“ENOUGH OF THIS I’M-NOT-LATINO-ENOUGH BULLSHIT”

Eroticism and Afro-Latinx Celebrities in U.S. Pop Culture

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Stephanie Engel
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ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the erotic cultural productions of Gina Rodriguez, Cardi B, and Tessa Thompson, three Afro-Latinx celebrities in contemporary U.S. popular culture. Through study of their plays with purity, corporeal fragmentation, and sexual ambiguity, I address how these women utilize different facets of the erotic to provide the opportunity for new, expansive notions pertaining to Latinx identity in the United States. Reliant upon the close reading of particular moments in each of their entertainment careers, my project investigates the public and private identity constructions of each celebrity to showcase the racially fragmentary and inherently anti-Black notions beneath current Latinx formations. In synthesizing the work of scholars from both Black feminist theory and Latinx cultural studies, this thesis considers the capacity for Black studies to mobilize new narratives within the framework of Latinx and further highlights the category's continued struggles with racial objectification and discrimination on U.S. soil.

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INTRODUCTION

It is 2018 and a self-assertive set of rap lyrics rip across the stage of the American Music Awards. Hollering "I like proving niggas wrong, I do what they say I can't," the now well-known American rapper/social media star Cardi B introduces herself through the song's next line. Picking up the pace as she chants, "they call me Cardi Bardi, banging body, Spicy mami, hot tamale,"[1] her quickened rhymes reach the audience as she lies center stage face up on a revolving turntable. Upon the conclusion of her first verse, Cardi spreads her legs wide before slowly moving downstage; continuing on to perform the second half of "I Like It," the only bilingual song on Cardi B's debut thirteen-track album to reach the top of Billboard's Hot 100 chart.[2]

Cardi B in the center of the circular platform, legs spread out from side-to-side. As taken from Cardi B's performance at the 2018 American Music Awards. Cardi B, "Cardi B, Bad Bunny & J

[1] Cardi B, "Cardi B, Bad Bunny & J Balvin - I Like It [2018 American Music Awards]," *YouTube*, October 9, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z92NeR7KWU.
[2] Leila Cobo, "The Times Have Changed: What 'I Like It' Hitting No. 1 Means to Latin Music," *Billboard*, July 3, 2018, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/8463929/-i-like-it-hitting-no-1-means-to-latin-music-billboard-chart-cardi-b-j-balvin-bad-bunny.

Balvin - I Like It [2018 American Music Awards],” *YouTube*, October 9, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z92NeR7KWU

A Dominican-Trinidadian rapper born and raised in The Bronx borough of New York City, Cardi B is a coalescing of competing identities all fighting for attention on the AMA stage. Both Black and Latinx, Cardi B is one of several Afro-Latinx celebrities taking ahold of current U.S. popular culture. Part of a shifting trend that includes other performers like TV star Gina Rodriguez and cinematic celebrity Tessa Thompson, these three women offer insight into a world that dovetails issues of race, sex, and gender under the complicated umbrella of Latinx identity.

At the inception of this project, my initial aim was to play with conceptions of borders both on body and in the greater body politic. Akin to what Michael Awkward puts forth in his reworking of Marjorie Garber's theory, I sought to interpret Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson as transracial figures; ones that inherently refused "definitional distinction" and thus made distinctive borders permeable and permissible for others to cross at will.[3] Essentially portraying them as women in the midst of their own interpretive border crossings, I placed these Afro-Latinx celebrities at the intersection of domestic transnationalism, proffering them as figures that illuminated and disrupted the idea of racial categorization in the construction of United States citizenship. As the project evolved however, my focus began to shift towards how Afro-Latinx identity impacts Latinidad in the United States, rather than how it may influence general U.S. practices of racial

[3] Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 182.

recognition. Now focused on how Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson's subject positions uncover the racialized inner workings of Latinidad, I seek to demonstrate how these women challenge the Latinx framework and its heteronormative standards of racial acceptability.

In the United States, Latinx women are often purveyed as accented, hyper-sexed, and foreign to the western, male standard of female sexual propriety. Consistently documented by Latinx scholars like Mary C. Beltrán, Charles Ramirez Berg, Myra Mendible, and Angharad N. Valdivia, these theorists proffer case studies that similarly interrogate the presence of Latinx celebrities in the United States. However, when investigating the theoretical canon, I notice that few studies go beyond a certain spectrum of physical identification. Mainly conforming to what Clara E. Rodriguez describes as the "Latin Look," past scholarly efforts primarily focus on young, contemporary Latinx female entertainers such as Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, Selena, and Shakira, all of which either subscribe to the characteristics of "the generic Hispanic,"[4] or possibly perform as white-passing. Yet as theatrical practitioner Olga Sanchez Saltveit would argue, this selection of women feels counter to the inclusionary term of Latinx, which, like the United States population, is supposed to comprise a spectrum of identities that are ethnically and racially complex.[5]

[4] A phrase used by a collective group of anonymous casting directors and advertising agencies in the United States, as taken from Arlene Dávila's *Latinos, Inc.* Upon polling these anonymous individuals, Dávila crafts the "model Latino" as someone who is a "whiter-looking, Mediterranean Hispanic type," with dark, long brown hair, and off-white, but not dark, skin. Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 111.

[5] Olga Sanchez Saltveit, "(Afro)Latinx Theatre: Embodiment and Articulation," *Label Me Latina/o Special Issue: Afro-Latina/o Literature and Performance* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 1-20.

However, the label Latinx in reality, is a far more melded morphology than what appears on the outset. Both generic and specific, Latinx functions as the representative of a diverse range of participants that relate to one another through their "nationality or culture, locale, accent, or physical type."[6] An amalgamation of conflicting perspectives that must then deliver itself as a singular, cohesive identity to the greater cultural marketplace, the subsequent mixture, or mestizaje of identities, produces an ideology otherwise known as Latinidad. Social theory that promotes "the idea of a blended populace, free of the colonial system of social stratification,"[7] Latinidad also ironically imposes its own unique sense of divisionism. In the aim to resist intra-communal discord and "mejorar la raza,"[8] Black identities are often silenced. Seen as a physical signifier that "implodes the notion that Latino/as are genetically a more racially harmonious people,"[9] blackness often does not exist within the "Latin Look." Rather, what a Latinx woman becomes is the type of person who best represents a homogenizing panacea to racial issues, appearing "never too dark, yet dark enough to be recognized as ethnic."[10]

By focusing solely on Afro-Latinx women I take a similar position as to what bell hooks argues in her book *Talking Back*. With Black women at the

[6] S. Robert Lichter and Daniel R. Amundson, "Distorted Reality: Hispanic Characters in TV Entertainment," in *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media,* ed. Clara E. Rodríguez (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 74.
[7] Sanchez Saltveit, "(Afro)Latinx Theatre," 6.
[8] Literally translated as "to improve the race," the phrase is frequently part of the rhetoric in Latinx cultural legitimization, which often entails the commitment to acts of cultural or racial whitewashing to best fit dominating white narratives. Ibid., 7.
[9] Tanya Katerí Hernández, "'Too Black to Be Latino/a': Blackness and Blacks as Foreigners in Latino Studies," *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 154.
[10] Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 111.

argument's center, I conduct the following study as "an invitation, a challenge to those who would hear us speak, to shift paradigms rather than appropriate."[11] Women are far more disenfranchised than men in this country. And with additional assistance from Patricia Hill Collins' scholarly work, I argue that Afro-Latinx women provide observers a greater chance at understanding how othered bodies belong as subject bodies via their acknowledgement, but not acceptance of, socially conditioned expectations of cultural exclusion. As further evinced by Collins, "resistance strategies and power are always multiple and in constant states of change, [and] while these ways of knowing are not gender specific, disproportionate numbers of women rely on such cultural values."[12] Therefore, as female cultural producers, Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson popularly illuminate the kind of disidentificatory strategies put forth by José Esteban Muñoz, operating through and counter to dominating sociopolitical frameworks within pop culture's U.S. hemisphere.[13]

Through use of their sexually racialized bodies to undo current homogenized practices that exclude them from larger social narratives, women like the three discussed in this thesis further demonstrate what Maria Elena Cepeda describes as "survival aesthetics."[14] Distinctly aware of the socially charged, potentially risky relationship between 'modes of displaying the body and social

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[11] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 16.
[12] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 283.
[13] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
[14] Maria Elena Cepeda, "Survival Aesthetics: U.S. Latinas and the Negotiation of Popular Media," in *Latina/o Communication Studies Today*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2008), 237-256.

response,'" Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson thereby offer up "an alternative form of gendered, classed, and racialized behavior" to showcase the possibilities of identificatory expansion across the planes of sexual and racial categorization. [15] Erotically playing with and against their otheredness, whether that involves Rodriguez's struggles with marianism, Cardi B's bodily fragmentation, or Thompson's non-binary ambiguity, these Afro-Latinx women employ eroticism as a means of constructing altered platforms of Latinx visibility. Reliant upon Audre Lorde's argument that the erotic is a mode of female expression "firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,"[16] I argue that eroticism is a methodology in which these Afro-Latinx women find power in other amorous forms besides sexual arousal or excitement. Framed to encompass the exhibition of how they grows into their sexuality, commit themselves to love relationships, and/or determine how to best express their sexual personas, I see the erotic these women employ as a means to claim authority over their own sense of self and capacity within the greater cultural marketplace. As argued by previous scholars like Gayle Rubin, Simone de Beauvoir, and again, Audre Lorde, the erotic life is an ambiguously political one, a space where one is both object and subject, othered and owner at the same time. Able to "undermine pre-existing notions of the self (woman's self) and society" through the lens of the erotic,[17] Rodriguez, Cardi, and

[15] Ibid., 239.
[16] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York, NY: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), 53.
[17] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 48.

Thompson offer us the chance to witness "simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency."[18]

Yet how do celebrities like Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson have influence over any form of social representation? As argued by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes in the introduction to their edited reader, *Stardom and Celebrity*, "stars and celebrities *do* matter: they "house" our dreams and fuel our fantasies; they address and represent (often implicitly) some of the most important political issues of the day."[19] Therefore by publicly demonstrating to viewers how they erotically "exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie," as Claudia Tate asserts "in this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions."[20]

Whether its Cardi B telling interviewers that to survive you cannot "fuck up the formula,"[21] or Tessa Thompson's continual address of the country's "binary ways of thinking,"[22] these popular Afro-Latinx artists provide possible autonomy for others via their own awakenings to a conscripted space that has a powerfully historical hold. Time and time again, Black women like Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson face a series of social institutions that relegate nonnormative bodies to

[18] Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, MA: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 1.
[19] Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, eds. *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 11.
[20] Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1983), xxiv.
[21] Rawiya Kameir, "Cardi B Did It Her Way" *The Fader*, June 22, 2017, https://www.thefader.com/2016/02/29/cardi-b-interview.
[22] Sandy Cohen, "Westworld's Tessa Thompson Talks Acting, Activism, and Impulse Tattoos," *American Way*, April 2018, https://americanway.com/en/features/2018/04/tessa-thompson-on-her-wild-frontiers.

a realm of increasing disenfranchisement. Consistently required to craft their identity in accordance with the expectations of the greater establishment at large, their decisions are always framed in relation to how they may affect others and not their own selves. Provided little authority or power over their own identity formations, the struggle each woman faces hinges upon the rejection of these externally defined constructs which, when coupled with their physically eroticized productivities, proffers a similar version as to what Moraga and Anzaldúa describe as "theories of the flesh." By "naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words,"[23] Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson refuse the limitations of the institutional hold and produce a corporeal strategy that bridges across "othered" differences to highlight the constrictions behind Black identity formation within current constructs.

To bring light to their interrogations of blackness, the following paper devotes one chapter to each of the three women selected for this study. With every section, I begin with the close reading of a particular moment in their careers that I believe highlights their employment of racially erotic counternarratives. From there, I utilize the vignette's visual conveyance as an insertion point into each woman's prospective critical histories, tracing how each artist's variant erotic approaches in their professional and personal life inculcate new ideas about Latinx identity formation. In Chapter One, I focus on Gina Rodriguez and the social platform she constructed through her role within the CW show *Jane the Virgin*. Via

[23] Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: State University of New York SUNY Press, 2015), 19.

the close reading of Rodriguez's first time directing in the series' fourth season, I look at how *Jane the Virgin*'s grapplings with Latinx purity culture parallels the racial purity standards Rodriguez operates around in her political activism. Through her combat of social rhetoric that predicates the dominance of men and non-Black bodies, Rodriguez's erotic formation crafts a collective perspective made to fight for female individuation, but at the same time limits the potential for Black agency. Interested in unity over individuality, Rodriguez avoids the intracultural divisions inherently within the Latinx community and distances herself from Black narratives. Thereby dancing along multiple lines of purity standards located within Latinx culture, Rodriguez leans away from her potential blackness to play a bigger part in Latinx identity politics, even if it consequently reinforces a legacy of racial erasure.

In Chapter Two, I turn to Cardi B, a female rap mogul who recently became the first solo female artist to win the Grammy for best rap album. A rather unknown performer in the entertainment industry as little as three years ago, Cardi now owns an eight-million-dollar brand primarily based upon an excessively sexualized, material aesthetic. Repurposing the long-held U.S. convention of making sexual spectacles out of Black women's bodies, Cardi B constructs an improved social platform for herself and other Latinx artists. Through an initial close reading of Cardi B's music video "I Like It," I unpack the artist's performative history in the recording booth and online to demonstrate these eroticized aesthetics. Buoyed by a candid embrace of a strip club past and humorous Dominican-Trinidadian realness, I mark how Cardi's sexually fragmented body of enduring racist practices is the

gateway to seeing Black bodies as subject bodies in contemporary cultural conversation.

In Chapter Three, I conclude my critical analysis with Tessa Thompson and her sexual fluidity as framed around the 2018 "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer*. Produced by Janelle Monáe, the sci-fi-inspired music video opened a new door to Tessa Thompson's activism by way of her personal relationship with Janelle Monáe. Via the study of her evolutionary racial and erotic platform pre-*Dirty Computer*, and purveyance of her relationship with Janelle Monáe outside of the emotion picture's construction; I argue that Thompson proffers viewers a Latinx identity that exists in the antithesis of its normative standards. Never outright in her reclamation of Latinidad, Thompson instead puts her blackness first and further disrupts categorization through public plays with sexual ambiguity, the latter of which often leaves audiences asking for more. Thereby eliciting outside investment in non-normative subjectivities, Thompson crafts what I believe is a reversed reading of what Latinidad should entail, essentially becoming a reflective window that refracts currently solidified facets of Latinx communion.

With Rodriguez's reliance on telenovela-inspired soap opera, Cardi's fixture within the contemporary hip hop canon, and Thomspon's work within science fiction, all three Afro-Latinx celebrities commit to erotic practices that span across a wide expanse of artistic genre. By focusing on their erotic acts within American subgenres, we as readers witness how even their utilization of the artistic establishment furthers their political drive for ethnoracial re-evaluation. Though both soap opera and telenovela may appear apolitically melodramatic on the outset,

their insistent interest in stories about family and fairytale romance also frequently interrogate contemporary issues via their relational value to very human aspects. Hip hop meanwhile arose as a contemporary continuation of Black oral tradition, helping Black men and women express their experiences within a societal realm created for those who are mainly white. And though science fiction was initially conceived as a twentieth century extension of the Western world's colonizing operations, when subverted by the hands of those who historically faced such impositions of white hegemony, science fiction becomes a prime space for new critiques on social reality.

Therefore when we explore the artistic and personal work produced by Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson, these Afro-Latinx celebrities demonstrate how "sharing and learning from one another's experiences of oppression and explorations of one's body and sexuality,"[24] can lead not just to personal reworkings of political selves, but greater visibility for blackness within the Latinx perspective that currently exist within the United States. An aim similar to what is already put forth by scholars like Myra Mendible, I choose to suggest that the work these women do does not only aid the reformation of "Latina identity positions," [25] but also helps shift the overall conception of Latinidad towards a genuinely more pluralistic sense. Not "one singular umbrella latinidad, but rather multiple

[24] Ingrid Ryberg, "'Every time we fuck, we win': the public sphere of queer, feminist, and lesbian porn as a (safe) space for sexual empowerment," in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, edited by Tristan Taormino (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 142-143.
[25] Myra Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 118.

latinidades,"[26] through the study of the cultural work committed by Afro-Latinx women in the U.S. entertainment market, we as viewers can connect how the power of their publicly purveyed eroticism addresses more than just questions of sexual abjection, but also challenges distinct ethno-racial divisions that are currently ongoing in today's Latinx formulations.

Yet most importantly, with this thesis I argue that these cultural representations, no matter how individually specific, are essential to the establishment of larger political livelihoods. Without the efforts of women like Gina Rodriguez, Cardi B, and Tessa Thompson, minimized divisions within Latinidad will continue to face insurmountable vulnerability within this country. Consistently consumed by homogenizing rhetoric that exists within their own culture and a larger one that seeks to impose its own standards of Western acceptability, unless this trend is destabilized, Afro-Latinx men and women will remain persecuted and degraded for their identity. No voice equates to no existence, a violent erasure that threatens to effect approximately thirteen million United States citizens today. Should their recognition continue to belong in the hands of whitened, institutionalized structures, their inalienable right to life in this country will remain but a figment of the social imaginary; a pervasively biased limitation that today faces the possibility of disruption through the racialized, erotic performances of Gina Rodriguez, Cardi B, and Tessa Thompson.

[26] Keara K. Goin, "Zoe Saldana or Zoë Saldaña?: Cinematic Dominicanidad and the Hollywood Star," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 2.

CHAPTER 1

Vibrators, Virgins, and Visibility: Gina Rodriguez's Grapplings with Marianism Through *Jane the Virgin*

Alba Villanueva sits on the floor of her kitchen in Miami, lamenting over her choice to not accept a marriage proposal from her now ex-boyfriend Jorge. A misstep she attributes to her sexual insecurities, Alba explains to her granddaughter Jane that after thirty years of self-imposed celibacy, sex is not like riding a bike, but instead like "finding an old broken wheel on the side of the road."[1] Destructive thoughts left to fester over the years, Alba's sex life, or in this case lack thereof, is now the reason why she discounts herself as a woman. Appalled by the notion, Jane takes charge of the situation and does the only thing a doting granddaughter can do, take her grandmother to her very first sex shop experience.

Through Gina Rodriguez's role as actor and director for *Jane the Virgin*'s "Chapter Seventy-Four," Rodriguez plays Jane, whom in the following scene tries to help Alba rediscover her sexuality. A common struggle for many older women across the pan-Latinx community, sex is often framed for the service of others and not through any form of self-identification. Whether this is due to long-enduring religious inculcations, "God gave me my mouth to speak and eat, not to do dirty things,"[2] or the fact that their "life's work has been taking care of other people and

[1] *Jane the Virgin*, Season 4, Episode 10, "Chapter Seventy-Four," directed by Gina Rodriguez, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, Micah Schraft, Paul Sciarrotta, Chantelle Wells, Rafael Agustín, Madeline Hendricks, and Perla Farías, aired on February 9, 2018, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.
[2] Yvette G. Flores, "Latina Sexuality: De(re)constructing Gender and Cultural Expectations in Midlife," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 1, no. 1 (2013): 95.

forgetting about taking care of myself,"[3] sex for older Latinx women frequently appears to do more harm than good for their social well-being.

By posing this issue about sexual congregation, "Chapter Seventy-Four" fits within a larger show narrative that interrogates the role of sex and Latinx female identity formation. Though *Jane the Virgin* does not go further to explicitly address the presence of Black bodies like Rodriguez's within its pursuit to re-evaluate female Latinx sexuality, as the director for the episode, I argue that Rodriguez still showcases Black sexual elision through her own perspective as an Afro-Latinx woman. For upon viewing a pivotal moment in the sex shop where Jane offers Alba her first vibrator, Rodriguez's very presence in front of and behind the camera compels us to consider what happens when both brown and Black bodies attempt to reclaim sex for themselves. Held up behind a set of fishnet tights worn by a pair of white mannequin legs, Alba and Jane go back and forth as to whether or not a woman of Alba's age and religious affiliation should experiment with adult toys. A tongue and cheek dig at the visibility of female sexual pleasure on American television screens, this image also more importantly critiques dominant U.S. ideologies about non-white sexuality as a whole. Purposefully staged by Rodriguez herself,[4] the mannequin legs reflect the notions Jennifer Tyburczy put forth regarding "erotic exhibitionism." In the construction

[3] Ibid., 91.
[4] Quoting from an interview with *Variety*'s Danielle Turchiano about her directorial debut, "there was a lot of restrictions I had to navigate around. Originally when I scouted the shop it looked a certain way and then we had gone for the second tech scout it looked a different way, and then when we got on set it looked a different way." Danielle Turchiano, "Gina Rodriguez on Her 'Jane The Virgin' Directorial Debut: 'I Found It Very Freeing,'" *Variety*, February 9, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/news/gina-rodriguez-jane-the-virgin-directing-interview-1202692816/.

of a sexual space (or for my purposes a sex shop), a crucial component in the site's formation and intended interactional image is based on the privileging of the heteronormative white male gaze.[5] Often conditioned through the placement of a nude, white female body on a pedestal of carefully constructed spectatorship, the mannequin's legs here thus appear to perpetuate this idealized emblem of voyeuristic, manufactured Western sexuality. Further positioned in the center of the sex shop and raised onto a platform that overlooks the actions of the shop's participants, the image of white limbs become the central focus of the story's action, overshadowing and framing every buyers' movements, including those of Jane and Alba who remain sequestered behind the legs' prominent placement.

Alba and Jane in the sex shop. As taken from *Jane the Virgin*, Season 4, Episode 10, "Chapter Seventy-Four," directed by Gina Rodriguez, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, Micah Schraft, Paul Sciarrotta, Chantelle Wells, Rafael Agustín, Madeline Hendricks, and Perla Farías, aired on February 9, 2018, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.

An added critique of the sexual space in which the two Latinx characters must exist, Rodriguez's staging suggests the preeminent importance of white

[5] Jennifer Tyburczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 40.

controlled sexuality over non-white, self-created sexuality. Yet as further argued in this chapter, "Chapter Seventy-Four" is not the only capacity in which Rodriguez expresses her thoughts on what sociosexual acceptability look like as Afro-Latinx. Looking through and beyond *Jane the Virgin*, this chapter unpacks how Rodriguez grapples with similar issues pertaining to standards of acceptance in her own advocacy work outside the television studio. Whether addressing change for women via the tropes that are critiqued in *Jane* or constructing a totalizing narrative to how Latinx persons can most successfully improve their visibility, Rodriguez often relies on the sense of purity culture that exists around Latinidad. Not just a sexually prohibitive space, but a racially discriminatory one, Latinidad necessitates confrontation with blackness to create any form of social difference. However, unlike the erotic efforts Cardi B and Tessa Thompson display in Chapters 2 and 3, Rodriguez does not play against but rather to Latinx purity standards in both a sexed and raced format. Essentially crafting a brand of progressive social change based on an essentialist type of racial unity, Rodriguez leans into "mejorar la raza"-like activism to manipulate how her Black body can still participate within new Latinx representation.[6]

In the analysis that follows, I begin the chapter by describing *Jane the Virgin*'s reliance on other successful American television dramas like *Gilmore Girls* and *Ugly Betty* to more effectively address larger Latinx issues like

[6] Part of the terminology introduced in the introduction to this thesis, "mejorar la raza" literally translates as "to improve the race" and is frequently part of the rhetoric in Latinx cultural legitimization; which often entails the commitment to acts of cultural or racial whitewashing to best fit dominating white narratives. Olga Sanchez Saltveit, "(Afro)Latinx Theatre: Embodiment and Articulation," *Label Me Latina/o Special Issue: Afro-Latina/o Literature and Performance* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 7.

immigration and general representation. Demonstrated through a close reading of Season 3, Episode 3's "Chapter Forty-Seven," I then go on to detail how *Jane the Virgin* uses the show's main concept of virginal propriety to pose even more in-depth questions pertaining to the sociopolitical constriction of female Latinx bodies. As the episode where Jane loses her virginity, with this reading I connect how looming Latinx concepts regarding feminine purity exist beyond just the scope of a woman's sexual capacity. With a reliance on ethnographic, psychological studies to illuminate how purity plays a role in all aspects of a Latinx woman's societal placement, including how she appears ethnically and racially, I thus construct a parallel between Jane's fictional life and Gina's lived one.

An argument I defend through a series of racially-charged comments Rodriguez made in the past two years, I then visit the works of Merida Rúa and Frances R. Aparicio to suggest that Rodriguez intentionally distances herself from her blackness to best play politics with a society that does not allow Black bodies to actively participate. Further evinced by "Chapter Seventy-Four"'s final sexual triptych, where Rodriguez highlights Latinx women, but not one who definitively identifies as Afro-Latinx; I thus conclude the chapter with an extensive look at Rodriguez's social activism outside of *Jane the Virgin*. Through this final section, I note how Rodriguez invests in the celebration of all identities, both in the sexual and Latinx spheres, which consequently continues to obscure issues pertaining to ethnic and racial discrimination. Several moves that I argue in the end benefit the communities' current hegemonic structure as much as they do her, I finish with a look towards her most recent artistic iterations to posit Rodriguez's decision to deny

her blackness as a choice that still provides her the possibility to participate within re-evaluative ethnoracial conversation.

Jane the Virgin's development as a popular primetime television show began in 2002, with the premier of the Venezuelan telenovela *Juana la virgen*. Written by Perla Farías for RCTV, *Juana la virgen* proffered viewers a story about a sixteen-year-old virgin accidentally inseminated during a routine doctor's visit. When the show transferred to the United States, the basic plot structure remained, but the character and context changed. Now sold as "*Ugly Betty* meets *Gilmore Girls*,"[7] the storyline shifted to focus on a twenty-three-year-old aspiring romance novelist in Miami, caught in a love triangle between her husband-to-be and the inadvertent father of her unplanned child. Much unlike its Latinx-promoting predecessor *Ugly Betty*, *Jane the Virgin* avoided playing comedic relief with the concept of the lone, the subversive Latina and did not force Jane to assimilate into a white-centric, western world. Rather, through the show's reliance on *Gilmore Girls*' trigenerational mother/daughter dynamic, *Jane the Virgin* sets up an environment that is constructed around Jane, rather than a place where Jane must construct herself around it. By living with her mother and grandmother, Jane encounters most of her character development via the familial influences she receives at home. Through her grandmother Alba's Catholicism and struggles towards US citizenship, Jane forms into who she is spiritually and constitutionally, making the decision to remain celibate until marriage and

[7] Yvonne Villarreal, "'Jane the Virgin:' 'Ugly Betty' meets 'Gilmore Girls,' co-creator says," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st-jane-the-virgin-ugly-betty-meets-gilmore-girls-20140718-story.html.

championing the rights she and her loved ones have to live and labor in the United States. Meanwhile, by watching her mother Xo pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a famous singer, Jane learns how to let go of preordained ideas and lean into her own desire to become a published novelist, which eventually becomes a reality. Together, all three women are on their own individual pursuits towards happiness, but because they are united under one roof, the Villanueva's home is the focal point where their diverging storylines cross, allowing each character to impart wisdom onto one another, but most especially Jane. Therefore not just limited to the plotline of environmentally subjected pregnancy, Jane's identity formulates through an environment that is as much hers as it is Alba's and Xo's, three Latinx women that possess rather than fight for space they can call their own.

Jane also significantly differs from *Ugly Betty* in the way the story showcases its Latin roots. Due in part to its distinct separation from most of its original telenovela foundations, *Ugly Betty* as a show "wasn't about [Betty] being Latina," but instead "could have been the exact same show with a character of a different race."[8] Yet with *Jane,* the show demonstrates a larger embrace of Latinx culture can still beckon in high ratings and critical audience participation. Dedicated as "a love letter to telenovelas,"[9] *Jane* pokes and prods at the genre in a far different from the simple comic gags and dreamscapes *Ugly Betty* seemed to

[8] Dave Itzkoff, "'Jane the Virgin' Aims Beyond Its Latin Ethnicity," *The New York Times,* September 19, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/21/arts/television/jane-the-virgin-aims-beyond-its-latin-ethnicity.html.
[9] Stacey Wilson, "'Jane the Virgin' Boss on Avoiding Stereotypes and the Show's Surprising Superfans," *NALIP*, April 27, 2015, https://www.nalip.org/_jane_the_virgin_boss_on_avoiding_stereotypes_and_the_show_s_surprising_superfans.

provide. Instead of marginalizing the telenovela to a side story or distancing the format to the television screen the Villanueva family watches,[10] the show imbricates telenovela tropes into the storyline. With crime lords, evil twins, and other surprise twists in the ever-evolving plot structure, *Jane* perfectly primes viewers into digesting serious, real-life subject matters, while under the self-separating lens of unrealistic melodrama. As explained by Carolina Acosta-Alzuru in her study of telenovela audiences:

> [...] the audience is aware and understands the genre's melodramatic codes: 'That happens only in telenovelas,' 'well, it's a telenovela after all!' However, they still perceive what they see in telenovelas as a reflection of reality, not as a construction of it [...] many times they think of the telenovela characters as people they "know" and as such, include them in their daily conversation [...] In this sense, participants attributed a lot of power to the genre.[11]

To demonstrate the show's proactive nature, in Season 1's "Chapter Ten," the episode opens with Alba in the hospital after the mother-in-law of the man whose sperm Jane was inseminated with, pushed her down a flight of stairs. When Xo visits Alba, the doctor informs her that the hospital cannot cover Alba's medical bills. Worse yet, because Alba is not a U.S. citizen, once the hurricane lifts (another dramatic ongoing telenovela plot point in this episode), the hospital will notify ICE and deport Alba back to her home country of Venezuela. Incredulous,

[10] In *Ugly Betty*, most references to the telenovela genre are scripted through the television playing in the Suarez home and "can be read as tongue-in-cheek references to the original form," mainly playing on parody rather than exploring anything politically substantiative. Jaime J. Nasser, "Giving Soaps a Good Scrub: ABC's *Ugly Betty* and the Ethnicity of Television Formats" in *The Survival of Soap Opera: Transformations for a New Media Era*, eds. Sam Ford, Abigail De Kosnik, and C. Lee Harrington (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 52.
[11] Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, "Tackling the Issues: Meaning Making in a Telenovela," *Popular Communication* 1, no. 4 (2003): 210.

Xo exclaims “What? That can’t be legal!,” which then immediately halts the scene’s action and leads the narrator to type out across the screen:

> YES, THIS REALLY HAPPENS
> LOOK IT UP
> #IMMIGRATIONREFORM[12]

Unusually political in comparison to the rest of the episode, this metatheatrical injection demonstrates how *Jane*, while framed as harmlessly entertaining, operates as an advocate for marginalized voices. With an average of 134 cases each year,[13] those who suffer from the practice known as medical repatriation are a seemingly small number, but through Jane they become a prominent sticking point in a larger conversation surrounding U.S. immigration.

Thereby providing far more nuanced debates to issues that create serious, human impacts within Latinx communities, *Jane*’s then dominant focus on female piety thus becomes another tool for radicalizing conversations regarding Latinx female identity. In the show’s pilot, the episode opens on a shot of a white carnation, held in the hands of a ten-year-old Jane. Instructed by Alba to crush the blooming flower between her fingertips, when Jane then tries to restore the petals back to their original condition, Alba tells Jane that her virginity is just like the flower; once gone, Jane will never again attain the same beauty of her former self. Now a devout Catholic thirteen years later, Jane has the same framed above her

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[12] *Jane the Virgin*, Season 1, Episode 10, “Chapter Ten,” directed by Elodie Keene, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, Meredith Averill, and Christopher Oscar Peña, aired January 19, 2015, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.
[13] John Henning Schumann, “When the Cost of Care Triggers A Medical Deportation,” *NPR*, April 9, 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/09/473358504/when-the-cost-of-care-triggers-a-medical-deportation?t=1553179793709

bedside, a constant reminder of not just her moral obligation to her virginity, but to her religious faith as a whole.

Jane's framed flower as purposefully displayed above her bed in the show's first episode. *Jane the Virgin*, Season 1, Episode 1, "Chapter One," directed by Brad Silberling, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, aired on October 13, 2014, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.

Beyond the flower's usefulness as a metaphorical character trait, this feminine symbol and the scene surrounding its introduction depict a foundational concept that plagues the psychosexual development of women throughout Latin America. As further alluded to through the show's many blatant parallels between Jane and the Virgin Mary, *Jane*'s collective narrative leans into a common gender role phenomenon that uses the religiosity of virginity to inculcate a world for women where "caretaking, self-sacrifice, honor, passivity, and sexual morality,"[14] are the only traits they must possess and purvey. Conceptualized by Evelyn P. Stevens as "marianismo" in 1973, marianismo is automatically shaped to counterbalance male machismo, "a cult of virility," which characterizes men as

[14] Kiran M. Hussain, S. Gisela Leija, Florence Lewis, and Bridget Sanchez, "Unveiling Sexual Identity in the Face of Marianismo," *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 27, no. 2 (2015): 72.

emphatically heterosexual and sexually aggressive in their treatment of women.[15] Together, the concepts of machismo and marianismo construct an ideal relationship as one that remains strictly heterosexual, with the man providing for the family economically, politically, and socially, while the woman supports any needs her significant other has and the future offspring they raise together.

Like the feelings Alba expressed at the start of this chapter, Latinx women thus feel frequently de-sexed and deprived of all else besides the prerogatives of their male companions. Portrayed as either virgins or mothers, with very little room for experimentation in-between, the inherently religious framework held above the female Latinx body makes sex a place where the man always dominates the dynamic. For women, the very idea of sex therefore never starts as a space for personal gratification, and should she express any sexual assertiveness of her own, it will ultimately lead to moral blasphemy or social segregation.[16]

Yet through *Jane the Virgin,* the show takes up the mantle of marianismo, only to then directly tackle its perpetuated culture of sexual restriction. Unlike the original telenovela, which ends with Juana finally giving birth to her immaculate conception, Jane delivers her son near the end of Season 1 which allows her

[15] A summation of Evelyn P. Stevens 1973 work, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo" as told through Paul Allatson's *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 146.

[16] The central crux of what many term as the "virgin/whore dichotomy," as summarized by Gottschall, Allison, De Rosa, and Klockeman in their 2006 empirical study of the dualistic subject term, "The main idea is that men and/or societies divide women into two binary types: virgins and whores. The former type encompasses characters who are nurturing, 'good,' and who express their sexualities within culturally sanctioned bounds. In practice, this means that 'virgins' typically express their sexualities, if they express them at all, within marriage or another type of culturally sanctioned monogamous union. Women who fail to embody this ideal are 'whores:' they are explicitly or symbolically immoral and dangerously concupiscent." Jonathan Gottschall, Elizabeth Allison, Jay De Rosa, and Kaia Klockeman, "Can Literary Study Be Scientific?: Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 1-2.

character to develop for several seasons sans the Virgin Mary trope. Though she remains a virgin throughout Season 2, by Season 3, Jane loses her virginity to her now-husband Michael. Located in Episode 3's "Chapter Forty-Seven," *Jane*'s creators decided to depict the pivotal plot point by means of cartoon animation. Seen in a brightly colored rocket that bursts through the roof of their house and takes off into the night sky, Jane and Michael's sexual journey the visual allude lasts for a surprisingly short fifteen seconds. But in the aftermath of the cartoonish interlude, Michael and Jane seem to celebrate their first time together. Later excusing herself so that she may get a drink of water from the kitchen, Jane stands over the sink with a glass of water in hand. There, she affirms aloud that yes, she is "now a person who has had sex,"[17] before then turning to pack away the framed flower of her virginity that so happens to sit on the counter next to her.

However, Jane actually faked her orgasm; and the rest of the episode shifts to focus on Jane and Michael grappling with how sex will play a part in their newly-consecrated marriage. For Jane, she concludes that sex is founded on the intimacy between two married people and that because of this, sexual pleasure does not necessarily function as the most important part of their relationship. But instead of the show seemingly supporting a marianistic trope of male over female pleasure, Michael pushes against her thinking and explains that he now finds himself inhibited because he cannot give his wife any sexual satisfaction. Together, the two then work to find a solution, and with the assistance of a sex tape they inadvertently

[17] *Jane the Virgin*, Season 3, Episode 3, "Chapter Forty-Seven," directed by Eva Longoria, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, Carolina Rivera, Micah Schraft, Carolina Rivera, and Perla Farías, aired October 31, 2016, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.

took during their first intimate encounter, another erotic attempt ensues. But this time the animation that follows goes on for twice as long, with Jane and Michael's rocket travelling across the world, passing countless rapt spectators who cheer and display signs like "Get it Jane,"[18] underscoring that Jane's second sexual venture was ultimately a success.

In the top image, Jane affirms her sexual behavior with her virginal flower now stowed away behind her, while in the second visual, animated versions of Jane and Michael rocket by a blimp that reads "Get It Jane," following their second sexual encounter in the episode. Both are taken from *Jane the Virgin*, Season 3, Episode 3, "Chapter Forty-Seven," directed by Eva Longoria, written by Jennie Snyder Urman, Carolina Rivera, Micah Schraft, Carolina Rivera, and Perla Farías, aired October 31, 2016, on CW, https://www.netflix.com/title/80027158.

[18] Ibid.

Still, the most crucial part of this episode, does not arise from Jane's successful sex, but from a conversation between her and her mother right before Jane and Michael figure out their sexual chemistry. After getting into a fight with Xo about her music career, Jane confesses to her that she and Michael are having problems sexually and admits she is not sure how she exactly feels about the loss of her virginity. "This is so stupid. I'm married," Jane cries, "I wanted it to be gone. I don't know...I just...I feel weird. Like...I lost something...like a part of my identity."[19] Yet rather than criticize her internal conflict, Xo responds by telling Jane that she did not lose a part of herself, but instead "gained something, a whole new dimension of your life, your relationship."[20]

By crafting a positive connection between sex and personal female development, the show then utilized the dialogue posited in "Chapter Forty-Seven" to expand on Jane's ability to exist as more than just a virgin. Following the episode of Jane's "deflowering," the show's title captions changed. No longer, JANE THE VIRGIN, but JANE ~~THE VIRGIN~~ THE HAPPY MOM or JANE THE ~~VIRGIN~~ GUILTY CATHOLIC, the manipulation of title cards conveyed to audiences that Jane was the same person, only her perspective on life was different. Able to now embrace other aspects of her multifaceted identity, as the series continued, Jane willfully engaged in more sexual play, even while demonstrably still practicing the same religious tenets that enforced her virginity in the first place. Now beyond any physical signifier assigned to her via an outside demand, Jane was her own multifaceted woman. Or as parodically conveyed by one of Jane's fictional

[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

hallucinations at the end of "Chapter Forty-Seven," "stop obsessing over this virgin whore nonsense[.] Hay muchas otras cosas interesante de sobre mi."[21]

Yet another moment of metatheatrical injection, this fiction within a fiction's final word in Jane's sexual liberation is a notable plot choice to make. Not the first imaginary persona to appear in the show, nor the last for which Rodriguez also portrays the part, this character Celia is everything that Jane is not; a sexed-up, sharp tongued, Latinx woman who solely speaks in Spanish, a language Jane herself rarely employs in the show. The last of which makes this character all the more perfect for Rodriguez to don, with Celia's final comment conveyed in Spanish, her commentary brings Rodriguez's own personal life sharply into focus. Neither fluent in performance nor in real life, Rodriguez received a great deal of negative attention when the show first started gaining traction in 2015. Following a post to Instagram where Rodriguez wrote the caption entirely in Spanish, the Afro-Latinx actress receive backlash for her bad grammar.[22] With some commentators even suggesting that this meant she was "not Latina enough," Rodriguez retaliated by telling the *Huffington Post* that same year, "I am as Latina as they come. And I am not defined by anybody's definition of Latina. I don't actually sit in a definition. I walk in my world, happily and confidently."[23]

Therefore when we return to the creation of Celia in "Chapter Forty-Seven," the character seems to marry the worlds of Jane and Gina into one grander statement

[21] The Spanish phrase loosely translates as "There are more interesting things about me." Ibid.
[22] Emily Tess Katz, "Gina Rodriguez To Those Saying She's 'Not Latina Enough:' 'I Am Latina As They Come,'" *Huffington Post*, October 8, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/gina-rodriguez-to-those-saying-shes-not-latina-enough-i-am-latina-as-theycome_us_56156 a99e4b0fad1591a7953.
[23] Ibid.

about what Latinx women can do and say. Normally virginal in performance Rodriguez flashes viewers with an unexpected look into what her character could alternatively posses. Antagonistic, sexually-explicit, and Spanish-speaking, this "anti-Jane" exists within the same body as the show's protagonist, which subliminally conveys to audiences that Celia and Jane are one and the same. With them both bound to Rodriguez, Jane's split identity encourages viewers to see Latinx identity as more than just one stereotypical trope, both in fiction and in real life. For even if "Chapter Forty-Seven" is not a direct commentary on Rodriguez's own personal problems, by having Rodriguez subvert some of the conventions that she also confronted in real life, fiction and reality bleed into one another, much in the same way Alba's hospitalization incorporated contemporary issues pertaining to U.S. immigration.

A fictitious moment that only lasts for so long, Celia dissolves back into the character of Jane by the episode's closing. Consequently shaped as a moment that deviates from the norm but does not appear as an inherent expectation, *Jane*'s next episode centers around domestic life and the home, with the opening of "Chapter Forty-Eight" set around Jane and Michael's upcoming housewarming party. "A tricky tension in the show between its family-time warmth and its fascination with sex itself,"[24] *Jane the Virgin*'s revisions to marianismo therefore often involve the reliance on other marianistic tropes to allow for more radical points to make it onto camera. As previously suggested marianismo is not sequestered to just the role of sex inside and outside of marriage. In fact, according to Castillo's "Construction

[24] Emily Nussbaum, "'Jane the Virgin,' Is Not a Guilty Pleasure," *The New Yorker*, March 12, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/12/jane-the-virgin-is-not-a-guilty-pleasure.

and Validation of the Marianismo Beliefs Scale," marianismo actually comprises of five different psychosocial dimensions. For Latinx women, they must more than just be virtuous and chaste, but also have an active faith, support the house and home, stay subordinate to others, and always silence themselves in order to maintain greater familial or social harmony.[25] The first two of which *Jane* often and obviously presents, with "Chapter Forty-Eight" produced after a highly critical episode like "Chapter Forty-Seven," the following chapter's plot demonstrates another level of suppression within these new, potentially liberating narratives. By perpetuating stable home life, the third pillar of systemic marianism, *Jane*'s construction of "Chapter Forty-Eight" thus structurally commits to the same process that created and re-integrated Celia back into Jane's psyche, working in waves of affect that cause ruptures in marianistic life lines, only to then smooth them back into place with alternative forms of obstructive patriarchy.

And like the show, the purveyance of Rodriguez's own social activism also constantly conveys its own brand of boundary policing, but through a much more racially-charged outlet. For as much as Rodriguez says and performs as one who is not defined by any particular definition of Latinidad, there is only one way she believes audiences should read her, one that addresses the final two pillars of dominating marianistic structuralism. Recently, Rodriguez caused controversy with a few statements the public saw as anti-Black in nature. Upon announcement of the *Black Panther* movie in 2017. Rodriguez tweeted about the lack of "Latinos" in the

[25] Linda G. Castillo, Flor V. Perez, Rosalinda Castillo, and Mona R. Ghosheh, "Construction and Initial Validation of the Marianismo Beliefs Scale," *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (2010): 163-75.

Marvel/DC universe. Without acknowledging the presence of Afro-Latinx stars like Zoe Saldana and Tessa Thompson in their roles as Gamora and Valkyrie, people perceived the tweet as undercutting Black representation in popular entertainment, including those in her own Latinx community. Rodriguez did not specifically speak out on the matter until two other incidences in the next year. At a *Net-a-Porter* roundtable in November, Rodriguez argued that Black women are consistently paid more than Latinx women, which followed shortly after Rodriguez asserted that her Black castmate in *Small Foot* was not a role model to Black women but to "so many women."[26] Two additional encounters that led to even more social media criticism, when asked to comment on the growing controversy for SiriusXM's *Sway in the Morning*, Rodriguez finally defended herself with the following statement:

> The black community was the only community that I looked towards growing up. We didn't have many Latino shows, and the black community made me feel like I was seen. [...] So to get anti-black is saying that I'm anti-family. My father is dark-skinned, he's Afro-Latino … If anything, the black community is my community. As Latinos, we have black Latinos. That is what we are. **I am not**, so I think that when I speak about Latino advocacy people believe I only mean people of my skin color.[27]

Therefore though Rodriguez encourages the idea that Latinidad can exist beyond confining gender roles, through her work on *Jane*, in this instance she returns to supporting the homogenizing panacea of one particular look, rejecting the idea that her Latinidad includes blackness. Genetically Black and admittedly shaped by Black communal experience, by explicitly stating that she is not Black, Rodriguez remains within a racially totalizing boundary of the term "Latino." Much unlike

[26] Opheli Garcia Lawler, "Unpacking the Gina Rodriguez Controversy," *The Cut*, January 23, 2019, https://www.thecut.com/2019/01/what-to-know-about-the-gina-rodriguez-controversy.html
[27] Ibid. The bold is of my own textual emphasis.

what Cardi B and Tessa Thompson demonstrate, Rodriguez relies on Black experience to subsequently push away from it. Akin to what Merida Rúa calls "colando-ing,"[28] Rodriguez constructs a type of identity formation that Frances R. Aparicio further explains as "passing for one identity while erasing the other" elsewhere, undergoing a series of negotiations based more on "specific social contexts, in family, neighborhood, or with friends."[29] Yet instead of fabricating a more inclusive category of ethnic characterization, Rodriguez's colando-ing allows her to choose "from a repertoire of transcultured elements," to make a place for herself in the greater Latinx community, but only "by either cutting in line or with the assistance of others."[30] Opting in and "out based on what is most beneficial at that time,"[31] Rodriguez chooses to highlight her heritage and cultural history as a way to pass as inclusive, without ever having to actually acknowledge real racial difference. In some ways a mouthpiece for but not an actual participant in non-normative subject positions, Rodriguez creates distance between what she is and what she wants, a "Latina" that defies definition but also is not more of an anomaly than she already is to the greater Latinx community.

And the reason why much of this relates to marianistic tropes is how the history of race plays, or in this case cannot play in the structure's re-evaluation. According to David William Foster in his introduction to *Latin American Writers*

[28] Merida Rúa, "Colao Subjectivities: PortoMex and MexiRican Perspectives on Language and Identity," *Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 8, 2 (2001): 119.
[29] Frances R. Aparicio, "(Re)Constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latina/o Studies," in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies,* eds. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Oxford, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 45.
[30] Ibid., 46.
[31] Keara K. Goin, "Zoe Saldana or Zoë Saldaña?: Cinematic Dominicanidad and the Hollywood Star," *Celebrity Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 9.

on Gay and Lesbian Themes, the "indian and the black woman [do] not follow this pattern of socialization," which means they automatically are coded as either "whores [or] as hysterics."[32] Never allowed to even partake in marianismo, but instead perpetually held at arm's length, Black and indigenous women face a socially abject position that robs them of their re-evaluative agency. Therefore as a Black woman, Rodriguez potentially knows that if she were ever to make the claim that she was Black, her efforts to subvert the tropes of marianismo would never come to fruition. Instead coded as Black in awareness but not Black in body, Rodriguez manipulates her own appearance so as not to call undo attention to herself, thereby avoiding the chance of inadvertently undermining any attempt she seeks to make within Latinx subjectivity.

The potential to read racial self-censure arises when returning to Rodriguez's direction of "Chapter Seventy-Four." Described by *Vox* as "sex positive, in both its empathy for its characters' sex lives and its emphasis on the idea that sex is very often an essential part of life that does no one any good to ignore,"[33] the episode provides a panoply of perspectives on what sex looks like for Latinx women of all ages and orientations, yet their actual agency varies depending on how one perceives each individual storyline. Because, through a more careful reading of "Chapter Seventy-Four"'s end, what Rodriguez actually does is provide

[32] David William Foster, *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), xix.
[33] Caroline Framke, "Jane the Virgin Just Took its Sex Positivity to a Whole New Level," *Vox*, February 11, 2018, https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/2/11/16997268/jane-the-virgin-chapter-seventy-four-recap-sex.

increasing visibility to Latinx sexuality, but not necessarily a greater move towards ethnoracial multiplicity.

In the episode's final moments, "Chapter Seventy-Four" proffers audiences an erotic montage of individual vignettes that encompass the current sexual trajectories of Alba and Jane, as well as the additional side character Petra Solano. Through Alba, Rodriguez portrays Jane's grandmother as a woman now committed to taking charge of her own intimacy. In bed with vibrator already invisibly placed between her legs, Alba's disposition distinctively shifts to a look of determination as she decides to push forward with her sexual pleasure. Once there, the camera communicates to viewers that Alba still holds puritanical guilt for her actions via the last-minute sense of disquiet that crosses her features. Candid in its depiction of the not so simplistic route to sexual liberation, the shot captures a conflict however that is only temporary. Ultimately leaning back against her pillows and grinning, Alba moves forward in reclaiming her sexuality amidst the song in the background playfully crooning "got my finger on the trigger."[34]

Meanwhile in Jane's portion of the montage, the action focuses on Jane and her boyfriend Rafael having sex for the first time in Rafael's shower. Backed by the lyrics "I'm coming for you," the song and the shower form a cumulative moment for Jane's erotic journey. Rather than another cartoon stand-in, the story stays with the action, with particular attention paid to Jane's face and what her reactions are to the ensuing pleasure. Through seeing her laugh, smile, and sigh before the scene fades away, viewers come to perceive sex as something that can

[34] *Jane the Virgin*, "Chapter Seventy-Four."

generate a better well-being, which is especially important when coming from the one character who felt that after the first time she had sex, part of her identity had simply fallen away.

Yet with Petra, whose storyline actually incites the ensuing erotic montage, the sexual agency for Latinx women is far less clear. As Rafael's statuesque, blonde-haired and blue-eyed ex-wife, Petra initiates the scene by opening the door to her hotel room, clad in nothing but a silk robe. Greeting her lawyer Jane Ramos at the door, the two romantically embrace, only for Petra to wake from what apparently was an erotic dream. The closest opportunity viewer get in seeing a romantic relationship between Petra Solano and Jane Villanueva,[35] the sexual fantasy between Petra and Jane Ramos proffers itself as a compromise towards bisexual Latinidad, yet only by remaining within the hands of white authority. Unlike a pairing between Petra and Jane Villanueva, where both women would work and live autonomously from one another,[36] Ramos, played by Rosario Dawson, was hired by Petra. Not a character that functions independently from

[35] Many avid viewers of the show are in favor of a pairing between the two characters, with Rodriguez remarking in her interview with *Bust* that she sees the fantasy pairing online "so often." In fact, on many occasions Rodriguez must explain to fans that Jane is not bisexual, even if she herself wishes to say the exact opposite. "So many fans ask me if Jane is bisexual. Jane is the furthest from bisexual—maybe Gina's a little closer than Jane is!—but I love that they want that. And I'm all about 'Jetra.' I love 'Jetra.'" Smith, "Our Lady of Prime Time."

[36] On popular fan fiction sites like Archive of Our Own, plot structures vary. However, when directed through the viewpoint of Jane Villanueva, storylines frequently frame Jane as a woman in search of new experiences or suddenly coming to the realization that she cannot fight her hidden desires any longer. Quoting the synopsis of anonymous author fineh's fan fiction, *call it a night*, "Petra looked so pretty standing in front of her, the street lights providing the perfect backdrop for her arresting smile. Hair haphazardly falling around her as she laughed a goodbye to Jane, still giggling at the ridiculous movie Jane coerced her into watching. Jane hadn't been able to let her go, shocking both of them by pulling Petra closer. In which Jane can't fight it any longer." As taken from the search page "Petra Solano/Jane Villanueva - Works," *Archive of Our Own*, accessed March 5, 2019, https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Petra%20Solano*s*Jane%20Villanueva/works.

Petra's story arc, Ramos is automatically always conscripted to Petra's development. Though Ramos is the one who initiates first contact between the two women during their erotic scene, the dialogue between the two is directly hinged on "getting [Petra] off."[37]

Ramos: I have an update from the D.A. Looks like I got you off.

Petra: Really?

Ramos: Yeah. [Ramos reaches for the tie in Petra's dressing gown]

[music cue: *In the dark, in the night. Sense wake I'm alive...*]

Petra: ...

Ramos: Now I'm really going to get you off.[38]

Upon Rodriguez's additional direction, Ramos then sat in further servitude to Petra. With the camera affixed to mainly Petra's reaction, the frame obscures any type of pleasure Ramos may receive on her end, going so far as to require Ramos to quite literally close the door on the moment before audiences see anything beyond Petra's enjoyment. Yet what makes this situation even more problematic is through how Rosario Dawson identifies as an Afro-Latinx woman. Predominately independent and forward-thinking in the rest of her characterizations on the show, Dawson's portrayal in this scene thus seems to undercut her subject position, allowing her to take part, but only if she stays as a tool to a white daydream with non-normative Latinidad.

"["Chapter Seventy-Four"] was a really big episode for us," Rodriguez later explained to *TVGuide*, "I think it was an opportunity for me to talk about something

[37] *Jane the Virgin*, "Chapter Seventy-Four."
[38] Ibid.

that I know so many women would love to talk about."[39] Yet through her minimization of Jane Ramos' impact on screen and the triptych's end with her own scene in the shower, Rodriguez's direction of "Chapter Seventy-Four" essentially made the show's social message a personal one centered upon genericized experiences. An easily regulatable tactic Rodriguez frequently uses to champion other women's stories through the entertainment spotlight, Rodriguez utilizes *Jane*'s messaging to "push forward the idea of my culture, of women, of beauty, my idea of liberating young girls."[40] Whether sharing her own loss of virginity and encouraging fans to see that "it's your body, it's your ownership, it's your decision,"[41] or arguing that the Virgin Mary is a woman who demonstrates "how much we [women] contribute to this world,"[42] Rodriguez re-deploys what she learned from *Jane the Virgin* to portray other obscured parts of female sexual development. Later partnerring with Always and Feeding America in 2018, Rodriguez advocated for proper knowledge of reproductive health and better access to sanitary products for women. As written in the op-ed piece she wrote for *Teen Vogue* that same year, "nearly one in five U.S. girls have left school early, or missed entirely, because they don't have access to the products they need to manage their periods [...] I'm so lucky that this isn't something I ever experienced firsthand, but

[39] Sadie Gennis, "Why Jane the Virgin's Gina Rodriguez Felt Empowered Directing Her Own Sex Scene," *TV Guide*, February 9, 2018, https://www.tvguide.com/news/jane-the-virgin-gina-rodriguez-directing-rafael-jane-sex-scene/.
[40] Geoff Berkshire, "Press Tour: 'Jane the Virgin' Breakout Gina Rodriguez 'Waited Patiently' for Right Role," *UPROXX*, July 18, 2014, https://uproxx.com/hitfix/press-tour-jane-the-virgin-breakout-gina-rodriguez-charms-tv-critics/.
[41] Smith, "Our Lady of Prime Time."
[42] Kathy Pierre, "Gina Rodriguez: God Put Virgin Mary and Jane the Virgin Roles in Her Path," *Relevant Magazine*, November 15, 2017, https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/gina-rodriguez-god-put-role-of-virgin-mary-and-jane-the-virgin-roles-in-her-path/.

I know that the impact can be devastating."[43] By arguing that without a "FULL and UNINTERRUPTED" education[44] she would not stand where she currently resides in her career, Rodriguez emphatically stressed that female reproductivity has a direct influence on the power a woman holds in the Western world. "Because there's not a normalization of the conversation, you don't feel comfortable talking about it either. Sometimes the lack of conversation can make you feel alienated," Rodriguez explained in another interview with *StyleCaster*, "so I want to help free up young girls not only from the stigma of it, but to normalize the conversation, bring awareness to the fact that there is a problem [because] I shouldn't have to feel afraid to claim anybody's time that's needed for myself."[45]

In tandem with her campaign to reframe a young girl's reproductive rights, Rodriguez also sought to encourage sexual play via her business partnership with Catalina Girald. Together, the two women formed the lingerie brand Naja, an intimate apparel company marketed to female consumers as a product for all shapes and sizes that aims to celebrate the female body and hopefully provide a distinctly feminine perspective to a sexual space usually geared towards the male gaze.[46] Behind the scenes, the lingerie company also makes the manufacturing of its sexual products empowering to its specifically female laborers. Staffed mainly by single mothers and women are the heads of their households, Naja offers flexible work hours and even gives each of their employees' children educational supplies and

[43] Gina Rodriguez, "Gina Rodriguez: What My Life Would Have Been Like if I Missed School Because of My Period," *Teen Vogue*, August 7, 2018, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/gina-rodriguez-period-poverty.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Jason Pham, "Gina Rodriguez on How 'Jane the Virgin' Is Fighting Period Stigma," *StyleCaster*, August 2018, https://stylecaster.com/gina-rodriguez-jane-the-virgin-period-stigma/.
[46] "Our Story," *Naja*, accessed February 11, 2019, https://www.naja.co/pages/our-story.

money for school meals. Naja additionally hires women in Colombian slums to make the lingerie bags that come with every purchase, establishing a new generation of female "micro-entrepreneurs" that can make a better life for themselves and their prospective families through commercial sex production.

Thereby affirming women's power to more directly engage with their sexual selves, Gina Rodriguez, whether on screen or behind the scenes, takes what she learned from *Jane the Virgin*, and transforms it into the ultimate virile social strategy. In an explanation she gave to *Elite Daily* in 2018:

> I feel like [women] were born into being domesticated to know and believe and be OK with the fact that our superpower, i.e. our period which makes us procreate, which means the only reason any of the men are here to begin with, is because of us. It terrifies people. And by people, I mean men. Because we are powerful.[47]

Though directed towards her advocacy work with Always, what Rodriguez still shows here her intent to reframe sex as not something that makes women lesser, but actually becomes the best tool in which to see something greater in themselves.

Yet where does blackness play into Rodriguez's social agenda if it so predominately arises in mediated forums and her directorial efforts? Upon additional review of her advocacy work with Always and Naja, Rodriguez's racially-inclusionary tactics unfortunately remain in play. With Always, all underprivileged women are included in the campaign for improved sexual education and health practices, which makes Rodriguez's activism more about gendered classicism, rather than any one particular identity or culture. Meanwhile

[47] Kelli Boyle, "Gina Rodriguez Says A Woman's Period Is Her "Superpower" For A Good Reason — EXCLUSIVE," *Elite Daily*, August 15, 2018, https://www.elitedaily.com/p/gina-rodriguez-says-a-womans-period-is-her-superpower-for-a-good-reason-exclusive-10056474.

with Naja, although the lingerie brand is run by two Latinx women and benefits other like them in Colombian slums, these facets are part of the overall packaging, but not the main identity behind a company that intends to cater to all female consumers within the U.S. marketplace.

Of course, when provided the larger scope of opportunities that *Jane the Virgin*'s platform afforded her, Rodriguez does make more deliberate attempts to highlight Latinx representation via mediated U.S. airwaves. But even then, the idea of catering to an overarching culture of generality remains. Following her 2015 Golden Globes win for her role as Jane, Rodriguez created her own production company entitled I Can & I Will Productions, a starting phrase she referenced when accepting her award. Stating in her speech, "this award is so much more than myself. It represents a culture that wants to see themselves as heroes,"[48] before telling the audience that with her father's phrase, "I can and I will," that she could and she did, Rodriguez now operates a company that pushes to change an entire culture on the basis of an individual success story. Through shows like, *Have Mercy*, *Illegal*, and *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, I Can & I Will Productions marketed products that proffered various Latinx experiences within the United States. However, these fictionalized portrayals, when addressed through the blanketing language of the production company, do not break away from the same type of prescribed homogenization found in Rodriguez's advocacy work for young women. Like Rodriguez's Golden Globe speech, I Can & I Will Productions makes

[48] Leanne Aguilera, "2015 Golden Globes: Gina Rodriguez Made Us All Cry With Her Incredible Acceptance Speech," *Entertainment Tonight*, January 11, 2015, https://www.etonline.com/news/156131_2015_golden_globes_gina_rodriguez_made_us_all_cry_with_her_incredible_acceptance_speech.

one narrative stand in for all voices, "to create art that tells stories from the unheard and unseen, discover and expose new talent and increa[se] empathy and understanding for all communities."[49] Productive work hinged upon working within "all communities," Rodriguez's company thus sets up a type of rhetoric that created significant trouble for Rodriguez when she started substituting Black women for "so many women."

In a public speech Rodriguez gave at a New York City advertising event, the same year her production company successfully inserted itself into the television market, the actor got "real" with investors by saying, "television has the power to bring someone into your living room that you may not have had the opportunity to have met in any other scenario. We can't be everything at once — straight, gay, black, Latino, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, male, female — but we can learn about what we are not through art."[50] Paired with the idea that the stories they should tell need to "reflect what America truly looks like — a melting pot of cultures, religions, ethnicities,"[51] Rodriguez's rhetoric distinctly denoted an ingrained belief that everyone is inherently different, but still must conform to become one in the same. To push for a difference in current representation, yet only so that it may fit within a grander cultural narrative, whether the topic is about a woman's sexuality or ethnicity Rodriguez consistently redirects each of her

[49] "Our Mission," *I Can and I Will Productions*, accessed February 11, 2019, http://www.icanandiwillproductions.com/about.html.
[50] Elizabeth Wagmeister, "Gina Rodriguez Champions for Inclusivity, Diversity at CW Upfront: TV Has 'Super Power to Heal,'" *Variety*, May 18, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/gina-rodriguez-jane-the-virgin-cw-upfronts-speech-diversity-1202434407/.
[51] Ibid.

political efforts back to the long dominant presence of silencing one body for the good of an entire one.

This pattern, which seems highly unusual considering her own personal struggles with not fitting into the Latinx landscape is most likely explained from some of the additional commentary that surfaced back during her "I'm-not-Latino-enough bullshit,"[52] controversy. In an explanation she gave to *Cosmopolitan*:

> the truth is that all Latinos don't feel the same about each other. They don't get along the way the world thinks they do, and they don't think they are all the same, just like the world thinks they are. This culture, this country we live in is like, 'Oh, you're Latino. All of you guys go over there.' Then we go over there and we go, 'Well, you're Mexican. You go over there. You're Ecuadorian, you go over there, and you're Puerto Rican. You put your ass over there.' [...] That was eye-opening. That is why I'm working on a documentary about it now and having conversations with Latinos about it a lot more. Because the only way for us to win the game is to figure out how the fuck we're playing it. Unity is needed right now.[53]

Disassembled by her own community for so long, Rodriguez now believes that the only way to move forward in changing divisionist tendencies within Latinidad, is to return to a non-variant culture of community. Ingrained with the mindset that the most successful rhetoric is that of the "all-inclusive," Rodriguez intentionally others herself to feel more included. Devoid of her blackness and now performing as "conceptually equivalent to brown,"[54] Rodriguez and her message are universal, but not distinctive. Conforming to the universality of socially-entrenched mestizaje, Rodriguez works within its instructional guidelines to make change, even though

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[52] Kate Williams, "Gina Rodriguez Is Done With Your 'Not Latino Enough' B.S.," *Cosmopolitan*, November 19, 2015, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/news/a49552/cosmo-for-latinas-gina-rodriguez-winter-cover-story/.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Jorge Duany, "Neither White nor Black: The Representation of Racial Identity among Puerto Ricans on the Island and in the U.S. Mainland," in *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective*, eds. Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Almaguer Tomás (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 176.

her efforts sometimes come in conflict with her own variant identity and the attempts of other women in her same ethnic and artistic field.

In 2016 Rodriguez told *In Style*, "it's not like I am unbroken. I am broken. But now I own the ability to every day make a choice."[55] A choice that required her "to make sure [she] was contributing positively and not allowing limitations to dampen [her] experiences and [her] journey,"[56] Rodriguez assembled the conflicting pieces of her livelihood into a unified activist, one that homogenized herself and her community to instill greater change. Although still grappling with the fragmentary nature of who she is and what culture she resides in, by becoming "a brown girl" so that she "can cross all the lines,"[57] Gina Rodriguez's position in the current cultural campaign to change the rhetoric around Latinx representation in the U.S. is ever-present. Now a noted member of groups like CHCI, NALIP, the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts, NCLR, and VotoLatino, Rodriguez uses her additional positions on boards like Hispanic Scholarship Fund to even divert Emmy campaign money towards sending Latinx students to college, free of charge.[58]

Significant social operations that are still tied to her connections within the U.S. entertainment industry, Rodriguez to this day strives to find any popular

[55] Emily Greener, "Gina Rodriguez Talks #InnerStyle: 'It Took Me So Long to Be Comfortable With the Woman I Am,'" *InStyle*, February 11, 2016, https://www.instyle.com/news/gina-rodriguez-talks-being-late-bloomer.
[56] Laurie Sandell, "Gina Goes All In," *Marie Claire*, December 12, 2016, https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a23976/gina-rodriguez-january-2017-cover/.
[57] Stacey Wilson Hunt and Michael O'Connell, "Lena Dunham, Amy Schumer and Comedy Actress A-List in Raunchy, R-Rated Roundtable," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 27, 2015, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/lena-dunham-amy-schumer-comedy-797861.
[58] Michael O'Connell, "Gina Rodriguez Funds College Scholarship for Latinx Student With Emmy Money," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19, 2018. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gina-rodriguez-is-paying-it-forward-a-college-scholarship-1119242.

artistic medium that can sustain new opportunities for Latinx representation. Set to produce a spin-off for *Jane the Virgin* in the next year, Rodriguez is also nationwide with the release of *Miss Bala*, a Hollywood blockbuster remake of an Oscar-nominated Mexican-made film that only ever received a limited release in the United States. Hence a series of productions that repurpose and reiterate projects either once popularly or critically successful for female Latinx subjectivities, whether her choice in racial erasure will best enable better Latinx visibility, is a question still up for debate. Yet from this interpretation of Rodriguez's marianism-laden activism, what Rodriguez does is at least make herself a clearly visible part, or should I say whole, in the re-evaluation of Latinx presentation in the United States.

CHAPTER 2

"You Gotta Believe Me When I Tell You"
Cardi B's Social Platform of Sexual Realness

With her back to camera, Cardi B leans against the ivy-framed doorway of an undisclosed alleyway, dressed in a beaded Marc Jacobs top, voluminous high-low Alejandro Peraza skirt, and a sky blue headwrap. As the introductory notes to her hit song "I Like It" begin to play in the background, an evolution of quick cuts ensues. Shaved ice, sunlight, palm trees, men exchanging pleasantries, and a few elongated shots of a woman taking long licks from a half-devoured snow cone. Exoticized contextualization that only lasts for a short fifteen seconds, the camera then returns to Cardi, who shakes and shimmies her body as she starts to rap, frequently utilizing her hands to frame her rapping facial features and purposefully emphasized assets. Shot from low, to high, to mid-level camera angles, the video offers onlookers an all-encompassing view of the rapper who continues to rap about purchase power, influence, and any additional sexual euphemisms she can before finishing her initial verse.

As the video for "I Like It" progresses, Puerto Rican trap rapper Bad Bunny and Colombian reggaeton singer J Balvin join Cardi to strut around a set that looks like a back room of an empty warehouse with additional neon signage. There, the three performers bop and weave in tune to the music, and in an image Cardi later posted on Instagram to champion the song's subsequent success, the three pose in a panoramic triptych that leads first with Bad Bunny, then Cardi B, and finally J Balvin. Here, Bad Bunny highlights his nationality, directing viewers' attention towards his monogrammed jersey which touts the name of the

nation in which he is from. J Balvin meanwhile raises his hands in a similar mode akin to prayer, possibly harkening to the religious imagery prevalent throughout his male partner's verse or providing voiceless gratitude to his unseen audience. And then there is Cardi B, who forgoes any form of nationalistic pride or invocational imagery and instead directs viewers to her chest, resting her hands on a set of cosmetically manufactured "hydrogen-bomb-shaped boobs,"[1] purposefully shaped "for optimal viewing at medium-to-long-distance range."[2]

Image taken from a post shared by Cardi B on her official Instagram page. Cardi B (@iamcardib), "NUMBER #1 @badbunnypr @jbalvin," Instagram photo, July 2, 2018 at 12:15pm, https://www.instagram.com/p/BkvZxNyAyv_/?utm_source=ig_share_sheet&igshid=101n13bhzx8c0.

A "bad bitch" that makes him, oh so very nervous,[3] Cardi B is a marvel of highly coded entertainment. Through the dressing of her body alone, Cardi demonstrates a bright, flashy coalescing of historically coded aesthetics; a twenty-first century Carmen Miranda in the making. Yet Miranda, although an objectified

[1] Allison P. Davis, "Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl From the Bronx," *New York Magazine*, November 13, 2017, https://www.thecut.com/2017/11/cardi-b-was-made-to-be-this-famous.html.
[2] Caity Weaver, "Cardi B's Money Moves," *GQ*, April 9, 2018, https://www.gq.com/story/cardi-b-invasion-of-privacy-profile.
[3] This phrase is a play on Cardi B's last lyric in the chorus of "I Like It," "Bad bitch make him nervous (I said I like it)." Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic Records, April 5, 2018.

Latinx performer in her own right, only skims the surface of commodified sexuality when compared to the artistic path Cardi B pursued in her bid for the top spot in the U.S. musical market. With her breasts as the main signifier of distinction between her and her two featured Latinx artists, Cardi B's show of sexualized gender difference in "I Like It" stands as a representative symbol to a larger gratuitous routine that subverts long-held U.S. practices of Black female commodification. Further demonstrated through her embrace of a strip club past and raunchy underlying personality, Cardi pairs her repurposed body with a "real" one, leading viewers to remember her as much for how she fits within pre-established systems as she also uniquely exists beyond them. Thereby performing her blackness as a platform of her own choosing, I argue that Cardi B's erotic entertainment platform inserts new space for Black female presence in Latinx and U.S. social systems.

A comparison of Cardi B in her music video "I Like It" and a promotional photo of Carmen Miranda from the Michael Ochs Archives. The image on the left is taken as a screenshot from Cardi B's music video "I Like It." The video can be found on YouTube under the username Cardi B and the title "Cardi B, Bad Bunny & J Balvin - I Like It [Official Music Video]," as released on May 29, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTlNMmZKwpA. The image on the right is taken from Getty Images, "Photo of Carmen Miranda," released on January 1, 1970, https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/photo-of-carmen-miranda-photo-by-michael-ochs-archives-news-photo/74284031.

To begin my analysis of Cardi B's eroticized aesthetics I start my chapter with a reflection on the historical objectification of Black women's bodies in Western society and its manifestation within the U.S. hip hop entertainment industry. Through a short reflection on the history of Saartjie Baartman and her "hottentot apron,"[4] I track the derogatory reshaping of her consequent label as a "freak" within modern hip hop culture and its own visualizations of Black women. A progression from objectified object to libidinous participant, the "freak," though a sexually-charged term, I argue also became a label full of erotic potential, with Black female entertainers at the cusp of the early 2000s laying claim to the word as a choice of their own making. Only part of a larger system of Black female sexual conscription within the genre, I then move to elaborate on the

[4] Please refer to page fifty for full contextual reference.

push and pull dynamic between objectification and autonomy women like Cardi B face in the hip hop industry's twenty-first century evolution.

With Cardi B's music video "I Like It" situated upon this racially misogynistic background, I utilize theories of comic gesture from Gloria Anzaldúa and historical analysis of "I Like It'"s reliance on boogaloo to unpack the song's political potential for both female and racial autonomy. The basis in which I expand further outwards to showcase Cardi B's racially radical presence within many of her musically mediated performances, I then juxtapose Cardi B with Lil' Kim and Nicki Minaj, two other famous Black female hip hop entertainers who relied on similarly sexualized platforms to enter the music scene. With this comparison, I suggest that Cardi B erotically disrupts existing practices of sexual objectification in a manner that is far more "real" than her Black female counterparts. Consequently bringing to question the theme of "realness" within hip hop culture as a whole, through the real, I conclude the chapter by unpacking Cardi B's start on social media, move to reality television, and eventual inundation across all entertainment platforms, to summarily suggest that although Cardi's "realness" is as much packaged as her bodily aesthetics, it is still effective in how we conceive blackness and Latinx in today's cultural economy.

Cardi B, or Belcalis Almanzar, was born in the Bronx's Highbridge neighborhood, where she lived for most of her life. After attending a performing arts school on the Bronx's east side, Cardi later studied history and French at the Borough of Manhattan Community College but dropped out after two semesters. Unemployed shortly thereafter, Cardi's now ex-boss suggested she start stripping

at New York Dolls, a strip club where in eight hours, Cardi made the same amount of pay she only earned after a week of work at her previous job. [5]

In order to remain competitive within her new job market, Cardi quickly traded in her original body for a breast augmentation and basement butt injections, which she still emphatically employs today. Whether featured in music videos twerking on a stripper's pole in nothing but body paint, lying in a pile of money that covers only her breasts and vagina, or feeling herself in the back of a moving car while rapping, "Who you know drip like this? Who you know built like this?,"[6] Cardi's platform of production is constantly channeled through the framing of her augmented secondary sex characteristics. What Cardi does then is essentially break her body down into separate components, framing her breasts and buttocks as the important parts of herself.

A choice in performance style defined by scholars like Laura Mulvey as a larger mode of cultural fragmentation,[7] the kind of objectified portioning Cardi commits to her corporeal frame runs throughout the history of Westernized presentations of Black female bodies. Frequently employed to bisect the body from the self, corporeal fragmentation often shaped Black women as features of flesh instead of all-over embodied personhoods.[8] One commonly cited case of this effect is the spectacle surrounding Saartjie Baartman, a young Khosian woman,

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[5] Rawiya Kameir, "Cardi B's So-Called Life," *The Fader*, February 29, 2016, https://www.thefader.com/2016/02/29/cardi-b-interview.
[6] These three references are taken from the following videos published on YouTube, City Girls' "Twerk," G-Eazy's "No Limit (Remix)," and Cardi B's "Bartier Cardi."
[7] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1989), 10.
[8] Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 208.

whom in the nineteenth century, was displayed in many popular English and French sideshows as the "Hottentot Venus." Described as a "freak" in historical discourse, Baartman's body functioned as an objectified performance piece through the sum of its objectified parts. Marveled for the shape and size of her bosom, buttocks, and vaginal area, Baartman became the "hottentot apron,"[9] both in life and in death,[10] forever essentialized into an assemblage of sexual parts.

Even in the present day, the freak script still permeates Cardi B's domain of hip hop culture. Now more than just freaked for the physical shape and/or size of their breasts or buttocks, the freak evolved into a hybridized version of the white-imposed Jezebel stereotype, portraying Black women as people who were "sexually open and often engaging in what can be considered high-risk sexual behavior" as a means of satisfying their limitless sexual drive.[11] Expected to provide uninhibited sexual congress no matter the given situation, by the 1980s, popular hip hop artists made it clear that the freak was a woman "available for all comers and takers."[12] Demonstrably apparent through songs like Rick James' "Super Freak," James croons in one verse, "she's a very kinky girl, the kind you

[9] A phrase used by French naturalist and zoologist Georges Cuvier in his scientific account of Baartman and the lower regions of her body. Georges Cuvier, "Report on the observations made on the body of a woman known in Paris and in London as the Hottentot Venus," *Memoires du Museum d''Histoire Naturelle* 3 (1817): 259.

[10] Upon Baartman's death, fascination with her enlarged body parts remained. Researchers, interested in pursuing further scientific study, cut off her genitalia and later displayed them for over 160 years at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 91.

[11] Nicole M. Coleman, Ebony O. Butler, Amanda M. Long, and Felicia D. Fisher, "In and out of love with hip-hop: saliency of sexual scripts for young adult African American women in hip-hop and Black-oriented television," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 18, no. 10 (2016): 1167.

[12] Dionne Stephens and P. Phillips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts," *Sexuality and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2003): 21.

don't take home to mother. She will never let your spirits down, once you get her off the street."[13] Therefore likening freakdom to prostitution, musical alludes like James' essentially prostituted Black women in song and real life, exploiting their hypersexed bodies to sell, what for James at least meant over four million records at the time and seventeen weeks on Billboard charts.[14]

Yet as the genre evolved, questions regarding the freak and female autonomy began to change. Upon review of the sexual script's suggestion that sex was "a means by which she can gain and maintain sexual control over her partner while also satisfying her own sexual needs,"[15] Black female rappers in the 1990s saw the potential for female autonomy, even if still enmeshed in an ultimately objectified type of sexual gratuity. Through this new alternative reading, James' type of "super freak," actually transitioned "from cultural producer (whose role is to represent or depict sex) to sexual laborer (whose role is to trade/on sex) to sexual intellectual (whose role is to critique sex labor and sex representations, as I do) to superfreak (who performs all of the above)."[16] With songs like Adina Howard's "Freak Like Me" in 1995 and Missy Elliot's "Get Ur Freak On" at the turn of the twenty-first century, chart topping hits by female rappers changed the definition of what and who a freak could be. Now a "freak" that functioned as more than just an unchecked sexed body, women in hip hop asserted the idea that

[13] As taken from the final stanza of Rick James' "Super Freak." Rick James, *Street Songs*, Motown Records, 1981.
[14] Eric Gelman, "Rocking Video," *Newsweek*, April 18, 1983, 98. "Super Freak (Part I)," *Billboard*, accessed March 1, 2019, ://www.billboard.com/music/rick-james/chart-history/r-b-hip-hop-songs/song/574637.
[15] Coleman, Butler, Long, and Fisher, "In and out of love with hip-hop," 1167.
[16] Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 117.

a woman was much more than just the kind of initial "apron," freakdom once implied.

However, the attempts made by Howard and Missy Elliot were still small, isolated incidences compared to the vast sense of "otherness" hip hop music forces onto its female participants. Highly criticized for its misogynistic and gender restrictive tendencies, rap music often portrays Black women "in some of the most over-the-top and explicitly reductive representations in contemporary popular culture."[17] Described by Nicole Fleetwood as "the symbol of black female undervaluation as individual subjects,"[18] for many, the view hip hop entertainment provides often "translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness,' resonating through various centers of human and social meaning."[19]

Therefore when we return to Cardi B and the latent posturing she employs in her "I Like It" triptych, one could initially argue that this visual number is just another systemic perpetuation of sexualized otherness. Yet as argued by scholars like Deborah R. Vargas, even in moments that appear to produce essentially reductive results, there remains the possibility to read these highly objectified frames as tools that illuminate and critique "the social structures that continually attempt to relegate nonnormative subjects to varying degrees of

[17] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 133.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 206.

disenfranchisement."[20] Extending our gaze upwards beyond her breasts, Cardi's face is comically scrunched and her tongue sticks out as if she is a rock and roll star. A frequent feature of Cardi B's performances, her tongue is habitually employed in a variety of ways. Used to either lick her lips seductively or purvey a teasing manner of comic disregard, Cardi B routinely mugs for the camera. First utilizing sexual tropes of the female tongue only to then pull a face that draws attention away from her eroticized body, Cardi employs humor to emphasize an inherent irony to her sexual conduct. Not just moments of sexualized gratuity, but also an extremely candid critique,

Cardi B's visage thus becomes an exaggerated caricature that endows further meaning to her suggestive posing or silly smiles. "Making face" as Gloria Anzaldúa describes it, Anzaldúa explains that "face is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures."[21] Therefore "making face," is a rather literal way in which the body can "tell off" the one viewing it, whether that equates to a coy smile, protruding tongue, or derogatory emphasis of projectile like body-parts obtained through an excessively corporeal aesthetic.

An adage of parody to an already provocative performance, Cardi B calls upon a common technique utilized in the past by other ethnically or racially stereotyped popular female performers. As demonstrated by Carmen Miranda in "Chica Chica Boom Chic" and Josephine Baker with her infamous "banana dance," the two women often donned comedic gestures while performing in roles

[20] Deborah R. Vargas, *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 186.
[21] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), xv.

that required them to emphasize a sexually explicit and/or exoticized femininity. Thereby reliant on Western standards of commodified sexualization to then better ridicule the confines in which they found themselves, their straddling between the nubile and comic, allowed them to craft an incongruous framework that illuminated the underlying tension between a societally demanded hypersexual visualization and the actual personality submerged underneath. “By moving away from ‘reality’ and ‘authenticity’ and toward the humorous and imaginative,”[22] Miranda and Baker commanded their own form of ownership over their bodies, attaining self-made success through catering to the audience as much as they did for themselves.

[22] David Krasner, "'The Mirror Up To Nature:' Modernist Aesthetics and Racial Authenticity in African American Theatre, 1895-1900," *Theatre History Studies* 16 (June 1996): 130.

The two images are screenshots from videos reproduced for popular viewing on YouTube. On the left is Carmen Miranda performing the song "Chica Chica Boom Chic" from the 1941 movie *Night in Rio* as taken from CineLeonor's upload "Carmen Miranda - Chica Chica Boom Chic," YouTube, February 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHJLm6WNEv4. On the right is Josephine Baker performing "The Charleston" as taken from John Hall's upload "Josephine Baker - Dancing Up A Storm in 'The Charleston' (1926-27)," YouTube, September 7, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBPHceq_6jQ.

Thus with Cardi B her consistent use of distorted facial expression disrupts rather than reinforces the expectations that her videos are just created for a viewer's sexual pleasure. With one of her latest music videos "Money," spectators receive an image of yet another visual triptych, only this one is much more sexually vertical. Upon the song's lyrics "bitch I will black on your ass. Wakanda forever,"[23] Cardi, this time dressed in a black sequin monokini and strappy platform stilettos, grasps ahold of a stripper's pole with both hand as she squats on top of two other women carefully balancing on the pole below her. While thrusting her pelvis towards the audience, Cardi sticks her tongue out and yet again mugs for the camera. The only demonstrable moment in the video where Cardi definitively injects her campish aesthetic, the clip is less than five seconds.

[23] Lyrics taken from the stanza before the final chorus of Cardi B's "Money." Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic Records, April 5, 2018.

Yet with its comic injection coalescing over the refrain for Black power and one of the most erotically objectifying moments in the video, Cardi B's comedic commentary summarily suggests that the imposed standards she is playing towards are actually of her own empowering design.

Screenshot from Cardi B's music video "Money." Cardi B, "Cardi B - Money [Official Music Video]," *YouTube*, December 21, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUOh09GoQgk.

However, Cardi's reliance on previous iterations of other politically racial artistry is not solely extended to her looks and dress. When dissecting "I Like It"'s base track, the listener can easily distinguish the song's reference to Pete Rodriguez's original incarnation known by the longer title of "I Like It Like That." Strongly grounded in the history of the Bronx's Nuyorican social sphere, "I Like It Like That" was first produced in 1967 by Rodriguez and Alegre Records, a Bronx-based label that featured the likes of Tito Puente and Johnnie Pacheco. Rodriguez, who also was a Bronx-born singer, formed the musical group Pete Rodriguez y Su Conjunto in 1965 and was shortly thereafter dubbed "The King of

Boogaloo" following the popular success of "I Like It Like That." Yet what is boogaloo, exactly? The boogaloo, also known as bugalú, was and still is a musical mixture of Afro-Cuban dance beats with mid-twentieth century Black soul. Two different paths bound together through their connection to African diaspora, at the time of Rodriguez's production, the boogaloo musically reflected the growing closeness of the African-American and Puerto Rican populations in New York's upper north borough. A combination of doo-wop vocals, R&B chords, and the musical progressions of Afro-Latin styles like the cha cha and mambo, for the genre's performers, the boogaloo offered players the opportunity to construct a new, expanding identification of Nuyorican form, one that Berta Jottar described as "a sovereign performative nation exceeding the racial boundaries of the nation state through the performance of this Nuyorican hybrid identity."[24]

Therefore, with the resounding horns and reverberating piano keys of boogaloo sound present within Rodriguez's track "I Like it Like That," the song's reliance on the musical genre consequently provided an additional layer of Black empowerment to the production of the popular hit. Yet before "I Like It Like That," Rodriguez's three previous boogaloo albums did not track well with mainstream, English-speaking audiences. And one of the main reasons why "I Like It Like That" suddenly broke through into mass culture, was because of its switch from Spanish to English. Distinctly emblazoned with mostly English lyrics, the song proffered an anglicized accessibility for non-Boricua audiences,

[24] Berta Jottar, "Central Park Rumba: Nuyorican Identity and the Return to African Roots," *Centro* 23, no. 1 (2011): 6.

an intended political move made to reach out towards an increasingly hybrid pan-Latinx community.

Through then closer review of Cardi B's "I Like It," listeners hear Rodriguez's bandmate Tony Pachuco and his distinct laugh before he rolls into the chorus, a riff that is repeated and remixed for the back track of Cardi's single. Though she does not actually include the Spanish within Rodriguez's original intro, instead of additionally anglicizing the track, Cardi pursues new Spanish avenues to connect a wide range of Latinx community members through a still mass-consumable musical product. Beyond Cardi's English-only verse and chorus, the other two thirds of "I Like It" is all in Spanish and gives significant nods to Latin icons and standards of representation that are not based on white, Western ideals. J Balvin's verse is admittedly the least weighty with its politics, however, he does engage with the idea that, like the boogaloo itself, Latinx identity can culminate in forms that are more Afro-Latin-centric. Starting off his verse crying "como Celia Cruz tengo el azúcar,"[25] which in English translates to "like Celia Cruz I have the sugar," J Balvin immediately aligns himself not with the standard trope of white male success, but with one of the greatest Latin artists who also thrived through the celebration of her Black authenticity.

As for Bad Bunny, he highlights racial diversity via a sexual analytic that is akin to Cardi B's own erotic efforts. In his verse, the Puerto Rican rapper paints a lascivious past with a vast number of women, another derogatory method of musical entertainment not unusual to the rap genre. Yet at the same time, what he

[25] Lyrics taken from J Balvin's verse in the stanza before the final chorus of "I Like It." Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic Records, April 5, 2018.

also indicates through his love for a wide panoply of women is the inherently diverse nature the Latinx identity provides. Rapping, "I like Puerto Ricans, I like Cubans, I like the accent of the Colombians, how Dominicans move the ass, but Venezuelans fuck me good,"[26] the listing off of his sexual preferences place the collective womanhood of the Caribbean and northern parts of South America into one hospitable bed. Not interested in women who conform to a singular standard of beauty, through his eyes, any Latina's nationality is welcome. Further claiming that together "we are active" in the greater effort to "let the race live,"[27] Bad Bunny thus summarily suggests that acknowledgement and acceptance of all national affinities will help bring further autonomy to potentially neglected spaces in the Latinx community.

Now Cardi B's employment and manipulation of old ideas to build newer, more ethnically and/or racially progressive ones is not a new trend for the hip hop artist. In fact, Cardi's previous hit before "I Like It" also manipulated past tracks into a mass consumed, raunchified aesthetic that emphasized the re-evaluation of sex and race in the grand schema of popular culture. Produced by J. White Did It in 2017, "Bodak Yellow" was Cardi B's first hit single to reach widespread acclaim in the United States, going gold within ten weeks of its release.[28] A riff on Kodak Black's "No Flockin," Cardi's rendition is based on a freestyle rap first found on YouTube in 2014 that reached number ninety five on Billboard's Hot

[26] Lyrics taken from Bad Bunny's stanza in Cardi B's song "I Like It." The lyrics are loosely translated from Spanish to English with the assistance of Suzette Fernandez's "Cardi B's 'I Like It' With Bad Bunny and J Balvin Goes Beyond Liking Material Things," *Billboard*, April 6, 2018. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/latin/8292613/cardi-b-bad-bunny-j-balvin-i-like-it-lyrics.
[27] Ibid.
[28] To go gold in the music industry, an album must sell at least five hundred thousand copies.

100 upon its release on iTunes a year later. Yet again another artist's rhythm remixed to make a new, distinctly Cardi-owned track, although "Bodak Yellow" became a mass hit, the song was not initially created with the public airwaves in mind. Unlike the palatable pan-Latinx collaboration of her latter hit, "Bodak Yellow"'s lyrics are aggressive, explicit, and selfish, with Cardi snarling through the opener:

> Say I don't gotta dance, I make money move
> If I see you and I don't speak
> That means I don't fuck with you
> I'm a boss, you a worker bitch
> I make bloody moves[29]

Described by *The New York Times Magazine* as a song that "does not seem to care whether you think it's an anthem,"[30] the track either fucks with or does not give a fuck, ultimately mirroring José E. Limón's reading of the word "chingar" in his study of Mexican-American men. "Chingar," which is Spanish slang for "fuck," is a common piece of Spanish language, although nowhere is the word more prominently used and abused as it is in Mexico. Though not of that ethno-political identity, Cardi's employment of the word "fuck" is conveyed through a manner most like what Limón observes in his ethnographic study, forming a part of "speech body play" that inculcates a larger "dynamic [forum] that interactionally produce[s] meaning, mastering anxiety by inverting passive destiny through active play."[31] A significantly different song in comparison to the

[29] Lyrics taken from the first stanza of Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)." Cardi B, *Bodak Yellow (feat. Kodak Black)*, KSR, June 16, 2017.
[30] Jamie Keiles, "Bodak Yellow," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/08/magazine/25-songs-future-of-music.html#/intro.
[31] José E. Limón, *Dancing with the Devil Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 125, 133.

sanitized syntheticism of popular pro-female ballads of the time,[32] "Bodak Yellow" united listeners under the banner of self-worth and was also radical for its embrace of tawdry pasts and female-first thinking. But most importantly, "Bodak Yellow" provides interesting inversions of race and status. Quoting from an MTV interview, Cardi states "I call it 'Bodak Yellow' because Bodak, my name start with a B and yellow because I'm a yellow bitch,"[33] a racial signifier that has existed within English vernacular since the nineteenth century. Interchangeably oscillating between "yellow" and "yellowface," racial descriptors like these today are often employed when negatively depicting Americans with predominantly Asian features. Yet historically, yellow was also used as a physical indicator to describe someone of African descent with lighter-toned skin and/or someone of mixed race. During the twentieth century, the use of color as category led to the frequent appearance of descriptors like "black," "brown," and "yellow;" colors which would circulate popularly but never totally eclipse its "Negro" partner. With yellow, white persons could better describe the color of someone who they believed was "mulatto,"[34] which led Black artists like Langston Hughes to frequently invoke the language of color, rather than race, to point out discrepancies in racial treatment.[35] Apparently continuing to perpetuate colorful

[32] When "Bodak Yellow" topped Billboard charts, much of the media coverage surrounding the event surrounded the song's "dethroning" of Taylor Swift's "Look What You Made Me Do," a song that blends an electroclash, technological 80s and 90s sound with a now well-established pop style that often emphatically pushes for a "female-first" style of empowerment.
[33] MTV News, "Cardi B on How Kodak Black Inspired 'Bodak Yellow,'" *YouTube*, June 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCuBxAbnzyU.
[34] Christine B. Hickman, "The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census," *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 5 (1997): 1225.
[35] As one case in point, when Langston Hughes wrote his 1935 play *Mulatto*, Hughes references to the character Robert, who has a white father and Black mother, as a "little yellow bastard child." Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*, first electronic ed. (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2002), 21.

United States history, upon the adherence of the additional subcaption "Money Moves," Cardi B utilized the song's title to defiantly tout her ability to economically game the system as one of its non-white, non-normative citizens. With the aforementioned title never present in the song's lyrics and only tangentially relying on racial nomenclature through her use of the word "nigga," the actual text of the track is surprisingly void of racial content. Not auditorily distinctive in its racial ownership, listeners bought into the song because of its infectious rhythm and surface level claims towards economic empowerment and social pride. As easily demonstrated by viral videos that showcase almost all-white audiences repurposing the track for coordinated dance routines pertaining to non-song related events,[36] Cardi's specific racial labelling went unheeded by a majority of listeners. Thus branding the musical product as a part of her racial design without ever calling attention to its use, when Cardi then states in the track, "I'm like, 'OK, I'll let him get what he want,' he buy me Yves Saint Laurent,"[37] the rapper is more than just bragging about how all she has to do is sit back and cash checks. Instead, what Cardi B constructs in the creation of her title "Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)," is a song that in its entirety, implicitly boasts about a kind of self-owned success made by none other than a

[36] In one video posted to Twitter by *Sports Illustrated* last year, at a University of Florida basketball game, the entire stadium's audience performed the song in a coordinated, but off-kilter group dance number as part of their school's athletic pride. From what the video recorded, of those in attendance, only a few were not white. Sports Illustrated (@SINow), "The Gators lost today, but at least their fans made money moves," Twitter post, February 3, 2018, 4:46pm, https://twitter.com/SInow/status/959951362493730817?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7.Ctwcamp%5EtweetembeE%7Ctwterm%5E959951362493730817&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fww.complex.com%2Fmusic%2F2020%2F02%2Funiversity-of-florida-fans-roasted-offbeat-bodak-yellow-performance.

[37] Lyrics taken from the second stanza of Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)." Cardi B, *Bodak Yellow (feat. Kodak Black).*

mixed-race Black woman. "'Bodak Yellow' is now synonymous with 'money moves,' and of the surprising rise of a female artist of color," Kayla Hawkins from *Bustle* argues.[38] "By not having previous etymology, the phrase 'Bodak Yellow' winds up being defined by Cardi B's incredible success in the musical field entirely, creating its own meaning and its own mythology worth celebrating."[39]

The image provided above is the album cover of Cardi B's *Bodak Yellow: Money Moves*. The album cover can be found through Spotify's Cardi B artist page.

Therefore as a "hot tamale" with a "banging body,"[40] Cardi often self-imposes sexual and racial objectifications onto herself to make larger points about her socialized marginalization. Akin to what other scholars like Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman define as "self-tropicalization,"[41] Cardi's

[38] Kayla Hawkins, "What Does 'Bodak Yellow' Mean? Cardi B's Song Title Has Created Its Own Meaning," *Bustle*, October 10, 2017, https://www.bustle.com/p/what-does-bodak-yellow-mean-cardi-bs-song-title-has-created-its-own-meaning-2810300
[39] Ibid.
[40] Lyrics taken from the first stanza of Cardi B's "I Like It." Cardi B, *Invasion of Privacy*, Atlantic Records, April 5, 2018.
[41] Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1997), 11.

process of sexual personalization locates her in a space where she is both identifiable and unrecognizable. A "conflictive system of representation," where Cardi is as in charge as she is bound by the demands of the greater market, her self-exoticization enacts "a destabilizing process in which symbolic norms are used as a way to bring about performative agency."[42] Musically assuming the role of a racialized sex object, Cardi thus constructs "a particular subjectivity committed to creat[ing] something different with her voice and body."[43] Or when taking directly from her music, "I'm Cardi exotic […] I am a whole different breed."[44]

Now Cardi B's distinctive differentiation via the employment of sex and body is hardly a new socially re-evaluative technique within the repertoire of rap's Black female entertainers. Beyond the simple singular co-option of the word "freak," other recent acts like "Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Remy Ma, Nicki Minaj, forgotten groups like HWA (Hoez With Attitude), all share an insistence on demanding, over hard-rap tracks, what their male counterparts demand — money, power, respect, [and] quality oral sex — from the female point of view."[45] With Lil' Kim in the 1990s bringing a gangster-rap authenticity to the role of female MC and Nicki Minaj's late-2000s entrepreneurial branding of her body and caricaturized personas, the relation between these women and Cardi B might simply suggest that Cardi is just a sticky simulacrum of performers past.

[42] Arrizón, "Latina Subjectivity, Sexuality and Sensuality," 193.
[43] Ibid., 192.
[44] Lyrics taken from the first and second stanzas, of Cardi B's "On Fleek," excluding the chorus. Cardi B, *Gangsta Bitch Vol. 1*, KSR, March 7, 2016.
[45] Davis, "Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl."

When Lil' Kim first came to the spotlight in the mid-to-late-90s, her debut album "'Hardcore,' made the highest-ever debut on the Billboard charts for a female rap artist, [while also providing] an unparalleled fusion of hip-hop and pornography."[46] For listeners of Lil' Kim, what made her distinct was "her agile use of many 'tongues'" which helped blur "any distinction between 'sex play' and 'word play,' particularly as the oral [came] to refer to oral pleasure and the politics thereof."[47] Creating rhyme schemes in a cacophony of vocal styles and odd enunciations, Lil' Kim pushed against the boundaries of gangsta rap by playing the same game her colleagues did, speaking like a man and calling for the same violence and sex that so glorified the genre. With lyrics like, "if you ain't lickin' no clits, we don't want it,"[48] Lil' Kim succeeded by performing on a platform that called for domination of the men that so often sought to dominate the rap game and any woman they saw fit. For Lil' Kim, her strategy was all "about pussy, really: the power, pleasure and politics of it…[creating] songs that deify it, demand we respect, revere and glorify it."[49]

In comparison, rapper Nicki Minaj's more recent iterations do not focus so predominately on sexual satisfaction, but also never paint her as passive in her sexuality. Rather than play distinctly on the power of the pussy and the endeavor to put female pleasure first, Minaj represents her body through a site of male

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[46] Kristal Brent Zook, "The Mask of Lil' Kim," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2000, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2000/09/03/the-mask-of-lilkim/b9a06fe7-adde-49fa-9259-aa1dbf71e655/.
[47] Greg Thomas, *Hip-Hop Revolution in the Flesh: Power, Knowledge, and Pleasure in Lil' Kim's Lyricism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 20.
[48] Lyrics taken from the chorus of Lil' Kim's song "We Don't Need It." Lil' Kim, *Hardcore*, Atlantic/Big Beat/Undeas, November 12, 1996.
[49] Robert Marriott, "Blowin' Up," *Vibe*, June/July 2000, 126.

enjoyment, promising "sexual pleasure defined by straight male satisfaction."[50] Yet even if she proffers her sexuality through a different format, Minaj does incorporate a kind of polyvocal positionality Lil' Kim also expressed in her work. Coined by Uri McMillan as "Nicki-aesthetics,"[51] upon her arrival to the popular music scene, Minaj donned several alternating personas both physically and verbally. A camp-like charisma which allowed her to go from comic to cute to downright aggressive when flipping from one line to the next, in one song Minaj could perform as "a Barbie doll; glorifying women dressed as prostitutes and set in red-light district windows,"[52] while in the next she could shout "if you weren't so ugly, I'd put my dick in your face."[53] Thus both a "'body-product' for mass consumption" and an artist who assertively pushes against its limiting confines,[54] Minaj "bravely rebuke[d] hip-hop's standard trifecta – masculinity, realness, and normative blackness – [through] an artistic style emphasizing Technicolor artifice and alterity with a dose of clever wit."[55]

With parallels between the way she aggressively raps and caters to the male gaze, though Cardi may "seem almost like a caricature of a female rapper who has remixed the vibes of those women who came before her,"[56] what marks as different is how she openly established her role as a far more objectified object

[50] Seth Cosimini,"'I'm a Motherfuckin' Monster!': Play, Perversity, and Performance of Nicki Minaj," *Feminist Formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 58.
[51] Uri Mcmillan, "Nicki-aesthetics: The Camp Performance of Nicki Minaj," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 79-87.
[52] Vanessa Grigoriadis, "The Passion of Nicki Minaj," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 7, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/magazine/the-passion-of-nicki-minaj.html.
[53] Lyric sourced from the second verse of Nicki Minaj's song "Come on a Cone." Nicki Minaj, *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded*, Young Money/Cash Money/Universal Republic, April 2, 2012.
[54] Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?" *Feminist Formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 26.
[55] Mcmillan, "Nicki-aesthetics," 85.
[56] Davis, "Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl."

within the American marketplace. Unlike the sexual personifications Lil' Kim or Nicki Minaj have or continue to employ, Cardi B is a body commodity in its most direct form yet, an ex-stripper and previous "video ho" of the hip hop industry.[57] A fact that she makes quite clear to those who listen, Cardi B emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and respecting where she comes from, telling *Cosmopolitan,* "people say, 'Why do you always got to say that you used to be a stripper? We get it.' Because y'all don't respect me because of it, and y'all going to respect these strippers from now on."[58] Ultimately laying claim to her abject status, Cardi also then pushes against it to address the reality of what the position entails:

> A lot of video vixens have spoke about this and nobody gives a fuck. When I was trying to be a vixen, people were like, 'You want to be on the cover of this magazine?' Then they pull their dicks out. I bet if one of these women stands up and talks about it, people are going to say, 'So what? You're a ho. It don't matter.'[59]

When Cardi B thus employs her erotic exercise for the cultural purview, there lies a potential for something far more substantively political than erotic iterations past. Similar to how Mireille Miller-Young describes the difference between Black feminist filmmakers who direct porn and Black porn actresses who make their own, I believe that Lil' Kim and Nicki Minaj:

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[57] A video ho, or video vixen as they are also known, is typically a Black woman who performs behind and around a given artist in a hip hop music video. Predicated on the slur of "ho," "the updated black vernacular hip hop version of the super-sexual Jezebel," video hos are what make many hip hop videos close to what is often described as softcore porn. Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 144.

[58] Jazmine Hughes, "Cardi B Gives Her Most Explicit Interview Yet," *Cosmopolitan,* March 19, 2018, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/a18930050/cardi-b-cosmopolitan-cover-interview/.

[59] Ibid.

> do not engage illicit erotics in the same way. Rather than use their own sexualities for commoditized gains, they propel the sexuality of others to enact fantasies for commoditized gains, they propel the sexualities of others to enact fantasies of their own design, fantasies that intervene in the narrow landscape of possibilities for black female sexuality under racial capitalism.[60]

Unable to identify with the intensified objectification Cardi B experienced as a full-time stripper and ex-video vixen, Lil' Kim and Minaj critique sexual commodification in a way that benefits them but ultimately distances themselves from the type of discrimination they wish to speak out against. Especially in the case of Nicki Minaj, who often attacks the stripper or video ho instead of reconstituting its image, Minaj makes these more objectified professions into something that is lesser than what women deserve.[61] With both women further perpetuating a cycle that revivifies the power of sexualized racial abjection Cardi B on the other hand taps into the inherent sexual power Black women can reinvent out of more extreme cases of degradation. Celebrating who she was and even suggesting to *Cosmopolitan* that when she was stripping "I had so much fun. I felt powerful in the club. I felt free,"[62] Cardi removes the abject nature from the subject, robbing the vilified notion of the stripper or video ho of its degraded nature.

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[60] Mireille Miller-Young, "Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors," *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Tristan Taormino (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 117.
[61] In Nicki Minaj's fourth studio album, *Queen*, which was released four months after Cardi B's debut album, she raps in the song "Dark White," "Uh, I ain't never played a hoe position, I ain't ever have to strip to get the pole position." Nicki Minaj, *Queen*, Young Money Entertainment/Cash Money Records/Republic Records, August 10, 2018.
[62] Hughes, "Cardi B Gives Her Most Explicit Interview Yet."

This kind of "unself-consciousness about her flesh,"[63] extends outwards into an additionally memorable vulgarity off-track that enables Cardi B to market her own personality to even non-listeners. With the handle @iamcardib on Instagram and Twitter, Cardi is nothing other than what she says she is through her music. In her first alleged video that brought her within the public purview, Cardi B struts before the camera in a tight black pencil skirt and barely there sparkling bralette, proudly proclaiming in the four-second clip, "It's cold outside but I'm still lookin' like a thotty because a hoe never gets cold,"[64] before giving a final self-approving twirl for the expectant camera.

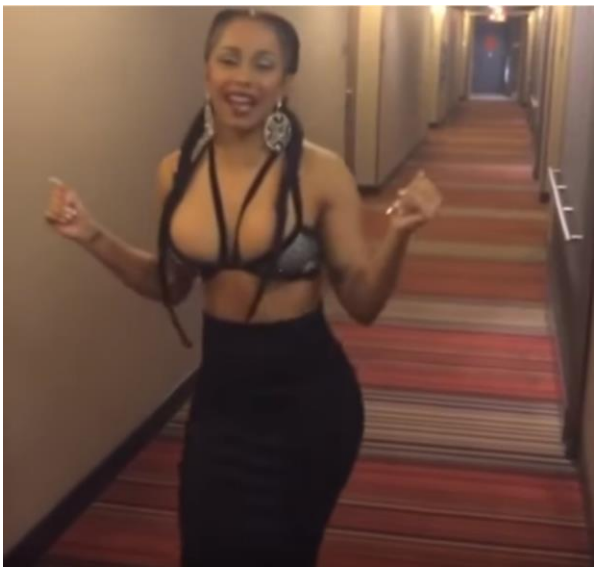

Image taken as a screenshot from a reproduced Vine video published on YouTube in 2016. "A Hoe Never Gets Cold," *YouTube*, November 8, 2016.

A thotty, which stems from the "classic" word hoe, is a term that often plays a major part of the larger free-living lifestyle Cardi B promotes through her

[63] Brittany Spanos, "The Year of Cardi B," *Rolling Stone,* October 30, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-year-of-cardi-b-200589/.
[64] The video was part of the now defunct social media platform Vine. This citation is taken from a reproduced video published on YouTube in 2016. Vine FC, "A Hoe Never Gets Cold," *YouTube*, November 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3bUuooPGxc.

publicized actions, a ploy that, as described by her own interviewers, is "not exactly strategy — but it's not exactly *not* strategy."[65] Via her release of video after personal video harping on the daily struggles of being a "stripper hoe," Cardi B informs rapt viewers how she approaches "sucking dick" and scamming men for all that they are worth, all in an often packageable thirty seconds or less.[66] With this gloriously raw, raunchy, and more importantly, catchy social media presence, Cardi B quickly tapped into a far bigger market when she starred on *Love and Hip Hop New York*'s at the start of her claim to fame. A long-enduring reality TV series on VH1 and a heavyweight in its own category,[67] *Love and Hip Hop New York* debuted on March 6, 2011 under the premise of giving "visibility to the women *behind* famous men in hip-hop."[68] The basic plot structure of the show consists of displaying the struggles behind constructing a musical career in the ever-evolving realm of hip hop entertainment. Yet when told from the perspective of the many that watch the show, what *Love and Hip Hop* really entails is the production of "a ratchet-reality soap opera," that contains over two hundred characters that pop in and out of the periphery of a hamstrung narrative more interested in televising personal "beefs" between popular characters.[69] Though some of the cast "won Grammys, [went] platinum, and crafted No. 1

[65] Spanos, "The Year of Cardi B."
[66] Ibid.
[67] According to Dria Roland's article "Cardi B's Success Proves Why She Never Needed 'Love & Hip Hop,'" "LHH is the cornerstone of Vh1. In 2017, the network had four of the top 10 unscripted shows on cable, and the Atlanta and New York editions were Nos. 1 and 2, respectively." Dria Roland, "Cardi B's Success Proves Why She Never Needed 'Love & Hip Hop,'" *Complex,* April 12, 2018. https://www.complex.com/music/2018/04/cardi-b-never-needed-love-and-hip-hop.
[68] The italics for emphasis are Roland's, not my own. Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

records at some point in their career," with very few songs every actually released to mainstream audiences, much of the show's success hinges on the search for what the actual plot is in this whole TV narrative.[70]

In Cardi's case, she soon realized her position on the show would not lead to her ultimate success. As only a sometimes-featured side character, producers of this *LHH* offshoot initially wanted Cardi to only focus on talking about her struggles as a stripper with only a side gig in the music industry. Painted to fill in as a leading woman to radio's Power 105 DJ Self, the show tracked their volatile relationship when it came to him playing, but more often than not, not playing her music. Described by *Complex*, "in her words, he was 'the hottest DJ in New York or whatever' and she was willing to deal with him seeing other women so long as he helped get her music played."[71]

Yet when Cardi became increasingly dissatisfied with the lopsided power dynamic, she took whatever piece she was on the side, both in her sexuality and characterization, and converted her marginalization into a momentum that later gave her popular clout in the music industry. Instead of hawking commercial products like other castmates did during their fifteen minutes of fame,[72] Cardi B repackaged the soundbites she created on TV into fully-produced musical hits,

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] One frequent endorsement deal *Love and Hip Hop* stars make is with ShoeDazzle, an online shoe company that partnered with other cast members like Apryl Jones and Hazel-E in the past. However, in Hazel-E's case, the hip hop artist later lost her sponsorship after making a series of racially bigoted and homophobic remarks. "Recap: Meet Our #ShoeDazzle VIPS," *ShoeDazzle*, May 21, 2018, http://blog.shoedazzle.com/shoedazzle-vip/. Shalaeya Brown, "ICYMI: ShoeDazzle Cut Ties With Hazel-E After Her Racial And Homophobic Remarks Scandal," *BET*, October 20, 2017, https://www.bet.com/style/fashion/2017/10/20/icymi--shoedazzle-dropped-hazel-e--s-endorsement-after-racial-an.html.

manipulating the larger view counts she received from VH1's greater audiences to give her the successful musical opportunities the show was not planning to give her. Quoting from an interview Cardi conducted with the *New York Post* at the time of the show's success, "the first time around I was a bit skeptical when approached to be on the show because I was working on my music. I did not really want to open up about my entire life on TV, but it was a big opportunity."[73] And after shortly realizing that opportunity meant taking her new fanbase and investing it in her music,[74] Cardi repurposed one of her most well-known catchphrases on *Love and Hip Hop* into the lead single on her first mixtape, *Gangsta Bitch Vol. 1*. In the first half of the hook for "Foreva," Cardi raps "You know me, I be with whatever/ If a bitch beef with me, we gon beef foreva."[75] Familiar lyrics to some, the song debuted right after *Love and Hip Hop* televised an episode where Cardi twirled around a music studio warning a man she was involved with that "if a girl have beef with me, she gon' have beef with me… foreva."[76] A moment that went especially viral online, what Cardi did then was turn one attention-grabbing moment into a commodity that she could then make a greater profit from. Already able to coin quick catchphrases on the various social media platforms she employed for personal use, Cardi continued to couple her

[73] Tashara Jones, "Cardi B ditches stripper past for 'Love & Hip Hop' stardom," *New York Post*, November 19, 2016, https://nypost.com/2016/11/19/cardi-b-ditches-stripper-past-for-love-hip-hop-stardom/.
[74] Alex Macphearson, "I want you to feel that empowerment': how Cardi B went from stripper to star," *The Guardian*, December 1, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/dec/01/how-cardi-b-went-from-stripper-to-star.
[75] Lyrics taken from the chorus of Cardi B's "Foreva." Cardi B. *Gangsta Bitch Vol. 1*. KSR. March 7, 2016.
[76] VH1, "Cardi B Supercut (PART 1): Best Moments from Love & Hip Hop New York (Season 6) | VH1," *YouTube*, January 15, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hw5-zxBRQKQ.

memorable taglines from *LHH* with words that later transformed into other fully flushed out songs like “Washpoppin” and “Lick,” thereby making her material far more enticingly consumable to an audience who already was familiar with her viral antics.

This kind of virality is where Cardi B also appears different from Black female rappers past. While other performers like Nicki Minaj do make themselves accessible to their fans, it is still a carefully curated line of production that instills a sense of removal from the everyday routines of modern life. Even on platforms like Instagram, which is the main site Cardi uses to express personal struggles or share inconsequential memes from her day, the material coming from rappers like Minaj still portrays a feeling of untouchable perfection, with them living their best lives and not their worst. Through these outlets, audiences are encouraged to participate through the lens of fandom, not “friendom,” modeling themselves in the shape of the performer’s desirable persona and idolizing a character that does not necessarily delve into the depth of who that performer truly is beyond their now well-promoted celebridom.

Cardi B on the other hand, uses her own carefully mediated space to tap into the tried and true brand of “keeping it real," for her captivated audience. A phrase that has long dominated the hip hop scene, to “keep it real,” an artist often must display his or her ability to remain “racially authentic to an urban, African American or Latino experience.”[77] For many rappers, "realness" is cultivated through the “language, style of dress, and references in their lyrics to the daily

[77] Hunter and Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop,” 31.

challenges of urban ghetto life (real or imagined)."[78] Hence when reflecting on both Lil' Kim and Minaj's previous performances, Lil' Kim best displayed this style by rapping about situations she and other women she knew went through. From "fightin' with your man or losin' a man to death. Being alone [or talking] about just bein' in the streets having no money and having to do illegal things to get the money,"[79] most of the topics Lil' Kim rapped about were true, including instances in songs like "Hold On," where she discussed "the pain of being pregnant and having an abortion."[80]

Yet unlike Lil' Kim and other "real" rappers in contemporary hip hop, their truthful stories of Black life primarily exist through the production of a musical persona and do not necessarily originate through what they say or do outside of their music. As suggested by scholars like Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, listeners interact with the performance first and the rapper second, thus causing the realness of the song to become the realness of the rapper.[81] But for Cardi B, the opposite effect occurs. Seen through social media first complaining about changing diapers or how she just wants to "get fat in peace,"[82] Cardi's own personality is what initially "keeps it real," flipping the script so the music now becomes an extension and not a causation of that creative realness. A realness that appears antithetical to the "real" rappers before her, the conflation between

[78] Ibid.
[79] Zook, "The Mask of Lil' Kim."
[80] Ibid.
[81] Hunter and Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop," 31.
[82] The quote comes from a now deleted Instagram post by the artist herself. Though no longer available for viewing, the post was later referenced in *Complex*'s "Cardi B's Funniest Instagram Posts," which was published on their site on March 25, 2018, https://www.complex.com/music/cardi-b-funniest-instagram-posts/.

Cardi's performance on stage and the person she plays remains, but it is the latter that audiences best know her for and the reason why they gravitate towards her in the first place. "Without Cardi B as a person, her music might be easily brushed aside," *Insider*'s Callie Ahlgrim writes, "no one else can deliver her lines and truly sell it. She infuses the essence of Cardi B into every line, beat, and feature she gets her hands on. It's her confidence that sells the story. It's her refreshingly unvarnished self-presentation; her uncompromising attitude."[83]

Both rapper and reality in the same body, Cardi appears as a person first and a performer second, a phenomenon that fans are all too desirous to see and hear. When described by those that follow her, the "unfiltered" Cardi, where she is the most "Cardi-est,"[84] is what first comes to mind. An excessive, raunchified aesthetic coupled with a raging self-awareness, Cardi is one of the most memorable and exciting products right now in popular entertainment. "Undercover" with *GQ*, featured on Ellen, and the co-host for multiple shows with Jimmy Fallon, everyone wants not just a sound bite, but an actual, all-encompassing bite of the Cardi B brand.[85]

And women, especially women of color, seem to love her the most. For them, Cardi preaches "an anthem of knowing your worth and getting what you deserve, of flipping expectations."[86] By leaning into her exoticization and then immediately playing against it, these fans see her work as an act of re-

[83] Callie Ahlgrim, "Cardi B is the biggest star in hip-hop right now, but here's how her rap skills actually measure up," *Insider*, January 9, 2019, https://www.thisisinsider.com/cardi-b-rank-best-rappers-alive-2019-1.
[84] Davis, "Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl."
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

signification that places women like them from margin to center, even if that means repurposing what's already available to get there. Today a multimillion dollar platform still in the making, as Cardi quipped to *The Fader* "yo, it's so crazy, like, them motherfuckers really doubted me. It's like, why would y'all doubt me? Like, I have seven hundred thousand bajillion followers [...] I'm telling them like, 'Yo, I have a brand.'"[87]

A brand all her own, Cardi B is "built to watch, built herself to be watched."[88] However, Cardi's projected authenticity, may just be another trope manipulated for cultural capital. In December of 2018, Cardi B separated from her husband Offset, because of his rumored habits of indiscretion. At one point trying to win back her affections, the male rapper surprised her while she was on stage at Rolling Loud, an annual concert series that is self-described as "the largest hip-hop festival in the world."[89] Carting out a big apology cake and grasping a large bundle of white flowers, Offset's attempt for attention did not go well and he was thus summarily dismissed after an awkward exchange between the two. On the outset, Offset's surprise seemed spur of the moment and Cardi's rejection appeared candid, but upon more material surfacing, this moment of visibly identifiable relationship trouble and possible female empowerment seemed false. In the day following the onstage debacle, Tariq Cherif, co-founder of Rolling Loud, published a statement through the event's Twitter page stating, "headliners and their teams have full control of the stage and who is allowed on it during their

[87] Kameir, "Cardi B's So-Called Life."
[88] Davis, "Regular, Degular, Shmegular Girl."
[89] "Festival Info," *Rolling Loud*, accessed December 20, 2018, http://www.rollingloud.com/info.

set,"[90] and with additional digging by fans, another Twitter user posted a video that showed Cardi B's longtime publicist Patientce leading Offset onto the stage in the first place.[91]

What this revelation of facts incited was a swath of gossip outlets and even some of Cardi's own fans suggesting that the whole thing was her plan all along, an elaborate staging to garner more attention to the pair via a social media-worthy event. Whether such speculation is accurate is not for this paper to say. But what moments like these do provide is insight in to the delicate balancing act Cardi B does as an artist in today's cultural economy. With her success as much based upon mimicry as it is authenticity, where the line between act and person exists is far less clear, even to her most adoring fans. Thus playing music in more ways than one, Cardi's played up persona functions the same way she seems to play the system. More than just a type of lighthearted action, I think towards Seth Cosimini's reworking of L. H. Stallings' work in *Mutha' is half a word,* and how play also "is a type of contestation and a powerful tool for destabilization, resistance, and pleasure. More than a pleasurable turn of phrase or an irreverent reversal of positions of power, play is an exploitation of the unstable and oppressive cultural sites of language, the body, and desire."[92] Multitudinous in its meaning, play can just as much "put something over on people" as it can

[90] Rolling Loud (@RollingLoud), "Regarding last night at #rollingloud LA. We love you @iamcardib," Twitter post, December 16, 2018, 2:40pm, https://twitter.com/rollingloud/status/1074434058828996608?lang=en.
[91] ODB (@OlDirtyBarbie), "Lol so Cardi's publicist was the one who led Offset onto the stage," Twitter post, December 16, 2018, 5:13am, https://twitter.com/OlDirtyBarbie/status/1074291371111002112.
[92] Cosimini, "'I'm a Motherfuckin' Monster!'" 49.

acknowledge, support, or endorse a preceding action;[93] and with Cardi playing her own sound by ear, this Afro-Latinx artist is as much a player of music as she is a player of industry. An auditory vision that sounds the same to merely passing receptors but is a product coming from an inherently different source, Cardi manipulates the current riggings of popular mass appeal "to sound like all your favorite rappers, […] taking all of their flows and embodying that bitch."[94]

"Not ashamed in admitting she is here to chase hits," Cardi both follows the trend and makes herself trend all so that she may float freely around the musical medium in whatever representation she sees fit for that moment. A pop culture body double in more ways than one, Cardi's dissonant sounds of similarity create "resulting oppositional readings [that] suggest she thickens, complicates, and deconstructs her own stereotypical representation, thereby undermining the very parts she is brought in to play."[95] Yet what actual part Cardi intends to play in the U.S. consumer market is currently indeterminate. For even with her moments of pro-female empowerment and pan-Latinx subjectivity, if you ask Cardi what she does and why, you will still get a far more direct to consumer answer. As written in *Fader*, "People be asking me, 'What do you does?' 'Are you a model? Are you, like, a comedian or something?' Nah, I ain't none of that. I'm a

[93] Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 230.
[94] This quote is a formalization of what Cardi stated candidly during her performance at South Carolina Fall Ball in 2017, as reported by *Billboard*. The full quote is as follows, "I'ma sound like all your favorite rappers. I'ma take all they flows and I'ma body it bitch," I'ma take all they flows and I'ma body it bitch." Nerisha Penrose, "Cardi B Says She Can Steal Any Rapper's Flow & 'Body' It," *Billboard*, October 2, 2017. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7982016/cardi-b-rant-kodak-black-new-music-birthday.
[95] Angharad N. Valdivia, *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood and Other Essays on Media Culture* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 105.

hoe. I'm a stripper hoe. I'm about this shmoney."[96] Truthful or not, this much is true. The Cardi B that Belcalis Almanzar will continue to sell to audiences is not just a woman who does not dance now, but someone who intently plans to make plenty of money and power moves that provide new representational opportunities the frequently abject Black female body.

[96] Another now deleted Vine, the post was later referenced in Kameir's "Cardi B's So-Called Life."

CHAPTER 3

Vaginal Mirror:
Tessa Thompson's Personal Play with Erotic Ambiguity

Dressed in a strappy fuchsia leotard and voluminous ruffled pants, Janelle Monáe begins her song "PYNK" singing in line with a chorus of similarly dressed dancers. With the folds of her pants unfurling out from between her inner thighs, Monáe thrusts her legs outwards, while her hands press together in a v shape that propels downwards to rest between outstretched thighs. Performed in tandem with the song's first line "Pink like the inside of your…,"[1] the v shape hangs mid-air amidst the folds, becoming the first of many deliberate vaginal metaphors that arise during the music video's duration. As the song progresses, a quick cut of the camera removes the chorus of dancers and leaves only Monáe, still dressed in her hyper-vaginalized attire, only now, there is something, or rather, someone protruding out from between her legs. Thighs now pressed together, the head of Tessa Thompson rests between them, floating mid-fold with her long black hair cascading downwards. Though the rest of her body remains hidden, Thompson's hands are still visible, lightly stroking the outside edges of Monáe's fabricated vagina; all while Monáe leans downward to grasp at the inner portions of her pants. Bending at the waist but head still fixed towards the camera, Monáe takes one hand and slowly drags it upwards and across Thompson's face before the video cuts back to the full chorus line. Thompson is now absent, with only the lyrics "Pink is the truth you can't hide,"[2] left to hang in the air.

[1] Lyrics taken from the first stanza of Janelle Monáe's "PYNK." Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*, Bad Boy Records, April 27, 2018.
[2] Ibid.

Janelle Monáe and Tessa Thompson in "PYNK." As taken from Janelle Monáe's "Dirty Computer," *YouTube,* April 27, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE&t=1738s.

Janelle Monáe's "PYNK" is what some call "a brash celebration of creation. self love. sexuality. and pussy power!"[3] Blatantly obvious with its use of vaginal imagery, "PYNK" is only a five minute "memory" in an almost hour-long "emotion picture" entitled *Dirty Computer*. In the full-length feature, audiences encounter a dystopian future where people are designated as "dirty computers" for their failure to follow the standards of an undefined tyrannical system. Performing

[3] A description that was once part of the music video's caption on YouTube, as reprinted in Caroline Framke's "Janelle Monáe doubles down on feminist self-love with her new music video for 'Pynk,'" *Vox*, April 10, 2018. https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/4/10/17219874/janelle-monae-pynk-video-tessa-thompson-dirty-computer.

as Jane 57821, Monáe is one of these dirty computers, held captive and currently undergoing her own compulsory cleaning. With audiences forced to watch as Jane's non-normative behaviors are slowly wiped from her memory by white, male officiants, Monáe's emotion picture pushes viewers to question what is and what is not acceptable within dominant hegemonic society, and what exactly is so non-compliant about a woman's vaginal evocations.

Yet through the resulting situation that unfurled between Janelle Monáe and Tessa Thompson, Thompson's personal love life also provided a radical space for social activism. Speculatively labeled as a romantic couple prior to *Dirty Computer*'s debut, when Thompson later revealed and then immediately disavowed their amorous relationship, her personal fluctuations are what I believe to be a new iteration of her longstanding racial and sexual activism. Through study of her pictorial metamorphosis, I suggest that Thompson evolved into a persona that currently stands as a challenge to Latinidad's binarism on all fronts, amplifying positions of blackness, biraciality, and non-heteronormative sexuality in ways that oftentimes also refuse to remain within their own definitive labels. Ultimately evolving her platform into what I describe as a politically eroticized ambivalence, I show how Thompson never actively engages with Latindidad, but still challenges it all the same. By always embracing her blackness and demonstrably displaying her sexually fluid positionality, I contend that Thompson's presence in itself encourages new non-heteronormative Black narratives within homogenized framework of Latinx.

To start, this chapter proceeds with a linear history of Thompson's career progression over the last five years. Interested in her investment in and impacts on the characters she performs, I read her involvement in movies like *Dear White People*, *Creed*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Thor: Ragnarock*, as well as her choice to return to television for HBO's *Westworld*, as a slow evolution of socially progressive racial eroticism. Through my reliance on Black feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins and Darlene Clark Hine, I then question Thompson's choice to employ silence and later dissemblance with her potential relationship with Monáe. Thereby juxtaposing her very public political persona with her sudden move towards ambiguity, I explore the political possibilities behind Thompson's publicized reveal, or not so reveal, of her sexual orientation and association with Monáe in the United States press. A disjuncture I believe is key to better reading the image first posed at the start of this chapter, I then return to the opening clip from "PYNK" to suggest that Thompson emergence on camera is akin to what scholars like Ana M. Lara describe as a birthing process, one that allows Thompson to symbolically hold a mirror out for other Afro-Latinx identities to see themselves and to refract back the image Latinx communities wish to put upon them.

The current "go-to actress for roles that speak to the complexity of the black experience,"[4] Thompson's solidified place in popular fictional Black narratives began in 2014 with her role as Sam White in *Dear White People*. The main protagonist of the film, Sam is a biracial activist who produces her own show for her university's radio station. Propelled into the student spotlight after

[4] Anita Badejo, "How Tessa Thompson Became a Modern Marvel," *Buzzfeed*, July 20, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/anitabadejo/tessa-thompson-seizes-the-moment.

critiquing on her show white people's appropriation of Black culture, Sam is quickly elected president of an all-Black residence hall on campus. However, when Sam is forced to maintain her radical image, even when she is falling for a fellow white male student, Sam encounters a pushing and pulling of contrasting identities that Thompson easily recognized in her own life. Reflecting on her own experiences with biracial fragmentation, Thompson said she accepted the role to process her past histories.[5] For like Sam, Thompson's biraciality in high school caused its own series of divisions, ones that Thompson consistently sought to challenge. As part of a "racial harmony group" in her first year, Thompson initially joined as a Black student, only to then identify as Latinx during the next school year. By her third term, when Thompson attempted to enter the same club as a white student, her cohort definitively rejected her, a move that Thompson now reflects on with a good deal of amusement. Laughing with *Buzzfeed* about the episode in a 2016 interview, Thompson did not criticize her fellow students, but instead spoke positively about her own elaborate self-fashionings. If anything, the moment was a testament to how she has "always been someone that's really fascinated by identity and really aware that it's a creation."[6] Choosing to then portray her character as "somebody that was manipulating identity and really understood that identity is a performance,"[7] Thompson therefore relied on her past

[5] Quoting from her interview with Badejo, "I think because of my high school experience I understood what that [Sam's positionality] was. And it was a way to get to process that and think about that with levity." Badejo, "How Tessa Thompson Became a Modern Marvel."
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

as much as she relied on Sam White to shape her purveyance of biracial blackness.

Following her work on *Dear White People*, Thompson starred in *Selma* that same year. As a large budget, Black biopic surrounding Martin Luther King Jr.'s march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the movie was a significant move to put Black voices in Hollywood blockbusters. Yet because Thompson received very minimal screen time in the supporting role of Diane Nash, many audience members did not implicitly remember Thompson's performance.[8] However, shortly the next year, Thompson performed a significantly more visible role in another notably big budget Black film. Cast as Bianca in the 2015 *Rocky* series spin-off *Creed*, Thompson played a singer with progressive hearing loss who eventually starts a romantic relationship with the movie's lead character, Adonis Johnson. Though Thompson knew the minority girlfriend trope often appears as "an imitation of what a woman is,"[9] the actor still took on the role and inevitably helped craft an important part of the movie's push for more accurate Black representation. Joining director Ryan Coogler as he walked down Philadelphia's streets for character inspiration, after the two saw "all these girls with their hair in twists, their hair in braids," Coogler and Thompson agreed that they both wanted Bianca to don this same hairstyle so she may "look like every

[8] As taken from her interview with Badejo, "I've spoken to people and I'll say that I was in *Selma* and they're like, 'Oh yeah? You were? Who did you play?' [and] I'm like, 'Thanks. I was in Atlanta for three and a half months filming that movie!'" Ibid.
[9] Joanna Robinson, "Ride of the Valkyrie: Tessa Thompson on a Decade Defying On-Screen Stereotypes," *Vanity Fair*, November 1, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/11/tessa-thompson-thor-ragnarok-westworld-valkyrie-interview-bisexual.

girl [they] saw walking down the street."[10] "A deliberate decision" that offered new dimensionality to Thompson's character,[11] braids are not only a common hairstyle for Black women in Philadelphia, but also more generally excluded within the narratives of Western cultural production.[12] Often described as "'unkempt' or 'unprofessional' and in violation of appearance codes,"[13] braids and many Black hairstyles like them are rarely used in the presentation of Black women in Hollywood movies. Yet through *Creed*, the selection of a Black hairstyle not only reframed how a Black woman should look but also helped convey the complexity of overall Black identity. Halfway into the movie, viewers watch as Adonis and Bianca reflect on what lies ahead for them while in bed together. As the two discuss whether Adonis should embrace his familial legacy or how Bianca plans for a future with progressive hearing loss, the two sit upright while Adonis mends Bianca's braids. Throughout the scene, the camera mainly focuses on the interplay between fingertips and hair strands, spending more time on Bianca's hair over any other action or expression either character emits. Already an unusually deep dive into the character intents of sports movie figures, what this scene does is then also emphasize Adonis and Bianca's blackness as

[10] Jarett Wieselman, "The Young Actor Who Isn't Afraid To Say No," *Buzzfeed*, November 22, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/jarettwieselman/tessa-thompson-in-creed-is-more-than-a girlfriend?utm_term=.oaRw5x5vnE#.fxbLX5XqvG.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Unlike when white women commodify the style, Black women often encounter economic and legal ramifications for how they wear their hair, as demonstrated by a series of court battles in the 1980s where several women took their previous employers to court after receiving termination notices due to their hair. This includes cases like Renee Rogers and American Airlines, Pamela Mitchell and Marriott Hotels, and Cheryl Tatum and Hyatt hotel. As taken from Ayana Byrd, "How Braids Tell America's Black Hair History," *ELLE*, December 27, 2017, https://www.elle.com/beauty/hair/a14380845/braids-tell-americas-black-hair-history/.
[13] Ayana Byrd, "How Braids Tell America's Black Hair History."

much as the scene highlights their multidimensionality. By thus marrying distinct physicalizations of blackness with complex identity construction, Coogler's reliance on his and Thompson's choice in Black hairstyle became an effective tool in changing conceptions surrounding Black presentation in Hollywood movies.

However, even though Thompson was veritably proud of her and the movie's general representational ability to encourage a "brave new world…[where]… people are interested in female characters not just being an object in the narrative but being the subject of the narrative,"[14] Thompson questioned whether the changes they made would "be something audiences [could] get behind? [Were] they going to be unsatisfied by the way she doesn't fulfill our ideas, in any way, of that role?"[15] Unfortunately, her concerns were correct, but only due to other issues pertaining to racial characterization. "I remember reading some idea that I had been cast in *Creed* because I'm light-skinned,"[16] Thompson recalled to Badejo from *Buzzfeed*. "*That* idea — that I'm in a position because Hollywood is so racist, I get parts because I'm more palatable — it's not that I'm uncomfortable confronting the validity of that, it's that I also feel—I have a hard time with that. Because I just don't think it's true."[17]

These critiques directed towards her skin color, over anything she actually did to alter Black characterization, are even more notable when considering Bianca was envisioned as a biracial Puerto Rican.[18] For Black Puerto Ricans, their

[14] Wieselman, "The Young Actor Who Isn't Afraid To Say No."
[15] Ibid.
[16] Badejo, "How Tessa Thompson Became a Modern Marvel."
[17] Ibid.
[18] As pointed out by *Creed 2*'s director Steven Caple Jr., "ironically enough, Tessa Thompson's character in *Creed* is Puerto Rican. It's a small thing, but [in the first movie] there is a moment where you see the [Puerto Rican] flag in the background." As taken from Carlos Aguilar, "'Creed

very blackness is often subject to a similar type of racial policing Thompson experienced through her casting as Bianca. “Too black” for Puerto Rico but not “black enough” when living in the United States,[19] even Cardi B, whose father was raised nearby in the Dominican Republic, has in the past defended how she is both Black and Latinx at the same time.[20] As for Thompson, who has an Afro-Panamanian father and mother with European and Mexican ancestry, her light skin color is what for many immediately robs her of her entire blackness. Therefore even when attempting to portray Black characters who most closely relate to her own identity, Thompson’s Latinx lineage relegates her to racial purgatory, Black but not Black at the same time.

Yet paradoxically enough, it is through the aid of her Latinx positionality that Thompson established her Black identity. Recognized for her artistic contributions at ESSENCE’s 11th annual Black Women in Hollywood luncheon, Thompson took the time to highlight how her “whitest” roots deserved as much acknowledgement as she did. Accepting the honor by saying the award meant

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II’ Director Steven Caple Jr Asserts That Tessa Thompson’s Character Bianca Is Latina,” *Remezcla*, November 19, 2018, http://remezcla.com/features/film/creed-ii-interview-steven-caple-jr/.

[19] In articles like Maritza Quiñones-Rivera’s “From Trigueñita to Afro-Puerto Rican: Intersections of the Racialized, Gendered, and Sexualized Body in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Mainland,” *Meridians* 7 (1): 162–182, Afro-Latinx persons such as herself express the double bind of their blackness in said communities, always never good enough to be African American nor Puerto Rican.

[20] In an interview with Zendaya for *CR Fashion Book* in December of last year, when Cardi B was asked what she wanted people to talk more directly to her about, she made it clear that “a lot of people be attacking me because they feel like I don’t be saying that I’m black. Some people want to decide if you’re black or not, depending on your skin complexion, because they don’t understand Caribbean people or our culture. I feel like people need to understand or get a passport and travel. I don’t got to tell you that I’m black. I expect you to know it.” As taken from Zendaya, “Cardi B Opens Up to Zendaya in the New Issue of CR Fashion Book,” *CR Fashion Book*, December 21, 2018, https://www.crfashionbook.com/celebrity/a15956294/card-b-zendaya-cr-fashion-book-interview/.

"more to me than any acknowledgement or accolades that I have been lucky enough to receive thus far [...] because being seen and appreciated by you and thereby your reader and thereby everyone in this room feels like home,"[21] Thompson went further on to argue that this social recognition of her blackness did not happen without her mother. "A woman of color even though she might not be readily identified as such," Thompson explained, "because of that, she always gave me space to explore my identity; get in touch with who I am. She understood the void of not having enough guidance, in that. Even though she is not a Black woman, throughout my life, she filled me with such pride of being one."[22]

Therefore, rather than shy away from predominantly Black roles due to the color of her skin or her growth within a Latinx household, Thompson refused to submit to racial constrictions and continued to take on distinctly Black roles. Playing Detroit in Boots Riley's 2018 movie, *Sorry to Bother You*, Thompson performed as a character whose racialized body is often placed centerstage. Portrayed through a cacophony of color and multitudinous physical manifestations, Detroit is a radical artist that many remember for the startlingly large earrings she wears, Accessories that range from -sized tag lines such as "Bury the Rag/Deep in Your Face,"[23] to less lyrical, purple bedazzled phalluses,

[21] ESSENCE, "Tessa Thompson Shares How Her Mexican Mother Helped Her Take Pride In Her Blackness,'" *YouTube*, March 3, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LE2T51v_lWk.
[22] Lauren Porter, "Tessa Thompson Shares How Her Mexican Mother Helped Her Take Pride In Her Blackness: 'She Wanted Me To Be Brave,'" *ESSENCE*, March 2, 2018, https://www.essence.com/awards-events/red-carpet/black-women-hollywood/tessa-thompson-speech-mexican-mother-pride-blackness/.
[23] This phrase in particular originates from Bob Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," a song that tells the story of a Black barmaid who was beaten by a drunk white man with a cane in 1963; and later died from her injuries. The son of a past Maryland legislator and an owner of a large tobacco farm, the man, whose name was Billy Zantzinger, served only six months in jail for his crime. His final sentencing was handed down the same day that Martin Luther King, Jr.

the confluence of such provocative racial and sexual imagery was actually written into the movie's initial drafts. Yet when reaching the scene where Detroit far more explicitly showcased her racially sexualized positioning as a Black woman, Thompson stepped in to alter the narrative to protect herself, but also inevitably reaffirm her blackness.

At Detroit's "The New F**k You" gallery opening, Detroit enacts a performance art piece where she stands stark naked and recites the following lines from Berry Gordy's *The Last Dragon*, "and in the end Eddie, you know what? You're nothing but a misguided midget asshole with dreams of ruling the world … yeah *also* from Kew Gardens … and *also* getting by on my tits!"[24] Performing as a stand-in for mistreated Black labor, Detroit then encourages gallery patrons to throw a conglomeration of bullet casings, old cell phones, and balloons full of sheep's blood at her naked frame. Thereby critiquing American patronage as a cyclical economic exploitation of Black bodies, Riley exposed Detroit so that she could expose racist capitalist practices. However, neither Thompson, nor Costume Designer Deirdra Govan supported the idea that Detroit should perform naked. As *Nylon* later reported, "she [Govan] and Thompson didn't want to 'have nudity for nudity's sake, it needed to have a purpose and meaning behind it.'"[25] Therefore in the final cut of the movie, Detroit went from bare to bearing clear plastic boots and a black leather glove bikini whose bottom half served as a gestural middle

delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech less than one hundred miles away in Washington, D.C.

[24] *Sorry to Bother You*, directed by Boots Riley (Oakland, CA: Cinereach, 2018).

[25] Taylor Bryant, "The Story Behind Tessa Thompson's Radical 'Sorry to Bother You' Earrings," *Nylon*, July 5, 2018, https://nylon.com/articles/sorry-to-bother-you-costume-designer-interview-deirdra-govan.

finger towards captive audiences. A collective of Black hands supporting and protecting the intimate parts of one, individual Black body, Detroit's new costume embraced racial place via a consistent brand of embodied messaging. With the additional glove that flipping off any viewer who gazes at Detroit's vaginal area, Detroit's dress provokes the onlooker to consider this as the character saying, my Black "body is my own. I own this."[26]

A still of Tessa Thompson at the start of her character Detroit's performance art piece in *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). As taken from *Sorry to Bother You*. Directed by Boots Riley. Oakland, CA: Cinereach, 2018.

Now although the new costume choice was all Govan's own design. Thompson's willfulness to engage in performing within fictional roles where racial body politics continually play out across her own personhood. And though *Sorry to Bother You* was not the first movie to require Thompson to express a sexualized aesthetic,[27] nowhere before this did Thompson deliberately exposure

[26] Ibid.

[27] In the 2010 horror movie, *Exquisite Corpse*, Thompson's character Liz receives oral sex from the main character Nicholas; while in her role as Sara Freeman in the BBC TV show *Copper*, Thompson has sex with her co-star Ato Essandoh in Season 2, Episode 2, during a Cranberries-backed musical montage. Even in *Dear White People*, Thompson at one point rises post-coitus from bed, naked with her back to camera.

her body as a distinctly raced and sexed object. Yet for Thompson to utilize sex as an additional critique to refract how a Black body should look and behave, her role selection needed to exist beyond the limited confines of heteronormative girlfriend. Crossing over to more scientific and fantastical genres in 2016, Thompson returned to television to star in the still-running HBO show *Westworld*.[28] "A proxy for corporate greed and the ways in which corporations can totally dehumanize folks,"[29] Thompson's character Charlotte Hale is the Executive Director of Delos Destinations, Inc, and oftentimes makes use of the company's theme park for her own devices. Frequently read as aggressive, and sometimes even irresponsible, some viewers consequently Thompson's portrayal of Hale as distinctly male, a critique then used against her to suggest how she was unsuitable for the part. However, in response to such criticism, Thompson argued:

> I think for some people, they felt like her behavior is so unprofessional, but I think for her, it's just that she's very good at her job. [...] I feel like so often with men in a professional space, it's not about being liked. It's about being respected. So, the rest of it, putting on airs of how you should behave, what is appropriate behavior, is sort of moot.[30]

By questioning notions of gender appropriate behavior, Thompson invariably found ways to additionally reject the overall notion that even gender non-conforming characters could only remain within such a singular gender role. First appearing in the series in a strapless bikini and later frequently shown on screen adjusting her hair or checking her reflection in a nearby window or mirror,

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[28] Thompson's first roles in her acting career came from television, which included supporting roles in shows like *Copper* and *Veronica Mars*.
[29] Jane Mulkerrins, "Break the Mold with Tessa Thompson," *Net-A-Porter*, June 29, 2018, https://www.net-a-porter.com/us/en/porter/article-502e16f70e0351fa/cover-stories/cover-stories/tessa-thompson.
[30] Robinson, "Ride of the Valkyrie."

Thompson's perpetuation of Hale danced back and forth between the line of masculine and feminine tropes. As she later explained to *Vanity Fair* about her choice, "I'm someone that likes to not think too binary about human qualities. I understand when you say it codes male, but in my personal life and also in my work, I try to challenge myself not to think in those terms."[31]

Now even though *Westworld* seemingly diverged away from Thompson's interest in interrogating race,[32] the incorporation of Black bodies and science fiction in itself reads as racially radical. As a white-centric genre built on a platform of colonialist interests,[33] futuristic fictions from the start are wholly undisposed to Black narratives. Faced with a lineage "deliberately rubbed out, and […] consumed by the search for legible traces of its history,"[34] Black narratives are frequently relegated to the past and stripped of their futurity. Therefore to see any form of autonomous Black participation in the science fiction genre automatically provides the possibility of racial disruption. The very "counterculture of modernity,"[35] the presence of blackness thus transforms science fiction into a speculative one. Without disrupting the presently biased bounds of prospective reality, Thompson's appearance, in a position of power no

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[31] Ibid.
[32] *Westworld*'s cast is not primarily white, nor do non-white actors face distinctive marginalization in screen time or plot structure.
[33] For more information on this subject, please consult the work of scholars like John Rieder and his book, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
[34] Mark Dery, "Black to the future: Afro-Futurism 1.0," in *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-wave Trajectory*, ed. Marleen S. Barr (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 8.
[35] A phrase introduced by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and then subsequently repurposed by the likes of Afro-futurists such as Marleen S. Barr in her book *Afro-future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-wave Trajectory* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2008), xvi.

less, implicitly critiques racially confining constructs through "an imaginative framework alternative to the authors empirical environment."[36] Like the nodes of magical realism I address in Chapter 1 and their politicized presence in *Jane the Virgin*'s critical messaging, science fiction offers Thompson the chance to employ a kind of optical illusion to better interrogate what an autonomous Afro-Latinx body means, without ever creating a sense of discord within watching audience members. As Janelle Monáe described in her own employments of the science fiction genre, both in *Dirty Computer* and before, "I thought science fiction was a great way of talking about the future. It doesn't make people feel like you're talking about things that are happening right now, so they don't feel like you're talking down to them. It gives the listener a different perspective."[37]

Thompson's move towards critiquing her racially sexed body seemed to flourish through the genre's potentiality, particularly when following her selection for the role of Valkyrie in Marvel's 2017 *Thor: Ragnarok*. A character whom, in the original comics, is a statuesque, blonde, and more importantly, white woman, Thompson appeared in stark contrast to Valkyrie's supposedly predetermined image. Let alone physically different in appearance, Thompson prompted more social commentary after suggesting that Valkyrie was not sexually fluid. Yet when the movie failed to include much of the material filmed to back that assertion, Thompson did not seem particularly bothered by the lack of sexual

[36] Darko Suvin, "On the poetics of the science fiction genre," in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 118.
[37] Eliza C. Thompson, "Janelle Monáe: The Year's Most Intriguing Pop Star," *Bust Magazine*, July 23, 2013, https://bust.com/general/10226-janelle-monae-the-years-most-intriguing-pop-star.html.

inclusion. When asked for her thoughts on the matter, Thompson told *The Independent*, "one thing to clarify about that, is it was so in passing. I hope we get to that space, where someone's sexuality is as immaterial as me drinking this green juice."[38]

Thompson's desirous reach towards racialized sexual immateriality is where *Dirty Computer* and Janelle Monáe seem to fully come into play. Not solely bound to the folds of Monáe's "PYNK" legs, Thompson starred in the overall emotion picture as Zen, Monáe's love interest and recently indoctrinated subject of the otherworldly totalitarian regime. Predominantly showcased in the starts and bursts of memories that slip out of Jane 57821's mind as she is slowly deprogrammed, through these memorial breakages, Thompson demonstrably purveys many moments of fluctuating Black sexual postionality. Introduced after Monáe croons, "I just wanna find a guy and I hope that she loves me too,"[39] Thompson performs a gambit of different transgressive behaviors, from marrying an interracial female couple to finding pleasure in the company of both a man and woman. But what is additionally important to make note of is how Thompson's character Zen always remains silent. In fact, during the entire production of *Dirty Computer*, the only time Thompson speaks is when she is no longer Zen but performing instead as the already "cleansed" Maryapple 53. A strict verbal dichotomy between the real and the lobotomized, the looming presence of silence

[38] Alexandra Pollard, "Tessa Thompson interview: 'Men should have the responsibility to deal with their toxicity,'" *The Independent*, November 30, 2018. https://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/films/features/tessa thompsoninterview-creed-ii-2-sexuality-men-bisexual-acting-michael-b-jordan-metoo-a8658881.html.

[39] As taken from the sixth stanza of Janelle Monáe's "Crazy, Classic, Life." Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*, Bad Boy Records, April 27, 2018.

over the uninhibited Black female body long dominates the history of Western social theory. As clearly demonstrated in the previous chapter, in the United States Black women are often relegated to visibly licentious roles to benefit white, heteronormative systems of power that feed upon differences in race, class, and gender expression. Therefore to best construct "safe spaces for Black women's self-definitions [this] often required public silences about seemingly provocative topics."[40] Or, as also further explained by Darlene Clark Hine, "only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle."[41]

Yet the purveyance of Black silence frequently leads to more harm than good, especially when thinking of its history with the "politics of respectability."[42] As a type of reform-aimed praxis that promoted restrained behavior in both social and relational dynamics, in the early twentieth century, Black people attempted to publicly self-censor in order to "define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourses."[43] Not distinctly a verbal medium of social rupture, respectability politics still constituted the idea that the best way to seek change was to silence parts of one's personality, curtail certain behaviors, and minimize any differences in sexual orientation. What this then created was a type of Black-oriented reformation that essentially undermined

[40] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 134.
[41] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance." *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 915.
[42] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.
[43] Ibid., 192.

many of its own community members. More akin to a politics of denial, Black women and men who worked outside normative white structures thus became doubly abject, rejected from both white systems of oppression and the very communities they most closely aligned with in the past. Thereby a causeway into what Evelynn Hammonds describes as the overwhelming "problematics of silence," self-silencing transformed into another manner of culturally imposed sexual and social elision that cordoned off better understandings of the various autonomous expressions of identity that co-existed within the Black community.[44]

However, as later readdressed by feminist and social activist bell hooks, Black communities did not necessarily need to completely abandon the techniques of silence to better enable Black voices. In her book *Talking Back*, bell hooks explains that the "struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard."[45] To then apply this to Thompson's silence in Monáe's music video, the moments where Thompson does not speak are actually where I believe her voice resonates the loudest. While only speaking when she is Maryapple 53, the voice Thompson uses is definitively not hers. Rather, by projecting the pre-programmed voice of the white hegemony that perceives her love relationship with Monáe's character as "dirty," Maryapple 53 voices only what her oppressors expect of her. A verbal dance of respectability politics, audiences know automatically how distorted this Black selfhood is after seeing all

[44] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and The Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2&3 (1994): 131, 134.
[45] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 6.

that Zen does outside of white confines. Therefore by not having Zen ever talk when living in the unmediated world she shares with her "dirty" companions, her silence comes to stand as the ultimate form of objection against a verbalized, yet truly silencing form of social behavior long imposed by politically normalizing forces.

Though Thompson's character never speaks back to Monáe's, the absence of speech is because Zen is finally able to not have to speak as someone else. Moments of silent sexual acceptance purveyed for the camera screen, these silences also became an important part of Thompson's social activism following *Dirty Computer's* debut. Clearly unafraid to address her racial or sexual placement within other fictional structures, whether through the production or the press tours afterwards, her lack of vocalization in and around Monáe's *Dirty Computer* seems to operate in stark contrast to how Thompson previously presented herself to captive audiences. And the reason behind such a difference potentially stems from the fact that unlike this creative enterprise, all her previous projects were not as directly personal as the story she portrayed in *Dirty Computer*. For as part of an ambiguously displayed dynamic long demonstrated in public photo ops and occasional social media posts, Thompson and Monáe's chemistry on-screen was just as possible off-site.

Upon Monáe's release of *Dirty Computer* and the highly erotic portrayal of the two together, especially in "PYNK," internet rumors reached a fever pitch, full of speculation as to whether the two would finally address the world with an officially designated relationship three years in the making. But fans were

disappointed when Thompson did nothing to alter the long-running ambiguity, telling *Entertainment Tonight*, "Janelle and I have been really close. We've been really good friends at this point for about three and a half years [...] If [the song] makes people feel liberated in their skin and feel closer to who they are, then I think we did our job."[46] Meanwhile, Monáe then conducted more verbal avoidance when directly questioned about their potential relationship by *The New York Times Magazine*'s Jenna Wortham. After a pause that Wortham described as a "mathematician working out Fermat's Last Theorem,"[47] Monáe decisively responded by saying, "I hope people feel celebrated. I hope they feel love. I hope they feel seen."[48]

As women who are not only being Black, but also queer, Monáe and Thompson face the difficult position as to whether or not they will purposefully step into what Patricia Hill Collins deems the ultimate site of intersecting oppressions. As explained by Collins, "Black lesbian relationships constitute relationships among the ultimate Other [...] they represent the antithesis of Audre Lorde's 'mythical norm' and become the standard by which other groups measure their own so-called normality and self-worth."[49] Now as celebrities, neither of the two women face the same types of struggles others like them encounter on the

[46] Alex Ungerman, "Tessa Thompson Reacts to Being 'Shipped' With Janelle Monáe After the 'Make Me Feel' Music Video," *Entertainment Tonight*, February 23, 2018. https://www.etonline.com/tessa-thompson-reacts-to-being-shipped-with-janelle-monae-after-the-make-me-feel-music-video-96993.
[47] The quote is taken from a reprinting of a portion of Wortham's interview in Anna Silman's "A History of Janelle Monáe and Tessa Thompson's Maybe-More-Than Friendship," *The Cut*, April 26, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/janelle-monae-pansexual-relationship-with-tessa-thompson.html.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 181.

everyday level; for as Thompson argued when facing backlash for other non-normative portrayals, "I'm an actor, we're [gesturing to interviewer] in the hotel right now, I'm fine, do you know what I mean?"[50] But even then, that does not mean Thompson and Monáe no longer face and/or express concerns about the precarious dangers of abject social placement. In Monáe's previous work as a musician, the alludes to her non-heteronormativity always remained cloaked and subverted, at least until after she officially released *Dirty Computer*.[51] As for Thompson, whose family willfully accepts whatever choice she makes regarding potential partnerships,[52] she also grapples with how best to publicly embrace her sexuality. "It's tricky," Thompson denotes, "because Janelle and I are just really private people and we're both trying to navigate how you reconcile wanting to have that privacy and space, and also wanting to use your platform and influence."[53]

Thompson's hesitancy, even as an Afro-Latinx woman supported by her family, might stem from the fact that her culture's "efforts to do family,"[54] often subsume any attempts for radical individuation. In her seminal text

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[50] Melissa Murray, "Celebrities: Tessa Thompson: 'I Never Thought I Could Be In A Superhero Movie,'" *BET,* October 30, 2017, https://www.bet.com/video/celebrity/2017/tessa-thompson-i-never-thought-i-could-be-in-a-superhero-movie.html.

[51] Listening to past lyrics from songs like "Mushrooms & Roses" and "Q.U.E.E.N.," it is a Mary who is referred to as the one to hold the singer's enduring affections and even the original title of "Q.U.E.E.N.," was actually intended to read as "Q.U.E.E.R.," a difference in word choice listeners can still hear in the background harmonies. And when asked, Monáe responded by saying the real answers are held within her music. "If you listen to my albums, it's there." Brittany Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," *Rolling Stone,* April 26, 2018, https://www.rollingstone .com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/.

[52] Quoting from her interview with *Net-A-Porter*'s Jane Mulkerrins, "I can take things for granted because of my family – it's so free and you can be anything that you want to be. I'm attracted to men and also to women. If I bring a woman home, [or] a man, we don't even have to have the discussion." Mulkerrins, "Break the Mold with Tessa Thompson."

[53] Mulkerrins, "Break the Mold with Tessa Thompson."

[54] Katie L. Acosta, *Amigas Y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 12.

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa discusses how publicly identifying as a Chicana lesbian worked against every facet of her dominant culture. “The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin-as sister, as father, as padrino-and last as self.”[55] Not encouraged in Latinx spaces to speak for oneself, but instead for the well-being of one’s own family and the community at large, Thompson also then faces a reception in Black households where “sexual minorities are accepted within African-American families and communities as long as they do not label themselves or acknowledge publicly that they engage in same-sex relationships.”[56] Thus placed at the nexus of two cultures who accept but typically wish for one to mitigate their own sexual individuality, Thompson faces the possibility of subjecting both sides of her family to a communal scrutiny that can harm them as much as herself. Worse yet, her decision to come out could lead them to buckle under the pressure of social conformity and ultimately reject her from her own abode. As ultimately explained by Anzaldúa, there is a legitimate “fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us.”[57]

[55] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, first edition (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 18.
[56] Shannon J. Miller, "African-American Lesbian Identity Management and Identity Development in the Context of Family and Community," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 4 (2011): 547.
[57] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 20.

Now, whether this is consciously or unconsciously felt, when Thompson revealed to *Net-A-Porter* that not only was she sexually fluid, but in a loving relationship with Monáe, Thompson's struggles with the personal versus the political seemed to reach a critical turning point. With considerable media attention swiftly directed their way, outlets ranging from the *Hollywood Reporter* to *Harper's Bazaar* circulated the interview, running with the often-quoted headline "we love each other deeply. We're so close, we vibrate on the same frequency."[58] Consistently followed by the line, "if people want to speculate about what we are, that's okay. It doesn't bother me,"[59] Thompson's romantic reveal seemed to put all speculation to rest. Or at least that was the case until two months later when Thompson appeared to backtrack on some of her previous statements. After speaking with Thompson as part of an interview with *New York Magazine,* Allison P. Davis later described their conversation in full*:*

> "The truth is Janelle and I are both in a space where we're trying to push boundaries in terms of the idea of what space a woman of color can occupy." She goes on, saying that they are both people who "believe fiercely that people should be free to love who they love," but aren't interested in "super-binary conversations" about "identity or sexuality." It's something they stand for "separately," but then she adds, "And in our friendship we celebrate that we're like-minded in that space, too."[60]

Apparently no longer love but only friendship held between the two, Thompson's fluctuation between openness and avoidance of direct expression appeared to follow the pattern of what Darlene Clark Hine describes as the dynamics of

[58] Mulkerrins, "Break the Mold with Tessa Thompson."
[59] Ibid.
[60] Allison P. Davis, "Tessa Thompson Knows People Can't Stop Thinking About Her …" *New York Magazine,* August 20, 2018. https://www.thecut.com/2018/08/tessa-thompson-knows-people-cant-stop-thinking-about-her.html.

dissemblance. “Creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma,”[61] Thompson diminished the event of going public by telling Davis, “I was just speaking candidly. I wasn’t there to sort of make any declarations,” an assertion Davis described as “calm” and “unmodulated” in tone.[62] However, Thompson’s assertion is distinctly untrue. In the well-publicized *Net-A-Porter* interview, Thompson previously discussed the difficulty in making the decision to come out, stating “that was something I was conscientious of in terms of this **declaration** around Janelle and myself. I want everyone else to have that freedom and support that I have from my loved ones.”[63]

By immediately disavowing her previous declaration, Thompson seemed to completely undermine her ever-continuous labors in challenging sexual and racial messaging in the U.S. cultural marketplace. Previously prolific in her aims to change the conversation, the actor has gone so far as to say that she was “happy to talk about it until I'm blue in the face.”[64] What this then leads us to question is whether Thompson’s intended activism is unable to exist beyond the foundational bounds of a theatrical reality. When thinking of another comment she made to BET about how her roles are the only truth “I can focus on, all I have control over,”[65] we must ultimately consider how Thompson might see her socio-sexual interests in radicalized fluidity as only an act ably conducted in front of the camera and not one

[61] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915.
[62] Davis, “Tessa Thompson Knows People Can’t Stop Thinking About Her.”
[63] Mulkerrins, “Break the Mold with Tessa Thompson.” The bold is of my own emphasis.
[64] Badejo, “How Tessa Thompson Became A Modern Marvel.”
[65] Murray, “Celebrities: Tessa Thompson: 'I Never Thought I Could Be In A Superhero Movie.’”

that is embodied by a portrayal of the entire self. Like what Collins suggests in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, "in a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount,"[66] a similar shutting of the door Thompson conveyed in her distinct retraction of key phrases that first entwined Thompson and Monáe together in a potentially romantic fashion.

Despite Thompson's apparent retraction, I still believe that her personal life and employment of silence and retreat is simply another, more subversive mode of self-fashioned eroticized racial activism. For in her apparent quest for a sense of seclusion from public narratives, Thompson's now privatized efforts read as all the more political when we already know her personally eroticized stance. As argued by Judith Squires in her article "Private Lives, Secluded Places: Privacy as Political Possibility," a shift from publicity to privacy creates "the means of achieving individualism by providing the barriers necessary to enable the individual to make uncoerced choices in life," meaning that the very mode of privacy "could therefore be viewed as a mechanism for the realization of pluralism and tolerance."[67] Hence when we recall the *Buzzfeed* interview where Thompson suggested that she would continue to speak until she was "blue in the face," Thompson also gives the interviewer another answer that makes this theory all the more probable. Asked as to whether or not she does this "in the hope of one day not having to,"[68] Thompson is described as letting out a "long, resigned

[66] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 134.
[67] Judith Squires, "Private Lives, Secluded Places: Privacy as Political Possibility," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12, no. 4 (1994): 390.
[68] Badejo, "How Tessa Thompson Became A Modern Marvel."

sigh" before stating, "yeah, absolutely. You talk about it enough so you never have to talk about it again."[69] Thereby willfully going into great detail about her love for Monáe before then completely disengaging from the dialogue, Thompson's privatized pivoting becomes its own form of talking until the issue never needs addressing again. With her verbal retreat, Thompson leaves spectators desirous for more information, intent on asking more questions about Thompson and her pluralistic identity. For as ruefully described by Davis in Thompson's retraction interview, "she might not want to answer the questions, but she sure does a good job of prodding us to ask."[70]

Through this analytic, Thompson's declaration of whom and how she loved, even if only just for a moment, becomes a piece of radical erotic work. As argued by Collins:

> Self-defined and publicly expressed Black women's love relationships, whether such relationships find sexual expression or not, constitute resistance. If members on the bottom love one another and affirm one another's worth, then the entire system that assigns that group to the bottom becomes suspect.[71]

Therefore as two women who in reality never proffered a markedly physical demonstration of their love for one another, the ability for Thompson to specifically name and express who she is and who she loves, already works to shift against the cultural tides of systemic expectation. However, unlike the Black lesbianism put forth by Collins, because Thompson is Afro-Latinx, her affective efforts of contradiction do not just disrupt normative power structures within the

[69] Ibid.
[70] Davis, "Tessa Thompson Knows People Can't Stop Thinking About Her."
[71] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 184.

United States, but also the homogenizing label of Latinx. As described by Ana M. Lara's own reflection on her Afro-Latinx lesbianism in "Uncovering Mirrors: Afro-Latina Lesbian Subjects:"

> Because I had always been taught to understand my gender and sexuality as something specifically heterosexual and predetermined by the 'fact' of my Latinaness, claiming my own lesbianism allowed me to shed all expectations of what and who I was supposed to be. Ultimately it freed me to invent myself and to create myself and my own expectations for my own life--not just in terms of sexuality but also gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality.[72]

No longer in alignment with any confining expectations, Lara elucidates how Afro-Latinx lesbians' public arrival allows them to see their conditioning as the ultimate other and thus helps them reframe their social state as not one of abjection, but unifying distinction. By instead choosing to operate completely outside all predetermined social structures, Afro-Latinx lesbians can therefore repurpose their uncloseted arrival as the primary tool to new selfhoods. As later recounted by Lara, "I create alliances where there should only be divisions, I make choices, I love."[73]

Through her own "loving critique," Thompson's not lesbionic, but sexually fluid love enables her to help others seek their own outlet of identitarian declaration. But why did Thompson do all this now when she easily could have made *Dirty Computer*, and especially "PYNK," into just another fictionalized performance of her politically eroticized repertoire? In an interview Thompson gave to 89.3 KPCC the month between declaring and retracting her love for

[72] Ana M. Lara, "Uncovering Mirrors: Afro-Latina Lesbian Subjects," in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, eds. Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 301.
[73] Ibid., 300.

Monáe, Thompson talked about the reception she and Monáe received from the release of *Dirty Computer*. "So many people that have come up to me or written me a text message saying that when they saw *Dirty Computer* it allowed them to come out to their family," Thompson explained, "I certainly was able to have more nuanced conversations with my family about myself, and so I think if these things you know start conversations and also help kind of set people free, it's important."[74] With the importance placed on the acceptance of family, Thompson depicts identity formation through the framework of familial support. Therefore not only a platform in which others could find their own inherent identifications, for Thompson, *Dirty Computer* became a space for re-evaluative acceptance within her own close familial circle. Now aware that her family was far more equipped to accept and understand her, Thompson no longer faced the totalizing rejection Anzaldúa encountered in her own erotic identity formation. Through this new potential realization, Thompson may have felt that she could then take the next step in her own identity construction, willfully publicizing and disrupting conventions to improve her erotic positionality as well as others like her.

And when we consider this moment in relation to the opening image from "PYNK," Thompson's appearance between Monáe's thighs is not solely a symbolic gesture of head and hair as clitoris and vaginal canal, but the start of a symbolic rebirth. Once moored to a path that Lara described as one "without mirrors, for in the eyes of a world in which we do not yet exist, we have not yet

[74] John Horn, "Code switching at the heart of 'Sorry to Bother You,'" *theFrame*, podcast audio, July 5, 2018, https://www.scpr.org/programs/the-frame/2018/07/05/18605.amp.

been born,"[75] through Thompson's fictionalized vaginal emergence, the actor realized her need to begin the birthing process. Now a mirror for countless other non-heteronormative Afro-Latinx women who seek their own reflections, Thompson's purposeful moves to publicly project even her most private self helps highlight and embrace the most abject parts of Latinx identity and thus enables other non-binary Afro-Latinx women to do the same.

Through her career's progressive insertion into Black narratives and slow incorporations of sex and objectification, Thompson's final political step was her foray into spotlighting the three most prejudiced paradigms of race, gender, and sex within Latinx identity. Invested in the celebration of the most minimalized parts of herself, Thompson continuously confronts the Latinx community in their need to reconceptualize what a Latinx woman looks like without ever addressing the category fully in the first place. Built upon both a willful presence and absence within dominating narratives, no matter which direction it takes, Thompson and her erotic platform continue to chart an active path towards refracting the definitive bounds of Latinx communion. An indefinable enigma to many, what Thompson does convey is that no matter what way she chooses to present herself, Afro-Latinx women as a whole are not supposed to "fit into those too-rigid spaces of what it means to be a woman, or what it means to be a black woman, or what it means to be an American."[76]

[75] Lara, "Uncovering Mirrors," 299.
[76] Sandy Cohen, "Westworld's Tessa Thompson Talks Acting, Activism, and Impulse Tattoos," *American Way*, April 2018, https://americanway.com/en/features/2018/04/tessa-thompson-on-her-wild-frontiers.

CONCLUSION

In an interview with *Newsweek* last year, Tessa Thompson reflected on her artistic praxis, speaking in-depth about its relevance to the recent completion of her then new movie *Sorry to Bother You*:

> I think [art] has a huge role. We have the ability not just to reflect the culture in which we live but to create it, change it, shift it, start cultural conversations. I think cultural change always precedes political change. Even the conversations that we're having now around women in the workplace and our value, [...] we're seeing a real shift. Art has the ability to start a cultural conversation and inside of the space of cultural conversation, you can really activate people and hopefully activate them to organize. That's something that I loved about this film so much. What it talks about is the power of a small group of people who are committed and angry enough to create change and have an effect—that's what the film leaves you with.[1]

A fictitious film whose message may come to life in other erotically embodied ways, Gina Rodriguez, Cardi B, and Tessa Thompson, are a trio of active artistic Afro-Latinx women "that [speak] to a larger sense of community and belonging, not of a specific sexual practice or identification," but as part of "a subaltern space that is coded by cultural knowledge, and sexual and social practice within specific communities."[2] Culturally constrained and silenced for their blackness, Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thomspon straddle the line of imposed inter and intra-communal normativities to "articulate their cultural differences, transform the meanings of their colonial legacies, and construct new liberating identities."[3] Thereby

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[1] Janice Williams, "Tessa Thompson Says 'Sorry to Bother You' Character Detroit 'Really Did Scare Me a Little Bit," *Newsweek*, July 6, 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/tessa-thompson-sorry-bother-you-1007678.

[2] Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces. Sexual Cultures* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), 26

[3] Edna Acosta-Belén, "Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of US Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern," in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, eds. Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Oxford, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 79.

industriously engaging in what Homi Bhabha theorized as the "Third Space of enunciation,"[4] these Afro-Latinx women make sexualized racial difference the prime way to best understand and challenge the anti-Black boundaries of their culture's supposed "diversity."

Yet even in their attempts to re-evaluate that which persecutes the presence of their very own bodies, their strides towards representational change do not occur via one distinctly clear path. As seen through Gina Rodriguez and her act of puritanical sacrifice, the sexually and/or racially diminished bodies of Afro-Latinx women do not always participate in a progression towards specifically Black differentiation. Sometimes too deeply embedded in the dominant cycles of homogenization to truthfully voice their subjugation to the general public, Rodriguez and many more women like her are still subjects formed through difference, but only by how they continue to split the internal self, rather than split societally imposed norms. Dissociating from blackness instead of disengaging from homogenizing cultural behaviors, women like Rodriguez do still help shift the tide of representation, but only by way of continued domination over their own personhoods.

However, through demonstrating such a conflict-ridden struggle in the realm of Black, Latinx subjectivity, the intent behind this thesis is to continue to redefine a genre of scholarship that is already pushing to more accurately frame Latinx within an environment of overlapping subjectivities, intertextual suggestions, and subversive conceptions. Engaging with eroticized blackness to

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 157.

fully exhibit the racist power structures constructed around Afro-Latinx presence, I push against the faux coherence of current Latinx categorization. Not simply suggesting the possibility for blackness within Latinidad, I, like Judith Butler, challenge us to consider with this thesis the possibility that even diversely-claimed ethnic categories are "regulatory regimes," ultimately imposing their own strict sense of conformity to fight against similar outside essentializing oppressions.[5] Frequently dissociative towards those who do not "mejorar la raza,"[6] for Latinidad to now face the persistent embattled presences of Afro-Latinx women like Gina Rodriguez, Cardi B, and Tessa Thompson, the categorical connotations of what Latinx means may finally acknowledge the historically lopsided racial investment the category has within U.S. identity formation at large.

Highlighting the importance of racial difference by "claiming subjectivity, critiquing representation, constructing new sexual languages, and aiming for new forms of economic survival and mobility,"[7] each of the three celebrities' adaptation of the erotic co-opt the dominate frame that understands their racial presence as in service to others and curtails a culture that forces them into rejected positions of degraded self-worth. Transforming erotic experience from othering in format to a tool that is personifying in practice, these Afro-Latinx women rely on erotic platforms to call attention to racialized difference and claim control over their

[5] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination (1990)," in *The Judith Butler Reader*, eds. Judith Butler and Sara Salih (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 121.
[6] Olga Sanchez Saltveit, "(Afro)Latinx Theatre: Embodiment and Articulation," *Label Me Latina/o Special Issue: Afro-Latina/o Literature and Performance* 7, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 7.
[7] Mireille Miller-Young, "Interventions: The Deviant and Defiant Art of Black Women Porn Directors," *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, edited by Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, Mireille Miller-Young (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 2013), 118.

cultural subsumption. And while like Nicole Fleetwood, I do not believe the erotic performances of Rodriguez, Cardi, and Thompson are distinctly emancipating in manner, what they do proffer to audiences is an acknowledgement of Black women's entrapment and resistance against persisting modes of whitened, heteronormative visibility.[8] Addressing what many Black feminists depict as the site of initial subjective injury, these artists' erotics highlight the recurring problematics of the visual field and reflect the histories of damage constructed through the abject display of Black women, all so that they may best recover new, awakened modes of Latinx feminine subjectivity.[9]

In connecting personal erotic empowerment to the next generation of Latinx perspectives, I build upon Leticia Alvarado's argument concerning abject Latinx performativities. Though her text is not particularly centered on the performative spaces of eroticity, I do believe that the erotic aesthetics of these three women also allow for new affiliations to form alongside inherent differences and offer greater "critique of coercive mimeticism."[10] A revelatory state fueled not by the "desire for normative inclusion but as a resource geared toward an ungraspable alternative social organization, a not-yet-here illuminated by the aesthetic,"[11] by balancing between the poles of sexually racialized object for consumption and erotic subject of awakened potential, these Afro-Latinx artists contribute to new, albeit competing communal constructions in the ever-evolving Latinx community. Contributions

[8] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 112.
[9] Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 48.
[10] Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 137.
[11] Ibid., 11.

that will continue to expand upon the possibilities for Black presence within the imposed imaginations of dominant racialized sexualities, their approaches, even if sometimes appearing as homologous in intent, create space for new future metamorphoses in Latinidad's representative social histories in the U.S. cultural marketplace. Closing with an interview Tessa Thompson completed with the BET during her press tour for *Thor*, Thompson outlines the future she sees in getting her own voice and body out there to her audiences. "[There is an] importance for us culturally to be able to see, you know, what--who we can be, what we can be," she argues, "[because] to have a young girl as a result have a more expansive idea of who and what she can be, that's just exciting for me."[12]

[12] Melissa Murray, "Celebrities: Tessa Thompson: 'I Never Thought I Could Be In A Superhero Movie,'" *BET*, October 30, 2017. https://www.bet.com/video/celebrity/2017/tessa-thompson-i-never-thought-i-could-be-in-a-superhero-movie.html

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