U.S., and Femme Souilée, Inhalt, Emanuel, Whitelady, La Cousine, and Samy in Europe (especially France, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and Spain).

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