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From Margin to Centerfold: The (Mis)Recognition of Pleasure and Danger in Contemporary Black Erotic Fiction

What are our names and the touch, taste of our bodies? Where do our tongues linger on each other and what is the nature of the language we speak? Can generations of Black girls chastened by the thoughts/realities of White men in pickup trucks loosen gingerly for one of our own? Do Black men who've battled brutally for the right to walk on sidewalks where White women walk resent women, the idea of sex, so much that the scent of a particular woman, her sighs or pleasures, escape them?

Ntozake Shange *Erotique Noire*

Ntozake Shange asks this series of questions in the preface to *Erotique Noire = Black Erotica*, a collection of Afrodiasporic creative and critical expressions of the erotic. Published in 1992 by the literary scholars Miriam Decosta-Willis, Reginald Martin, and Roseann Bell, the anthology features work by such prominent authors, poets, and scholars like Chester Himes, Alice Walker, Gloria T. Hull, Nancy Morejón, and Manuel Zapata Olivella. With Romare Bearden's collage *Hidden Valley* adorning the front cover, *Erotique* compiles Black canonical artists' reflections on one of the most taboo subjects: Black sexuality and desire. In her preface Shange celebrates the arrival of the anthology "five hundred years into the Diaspora, one hundred and twenty-nine years since emancipation, thirty-seven years since Emmet Till's slaughter, three years from Bensonhurst, and in the time of 'sexsational' personalities from Prince and Michael Jackson to Hoes Wit Attitude (HWA) and 2 Live Crew" (*Erotique Noire* xix). The appearance of *Erotique* and other Afrodiasporic anthologies of erotica are celebrated as new crossroads in the significance and representation of Black desire.

This article grapples with the complex fantasies and representations of sexuality that Black authors produce about Black women and men in the Post Civil Rights Era. After the publication and success of *Erotique*,¹ various anthologies² of Black erotic writing entered the literary marketplace. These collections are marketed to a Black readership and enjoy tremendous popularity³. Several of these anthologies, especially the *Brown Sugar* and *The Eroticoir.Com* anthologies edited by Carol Taylor and Zane respectively, are represented on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, and consistently on *Essence* magazine's recommended and bestselling lists. These collections boast titles like *Chocolate Flava*, *Caramel Flava*, *Black Satin*, and *Dark Eros*. While some are edited by Black literary scholars, many anthologies also include critical forwards and afterwards by canonical authors like Ishmael Reed, John A. Williams, and Lenard D. Moore. Cover art features either Black couples in passionate embrace, or sensual photographs or drawings of Black women. These collections are located in African American fiction sections of popular bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Nobles, and they are also promoted via the internet in cyber chat-groups or on websites like the author and publisher Zane's *eroticanoir.com*. Zane's achievement in the publishing world includes her successful enterprise Strebor⁴ books.

¹ According to the editors' introduction, influences for *Erotique* were the successful collections of women's and lesbian erotic fiction like *Touching Fire* (1989) and *Deep Down* (1988), and the paucity of Black women's writing in these anthologies.

² Although there are several full-length, Black erotic novels currently enjoying popularity and success (at the time of writing this chapter Zane's erotic novel *Addicted* is being adapted to a feature film), I have chosen to limit the scope of my analysis to contemporary anthologies of Black erotic fiction. My focus on shorter works allows me to catalog the recurring themes, tropes, and conflicts appearing in various writers' texts.

³ Note the success of Black publishers and new publishing houses specializing in adult fiction like Brown Skin Books and Strebor Books. See Vastiana Belfon, "Commentary" *New Statesman* 133.4691 (June 7, 2004): 55.

⁴ Among various future ventures, Strebor Books will soon publish Black Christian women's fiction as well.

Regardless of the institutional or canonical recognition the editors of and contributors to contemporary Black erotic anthologies have received, a single, menacing question surrounds public articulations of Black sexual desire: How, given the ways that racism and racist oppression manifest in sexual violation, can Black people speak of the erotic? What many of these authors and editors repeatedly foreground is the undeniable relationship between the erotic and racist oppression. This connection does not mean that one must take pleasure from acts of racist and sexual abuse, but that Black erotica is concerned with and shaped by Black peoples' memories, experiences, and narratives of racism. Because sexual violence historically has been a key mode through which bodies are racially marked and subjugated, then the realms of sexual intimacy, bodily pleasure, and love are important places where the struggles over recognition and affirmation emerge.

The majority of Black erotic narratives imagine intraracial eroticism, yet violence, betrayal, loss, addiction, abandonment, and/or rejection invariably contextualize many Black erotic authors' depictions of sexually explicit encounters and fantasies. Rather than an exclusive focus on sexual pleasure and agency, this fiction illustrates how sexual terror and vulnerability circumscribe the genre of Black erotica, representations of African American sexuality, and therefore what Patricia Hill Collins calls "Black sexual politics." Because intimacy and recognition are socially based and constructed, this article examines the barriers to and possibilities for intraracial recognition in the intimate realm. Contemporary Black erotic writing reveals the historical influences that have shaped Black sexuality and the current issues and concerns that shape Black sexual attitudes and perceptions of the erotic. The ability to speak of the erotic is therefore also

the possibility to articulate both the materiality of racist structures and the collective psychic damage that accompanies racial oppression.

Nevertheless, our desire to seek the “truth” about African American subjectivities from sexual testimonies and confessions seduces us to mis-recognize Black peoples once again. Departing from Michel Foucault’s analysis of the confession in *The History of Sexuality I*, Roderick Ferguson argues that for Black people “the incitement to discourse confirmed and ensured the repetition of stereotype. In other words, it assisted the production of racial knowledge about African Americans” (Ferguson 73). Racialized knowledge about Black sexuality becomes the object of sociological interest and the basis for determining policies about welfare, housing, healthcare, and education. Black sexuality is continually held under State surveillance, and articulations of or about Blacks sexuality are therefore inseparable from non-sexual issues like poverty, literacy, neighborhood conditions, inclusion, and recognition (77). The production of knowledge about Black people and eroticism requires careful consideration of the multiple desires and converging structures of power competing for hegemony over the representation of Black sexuality.

Given the entrapments that thwart expressions about Black sexual life, how does one begin to produce alternative, affirmative knowledge about African Americans and Black erotica? How do we recognize the distinction between the repetition of imposed images of Black sexuality, versus the attempt to posit an alternative vision of sexual self-possession? Do contemporary erotic representations demonstrate an investment in patriarchy or a negotiation of Black female agency within the treacherous landscape of Black sexual politics?

Black scholars⁵ have repeatedly shown how anti-Black racist violence, particularly in the forms of forced poverty, rape and lynching shaped African Americans' discursive practices, public personas, and expectations about behavior. The gender-specificity of certain racist practices and sexual ideologies intends to render Black masculinity and femininity unrecognizable and thus illegitimate in the public sphere. Yet, mutually-informing mythologies about Black male and female sexualities create a reinforcing structure that allows for the spectacle around one gender's presumed sexual pathology to confirm the supposed truth about the other. Although this dynamic is most often articulated at the site of interracial conflict and white hegemony, what impact does the public scrutiny and reciprocal debasement of Black male and female sexualities have on the ways African Americans perceive and treat one another? Contemporary Black erotic writing reveals how the prison industrial complex, welfare system, and the angst associated with Black class privilege nullify Black claims to normativity. The imposition of the state and the radical divisiveness of capitalism manifest in various authors' portrayals of anxiety, abandonment, and distrust in the intimate sphere. Analyzing the articulation of desire in Black erotic fiction involves consideration of the impact of public scrutiny, and attention to the significance of intracommunal recognition and wellbeing.

⁵ William H. Chafe et al, *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New York Press, 2001); Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin': The African American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993); Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality;" Hazel Carby, "Policing a Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 738-755; Darlene Clark Hines, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995).

Still, various scholars look to the subjective and sexual dimensions of freedom that appear within Black people's reach and control⁶. The disappointments about the unfulfilled promises of freedom and democracy in the Post Emancipation and Post Civil Rights eras give rise to a certain interest in re-imagining alternative forms of freedom in intimacy and love. Such alternative modes do not surrender the demands for political rights and social justice, but they do emphasize the necessity of affirmative intracommunal recognition to the vision of freedom. Black feminist critics like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith have often looked to the erotic as a realm from which to consider pleasure, spirituality, power, healing, and resistance. Audre Lorde argues that the erotic is an unrecognized source of power within women, and a feminine resource that has been corrupted, abused, and devalued under patriarchy (Lorde 53). Reclaiming the erotic as power therefore, can provide energy for change and alternative models for sociality and recognition. Building on Lorde's analysis, Farah Jasmine Griffin discusses the significance of the erotic in fiction to re-claiming the despised and debased bodies of Black women ("Textual Healing" 522). Griffin's article evaluates the relationship between the erotic and resistance, but the primary concern is to consider how Black people recognize the wounds of racism and foster healing. Black feminist interest in the erotic links the history and logic of racial and gender oppression to the prospect of intraracial healing and recognition.

While this article is inspired by the scholarship and visionary commitment of Black feminist analyses, and by the significance of pleasure to the erotic, it also seeks to examine how the experience of racism in the contemporary era shapes intraracial

⁶ See Angela Davis *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993)

expressions of the erotic. Returning to Ntozake Shange's preface to *Erotique Noire* (particularly her references to Hoes Wit Attitude and 2 Live Crew), I also intend to explore the celebration of contemporary Black erotic writing in a popular cultural landscape inundated with representations of sexualized desire and pleasure. The proliferation of mediated images of Black people in the mainstream cultural marketplace allow for the consumption of a particular form of blackness even as African Americans are being politically and economically disenfranchised. Moreover, representations of the Black erotic do not always conform to contemporary theoretical paradigms for cultural resistance. The examination of Black erotic writing obliges us to remember that, as Tricia Rose states, cultural expressions are rarely, if ever, consistently and totally oppositional ("Symposium" 36). Given the multiple axes of power *and* the ardent freedom dreams attracted to the realm of Black sexual life, Black expressions of desire parallel the struggles of a people seeking symbolic recognition and coping with the repeated refusal to their full inclusion. Rather than embarking on the contradictory task of harnessing the erotic, I proceed by interrogating how Post Civil Rights exigencies, racialized forms of patriarchy, and Black fantasies of liberation shape intraracial expressions of and investments in the erotic.

Counterrevolution and the Return of (Post) Civil Rights Desires

"These people in here are beyond the point of teaching and rehabilitating" Nancy Reagan at a 1989 police raid on a presumed "rock house."
Mike Davis *City of Quartz*, 267.

“Y’all make me sick – acting like just ‘cause they black and in jail they some kind of political prisoner! That muthafucka ain’t Nelson Mandela or Robin Hood – he a straight-up thug and yo’ ass know it”
Ife Ayodele “The Reunion”

Ife Ayodele’s story “The Reunion” opens *Chocolate Flava* (2003), Zane’s anthology of African American erotic fiction. As the titles of the story and anthology suggest, bringing together things or people that have been divided is a central theme and recurring trope in the collection of Black erotic writing. Hence, Zane’s anthology commences at the point of return and repetition. “The Reunion,” set in 1997, begins:

It was nearly night in the city they both loved. He stood at the window of the luxurious hotel room she’d arranged for in celebration of his return, the curtains drawn back, open to the sight of the lighted Capitol dome.

Over two years had passed since they last made love. I can’t believe that I’m home and that she waited for me, he thought. He was so lost in his thoughts of deep joy and anticipation that he was unaware the woman he had loved for so long stood silently behind him. Two years ago he would have bet any amount of money that this day would never come (3).

Although the story begins in anticipation of the nocturnal revelry that the two protagonists have waited so long for, the majority of the narrative is preoccupied with detailing the forces, factors, and fears that determine the couple’s separation and account for their two-year hiatus from physical, erotic exchange. The reference to the Capitol dome situates their reunion in Washington D.C., and thus with the curtains drawn back and open to the sight of this national monument, the prospect of intraracial eroticism unfolds defiantly with a view to national and political symbolics. In the context of the protagonists’ reunion, the Capitol dome (the meeting place for the US Congress) is a synecdoche for the authority and imposition of Constitutional power and federal laws. The State’s purview over Black sexual life occurs under the mandate to maintain law and order and to protect the rights of recognized citizens.

For Carrie and Nasir, the protagonists of “The Reunion,” the accumulated effects of anti-Black racism and the State’s role in expanding the definition of criminalization in the Post Civil Rights era are directly related to the evolution and expression of the couple’s romantic relationship. Carrie and Nasir first meet in 1995 while commuting on the D.C. Metrobus to work. Although small talk is part of the camaraderie of the metro commuters, Carrie and Nasir form a special bond when he expresses his entrepreneurial ambitions. Carrie’s response is eager and affirmative, and the *form* of her rejoinder fosters a bond between them: “I know what you mean. One day I’m going to work and tell them all ‘Massah day done! Beulah done lef’ de buildin’.” Nasir laughed out loud in surprise at her perfectly exaggerated mammy imitation. That was the beginning of their friendship” (4). Mutual recognition about the racially motivated hierarchies and headaches of corporate America and the affirmation of their shared dream of professional independence establish a basis for intimacy between Carrie and Nasir. Following the protocols of popular erotic writing, the narrator catalogs the physical attributes and attractiveness of the male. Apart from the “unusual combination of smooth dark skin and curly, wavy hair that was completely natural,” Nasir departs from the traditional script for the masculine love-interest by sharing with Carrie what she cannot *see* about him: “What you don’t know is that I live on North Capitol Street in a halfway house. I was released from Lorton earlier this month where I did time I’m a recovering crack addict” (5-6).

Although Nasir awaits “the standard ‘Be strong, brother, you can do it’” and Carrie’s hasty retreat, she acknowledges the number of her relatives who are serving time, and puts a Biblical saying in the service of communal understanding: “There but

for the grace of God . . . I know you know the rest” (6). The couple agrees to meet for dinner, and, instead of visiting a restaurant, decides to dine in Carrie’s apartment: “Since D.C. was undergoing major urban renewal with an influx of different kinds of city dwellers, many businesses had cropped up to cater to busy, single, urban pioneers” (10). Dinner conversation consists of an exchange of information about their families, their aspirations, his desire to have children, and his decision to become a Muslim. Nasir is even able to answer “questions about the role of women in Islam,” and to clarify “many popular misconceptions” (ibid.). When the couple decides to make love, Nasir dispels the ‘myth’ that all Black men in prison have sex with other men only to deny it later. Instead, he assures Carrie of his skills in auto-eroticism, and demonstrates his care for her by discussing safer sex: “If a man cares for a woman enough to make love to her, part of that caring is to protect her. So I brought protection for us both, to accommodate any kind of love we want to make; just in case this was in fact the right time” (11). The following pages depict the intensity, enthusiasm, and pleasure of their sexual activity. However, the memory of ‘how good they were together’ is quickly eclipsed by the narrator’s intervention: “Because Carrie had no knowledge of the true nature of addiction, she was unaware of the signs of his relapse” (ibid.). Soon after beginning to use crack cocaine again, Nasir is incarcerated and returned to Lorton Prison.

In front of Woodies, one of D.C.’s landmark department stores, Carrie lines up with the wives, girlfriends, mothers, children, and relatives of Lorton’s inmates. Tensions flare amongst the expectant visitors. One young woman, “resplendent in gold chains hung with charms, designer jeans, shoes, and a fresh hairdo,” boasts about the gifts she is bringing to Lorton for her boyfriend. In response to the woman’s enthusiasm her

friend explodes, “he ain’t away at college. His ass in *jail!* . . . And on top of everything else, who was he robbin’, cheatin’, and stealin’ from – other black folks? Shit, if he want a gold chain, gold watch, or gold teeth, his ass ought to get a job like the rest of us” (14-15). Aboard the van bound for Lorton, Carrie overhears the rumors that circulate about the jail, its prisoners, and Black female corrections officers. The women married to inmates at Lorton question the professional motivations of the female officers: “Most of them sisters is cool. They let you slide on the pat-down and everybody need a job, but some of them took that job so they could wear them tight-ass pants around a bunch of dudes” (16)!

Carrie arrives to Lorton Prison, a facility the narrator confirms was once a military installation. Consistently over two years Carrie visits Nasir in prison, “facing each other in the seating arrangement mandated by the prison, they embraced and kissed deeply, sharing as much love as could be had under the watchful eyes of the corrections officers” (17). Prison is acknowledged as the fire that molded, shaped, and strengthened the couple’s relationship. Rather than a focus on initial and fleeting romantic ideals, the narrator describes how Carrie and Nasir also discover each other’s limitations and flaws. Thus, when he is finally released, Nasir’s reunion with Carrie returns to and repeats the erotic enjoyment that initiates the short story *and* the cycle of physical intimacy and separation that characterized Carrie’s and Nasir’s relationship. Although common sense may consider romantic reunion with a struggling crack addict an example of compulsion, there is something in the repetition that defines Carrie and Nasir’s relationship that can also be understood as resistance. In fact, common sense conclusions about the disposability and inhumanity of Black drug-users or convicts motivate some of the

urgency that fuels the desire to bring the couple back together. ‘Desire’ should also be understood as demarcating absence and therefore the longing for something. The remedy to division that the reunion between Carrie and Nasir represents points to a desire for affirmative intraracial recognition not yet experienced. What are the obstacles to intracommunal collectivity and how are they figured in contemporary Black erotic writings?

In Ife Ayodele’s short story “The Reunion,” the protagonists Nasir and Carrie can be interpreted as negotiating the entrenched representations of Black masculinity and femininity. While the deconstruction of traditional gender roles is commonly portrayed and examined in erotic fiction generally, Black erotic texts depict the specificity⁷ of racialized gender construction, especially the charge of gender non-normativity as justification for collective disenfranchisement. Carrie, the female protagonist of “The Reunion” epitomizes the single, aspiring Black woman, who “had no time in her life for a relationship” (“The Reunion” 3). Another key figure in contemporary portrayals of Black women, the middle class or aspiring Black woman is often imagined as fiercely loyal to her White colleagues and superiors, or as sexually cunning and independent (*Black Sexual Politics* 140-46). Either way, such demeaning images of Black femininity also function to mark the patriarchal deficiencies of Black masculinity, such as lack of control over women. Carrie, however, remains loyal to her entrepreneurial dreams and the idea of business ownership that she and Nasir share. Also, the first description of physical pleasure involves Carrie and auto-eroticism. The scene portrays Carrie imagining Nasir’s countenance and touch at the same time as she affirms her body and

⁷ The specificity of African American gender formation includes the historical legacy of chattel slavery, the role of sexual violation, and the refusal of ‘traditional’ family structure.

desire: “Carrie was also keenly aware of whose image came to mind during the times when the ‘sap would rise’ as she referred to the desire that often flooded her body. At those times, she would stand at the mirror and stroke her nipples; . . . Not bad for over forty, she often thought” (6-7). Professional ambitions and self-affirmation are not sacrificed in the conscious, intraracial erotic fantasy depicted within the story. The state’s imposition, however, intrudes upon Carrie’s fantasy and problematizes any facile relationship to non-normativity or intraracial reconciliation.

Although the female protagonist is marked by class presumptions and angst, Carrie’s position is also determined in relation to dominant representations of working-class Black women. The verbal diatribe Carrie overhears on her way to visit Nasir at Lorton prison echoes the rhetoric about how Black on Black crime handicaps the Black community. The inmates at Lorton are contrasted to a political prisoner like Nelson Mandela, while the political dimensions of their imprisonment are masked by the presumed nihilism of “thug life.” Viewing the Black male criminal as too lazy to get a job, criminally materialistic, and eager to “dis” his own kind render him anathema to community and impossible to love. But the unnamed woman’s stinging sarcasm also marks her and her friend as “bitches.”⁸ The possibility that the friend could have children with her inmate boyfriend for whom she buys gold chains and Timberlands evokes the controlling image of the “Bad Black Mother.”⁹ The status symbol gifts she presents to her boyfriend signify her irresponsible economic sense, while her celebration of their one-month anniversary demonstrates the superficiality of her intimate relations with an

⁸ See Hill Collins’ discussion of the various uses of the term in the chapter “Get Your Freak On: Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Femininity” in *Black Sexual Politics* 119-148.

⁹ According to Hill Collins, the Bad Black Mother is a controlling image of working-class Black women who are seen as abusive and neglectful of their children. See *Black Sexual Politics*, 131.

already absent potential father. Similarly, the angry Black woman, whose tirade against the Black criminal casts him as weak, is seen as being inappropriately strong. The stereotypically strong Black woman cannot be aligned with dominative features of hegemonic femininity, for her exaggerated strength emasculates Black men and therefore ruins her own chances for being bestowed femininity. In addition, the other women on the bus to Lorton also educate Carrie about racial, gender, and sexual exploitation at the prison. According to these women, Black female corrections officers use their position within the prison to sexually harass male prisoners and to compete with visiting wives and girlfriends for the attention of and control over inmates. Employed by the State prison system, Black corrections officers represent the ultimate collusion between the white power structure and Black women. Not only do Black women find gainful (albeit low-wage) employment in a job market that increasingly finds Black men under- or permanently unemployed, these women use their strength and position to exploit Black men for the state. Finally, corrections officers' putative masculine behavior contrast with the visiting wives' and girlfriends' feminine loyalty to their incarcerated friends and partners. The short story illustrates how the perception of distance from or proximity to traditional forms of femininity can also produce intraracial and intragender tensions.

The quandary for Carrie and the other women who continue to visit loved ones at Lorton is also about the ability for the Black men and women to affirm each other's lives and to give each other recognizable, symbolic value. The angry denunciation of the Lorton inmates and correctional officers incompletely masks the underlying hurt and shame about the constraints on Black agency and intraracial misrecognition. Although "The Reunion" illustrates how the state's imposition through policing and incarceration

brings these women together and shapes their gendered presentation, the story's omniscient narrator reminds readers of the "sense" behind the woman's tirade. The story demonstrates how structurally produced non-normativity creates internal conflicts, and how intracommunal wounds require attention and healing as well.

Dominant perceptions of Black masculinity are also evaluated in the short story. The protagonist Nasir needs his sexual partner to know that he did not engage in homosexual sex while incarcerated. Nasir's pre-coitus explanation serves to facilitate the reader's attraction to a recovering crack addict and convict. Yet, the story anticipates that nourishing such attraction requires the affirmation of the male protagonist's masculinity. Ostensibly, "The Reunion's" depiction of the urban crisis' impact on intraracial eroticism is situated within the realm of heterosexual sex and desire. However, such desire and sexual expression are also inflected by the racial- and gender informed presumptions of Black sexual non-normativity. For example, instead of portraying a Black female addict, it is the male protagonist who struggles with crack cocaine. The character Nasir reverses the predominant portrayal of the racial and gendered pathologies, like debased maternal instincts and capabilities, associated with the drug. Anxieties about the threat to intraracial eroticism in the story are projected through the depiction of Black men's sexuality as unstable. Contemporary social issues like drug addiction, under employment, and incarceration are some of the factors that African American erotic texts attribute to this instability.

In "The Reunion," it is solely Nasir's status as ex-convict that brings the presumption of heterosexuality into question. His history of incarceration however, does not determine his sexual orientation toward men (homosexuality). Rather, "doing time"

evokes popular fantasies about the sexual pathologies associated with prison culture, about drug addicts' supposed sexual willingness, and about collective attitudes concerning the 'proper' punishment for crime (Ioanide). Such fantasies that reduce Black male sexuality to the position of being rendered prone also manage popular representations of the urban Black male as hyper masculine and improperly patriarchal. The proximity between African American men and the prison in the popular imaginary and in contemporary reality constructs Black masculinity as always concealing sexual deviance. Therefore, the performance of (hyper-) masculinity discloses the secret of emasculation brought about by the linking of Black masculinity to criminality and thus to the prison. In the post-lynching era, the threat of gender sameness between Black and White men continues to rely upon the imposition of sexual difference to reinforce racial difference¹⁰. The impact of urban crises and the representations of failed Black patriarchy collude in refusing Black men a wage into gender and sexual normativity.

"The Reunion" does not offer explicit indications about how to subvert the imposition of gender normativity or state-sanctioned violence. Once Nasir and Carrie are reunited, the remainder of the story provides a detailed description of the couple's physical exchange. Nevertheless, the protagonists' struggle to remain together, and their commitment to reunion do point to a recurring desire in contemporary African American erotic fiction. Similar to "The Reunion," stories that deal prominently with the urban crisis and its impact on expressions of the erotic seek alternatives to amputation, disembodiment, abandonment, and disfigurement otherwise used to describe the urban crisis. Stories like "White Heat" and "Copland" in the anthology *Chocolate Flava* allow

¹⁰ On masculinity, sexuality, and lynching see Robin Weigman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) and David Marriott, *On Black Men* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000). On prison race, masculinity, and prison rape see Hill Collins 238.

for mourning over urban violence and imagine alternative relations to the police.

“Random Acts of Violins” and “Hail Mary Full of Grace” also seek healing from urban trauma and envision affirmative intraracial relations in the collection *Brown Sugar*. Even stories and poems like “Do Ya Got Some Blow?,” “Acid Black,” and “Woman on a Bus” in *Dark Eros* that thematize drug use or the welfare mom offer more complex and humanizing portrayals.

Set in Washington D.C., “The Reunion” unfolds on the main staging ground for U.S. law and politics. Washington D.C. is also the city that was recognized as the nation’s murder capital during the early 1990s. Although the short story indicates the processes of D.C.’s gentrification in the mid 1990s, (reference to the restaurants and cuisine catering to young, moneyed professionals), the city’s reputation for rampant violent crime in racially segregated neighborhoods echoed media, political, and public portrayals of poverty in major cities across the country. Given the accumulation of political, economic, and labor power that one otherwise associates with major urban centers like New York, D.C., and Los Angeles, the degree of poverty, joblessness, and desperation in racially segregated ghettos should appear like cruel and unnecessary torment. However, analyses of the rapid production of criminal laws, the exponential growth in the prison population, and the restructuring of capitalist production and the labor market demonstrate powerfully how “prisoners and other disposed persons are at the centre (rather than under or marginal to) the contradictions by which the system moves” (Gilmore, “Globalization” 9). The system’s movement is also integrally determined by the structures and logic of racial inequality. In other words, the

maintenance of racial hierarchies and injustice activates and reinvigorates the processes of racialization.

Terms like amputation, disembodiment, abandonment, and disfigurement are used to describe the outcome that urban renewal, the war on drugs, and deindustrialization inflicted upon fragile communities of color primarily and on the nation as a whole post 1968.¹¹ The social and economic changes associated with deindustrialization, the removal of heavy industry from U.S. cities and the shift from manufacturing to service-based industries, intensified historically persistent racial and gendered discrimination. ‘White flight’ from urban centers and rising unemployment contributed to the spatial isolation of urban centers, while the assassination, imprisonment, or exile of 1960s activists and freedom fighters left racialized communities with fewer options for channeling their rage and frustration in libratory and affirmative ways. Along with the economic and political restructuring of the postindustrial and Post Civil Rights eras, urban renewal programs and policies instigated the relocation of city inhabitants and the destruction of established neighborhoods. The efforts to revamp formerly industrial urban centers and to establish commuter routes from suburbs to metropolitan hubs sacrificed the social, economic, and cultural livelihood of inner city districts and communities. The disfigurement of the urban landscape however, was partially legitimated by the moral panic created about the bodies, behaviors, and proximity of Black people. Produced by racial discrimination and the effects of economic shifts, the

¹¹ See analyses by Mindy Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Ballantine/One World, 2004); Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: Noonday Press, 1998); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994).

population of dispossessed persons soon came to represent America's political, economic, and moral crises.

In this context of momentous change and uncertainty, illicit drug users were public enemy number one. Beginning in the early 1970s, President Nixon's discourse about a necessary 'war on drugs' connected drug trafficking to foreign and international conflicts. Under President Reagan's federally funded and domestic war on drugs led to the expenditure of billions of dollars in policing, incarcerating, and demonizing raced inhabitants of America's inner cities¹². Chief among these public menaces were two ominous figures: the Black male drug dealer, and the Black crack-addicted female. The drug dealer was noted for his disregard for life, property, and traditional patriarchal values. He was also depicted as more than willing to rob his own mother and to sell his wares to the Black ghetto's children. Likewise, the Black female crack-addict was imagined as being stripped of all vestiges of human dignity with the first inhalation from the crack-pipe. Worse, the crack addict was said to lose her "natural impulse to mother" and was willing to expose her children to the vileness of the drug underground in order to get a fix (Roberts 156). The female crack-addict transgressed the expectations for femininity and motherhood by exchanging traditional domesticity for the 'crack house.' Public discourses emphasized the disgrace of crack-addicted newborns whose frail and trembling bodies symbolized the utter contemptibility of Black parenthood *and* the reproduction of Black criminality.

The depictions of the crack baby, crack-addicted mother, and male drug dealer created a rhetorical Black family that was responsible for its members' ruin. The familial

¹² See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag* (2007).

language, (crack baby, mother, house, etc.), situated this demise within the intimate quarters of and interpersonal relations between kinfolk. The rhetoric of urban collapse effectively transformed Black Power conceptions of community from the principles of communal control and shared interests, to debased images of familial pathology and violence. If addiction and brutality were figured as being born in and fostered by Black familial cum communal relations, then no Black person could deny having an association to criminality¹³. Although discourses about Black vice and cultural pathology metaphorically recuperated reproductive and biological arguments about Black inferiority, an important difference in contemporary articulations is their paradoxical emphasis on “choice”. Choosing to distance oneself from the people, places, and behaviors that signify the urban ghetto becomes the (unattainable) requirement for assimilation in the Post Civil Rights era. Those assimilating bodies that seek traditional forms of recognition however, reinforce the notion that personal choice alone determines one’s level of success or failure. Nevertheless, the presumption of familial and communal pathology means that there is no real possibility of fully overcoming one’s socialization¹⁴. Rather, aspiring Black professionals should always be met with suspicion given the ineluctable influence of the ghetto, and the looming possibility that they too will ‘get ghetto on you’. The Black family’s presumed commission in the production of non-normativity bankrupts the concept of Black collectivity and eradicates the possibility for intracommunal, affirmative recognition.

¹³ Consider, for example, film representations like *Jungle Fever* and *Boys In the Hood* that portray the problematic and destructive presence of ‘criminally-minded’ relations.

¹⁴ See Patricia Hill Collins’ discussion of the middle-class, professional, Black woman in *Black Sexual Politics*.

In addition to class-based repercussions, the rhetorically constructed Black family and Black community also reveal gender-specific anxieties about the recognition of African Americans in the Post Civil Rights era. Raced *and* gendered modes for representing Blacks as political subjects work in conjunction with depictions of African American private and intimate life. The production of racialized knowledge about African American sexual non-normativity constructs Blacks collectively as ill-prepared for full and equal inclusion in the public sphere. Discourses about Black sexual deviance necessitate the state's surveillance, intervention, and regulation of the Black private sphere. Roderick Ferguson's excellent critique of Foucault substitutes the latter's fixation on the production of the perverse *individual* for an analysis of how the *collective* is constructed (Ferguson 74). Ferguson discusses the "sociologization" of Black sexuality, which privileges the institutional surveillance of African Americans in order to determine sexual 'truths' about them (76-78). Extending Ferguson's theorization, I emphasize that the set of pathologies associated with Black sexuality is made up of race- and gender-specific determinations that mutually define and demean Black men and women. For example, the reproduction of pathology depends upon the symbiotic failures of Black motherhood *and* Black patriarchy. Yet the overdetermined representation of the African American male criminal, –his meaningless lust for violence and insatiable desire for White women– also contributes to the entrenched image of the single-parent Black mother. Therefore, "choosing" addiction and/or a life of crime is interpreted as tantamount to intracommunal devastation; and the presumption of Black women's irresponsible reproduction also participates in undermining the community and Black patriarchy.

Black feminist and proto-feminist scholars have examined how the pervasive representation and presumption of Black female lasciviousness contributed to the formation and power of the Black male rapist myth¹⁵. During the Jim Crow era, the joint force of these two myths about Black female and male sexuality provided moral, social, and political justifications for lynching. Simultaneously, such myths also defined Black femininity as being without the need for protection from or justice for the crime of rape. Rape and lynching, like incarceration, sterilization, and forced poverty, are crises related to power rather than Black morality. In the Post Civil Rights era however, traditional notions of Black sexual deviance continue to circulate in public discourses and cultural representations. Yet the consideration of how historical and structural forces produce privilege for some and render others vulnerable to premature death is lost in the exercise of what some scholars call the new racism.¹⁶ The current landscape in which discourses about Black sexuality and related images circulate is determined by new definitions of what constitutes racism. The erroneous and counterrevolutionary idea that racism consists of overt, individual acts of prejudice serves to deny systemic group dominance and to protect racial power. Rather than relying on notions of biological difference to rationalize racial inequality, the new racism utilizes arguments about cultural pathology to explain Blacks' inferior social and economic positions. Another important aspect of the new racism is its dependence upon mass mediated images, especially portrayals of Black male criminality and Black female promiscuity. Together, these facets of neo racism place greater emphasis on supposed patterns of intraracial relations and behavior

¹⁵ See, for examples, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate, and Paula Giddings.

¹⁶ On the new racism see Claire Jean-Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000); Patricia J. Williams; Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Patricia Hill-Collins.

in order to mask anti-Black racism and to fault intracommunal gender and sexual politics for the continuation of Black disenfranchisement. As some African Americans flatly perform the American sexual scripts of the ‘pimp,’ ‘thug,’ ‘skeeza,’ and ‘matriarch’ in popular culture, intraracial misogyny, criminality, and promiscuity (a modernized ideology of Black cultural inferiority) are terms used to characterize Black people’s collective pathologies and impediments in the Post Civil Rights era.¹⁷ The collective effect that dominant sexual ‘truths’ have is a key obstacle to intraracial recognition and articulations of the erotic.

Still, discursive representations of the crack addict or Black criminal do more than police racist boundaries at the color line. Sexual behaviors associated with prison culture bear upon how Black male bodies are read by themselves and others ‘outside’ correctional facilities as well (*Black Sexual Politics* 239). Entrenched, derogatory images of Black people and Black sexuality function beyond the level of representation and participate in shaping Black people’s perceptions of themselves and each other. Notions about Black criminality and sexual pathology partially determine what Patricia Hill Collins calls “Black sexual politics,” or the way Blacks are treated and how they treat each other. In the Post Civil Rights era, Black sexual politics are also central to analyses of the new racism and therefore to intraracial recognition as well. The representations of criminality, addiction, and promiscuity may point to the structures of oppression, but they cannot be the bases for establishing intracommunal recognition.

¹⁷ For critiques of representation and inclusion see Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2005) and Sadiya Hartman *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).

“even single mothers on welfare got needs”: Non-normativity and the Expression of Desire

and that’s all/that matters/and that’s nobody’s business/but mine/so
what’s all this talk/about taking my kids/my check/about my man/
leaving me/i luv my children/but i luv my roscoe too/if they cut my
check/roscoe gon go/I know he is/he gon leave/then what ima do/
...

either way/I lose/take my check/roscoe gon/take my kids/and i’m
still living in this hell hole alone/feel like/i’m getting the blues again/
i’m getting the saturday night blues/wish it was last night/the way he
held me tight/u woulda thought he was in luv/
Mawiyah Kai El-Jamah Bomani “Woman on a Bus”

What is to be said for African American women who find themselves on welfare and with dependent children, or for Black men who have been caught up in gang affiliation or ensnared by the rapidly growing prison system? How is affirmative recognition granted even intraracially when certain subject positions (the welfare mom, the Black criminal) *seem* to be subsumed by dominant, anti-Black definitions and critiques of Black community? Although the conceptualization of Black agency¹⁸ has been understood as Black people’s exercise of will and determination in spite of oppression, how do we develop contemporary readings of agency when intracommunal violence prohibits collectivity and masks racism? While the overdetermined figures of the welfare mom and Black criminal may not be models for creating an affirmative

¹⁸ There are numerous examples and analyses of ‘Black agency.’ Noteworthy sources include Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (1935); Elsa Barkley Brown, “To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women’s Political History, 1865-1880” *African American Women and the Vote 1837-1965* eds. Ann D. Gordon et al (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997); Carole Marks, *Farewell We’re Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); and Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (1994).

intra-racial politics, they are representations of Black gender and sexual non-normativity that cannot be summarily dismissed. Also, reductive images of gender and sexual pathologies associated with working-class Black culture cannot characterize the complexity and diversity amongst Black people. In accordance with the logic of racism, “poor and working-class Black culture was routinely depicted as being “authentically” Black” while positions of class privilege signify proximity to whiteness (Black Sexual Politics 122). Therefore, *all* African Americans are forced to contend with the social and political significance contained in dominant images of working-class Black sexuality¹⁹. Here, I am interested in analyzing how the convergence of class, gender, and race impact creative expressions of desire and intra-racial recognition.

The epigraph that begins this section is taken from a contemporary anthology of Black erotic fiction and features the poetic voice of the “welfare mom”. Nevertheless, the text’s form and content foreground the protagonist’s contestation of her subject position precisely because it limits her expression of sexual desire and possibilities for affirmative intra-racial recognition. The poem demonstrates that traditional forms of erotic representation are not available to poor and working-class Blacks even as the text seeks to express Black erotic desire.

The poem “Woman on a Bus” from the anthology *Dark Eros: Black Erotic Writings* offers important, creative perspectives on the entanglement between state-

¹⁹ For a recent example see the special edition of *Ebony* magazine and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, “The Irony of Achievement for Black Women: Notes on Black Women and the Culture of Disrespect” *Ebony* (July 2007): 86-88. (“Our own complicity in our objectification demands scrutiny as well. . . . The range of our successes and the diversity of our lives and career paths have been congealed in the mainstream media into video vixens, thanks to Karrine Steffans’ best-selling *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, or shake dancers given the frenzy surrounding the Duke rape case and hip-hop culture’s collaboration with the adult entertainment industry” (88).

sanctioned and extralegal exploitation. The speaker is a thirty-year old woman on welfare “torn between my aid to dependent children/and my children’s dependence on me/all this talk about orphanages/welfare reform/ and my mama constantly scolding me” (1-3). The speaker occupies the contested terrain of the city bus, a site historically construed as a moving theatre²⁰ in Civil Rights struggles over power and public space. The speaker in this poem however, does not align herself with the figure of Rosa Parks²¹, but with the almost forgotten defiance of Claudette Colvin. Arrested in March 1955 (*nine* months before Parks), Colvin also refused to give up her seat for a White passenger on the bus. Because the 15-year-old Colvin was pregnant at the time, Civil Rights leader E. D. Nixon dissuaded the boycott planned in response to the girl’s state assault²². In the poem “Woman on a Bus” the relationship between the state, Black maternity, and Post Civil Rights desire continues to seek expression and affirmative recognition. The speaker powerfully portrays how welfare and public scrutiny constrain Black women’s lives and their articulation of the erotic: “what’s all this talk/about taking my kids/my check/about my man/leaving me/i luv my children/but i luv my roscoe too/if they cut my check/roscoe gon go/” (13-15). The speaker’s public protest erupts from the way she is left with an impossible decision and without the ability to anticipate the future of her or her children’s lives. The woman is in the position of having to choose between her children and her lover, between motherhood and physical, erotic desire. In response to the “talk” about her life, the speaker strives to

²⁰ See Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels* (1994).

²¹ Although Parks had been a longtime Civil Rights activist, she is popularly remembered for her ‘quiet dignity’ and ‘spontaneous’ act of courage.

²² For further discussion about Claudette Colvin see Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson eds., *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (Broadway Books: New York, 1998) 274.

insert herself into the public discourse about the Black welfare mother. The invasiveness of the state in poor Black women's lives re-introduces serious questions about Black women's ability to claim motherhood:

with all these mouths to feed/what the hell am I suppose to do then/
maybe orphanages ain't so bad/
I mean they'll be getting three meals a
day/clothes on their back/I don't know maybe it's what they need/ (16-18).

Similar to the ways that the prison and prison culture signaled failed masculinity in the short story "The Reunion," welfare and its imaginary of irresponsible Black reproduction represents the failure of Black femininity. Post Moynihan, failed Black femininity carries an association with single parenthood and the blame for the moral panic around Black sexual and political desire. After all, a woman's ability to control her fertility and determine the direction of her children's lives attaches directly to concerns about access to housing, education, employment, and health care. These concerns have been central to defining racial boundaries in the US and to refusing Black women legitimacy as mothers and sexually desiring subjects.

The speaker in "Woman on a Bus" depicts herself as being torn between the responsibilities of motherhood and the imposition of the state. Her mother's expectations and her lover Roscoe's inconstant ways also contribute to the welfare mom's acute dilemma. Nevertheless, the speaker is not completely subsumed by the structures and demands that shape her life and constrain her choices. The woman's tone is defiant as she sarcastically states that maybe an orphanage is not so bad and perhaps what her children "need." Perhaps the only thing more fear-inspiring than a Black woman mothering *badly*, is her refusal to mother *at all* and to willingly turn her children over to the state. The speaker in the poem knows that neither abdicating parental responsibility

nor the state can solve her dilemma: “either way/I lose/take my check/roscoe gon/take my kids/and i’m / still living in this hell hole alone” (19-20). The loneliness that the woman describes, however, moves the reader closer to recognizing the complexity of the speaker’s lament. Roscoe, the woman’s love object, figures centrally in defining that loneliness: “most times/when he here/he ain’t here/and when he gone/it like u never even notice / he was even in the same place/as u” (23-24). The description of Roscoe’s phantom-like presence reveals the degree to which the speaker remains invisible to him as well. For the single mom on welfare depicted in the poem, the expression of desire is always rebellious:

yeah/there are times/when i fix my mouth/to tell him go/but then i turn right around/and make the foolish mistake/of letting him caress my insides/with his manhood/got me talking in tongues/when i never thought/i could/lapping at my thighs/and all areas in between/it’s like he the only person/who understands/even single mothers on welfare got needs/ (29-34).

Her desire to tell Roscoe to go is never communicated to him verbally. Telling Roscoe to go would also signify her refusal of her sexual desire in favor of the legitimacy that comes from submitting to the policing of poor Black women’s sexuality. Instead, the speaker chooses the “mistake” and talks in tongues about her revelry in physical, erotic pleasure. Her emphasis on sexual desirability and needs expresses a yearning to redefine how the single Black mother is recognized. Even the form of the poem, its refusal of standard grammar and punctuation mimics the work of Ntozake Shange and seeks an alternative basis for legibility. Still, what is to be said about Roscoe? Does the performance of his manhood exploit someone else’s position of vulnerability? How do we become blind to each other’s suffering, desire?

Black women's access to the public sphere has been shaped not only by parents or guardians, but by perceptions of Black femininity as well. Fantasies about Black women's promiscuity coupled with their physical and economic vulnerability render them subject to state surveillance and control through welfare and family law, and to exploitation in a service-based labor-market. Controlling images of Black women (especially poor and working-class Black women) as domineering, overbearing, and 'strong' render them "unworthy of exemption or defense, as they are perceived as always having the means to turn away" (Clarke 85). Without defense, and unable to rely on shrinking social services or other forms of state protection (e.g. the police), Black women's path to incarceration is formed by the interlocking nature of racial and gendered oppression. Black women's vulnerability to pregnancy and sole responsibility for dependent children also demonstrates how their lives can be continually threatened by and subject to state control and surveillance. In many ways, welfare signifies for Black women what the prison represents for Black men.

A model for identifying contemporary racism that prioritizes state violence and the public sphere without interrogating the gendered and sexual presumptions of those terms risks erasing Black women's fight with the state through surveillance, welfare, and reproductive control. The gendered and sexual oppression Black women face within marginalized communities can also be obscured without attention to intraracial dynamics and tensions. As Beth Richie²³ points out, increasing incarceration rates for Black women further challenges the viability of the 'Black family.' These rapidly growing rates of women's imprisonment also relate to both drug activity and domestic violence

²³ See Beth Richie, *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1996).

issues. Finally, expectations about Black women's gender performance and presentation still carry the demand for their loyalty to Black men²⁴. In its attentiveness to contemporary forms of racism, Black erotic fiction points to the symbiotic relationship between raced and gendered forms of disenfranchisement.

Black Fantasy

The erotics of African American racial formation produce a taxonomy of perversions particular to that formation. . . . Acknowledging the place of surveillance in the construction of sexual truths about African Americans and possibly other nonwhite subjects means that we must also be willing to admit other standards for producing discourses of sexuality.

Roderick A. Ferguson *Aberrations in Black*

Because black American women do not participate as a category of social and cultural agents, in the legacies of symbolic power, they maintain no allegiances to a strategic formation of texts, or ways of talking about sexual experience, that even remotely resemble the paradigm of symbolic domination, except that such paradigm has been their concrete disaster.

Hortense J. Spillers, "Interstices"

Throughout this article I have been arguing that the gender specificity of racism in the Post Civil Rights era impacts affirmative intraracial recognition and expressions of the erotic. Theorists of Black sexuality like Roderick Ferguson and Hortense Spillers demonstrate how any theorization of Black sexuality must contend with how historical, social, and political forces of power have shaped that formation as well. Extending their analyses, I add that the specificities concerning Black sexuality are also informed by intraracial sexual politics. Although popular erotic fiction, or any other body of texts,

²⁴ See Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism" *Signs* 27.4 (Summer 2002): 1059-1082; Joan Morgan, "Fly-Girls, Bitches, and Hoes: Notes of a Hip Hop Feminist" *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995): 151-157; and Lisa Jones *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) for a discussion of so-called Black third-wave feminist reflections on the continued demand for loyalty.

cannot fully account for the complexity of Black sexuality, these stories do reference the cultural and political preoccupations about the expression of desire.

For example, while Black feminists look to the Blues woman as a figure of sexual self-possession who also disrupts of the hegemony of Black middle-class cultural dominance²⁵, the Blues woman is virtually absent from contemporary erotic fiction. Much more common is the representation of the professional Black woman and her struggle to be recognized as a legitimate, romantic partner. These texts do not seek traditional forms of feminine recognition for Black women, but rather illustrate how the promises of bourgeois respectability (protection, security, and respect) evade the professional Black woman. Apart from the racialized expression of middle class angst that stems from negotiating the racist terrain of corporate America, these stories and poems reveal concern about intraracial recognition. Particularly explicit in this regard is Eunice Townsend's poem "Electric Lover:"

Middle-aged woman
High-powered job
Men don't romance me
Say I'm brass-hard
Hold top salary position
All power in my hand
Yet at night there's no
Tongue kissin
With a real man (1-9).

Moreover, stories that depict Black middle-class life and erotic fantasies uncover anxieties about the viability of nuclear family structure. Depictions of the failed middle-class Black family are far more pervasive than representation of dysfunction in poor and

²⁵ See Hazel Carby, "It Just Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" *Radical America* 20.4 (1986): 9-24 and "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context" *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 738-755; Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" *Black White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003); and Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms* (1993).

working-class homes. Infidelity and/or death are the most common vehicles for portraying the disquiet that surrounds Black middle-class intimate life. In “The Merry Widow” (*Chocolate Flava*) the church is the setting where the protagonist attends her husband’s funeral and discovers that he had maintained a string of extramarital relationships. The concluding erotic exchange that the widow shares with her late husband’s mistresses represents a critique of religious controls on Black female sexuality and of sexism in the Black church. The story also signifies changing attitudes about the role of the Black church in the contemporary era. “Transplanted” (*Brown Sugar 2*) depicts a very depressed widow’s pleasant discovery. Viewing the videotape her late spouse left for her, the widow receives her former mate’s permission to explore self-love and her own sensuality. The exaggerated expression of the protagonist’s grief belies her guilt about the way his demise opens up the possibility for her erotic exploration. The epistle in “Letters and Remembrances” (*Brown Sugar 2*) and “Midnight Letter to Fran” (*Chocolate Flava*) is the preferred form for expressing female, same-sex desire and how the expectation of heterosexual marriage prohibits the fulfillment of that desire.

Apart from illuminating problems and contending with existing forces of oppression, contemporary erotic Black fiction also points to other fantasies of affirmative recognition. They imagine ways that Black women can gain leverage in the intimate sphere. They detail the desirability of Black women, and many demonstrate sexual prowess. Often, these stories imagine the protagonist as a homeowner, with gainful employment, and the amenities of a successful career. Many narratives portray the return to the South, the frustration with the urban north, and certain nostalgia for an idealized Black communal space. This longing is also seen in those narratives that feature travel to

and a sense of home in other Black diasporic spaces, especially the Caribbean. While I have only provided a cursory list of themes, my goal has been to offer a more complex starting point for thinking about contemporary Black erotic fiction.

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