“Representing Intraracial Erotics and Conflict: Black-on-Black Discourse and the Production of Evidence in the Post Civil Rights Era”

Karrine Steffans’ *Confessions of a Video Vixen* produced a lot of turmoil and anxiety when it was released in 2005. An instant bestseller, her book was met with a tangle of outrage, disgust, and fascination about her sexual exploits with the rich and famous from various sectors of the entertainment and sports industries. Apart from the concerns of those celebrities whose sexual trysts Steffans’ *Confessions* described in explicit detail, the unambiguous representation of Black sexual behavior became a basis to critique various aspects of Black culture and Black life. No longer responding to the moniker ‘Superhead,’ the model/actress cum author became a recognizable (proper) name and her ‘autobiography’ an affirmation of critiques of hip hop, for example1. In book critic Kam Williams’ review of *Confessions* he writes: “For if just half of the allegations contained in this spellbinding confession are true, I feel totally vindicated for all of my diatribes against rap as misogynistic.” The video vixen, as a cultural figure, also presented a quandary for Black feminist criticism. In the wake of the Don Imus controversy, Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting expressed:

> Our own complicity in our objectification demands scrutiny as well. . . . The range of our successes and the diversity of our lives and career paths have been congealed in the mainstream media into video vixens, thanks to Karrine Steffans’ best-selling *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, or shake dancers given the frenzy

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surrounding the Duke rape case and hip-hop culture’s collaboration with the adult entertainment industry (Sharpley-Whiting, 88).

Even Steffans’ former lovers had curious responses. Rap artists Ja Rule responds to the allegations about his sexual relationship with Steffans by confirming the sanctity of his marriage. “She’s not going to mess up a happy home,” he asserts as a way of dismissing the rumors and appeasing his wife. Although Ja Rule seeks protection in the safety of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage, he happily accepts responsibility for giving Steffans the moniker ‘superhead.’ Similarly, R&B singer Norwood Young sought to align himself with hegemonic masculinity through his relationship to Steffans. Through her, he is able to deny rumors that he is homosexual although he claims to never have had sexual relations to Steffans. “I now wish I had” Young taunts, resorting to the most basic form of heteromasculinist affirmation. Actor Darius McCrary is best known for his role as Eddie Winslow on the television sitcom Family Matters about a Black middle-class family. McCrary asserts that his relationship with Steffans allowed him to get in touch with his ‘b-boy side’, a mode of masculine self-presentation he felt he had lost through his sitcom role. Porn actors and producers acknowledge that Steffans was able to “get paid,” but Suave XXX considers her monetary compensation for her Confessions to be “a foul way of going about getting your money.” In fact, ‘pimping and ho-ing’ are perceived as such unglamorous and destructive behaviors in the wake of Steffans’ Confessions that not even the archbishop Don Magic Juan is willing to endorse them. Described, ironically, as a pimp, spiritual advisor, and professional ladies’ man, Don Magic Juan complains that the motivation behind her writing Confessions was “all about the almighty dollar.” Rather than selfish gain, he calls for reciprocity between the
sexes, arguing, “what’s good for her is good for you,” and that “fair exchange aint no robbery.” What gives?

These days, the topics of intraracial conflict, especially those conflicts related to violence, addiction, and sexual exploitation seem to refer to the senseless brutality commonly described as ‘black-on-black’ exploitation. In the early 1980s (although the notion is not new) the concept of ‘black-on-black’ violence became a sustained, national issue, an issue more concerned with bad black behavior than with structural oppression, racism, and the cumulative effects of inequality. Black violence, intraracial violence, ‘black-on-black’ violence is, however (as we know) a construction, no more real, Mike Males argues, than ‘blond-haired violence’, or ‘left-handed violence’ (Wilson, 5). However, intraracial antagonism and conflict have become so commonplace discursively, that we rarely remark upon it. The presumption of intraracial class-conflict, inter- and intragender tensions, intracommunal homophobia, and intergenerational differences seem to occupy dominant notions of the challenges facing or the impossibility of racial community in the present. So the discourse of ‘black-on-black’ violence or exploitation becomes the most common way to talk about contemporary social problems, and the way to signify the impossibility of racial community.

We know that positing a dynamic, vibrant, and unified notion of racial community was invaluable to Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and to the gains these collective struggles for justice did achieve. These gains include, for examples, ending de jure segregation and securing voting rights, as well as the emancipation of thought and the opening of imagination to dream about the kind of world we want to struggle for, to live, to work, and to love in. So how did we get here, to a discursive space where
dominant notions of black-on-black exploitation occupy the discussion of racial community? How, through the discourse of ‘black-on-black’ violence, did African Americans supposedly shift from bearing witness to each other’s oppression to being the symbols of each other’s subordination? Although the concept of ‘black-on-black’ violence or exploitation is most closely associated with sociological and scientific discourses, I want to explore how this concept also impacts imaginative and representational spaces.

Now, the key question that our panel explores this afternoon is “what constitutes ‘evidence’ of racism in a post racial society,” and what an intersectional framework enables us to see in that regard. There are two considerations that I want to contribute to this discussion:

1. The significance of intraracial tensions/conflicts and their representation in the post-Civil Rights Era, and

2. What an intraracial epistemology makes possible in our analysis of intersectionality and the contemporary, so-called post-racial moment.

**Representing Black-on-Black Exploitation**

Studies of the post-civil rights era examine how ideologies about race and the exercise of racism reorganize and resurge in the period from 1968 to the present. Analyses of the contemporary circulation of racial ideas and the structures of racial inequality they support generally focus on four key areas: prisons, the shrinking welfare state, urban upheaval, and the problematic discourse of “colorblindness” that underwrites the notion of American racial equality. These forces of domination reinforce Blacks’ material and
social abjection (Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gillmore, Patricia J. Williams, Dorothy Roberts, Linda Faye Williams, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva).

Scholars of the “new racism” and racial dynamics in the era after the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements argue that ‘culture’ replaces ‘biology’ in contemporary conceptions of race. Rather than articulating whiteness as biologically superior, Blacks are depicted as “culturally” inferior, exhibiting beliefs, practices, and behavior that have resulted in their substandard economic, political, and social status. Successive administrations, from Nixon to George W. Bush, have argued for ‘law and order’ and economic responsibility by demonizing Blacks as diseased, violently criminal, and parasitic to federally funded social programs. Representations of Black homosexuals as demented transmitters of HIV, Black men as urban predators, and Black females as overly reproductive and avaricious depend on portrayals of Black gendered and sexual identities as inherently and irretrievably pathological.

Dominant, public images of Black Americans as violent and perverse imply that racial communities cannot reproduce normativity in private, or gain recognition in public. The phrase ‘black-on-black’ has become synonymous with violence, criminality, and sexual pathology. The phrase also depicts African American spaces and relations as lacking in value and benefit, but in need of surveillance and disciplining. David Wilson shows in Inventing Black-on-Black Violence how the discourse of intraracial conflict, primarily between urban, Black, male, youth, shaped US urban zoning and welfare policy decisions. In other words, policy shifts are also mediated through the notion and representation of black pathology.
The conclusion that there are serious defects within Black culture, not within racial, gendered, and economic stratification, locates the burden for challenges that Black people face squarely on Black people themselves. Teaching Blacks to be grateful and responsible citizens, preferably without government intervention, is the sought after solution, rather than shifting the distribution of wealth or the structure of opportunity. The ‘welfare queen,’ the unwed mother, the urban criminal, the video vixen. These contemporary, derogatory representations function in similar ways as the Jezebel and black male rapist images did during the Jim Crow era. But in the post-Civil Rights era, such pathological images of blackness circulate in a context of black inclusion and institutional representation. (Representations of a strong Black middle-class can illustrate both self-reliance and that working-class Blacks are not trying hard enough. If we are now a ‘colorblind’ society, it is considered ‘misguided’ to point out structural racism).

The popularity of formerly marginalized Black cultural products also takes place alongside ongoing and new forms of anti-Black racism and political and economic disfranchisement. The mainstreaming of Black culture and cultural representations of Blacks in popular media and culture intensify our need to understand the role of popular and expressive culture to the contemporary exercise of racism.

Masking the way that structural forces produce inequality contributes to intracommunal conflict as well. But if the processes of global capital and patriarchal state power can be masked by discourses of Black cultural pathology and intraracommunity conflicts, what happens when Black people express their grievances in the same terms of hypersexuality, bad behavior, and bad choices? Nowhere is the convergence between between dominant racial and gender discourses, structural
oppression, and intracommunity tension more apparent than in the production of the video vixen.

**An Intraracial Optic and Epistemology**

What would it mean to start with the intraracial as an optic, as an epistemological method? An important part of what a focus on intraracial conflict reveals is the ongoing need to grapple with the analyses that helped generate the theory of intersectionality itself. I am referring to the generation of Black feminists activists, scholars, and creative writers whose discussions of ‘double jeopardy’ and ‘intraracial sexual violence’ produced public dialogue about the gender-specificity of institutional and structural racism, AND about the impact of gender-specific racism on intraracial relations. Their collective social memories and grassroots theories have been particularly insightful about the function of racial and gendered violence as a technology of domination. From Ida B. Wells to Patricia Hill Collins, they help us to see how, although Black men and women can experience racism in gender-specific ways, racialized sexual violence works to oppress Blacks collectively. Applying their theorizations we are better able to interpret Karrine Steffans’ education in the eroticization of women’s bodies as a source of value.

For example, the origins of the video vixen’s narrative are situated within the contemporary processes of globalization and its particular racial and gendered effects. In the opening chapters of *Confessions*, Steffans describes her birthplace and early experiences on St. Thomas. The depictions of her birth and childhood on the island are figured through the intense hatred she feels toward her physically and emotionally abusive mother Josephine. Steffans’ animosity towards her mother stems from the perception of her mother’s desperation for and debasement by men. Impetuous choices in
men, frequent unplanned pregnancies, and bitter mother/daughter conflict are familiar criticisms of poor women of color especially. Women’s emotional and economic vulnerabilities in romantic relationships are generally perceived as solely women’s responsibility. Feminist scholars (like Jacqui Alexander) show how economic and gendered vulnerabilities intersect with racial and neocolonial regimes. The collusion between these forces exacerbates existing problems related to racial and gender inequality and produces new reasons for distress. Shifts in the exercise of economic, political, and racial power also disrupt intimate relations, limit life opportunities, and disparage those who suffer under these conditions of inequality. Black women’s mobility and social lives are shaped by global designs on their bodies as well. In an economy that depends upon tourism and the service-based occupations that support it, Black women find themselves recruited into servile labor and the symbols of its benevolence. The seduction of foreign visitors and capital to St. Thomas capitalizes on erotic fantasies of Black women as sexual available. Normative expectations about how women should conduct their private and public lives also seek to discipline their bodies in the pursuit of transnational profits.

The disciplining of Black women’s bodies makes race, sex, and gender central to both global interests and state initiatives. Limited economic opportunities and restrictive social expectations compel Steffans’ mother to migrate with her children to Miami, Florida. In Miami, Steffans’ mother is channeled into the low-wage labor market and the entire family is forced to contend with the stigma that gets attached to their poverty and island accents. It is also in Miami that Steffans is kidnapped and brutally raped. We can analyze her experience of rape within a culture of misogynist violence that is connected
to Black women’s vulnerabilities, Black poverty, migration and isolation, the patriarchal erotics of tourism, and the commodification of Black women’s bodies. These forces exert control over Black women’s bodies and their erotic autonomy while obscuring the policies and processes that create their vulnerabilities.

Mark “Brother Marquis” Ross of 2 Live Crew and Ice T are among the first people Karrine Steffans meets when she eventually moves to Los Angeles, California in the early 1990s. We know that the early 1990s was also the moment when 2 Live Crew and Ice T came to national prominence and vociferous public debate about misogyny and violence in hip hop music specifically. The respective legal trials that these performers endured are pivotal points in the shifts related to hip hop’s corporatization, mainstreaming, and lyrical and visual focus. It is significant that Steffans narrativizes her entrance into the music scene via these artists and at this historical moment. Ice T and Body Count were pressured to retract their critique of state-sponsored violence and their articulation of rage. By the time Ice T was persuaded to retract “Cop Killer” from commercial circulation, major record labels had already begun devising strategies to capitalize on so-called ‘gangsta rap.’ What I am trying to get at is how the video vixen is produced by multiple forces, including global capital, racial and gendered inequality, the sexualization of Black women’s labor, AND the prohibition of Black people’s critique of state-power.

Intraracial intimacy becomes its own site of struggle, a site that requires an intersectional lens to reveal and reject the dominant discourse of Black-on-Black exploitation precisely because it keeps us from seeing the operations of power AND dulls our sense of imagination and creativity – forces we are still in need of to develop
communities of consciousness about love and desire and about the ways these things are deeply connected to our intimate lives and expression.

In fact, all of the quotes I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, whether from Black book critics, scholars, rappers, actors, or self-described pimps, reveal that they are all contending with economic exploitation, a shrinking labor market, and decreased or limited opportunities. These factors pressure the ways they negotiate relationships, intimacy, betrayal, and gendered and racial identities. What is crucial to note, however, is that Steffans’ *Confessions* and the documentary *Kiss and Tail*, which comprises responses to Steffans’ *Confessions*, raised critical questions about the representation, commodification, and consumption of blackness.

Inverting mainstream hip hop’s dominant narrative structure, the documentary features music artists and video producers responding fretfully to Steffan’s desire for fame, profit, and recognition. If the gangsta, pimp, and ho have formed the ‘unholy trinity’ dominating hip hop’s storytelling worldview, *Kiss and Tail* reveals how hip hop artists also have to negotiate that imposition. Video producer Keith Paschall states that too many girls in hip hop video is actually a problem. Additional production requirements related to hair, makeup, and wardrobe are only a part of the issues women’s presence on set brings. Paschall laments that video models often get “in the artists’ ear,” offering comments and suggestions about how the rapper should perform or how the video would better proceed (*Kiss and Tail*). Paschall and music video casting director Pablo “Who?” Cornejo agree that video models also hinder production by demanding more exposure in the videos and more pay for their work. The models’ defiance of the

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directors’ and producers’ demands is one way the women are labeled ‘unprofessional’.

Video models featured in Kiss and Tail also attest to the feeling that their professionalism is determined by their willingness to submit to directors and producers. Further contradicting patriarchal perceptions about women, the models also dismiss the notion of female competition. Although many of the models agree that Steffans’ Confessions cast a negative light on all video models, Brittany Daily concludes that she “can’t knock anybody’s hustle,” or method for making money. Another video model, Krista Ayne, states that the real lesson from Steffans’ exposure is that artists “should pick the girl who is qualified” for work in the videos, rather than basing hiring decisions on sexual favors.

Although this dialogue plays out in the context of intraracial conflict, these artists inadvertently critique the association between blackness, violence, and hypersexuality. Their comments reveal their understanding of Black economic vulnerabilities even as they disclose the artists’ discomfort with the profits gained by betrayal and exploitation. While many of the individuals interviewed in Kiss and Tail established their fame through lyrical talent and misogynist expressions, their responses to Confessions produce the effect of challenging the viewers to question sexism in the entertainment industry as a whole. Finally, the debate exposes how race, gender, class, and nationality shape definitions and attitudes about sexuality. Sexuality functions as a site of intersectionality that reveals how oppressions converge and impacts Blacks collectively.

The site of the intraracial functions for us then as an epistemological and interpretive optic that reveals conflicts, their negotiations, and generative meaning that fall beyond the purview of the white gaze. Representations of Black people that are based on White, hegemonic fantasies of blackness have created a pervasive discourse of
black racial abjection. Such derogatory representations become the only mode of legibility – the only way to ‘see’ Black people. Without contesting the hegemony of ‘Black-on-Black’ discourse, we fall back into ‘proving’ or struggling to ‘disprove’ the presumption of black pathology. The site of the intraracial therefore, especially in the post-civil rights era, is so significant because it renders legible what otherwise must be structurally invisible – gendered and sexualized racism certainly, but also healing, and forms of recognition not based upon reproducing patriarchy and other forms of domination. The intraracial also becomes a site for discerning the ongoing process of community formation, the process of coming to collective consciousness about the ties that bind people together. Literary or other popular cultural depictions of ‘private relations’ become key sites for public discussions about Black social realities. Contemporary literary representations of conflict, tensions, disagreements, and struggles behind the veil may, after all, have something valuable to teach us about how we see, how we know, how we read, and how we imagine freedom right now.