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“She Ate My Ass and My Pussy All Night”: Deploying Illicit Eroticism, Funk, and Sex Work among Black Queer Women Femmes

S. Tay Glover and Julian Kevon Glover

Anti-respectability as method takes the form of what Christina Sharpe calls “undisciplining”—a process by which scholars develop new approaches, methods, and modes of inquiry that productively challenge disciplinary biases.¹ The work of scholars including LaMonda Horton-Stallings and Marlon Bailey indexes the importance of employing Black queer feminist methodologies to examine critical queer geographies forged through a resistance to concretized space as central to community and vestiges of colonial capitalist anti-Black racial/sexual terror and the deauthorization of racial biological epistemes that overdetermine kinship practices, Black death, and pleasure.² Our respective projects center Black transgender women in Chicago and Black cisgender queer and lesbian women in Atlanta, and consider how vulnerable Black queer women deploy strategies of self-investment and find pleasure while participating in sexual economies and navigating respectability within these critical queer geographies.³

Black Queer Women’s “Erotic Sovereignty”: Sex Work and Self-Investment

Addressing respectability’s influence when writing about sex work among Black transgender women remains inevitable, as it shapes popular (mis)conceptions of the reasons these individuals engage in this specific work. Scholars routinely frame transwomen’s engagement in sex work as a consequence of social marginalization.⁴ The underlying assumption is that trans women seldom choose to do sex work and would not engage if they had equitable access to social institutions such as health care, employment, and public accommodations (public restrooms, restaurants, businesses, etc.). Respectability undergirds such an assumption by denigrating sex work as an illegitimate work form to which

no self-respecting Black woman would aspire. Further, respectability's appeal to hegemonic notions of decorum and propriety necessarily casts sex work as incapable of enhancing racial uplift or facilitating socioeconomic ascension. Deauthorizing respectability promotes understanding how sex work exists as a form of self-investment and pleasure among Black trans women in an anti-respectable manner.

My ethnographic data suggest Black trans women in Chicago's ballroom scene⁵ engage in sex work by mobilizing their embodied knowledge⁶ in order to earn a high income (tax free), set their own hours and the terms of their services, and establish/maintain a community of clients and transfemme sex work colleagues. Tethering Black trans women's sex work to survival narratives obfuscates their capacity to be agential operatives in navigating exclusion and violence rather than passive victims of numerous forms of social, economic, and political marginalization. Such narratives deny how trans women engage in acts of self-investment by leveraging their embodied knowledge in a manner often illegible to individuals who do not occupy similar or adjacent subject positions. Careful scholarly attention to strategies of self-investment among Black transgender people reveals how community members thrive despite existing in a hostile world unconcerned with their survival.⁷

While not all of my (Julian) interlocutors engaged in sex work, *none* expressed disgust or annoyance with their sisters who do. The repeated phrase I heard in nearly every interview was "Do what you gotta do; just be smart about it [sex work]." As a member of the ballroom scene for over a decade, I am familiar with a range of attitudes about sex work among Black trans women. However, the prevailing attitude among my interlocutors indicates a significant lack of investment in respectability as an effective strategy for evading anti-Black violence and facilitating socioeconomic advancement. Probing my interlocutors to practically explain what "being smart" looks like revealed the deployment of strategies intentionally designed to prevent physical, verbal, or emotional violence while engaging with clients. These strategies include carrying mace and a small sharp weapon in their handbags, using pseudonyms while interacting with clients and (if possible) meeting clients while their sisters are physically nearby.⁸ One interlocutor asserted that if her sisters meet a client in their vehicle, the client should *never* park close to a wall on the passenger's side—a precaution that ensures the women enough space to quickly disembark from the vehicle should the client become violent or coerce the women into providing services not paid for or offered. These strategies reflect a sophisticated knowledge of the potential risks associated with sex work and a deep commit-

ment to self-investment through the strategic maintenance of a sense of safety. My interlocutors reject notions of respectability in favor of self-investment through a reliance on their individual and collective embodied knowledge.

My conception of self-investment extends what Mireille Miller-Young calls “erotic sovereignty”—characterized by self-rule and the pursuit of erotic pleasure and intimacy—an ongoing ontological process through which racialized sexuality is mobilized to “assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state.”⁹ Miller-Young’s meticulous attention to how Black women in pornography navigate the aforementioned constraints puts pressure on historical analyses to carefully examine quotidian subjects whose survival strategies, tactics, and tools appear negligent. Miller-Young’s work illustrates the benefits of ongoing scholarly attention to sex work and supports Cynthia Blair’s assertion that Black women’s sexual labor is where strategic negotiations for survival and autonomy continue to be made.¹⁰

Thinking with LaShawn Harris about Black women sex workers requires delineating the specific strategies through which Black women ascertain material (and human) resources for themselves while engaging in sex work. Harris points out that some women engaged in “badger games,” where they “cleverly used the pretense of sex to rob men or actually prostitutes that doubled as swindlers, cleverly used their knowledge of urban white men’s amusement habits and fantasies and assumptions about Black female sexuality for their own economic advantage.”¹¹ These badger games illustrate a connection between the creative tactics used among Black women, cisgender and transgender, sex workers, as my interlocutors describe how they employ catfishing—a process of deliberate deception that involves the use of digital technologies (computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) to circulate purported images of the sex worker that, in reality, are images of other people. Once clients arrive and discover the ruse, the women will forcibly obstruct clients from leaving until they have paid or agreed to proceed with the discussed sexual acts.

Ratchet Performance and Sex Work

Further considering strategies of survival that intersect with Black sexual and expressive cultures, Black feminist scholars such as Brittney Cooper, Heidi Lewis, and Therí Pickens have examined reality-TV representations of ratchet performance to consider the limitations of Black respectable versus nonrespect-

able behavior and representation, and to recuperate the derogatory term *ratchet*¹² as a performative strategy Black women deploy to secure liberatory space for themselves.¹³ My work brings a Black queer feminist, anti-respectable reading practice to sex-positive Black feminist analyses of ratchet reality TV and ratchet performance. For instance, focusing on VH1's ratchet reality-TV show *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta*, I consider the historical racial-sexual and geographical particularity of the Southern women cast members' relationship to power as context for analyzing their mobilization of femme ratchet performance within the hip-hop South at the intersection of hip-hop porn, music videos, strip clubs, and ratchet reality TV. This anti-respectable reading practice jettisons cis-heteronormative engagements with respectability and controlling images and attends to the epochal prevalence of Black queer women and explicit lesbian desire found on the show. This offers an opportunity to employ Black lesbian-queer feminist analytics to name the hegemonic forms of power operating in this sociocultural economy, and to ascertain how and why Black queer women deploy ratchetness for survival and erotic/financial sovereignty in this economy.

Since Black queer women's experiences of oppression, strategies of survival and seeking pleasure, and representation on reality TV are particularly understudied, conducting an analysis of these Black queer women's structural positionality and on- and off-screen lives is an effort to recuperate their humanity in a necessary way, jettison critiques of Black women reality-TV stars' "bad behavior," and instead read Black queer women's ratchet or disrespectful performances as more than simply a bad attitude or reflective of intrinsic perverse hypersexuality. Such an engagement addresses how Black feminist analyses about Black female sexuality theorize Black women's gendered and sexual oppression, representation, behaviors, performances, pleasures, and erotic spaces in respect to an overdetermined heterosocial context. Instead, writing about Black cisgender queer and lesbian women deploying ratchetness and engaging in sex work and illicit eroticism in the hip-hop South as a form of self-investment—at the intersection of hip-hop porn, music videos, strip clubs, and ratchet reality TV—requires acknowledging the erotic capital of ratchet or disrespectful performance within global and local popular culture and entertainment industries/economies in contradistinction to respectability, as well as the ways queer women are able to leverage this capital in androcentric contexts.

In particular, my case study of the on- and off-screen life of the show's star, Joseline Hernandez, offers insight into Black queer ciswomen's life circumstances and experiences navigating Southern structural inequality and respectability—which has its unique difficulties; their mobilization of ratchetness;

their engagement in illicit eroticism, sex work, play labor featuring *lesbian and bisexual play*; and their creation of interstitial Black queer geographies within the hip-hop South music, entertainment, sexual economy spaces, such as the strip club, toward these ends. In respect to the genealogy of the term *ratchet*—its connection to Southern hip-hop music and dance cultures that gave us twerking, and the derogatory connotation of the ratchet Black woman trope describing and mocking poor Black women who are uncouth, ghetto, unintelligent, loud, tacky, and hypersexual in behavior and performance—ratchet performance as something to be leveraged in the hip-hop South music, entertainment and sexual economy, is revelry within and strategic embodied deployment of the currency of Black female flesh, the trope, and its flamboyant, crude, vulgar, hypersexual anti-respectable behaviors. Working within these different sectors allows these women and artists to refuse inflexible hours, engage sexual radicalism and exhibitionism, and get paid for it in the Southern context of protracted effects of slavery, its history of racist gendered-sexual labor exploitation, and respectability. For instance, working in *all* sectors of this sexual economy has ultimately afforded someone like Joseline Hernandez the opportunity to deploy ratchetness for upward mobility into an independent career as an artist, celebrity personality, and entrepreneur at the intersection of popular fashion and beauty, TV personality appearances, her own spin-off shows, club hostings, and music *after* a life of US colonialist-induced poverty in Puerto Rico, teenage sexual labor and gendered responsibility to care for her family at a young age, homophobic violence within an Afro-Latina respectable home, and misogynistic violence and fetishization from pimps.

Her queer femme ratchetness and its currency is marked by how she infuses her sexual perversion—her ardent desire for other femme women and “eating pussy”—into all aspects of her artistry and career as well, namely, on- and off-screen lesbian and bisexual play within the strip club. For instance, a notable ratchet feud on the show in season 4 is between Joseline and Jessica Dime—another stripper turned reality-TV star via the show. We later come to find the feud is really a black queer femme lovers’ quarrel due to being estranged and feeling shaded after having a past intimate relationship born in the strip club they worked at together, revealing the strip club as not just a space in service of heterosexual desire and identity but a space where Black queer ciswomen also cultivate, indulge, and navigate erotic community and play labor. Using Joseline’s infamous retort while recounting why Jessica Dime was so upset by Joseline’s disinterest in continuing a relationship, it was because the strip club was a place where it all started and “she ate my ass and my pussy all night.”

Conclusion

Highlighting similarities between Black cis and transgender women sex workers enables the advancement of a relational ethic, undergirded by anti-respectability, which promotes conversations that do not emphasize purported differences between cis and transwomen—a common practice throughout the media.¹⁴ These narratives fuel distrust between Black cis and trans women and obfuscate the potential for connection and collaboration that bolsters the recasting of Black women’s embodied wisdom, fervency, and resilience in combating ongoing racial/sexual terror through their productive and reproductive labor. Methodologically, anti-respectability facilitates a relational ethic that refuses to disavow people due to the strategies they deploy to navigate a coercive and unsympathetic world that separates sensation and feeling.¹⁵ Taken together, the work of aforementioned scholars highlights the stakes of an investment in anti-respectability: the recuperation of subjectivities that remain disenfranchised and violently erased within both hegemonic society and Black communities committed to the belief that respectability will protect them from anti-Black violence in its myriad forms. Ultimately, anti-respectability enables scholars to join Black people, like Julian’s interlocutors and Joseline, in the creation of a future that affirms and supports (with material and human resources) manifold deployments of embodied knowledge.

Notes

- I extend sincere thanks to the Black feminists and queer folks across time who cleared a path for us all, as well as the editor(s) of this special issue and my beloved coauthor, who were pleasures to work with in this project of disrupting normative knowledge production and discourse concerning valuation of Black life.
1. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
 2. Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
 3. Relevant to our research sites, Chicago constitutes a critical queer geography (past and present) via how queers remain entangled within the past-in-present racial segregation and ill effects of inner-city life. Despite the city’s emphasis on situating Boystown as the purported “safe space” for the LGBT community, Chicago’s Black queer underside exists as the birthplace of house music—a queer spin on disco pioneered by Frankie Knuckles now subsumed into the mainstream—in addition to having a vibrant ballroom scene. Atlanta is the proclaimed “Hollywood” and music/gay mecca of the Bible Belt South—the epitome of the contradictory entanglement of musical, sacred, and sexual culture in the Black South, and a present-day outgrowth of years of an understated Black LGBT progressive sociopolitical history.

4. Lydia Sausa, A. Keatley, and JoAnne Operario, "Perceived Risks and Benefits of Sex Work among Transgender Women of Color in San Francisco," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 36.6 (2007): 768–77; Jae Sevelius, "Gender Affirmation: A Framework for Conceptualizing Risk Behavior among Transgender Women of Color," *Sex Roles* 68.11 (2013): 675–89; Jordan Blair Woods, Frank H. Galvan, Mohsen Bazargan, Jody L. Herman, and Ying-Tung Chen, "Latina Transgender Women's Interactions with Law Enforcement in Los Angeles County 1," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 7.4 (2013): 379–91.
5. The ballroom scene is a cultural formation made up of (mostly) urban LGBT Black and Latinx people who join houses and compete against members of other houses in a myriad of competitive categories—including runway, fashion, realness, face, and performance—for prizes that range from trophies to \$5,000.
6. We define embodied knowledge as the harnessing of knowledge derived from lived experiences of hegemonic racial, gendered, and sexual subjection that are transformed into strategies, tactics, and tools designed to enable black people to acquire the human and material resources needed for survival.
7. Enoch Page and Matt U. Richardson, "On the Fear of Small Numbers: A Twenty-First-Century Prolegomenon of the US Black Transgender Experience," in *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010): 57–81.
8. Numerous interlocutors expressed that they often use prepaid phones when providing sexual services to clients, as they are both easy to use and disposable. Additionally, the disposability of these phones creates welcome difficulty for clients and/or law enforcement agents who attempt to track the women's actions and whereabouts.
9. Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 16.
10. Cynthia M. Blair, *I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
11. LaShawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 152.
12. Popularized Southern pop culture term referring to ghetto or lively party behavior and experiences stemming from lifestyles, realities, and performative strategies of catharsis and survival of working-class Blacks in the American South, which expanded into a derogatory connotation describing and mocking poor Black women who are uncouth, ghetto, unintelligent, loud, tacky, and hypersexual in behavior and performance.
13. Nadia E. Brown and Lisa Young, "Ratchet Politics: Moving beyond Black Women's Bodies to Indict Institutions and Structures," in *Broadening the Contours in the Study of Black Politics: Citizenship and Popular Culture*, ed. Michael Mitchell and David Covin, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2015), 45–56; Brittney Cooper, "Ratchet Feminism," Crunk Feminist Collective, August 14, 2012, www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2012/08/14/ratchet-feminism; Heidi R. Lewis, "Exhuming the Ratchet before It's Buried," *Feminist Wire*, January 7, 2013, thefeministwire.com/2013/01/exhuming-the-ratchet-before-its-buried; Therí A. Pickens, "Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability: Black Women, Reality TV, and the Ratchet Performance," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 25.1 (2015): 41–58.
14. David Smith, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Transgender Row: 'I Have Nothing to Apologise For,'" *Guardian*, March 21, 2017, www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/21/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-nothing-to-apologise-for-transgender-women.
15. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. David Halperin, Henry Abelove, and Michèle Aina Barale (New York: Routledge, 1993), 339–43.