GET YOUR FREAK ON
Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Femininity

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

2001: At the height of his career in 1981, the “King of Funk” Rick James hits it big with “Superfreak.” Describing the kind of girls who wait backstage with their girlfriends in the hopes of landing a rock star, “Superfreak” portrays a “very kinky girl” who is “never hard to please.” She’s “pretty wild,” he loves to “taste her,” but she is not the kind of girl that he can take home to his mother. James’s hit catapults the term “freak” into popular culture. Midnight Star sing “I’m Your Freakazoid, come on and wind me up.” Whodini
Missy Elliott’s “Get Your Freak On” may have appeared to come from nowhere, but the differing meanings associated with the term freak are situated at the crossroads of colonialism, science, and entertainment. Under colonialism, West African people’s proximity to wild animals, especially apes, raised in Western imaginations the specter of “wild” sexual practices in an uncivilized, inherently violent wilderness. Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality. For Western sciences that were mesmerized with body politics, White Western normality became constructed on the backs of Black deviance, with an imagined Black hyper-heterosexual deviance at the heart of the enterprise. The treatment of Sarah Bartmann, forced medical experimentation on slave women during gynecology’s early years, and the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment illustrate how Western sciences constructed racial difference by searching the physiology of Black people’s bodies for sexual deviance. Entertainment contributed another strand to the fabric enfolding contemporary meanings of freak. In the nineteenth century, the term freak appeared in descriptions of human oddities exhibited by circuses and sideshows. Individuals who fell outside the boundaries of normality, from hairy women to giants and midgets, all were exhibited as freaks of nature for the fun and amusement of live audiences.

When Elliot sang “Get Your Freak On,” she invoked a term with sedimented historical meaning. But there’s more. During the twenty-year period spanning James’s “Superfreak” and Elliott’s “Get Your Freak On,” the term freak came to permeate popular culture to the point at which it is now intertwined with ideas about sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices. “Freaky” sex consists of sex outside the boundaries of normal-
ity—the kind of “kinky” sexuality invoked by Rick James and other popular artists. As boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality soften and shift, so do the meanings of *freaky* as well as the practices and people thought to engage in them. The term initially invoked a sexual promiscuity associated with Blackness, but being freaky is no longer restricted to Black people. As Whodini raps, “freaks come in all shapes, sizes and colors, but what I like about ’em most is that they’re real good lovers.” James, Elliott, and other African American artists may have led the way, but the usages of *freak* have traveled far beyond the African American experience. The term has shown a stunning resiliency, migrating onto the dance floor as a particular dance (*Le Freak*) and as a style of dancing that signaled individuality, sexual abandon, craziness, wildness, and new uses of the body. “Get your freak on” can mean many things to many people. To be labeled a freak, to be a freak, and to freak constitute different sites of race, gender, and sexuality within popular culture.

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

What seems different today under the new racism is the changing influence of Black popular culture and mass media as sites where ideas concerning Black sexuality are reformulated and contested.\(^6\) In modern America where community institutions of all sorts have eroded, popular culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African American youth, in particular, can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternal organizations, school clubs, sports teams, and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality. Mass media fills this void, especially
movies, television, and music that market Black popular culture aimed at African American consumers. With new technologies that greatly expand possibilities for information creation and dissemination, mass media needs a continuing supply of new cultural material for its growing entertainment, advertising, and news divisions. Because of its authority to shape perceptions of the world, global mass media circulates images of Black femininity and Black masculinity and, in doing so, ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

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

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

“BITCHES” AND BAD (BLACK) MOTHERS: IMAGES OF WORKING-CLASS BLACK WOMEN

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

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

They may be right. During the early 1970s, when films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* presented African American women as sexual props for the exploits of Black male heroes, Pam Grier’s films signaled the arrival of a new kind of “bitch.” As a “Black Bitch,” Grier’s performances combined beauty, sexuality, and violence. For example, in *Sheba, Baby* (1975), Grier is routinely called a “bitch” by the bad guys, a derisive appellation that does not seem to phase her. In other places in the same film when she is called a “Bitch” the term seems to signal admiration. She becomes a “Bad Bitch” (e.g., a good Black woman), when she puts her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities.

By contemporary standards, the violence in most of Grier’s films seems tame. But her films did contain violence and Grier was often the one engaging in it. Despite her long hair, facial features, and full-figured body that granted her femininity under Western standards of beauty, Grier’s height made her taller than most men, a size that granted her the power of potentially dominating them. This she did in several films, from slapping her brother for capitulating to drug dealers in *Foxy Brown* (1974) to putting a headlock on a Black male gangster and stuffing his face in a bucket of flour in *Sheba, Baby*. Grier may have been called a “bitch,” but in *Sheba, Baby* and *Foxy Brown* she got revenge on the loan sharks and drug dealers that preyed upon poor and working-class African Americans.

Moreover, her actions routinely drew admiration and praise from the African American men in these films, as well as those who were in the audience. Film critic Donald Bogle describes audience reaction to an especially memorable scene in *Foxy Brown* that he calls “enjoyably perverse.” Prior to the scene, Grier’s lover and brother were both killed by two drug kingpins, a corrupt White man and his White girlfriend. Grier’s Foxy Brown catches up with the man and has her boys unzip his pants. He is then castrated. Bogle describes what happened next:

> Pam pays a visit to the man’s ladyfriend—carrying a jar that contains the poor man’s most valuable parts. Grier then throws the jar at the white woman; it falls on the floor, its contents apparently rolling this way and that (mercifully, the audience doesn’t see this; it’s left to the
imagination), all to the horror of the woman who, upon recognizing what is before her eyes, screams out the name of the man she has loved. It’s her poor Steve! Audiences howled over this one.9

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

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

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

Nelson then speculates why this situation exists: “Black male comedians have encased black women in a negative stereotype, the basis of which is self-hatred projected on the handiest target: black women.”12
In the universe of Black popular culture, the combination of sexuality and bitchiness can be deadly. Invoking historical understandings of Black women’s assumed promiscuity, some representations of the “bitch” draw upon American sexual scripts of Black women’s wildness. Here, the question of who controls Black women’s sexuality is paramount. One sign of a “Bitch’s” power is her manipulation of her own sexuality for her own gain. Bitches control men, or at least try to, using their bodies as weapons. In her novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Sister Souljah presents one of the few book-length treatments of hip-hop culture’s materialistic “bad bitch.” Souljah tells the story of Winter Santiago, the oldest of four daughters of a New York City drug dealer, whose three sisters bear the names Porsche, Mercedes, and Lexus. A coming-of-age story, the novel traces Winter’s grooming through her opulent adolescence to be a “bad bitch,” only to learn how quickly wealth and power were stripped away when her father was put in prison. Souljah’s depiction of Winter Santiago provides one of the best descriptions of a “bad bitch”:

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

Winter then continues to identify the two options that are available to a “bad bitch” faced with this situation. She can either take him home and “get her groove on just to enjoy the sex and don’t get emotionally involved because he can’t afford her” or she can walk away and “leave his broke ass standing right there.”\(^\text{14}\) Having a relationship is out.

This theme of the materialistic, sexualized Black women has become an icon within hip-hop culture. The difficulty lies in telling the difference between representations of Black women who are sexually liberated and those who are sexual objects, their bodies on sale for male enjoyment. On the one hand, the public persona of rap star Lil’ Kim has been compared
to that of a female hustler. Resembling representations of her male counterpart who uses women for financial and sexual gain, the public performance of Lil’ Kim brings life to the fictional Winter Santiago. An exposé in *Vibe* magazine describes Kim’s public face: “Lil’ Kim’s mythology is about pussy, really: the power, pleasure, and politics of it, the murky mixture of emotions and commerce that sex has become in popular culture. . . . She is, perhaps, the greatest public purveyor of the female hustle this side of Madonna, parlaying ghetto pain, pomp, and circumstances into mainstream fame and fortune.”

But should we think that Lil’ Kim is shallow, the article goes on to describe her “soft center”: “Kim’s reality, on the other hand is about love. It is her true currency . . . the entirely of her appeal has much to do with the fact that love—carnal, familial, self-destructive, or spiritual—is the root of who Kim is. Pussy is just the most marketable aspect of it.”

What do we make of Lil’ Kim? Is she the female version of misogynistic rappers? If so, her performance is what matters. To be real, she must sell sexuality as part of working-class Black female authenticity.

On the other hand, many African American women rappers identify female sexuality as part of women’s freedom and independence. Being sexually open does not make a woman a tramp or a “ho.” When Salt ’n Pepa engage in role reversal in their video “Most Men Are Tramps,” they contest dominant notions that see as dangerous female sexuality that is not under the control of men. Lack of male domination creates immoral women. Salt ’n Pepa ask, “have you even seen a man who’s stupid and rude . . . who thinks he’s God’s gift to women?” The rap shows a group of male dancers wearing black trench coats. As Salt ’n Pepa repeat “tramp,” the men flash open their coats to reveal outfits of tiny little red G-strings. The video does not exploit the men—they are shown for just a second. Rather, the point is to use role reversal to criticize existing gender ideology.

In their raps “Let’s Talk about Sex,” and “It’s None of Your Business,” the group repeats its anthem of sexual freedom.

This issue of control becomes highly important within the universe of Black popular culture that is marketed by mass media. Some women are bitches who control their own sexuality—they “get a freak on,” which remains within their control and on their own terms. Whether she “fucks men” for pleasure, drugs, revenge, or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass
media. In discussing this updated jezebel image, cultural critic Lisa Jones distinguishes between gold diggers/skeezers (women who screw for status) and crack hoes (women who screw for a fix). Some women are the “hos” who trade sexual favors for jobs, money, drugs, and other material items. The female hustler, a materialistic woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants constitutes this sexualized variation of the “bitch.” This image appears with increasing frequency, especially in conjunction with trying to “catch” an African American man with money. Athletes are targets, and having a baby with an athlete is a way to garner income. Black women who are sex workers, namely, those who engage in phone sex, lap dancing, and prostitution for compensation, also populate this universe of sexualized bitches. The prostitute who hustles without a pimp and who keeps the compensation is a bitch who works for herself.

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

In the early 1990s, and in conjunction with the emergence of gangsta rap, a fairly dramatic shift occurred within Black popular culture and mass media concerning how some African American artists depicted African American women. In a sense, the celebration of Black women’s bodies and how they handled them that had long appeared in earlier Black cultural production (for example, a song such as “Brick House” within a rhythm and blues tradition) became increasingly replaced by the objectification of Black women’s bodies as part of a commodified Black culture. Contemporary music videos of Black male artists in particular became increasingly populated with legions of young Black women who dance, strut, and serve as visually appealing props for the rapper in question. The women in these videos typically share two attributes—they are rarely acknowledged as individuals and they are scantily clad. One Black female body can easily replace another and all are reduced to their bodies. Ironically, displaying nameless, naked Black female bodies had a long history in Western societies, from the display of enslaved African women on the auction block under chattel slavery to representations of Black female
bodies in contemporary film and music videos. Describing the placement
and use of primitive art in Western exhibits, one scholar points out,
“‘namelessness’ resembles ‘nakedness’: it is a category always brought to
bear by the Westerner on the ‘primitive’ and yet a phony category insofar
as the namelessness and nakedness exist only from the Euro-American
point of view.”

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

Objectifying Black women’s bodies turns them into canvases that can
be interchanged for a variety of purposes. Historically, this objectification
had a clear racial motive. In the post–civil rights era, however, this use of
Black women’s bodies also has a distinctive gender subtext in that African
American men and women participate differently in this process of objec-
tification. African American men who star in music videos construct a cer-
tain version of manhood against the backdrop of objectified nameless,
 quasi naked Black women who populate their stage. At the same time,
African American women in these same videos often objectify their own
bodies in order to be accepted within this Black male–controlled universe.
Black women now can get hair weaves, insert blue contact lenses, dye their hair blond, get silicone implants to have bigger breasts, and have ribs removed to achieve small waists (Janet Jackson) all for the purpose of appearing more “beautiful.”

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

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

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

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

Representations such as these contributed to a punitive climate in which the criminal justice system increasingly penalizes pregnancy by prosecuting women for exposing their babies to drugs in the womb and by imposing birth control as a condition of probation. Between 1985 and 1995, thirty states charged approximately 200 women with maternal drug use. Charges included distributing drugs to a minor, child abuse and neglect, reckless endangerment, manslaughter, and assault with a deadly weapon. In virtually all of these cases, the women prosecuted were poor and African American. As legal scholar Dorothy Roberts points out, “prosecutors and judges see poor Black women as suitable subjects for these
reproductive penalties because society does not view these women as suitable mothers in the first place.  

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

These images of bitches and bad Black mothers came at a time when African American children and youth became expendable. Simply put, in the post–civil rights era, poor Black children became superfluous as workers. Under chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation of the rural South, the need for cheap, unskilled labor and African American political powerlessness fostered population policies that encouraged Black women to have many children. Since African Americans themselves absorbed the costs attached to raising children, a large, disenfranchised, and impoverished Black population matched the perceived interest of elites. Black children cost employers little because children did unskilled labor and were ineligible for existing social welfare benefits. The post–civil rights era that required a more highly educated workforce and that increased Black children’s eligibility for social welfare benefits made them more expensive to
train and to hire. In this political and economic context, poor and working-class African American women were encouraged to have fewer children, often through punitive population control policies.28

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

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

Black women’s self-representation in rap results in complex, often contradictory and multifaceted depictions of Black womanhood.35 One
study of representations of Black women in popular music videos found that controlling images of Black womanhood occurred simultaneously with resistant images. On the one hand, when music videos focused on Black women’s bodies, presented one-dimensional womanhood by rarely depicting motherhood, and showcased women under the aegis of a male sponsor, they did re-create controlling images of Black womanhood. On the other hand, the music videos also contained distinctive patterns of Black women’s agency. First, in many videos, Blackness did not carry a negative connotation, but instead served as a basis for strength, power, and a positive self-identity. Second, despite a predominance of traditional gender roles, Black women performers were frequently depicted as active, vocal, and independent. But instead of exhibiting the physical violence and aggression found in men’s videos, the music videos sampled in the study demonstrate the significance of verbal assertiveness where “speaking out and speaking one’s mind are a constant theme.”

Another theme concerns achieving independence—Black women may assert independence, but they look to one another for support, partnership, and sisterhood. Black women’s music videos may be situated within hip-hop culture, but they reflect the tensions of negotiating representations of Black femininity: “what emerges from this combination of agency, voice, partnership, and Black context is a sense of the construction of Black woman-centered video narratives. Within these narratives, the interests, desires, and goals of women are predominant. . . . Black women are quite firmly the subjects of these narratives and are able to clearly and unequivocally express their points of view.”

Representations of Black women athletes in mass media also replicate and contest power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Because aggressiveness is needed to win, Black female athletes have more leeway in reclaiming assertiveness without enduring the ridicule routinely targeted toward the bitch. Black female athletes provide a range of images that collectively challenge not only representations of the bitch and the bad mother but are also beginning to crack the financial gender gap separating men’s and women’s sports. Whereas men have been able to use athletics, most recently college and professional basketball, for upward social mobility and financial security, women lacked this social mobility route until the passage of Title IX. This legislation helped generate opportunities for girls and women who wish to benefit from athletics in ways that have been long
available to boys and men. Because Black women have not typically participated in the women’s sports of figure skating, gymnastics, and until the Williams sisters, women’s tennis, they have not been the image of the female athlete. The entry of Black women into basketball and tennis has changed this situation. Black women athletes’ bodies are muscular and athletic, attributes historically reserved for men, yet their body types also represent new forms of femininity.

Take, for example, the dilemma that the tennis world faced with the success of African American sisters Venus and Serena Williams. The achievements of the Williams sisters are unprecedented. Standing at 6–foot-1 ½ inches and with a 127 mph serve that once set a women’s world record, Venus Williams has held the Wimbledon title twice (2000 and 2001) and at the Sydney Olympics was the first woman to win a gold medal in singles and doubles (with sister Serena) since 1924. Winning 3.9 million dollars in prize money, Serena Williams surged ahead in 2002, winning three Grand Slam titles to take the number one ranking away from Venus. In 2002, the Williams sisters were ranked number one (Venus) and number two (Serena) in the world, a first ever for siblings. Unlike Althea Gibson, Zina Garrison, and other African American female tennis stars whose demeanor and style of play resembled the White women dominating the sport, the Williams sisters basically reject tennis norms. They are exceptionally strong and play power games like men. They rebuff tennis “whites” in favor of form-fitting, flashy outfits in all sorts of colors. They play with their hair fixed in beaded, African-influenced cornrows that are occasionally died blond. The tennis world cannot remove them because the Williams sisters win. Their working-class origins mean that they don’t fit into the traditional tennis world and they express little desire to mimic their White counterparts. Yet their achievements force issues of excellence and diversity to the forefront of American politics.

The danger for Black women athletes does not lie in being deemed less feminine than White women because, historically, Black women as a group have been stigmatized in this fashion. Rather, for all female athletes and for Black women athletes in particular, the danger lies in being identified as lesbians. The stereotype of women athletes as “manly” and as being lesbians and for Black women as being more “masculine” than White women converge to provide a very different interpretive context for Black female athletes. In essence, the same qualities that are uncritically celebrated for
Black male athletes can become stumbling blocks for their Black female counterparts. Corporate profits depend on representations and images, and those of Black female athletes must be carefully managed in order to win endorsements and guarantee profitability.

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

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

Images of working-class Black femininity all articulate with the social class system of the post–civil rights era. Depicting African American women as bitches; the sexual use of African American women’s bodies by circulating images of Black women’s promiscuity; derogating the reproductive capacities of African American women’s bodies; and efforts to refashion images of Black female athletes in order to erase lesbianism all work to obscure the closing door of racial opportunity in the post–civil rights era. On the surface, these interconnected representations offer a plausible explanation for poor and/or working-class African American women’s class status: (1) too-strong, bitchy women are less attractive to men because they are not feminine; (2) to compensate, these less-attractive women use their sexuality to “catch” men and hopefully become pregnant so that the men will marry them; and (3) men see through this game and leave these women as single mothers who often have little recourse but to either try and “catch” another man or “hustle” the government. But on another level, when it comes to poor and working-class African American women, this constellation of representations functions as ideology to justify the new social relations of hyper-ghettoization, unfinished racial desegregation, and efforts to shrink the social welfare state. Collectively these representations construct a “natural” Black femininity that in turn is central to an “authentic” Black culture.
Aggressive African American women create problems in the imperfectly desegregated post-civil rights era, because they are less likely to accept the terms of their subordination. In this context, Black “bitches” of all kinds must be censured, especially those who complain about bad housing, poor schools, abusive partners, sexual harassment, as well as their own depiction in Black popular culture. They and their children must be depicted as unsuitable candidates for racial integration. Take, for example, the resistance to poor and working-class single mothers who aim to move into White neighborhoods. Resistance to racial housing desegregation can be palpable, primarily because poor and working-class Black children are stigmatized as being aggressive, undisciplined, unruly, and unsuitable playmates for White children of any social class. The prevailing logic suggests that, in the absence of strong fathers, their too strong mothers could not teach them properly so the children repeat the cycle of inappropriate gender behavior. In this sense, the term *bitch* becomes a way of stigmatizing poor and working-class Black women who lack middle-class passivity and submissiveness. Their undesirable, inappropriate behavior justifies the discrimination that they might experience in housing, jobs, schools, and public accommodations.

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

**Modern Mammies, Black Ladies, and “Educated Bitches”: Images of Middle-Class Black Women**

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

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

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

The character of Claire Huxtable exemplifies the new Black lady invented for middle- and upper-middle-class African American women. As a wife and mother, the character of Claire Huxtable was beautiful, smart, and sensuous. No cornrows, gum chewing, cursing, miniskirts, or plunging
necklines existed for the character of Claire Huxtable. Despite the fact that she was a lawyer, the show never showed her actually at her place of employment. Doing so would introduce the theme of her sexuality into the workplace, and exploring these contradictions apparently were beyond the skills of the show’s writers. Instead, she was allowed to be a sexual being, but only within the confines of heterosexual marriage and family. Occasionally, she and her husband would cuddle under the covers, until they were typically interrupted by one of their five children. Despite this commitment to hearth and home, Claire Huxtable somehow managed to make law partner in record time. Black women’s sexuality was safely contained to domestic space, and within the confines of heterosexual marriage.

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

The post–civil rights era has generated its share of representations of modern mammies, many of who also function as Black ladies. This combination of Black lady and modern mammy seems most evident on network television, a medium that reaches a broad audience. Unlike Claire Huxtable, who was almost always shown at home, these modern mammies are almost exclusively shown in the workplace. Many apparently either
have no family life or such lives are clearly secondary to the requirements of their jobs. These women are tough, independent, smart, and asexual. But they are also devoted to their organizations, their jobs, and, upon occasion, their White male bosses. They are team players and their participation on the team is predicated upon their willingness to lack ambition for running the team and never to put family ahead of the team.

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

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

Despite the considerable attention paid to Anita Hill in Black feminist theorizing, Oprah Winfrey has had a far greater impact within American culture than any other living African American woman. Oprah is one of the richest women in the world. In 2003, Winfrey became the first Black woman on Forbes magazine’s list of billionaires, two years after Black Entertainment Television’s founder Robert Johnson became the first Black billionaire. A good deal of Winfrey’s success lies in her ability to market herself within the familiar realm of the mammy, not violate the tenets of being a Black lady, yet reap the benefits of her performance for herself. Following in the footsteps of Hattie McDaniel, Winfrey’s career seemingly echoes McDaniel’s reply to those who criticized her acceptance of stereotypical roles. McDaniel once said, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn’t, I’d be making seven dollars a week actually being one!” Winfrey constitutes the penultimate successful modern mammy whom African American and, more amazingly, White women should emulate. Winfrey markets herself in the context of the synergistic relationship among entertainment, advertising, and news that frame contemporary Black popular culture. Winfrey began in soft news reporting, a format that positioned her to assume a local Chicago talk show and learn the ropes of delivering the all-important “money shot.” Her success in Chicago grew into the hugely popular Oprah Winfrey Show. Winfrey’s corporate power is impressive. Her show mixes a winning com-
combination of news and entertainment, or infotainment. She instructs and raises general consciousness on a list of important social issues ranging from child abuse to wife battering to rape. Almost single-handedly, Winfrey got America to read, an impressive accomplishment in a mass-media-saturated society that balks at funding libraries and public education. Having a book listed on her “Oprah’s Book Club” ensured overnight success. Winfrey entertains, makes money, and instructs, a stunning fusion of entertainment, advertising, and news. Winfrey’s immense success provides a stamp of endorsement to any philosophy that she might endorse that goes far beyond any expertise she might possess on any given topic.

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

When African American middle-class women stray too far from the narrow confines of the Black lady and the modern mammy, the price can be high. Anita Hill’s treatment during the 1992 Senate confirmation hearings of now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is instructive in this regard. Hill demonstrated all of the qualities of the assimilated, acceptable middle-class African American woman. Hill exemplified a politics of respectability—she stayed in school, got good grades, spoke standard
American English, and believed in the traditional American values of family, faith, and hard work. She never married, remained childless, and was devoted to her job. Yet because Hill was the target of sexual harassment, she was called upon to testify about her experiences years later. Virtually overnight, Hill as exemplary Black career woman became derogated as a dangerous, out of control threat to the social order. Given the lack of scandal in Hill’s personal history, her demeanor as a witness, and her basic credibility, Hill’s veracity was challenged. Her reliability as a witness was disputed on the grounds that she was acting out a fantasy of unrequited love for Thomas, a man who was her superior and who might be an ideal future husband who would protect her and allow her to share in his power. Thomas apparently rejected her and married a White woman, behavior that sparked a deep desire for revenge. Amazingly, this version of events actually fostered the rediscovery of erotomania, a medical disorder that first officially appeared 1987 as a subcategory of Delusional Disorder that was used as a political weapon against her. In brief, Hill was accused of being crazy.

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

Hill’s story illustrates the contradictions that face middle-class African American women who become judged within the confines of modern mammies and Black ladies. In Hill’s case, the mammy and the lady collided head-on, with Hill herself left as the casualty. As modern mammies, such
women are expected to put everyone else’s wishes ahead of their own needs; in fictional Ella Farmer’s case, her own wedding and personal happiness in favor of the “Chief’s” predicament and, in Hill’s case, Clarence Thomas’s alleged desires for sexual favors as the cost of keeping her job. But succumbing to his demands would have meant that Hill no longer fell within the equally confining image of Black ladyhood. Rejecting his demands eventually exposed Hill to the charge of aggression and bitchiness. Being the ultimate corporate, academic, or government mammy yields a lifetime of faithful service that can border on exploitation. These representations depict Black women professionals as women alone, either because their dedication to their careers has meant that they have not devoted sufficient time to their personal lives or because they have some sort of negative trait that makes them less desirable as marital partners, in Hill’s case, a latent case of erotomania.

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

Together, representations of Black ladies, modern mammies, and educated Black bitches help justify the continued workplace discrimination targeted toward many middle-class African American women. They lack loyalty (refuse to go out in a snowstorm in their wedding night to save their bosses), they are not ladylike enough (Anita Hill’s alleged erotomania that surfaced when Thomas rejected her advances), or they are so cutthroat and ruthless that they cannot be trusted (Jacqueline’s turning the tables and Lysterine’s values concerning the booty call). These representations also are used to explain why so many African American women fail to find committed male partners—they allegedly work too hard, do not know how to support Black men, and/or have character traits that make them unappealing to middle-class Black men. Only rarely do the families, friendships, and love relationships that African American women actually have find media validation. For example, the numbers of Black women who, through separation, divorce, or the decision to have children without male partners, live as single parents are routinely seen as having a lesser form of family life. Even more rarely are relationships that fall outside the scope of acceptable societal norms validated in mass media space. For example, with the exception of the HBO series *The Wire* that debuted in 2002, representations of Black lesbians in committed coupled relationships remain rare. This show is unusual in that, unlike the characters of Ella Farmer and Lieutenant Van Burens who also work on behalf of law and order, the character of Shakima G Greggs, an African-American/Korean-American female narcotics detective (played by Sonja Sohn), is in an openly lesbian relationship. Culturally Black, Kima is shown on the job, often engaged in everyday chitchat with her male colleagues about her “woman.” She is also shown at home with all of the conflicts that were denuded from characters such as Claire Huxtable. Kima argues with her Black lesbian partner Cheryl, who fears for Kima’s safety on dangerous narcotics details and wishes that she would place more emphasis on her law school studies. Kima and Cheryl are shown in sexual situations, a rarity in mass media. On *The Wire*, the committed love relationship of this Black lesbian couple is treated as no different than any other relationship on the series. This ordinary treatment thus provides a mass media depiction of middle-class Black women that remains highly unusual.
In essence, the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America. Because presenting African American culture as being indistinguishable from other cultures is not necessarily entertaining, newsworthy, or marketable, depictions of Black culture needed to be different from White norms, yet still supportive of them. This media constructed Blackness took class-specific forms that mirrored changes in actual social class formations among African Americans. The arrival of middle-class “Black” respectability, as evidenced by the strictures of the Black lady and the modern mammy, helped shape a discourse about racial integration and African American women’s place in it. For example, the Cosby family was definitely “Black” because they had Black cultural referents in their home (artwork, they listened to jazz, etc.), yet their values allegedly matched those of White middle-class Americans. Such images participated in an “enlightened racism” whereby Whites could claim that they were not racist, primarily because they would welcome Black families like the Cosbys as neighbors, despite data on patterns of urban migration suggesting that Whites actually preferred racially homogeneous neighborhoods. New patterns of color-blind racism needed a few acceptable, assimilated Blacks who could meet the high standards set by the Cosby family and, for Black women, those of modern mammies and Black ladies.

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

In this context, it is important to remember that ideologies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that produce the controlling images of Black femininity discussed here are never static. Rather, they are always internally inconsistent, reflect the experiences of the people who agree with and refute them, and thus are constantly subject to struggle. As the work of Black female artists within rap and the broadening of images of Black professional women on television suggest, contemporary images of Black femininity reflect these contradictions. How do those of Black masculinity fit within this new racism? Moreover, how do gender-specific images of Black femininity and Black masculinity work together?
in the United States. This includes any Black Christian who worships and is a member of a Black congregation. The formal use of the term refers to independent, historic, and Black-controlled denominations that were founded after the Free African Society in 1787. For a listing, see Monroe 1998, 297, n. 1. For a general history of the Black Church, see Lincoln 1999. For analyses of Black women’s participation in the Black Church, see Douglas 1999; Gilkes 2001; Higginbotham 1993.

56. Lincoln 1999, xxiv.
59. Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 120.
62. For a discussion of the family networks of Black gay men in Harlem, see Hawkeswood 1996. Also, see Battle et al. 2002, 13–17.
64. Somerville 2000.
71. Comstock 1999, 156.
72. Comstock 1999, 156.
76. Smith 1990, 66.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. The Funny Pages: List of Penises 15.
3. For an analysis that argues that body politics are a Western phenomenon and that African societies place far less emphasis on the body, see Oyewumi 1997.
5. Kennedy 2002, 48. The effectiveness of this strategy is debatable.
7. I use the terms representations, stereotypes, and controlling images to refer to the depiction of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture. Each term has a different history. Representations need not be stereotypical and stereotypes need not function as controlling images. Of the three, controlling images are most closely tied to power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For a discussion of controlling images, see Collins 2000a, 69–96.
NOTES

10. One commentator fails to see the complexities of the race and gender politics in some of Grier’s movies and places her with a framework of an undifferentiated “superbitch.” “In Foxy Brown alone, Grier thrashes a call girl in a bar, slashes the throat of another woman, cremates two men to death, and castrates a third and delivers his genitals in a pickle jar to his womanfriend as a warning. . . . It didn’t matter what Grier’s slated role was, her character type remained the same—who-rish superbitch who bedded with anyone including her professed enemies” Freydberg 1995, 234–235. Grier certainly did all of these things, but she was not a whore and her actions were politically motivated.

15. Marriott, 126.
21. See the discussion in chapter 6 of how images of White femininity, especially con-cerning physical beauty, operate as a hegemonic gender ideology for all women.
24. For a discussion of the family ideal as it affects African American women, see Collins 2000a, 46.
26. Roberts 1997, 152. Even worse are those women who remain on drugs, sell their bodies, and decide to keep their children. Those Black women who engage in sex work in order to support their children are especially chastised. The hoochie mama popularized in Black popular culture constitutes a bad mother who sells sex and neglects her children. The derogated Black mother who is on drugs also fits within this nexus of representations of bad Black mothers.
27. Two groups of children cost the state little: (1) those children whose middle-class and affluent parents absorb the costs of their education, health care, recreational services either through supporting private institutions or through living in sub-urbs that limit public services to residents; and (2) children of undocumented immigrants whose citizenship status renders them ineligible for state services and/or fearful of claiming state services to which they are entitled. The first group is groomed to take over professional and managerial positions while the latter can be used to fill the increasing service sector jobs. The majority of African American children, half of whom live in poverty but who by virtue of citizenship remain entitled to public benefits, fall into neither of these two categories. The result—Black children become increasingly expendable.
29. For discussions of race, welfare, and population control, see Collins 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001.
NOTES

32. For general discussions of race and the American social welfare state, see Quadagno 1994; Brewer 1994; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001.
33. Davis 1998; Roberts 1995.
34. Roberts 1995, 324.
41. For a discussion of The Cosby Show and race relations in the 1980s, see Jhally and Lewis 1992.
42. The professional success of the character of Claire Huxtable required erasing the actual high degree of discrimination that faces African American women in the legal profession. To get some sense of a sea change in media depictions of this theme, one need only compare the image of Claire Huxtable to that of Teri Joseph (played by actress Nicole Ari Parker) on Showtime’s original series Soul Food. Joseph is a high-powered Chicago lawyer aiming to juggle a career and family obligations. Unlike Claire Huxtable, who managed to make partner in record time as a mother of five children, childless Teri has a degree from a prestigious law school, works extremely long hours, is devoted to her job, yet is passed over for promotion to partner.
43. The Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas media event sparked numerous articles and at least two edited volumes entirely devoted to the case; see Smitherman-Donaldson 1995; Morrison 1992. Yet work on Oprah Winfrey, a figure who has had a far greater impact on American popular culture, remains neglected.
44. Bogle 1989, 82.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. This notion of booty as the spoils of war spurs a series of related meanings, namely, commonly acquired plunder that will be divided among the winners. Also, the phrase “to play booty” appears in the history of the term booty, in this case, to join with confederates in order to “spoil” or victimize another player. In other words, when two players act falsely in order to gain a desired object, they “play booty.”
2. The term booty also has special significance for Black femininity, for example, the fascination with Black female buttocks discussed in chapter 4 as a sign of racial difference. However, booty does not have the same function in shaping Black femininity as that played in framing Black masculinity. The dual meaning of booty as property and as sexual conquest is central to definitions of masculinity and Black men’s access to both has been blocked in American society. Because manhood is