abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory. I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account, “all by himself,” and, to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him—all gifts, all objects… What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father.”

Moreover, Alma must leave South Carolina and the legacy that is destined to her to understand the self as a subject of possibility. After she has left South Carolina and has relocated to New York, she describes this change in her body:

I never knew how full life could be—it is so full. How expansive everything is outside of South Carolina. I cannot walk that walk anymore—that thick-heeled, crusty, hot, southern dirt road walk—How could I possibly go back to that? I never knew I could enjoy the full-ness of my walk—my hips. I can’t wait to show this to Gene. How do you explain a new walk? (50)

Here Alma connects vision to performative possibilities. She no longer understands and performs the self through black female abjection rooted for her in the South. Alma has cultivated a possibility for subjective and sexualized expressiveness in a decontextualized sense, removed from her birth home and the community that raised her.

Unlike Emma of Color Struck who at the play’s end is trapped in her own color/gender insularity, Alma emerges as a viewing and speaking subject. In New York Alma sees possibilities of rejecting a visual system that marks her skin as excessively colored and her body as excessive matter. Vision for Alma not only is a system of terror but also holds the possibility for expressive embodiment. She performs her corporeality (for example, “the full-ness of my walk—my hips”) as “excess flesh,” a concept developed in the next chapter to address black women’s refutation of the discourse of abjection and negation. Yet for Alma this embodiment is precarious as it is based on her internalization of a colorist system that locates her suffering in a mythic South in which blacks exist to suppress the black other. It is, in the world of Yellowman, a totalizing system where one must kill her/his kinship to escape the legacy of black-on-black terror and the visual regime that regulates relations of alienation.

THREE

Excess Flesh: Black Women Performing Hypervisibility

The black female body as excessive body has been a widely explored topic in scholarship, artistic production, and larger cultural debates about representation, race, and gender. In the previous chapter, I examined what happens when the black female subject identifies with the aberrant image of black womanhood offered through dominant visual culture and the ways in which colorism produces a scopic practice of paranoiac self-surveillance in certain dramas by black female playwrights. The question that frames this chapter is what happens when black female artists and cultural producers take up the dominant representation of black women in visual culture and public discourse to construct new modes of operation. The understanding of the black female body as excessive is so much a given in cultural discourse that this conceptual framework has gained an aura of facticity. One might ask what is there to visualize or articulate about the black female body that has not already been represented? About this Francette Panteau argues that it is “a relation of over-determination, which produces the black woman as ‘excessive.’”1 Further theorizing the abundance of representation of black women as aberrant, Daphne Brooks writes:

black women’s bodies continue to bear the gross insult and burden of spectacular (representational) exploitation in transatlantic culture. Systematically overdetermined and mythically configured, the iconography of the black female body remains the central ur-text of alienation in transatlantic culture… Yet there are ways to read for the viability of black women making use of their own materiality within narratives in which they are the subjects.2

Considering the possibilities black women have to engage with visual practices as a reinscription of their corporeality, I analyze the works of black
women artists, entertainers, and cultural producers whose cultural production is reliant on the very problem that their bodies pose as visible and corporeal bodies. The chapter moves among the realms of “high” art, mass culture, and black popular culture to look at how audience identification and expectations shape the critical reception and affective responses to these works.

Renee Cox’s five-panel photograph *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996) unleashed an outcry from conservative politicians and policymakers, most notably New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, when it was exhibited in *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2001. The large photo-panel depicts a revision of the biblical Last Supper shared by Christ and his disciples through a reimagining of Leonardo Da Vinci’s fifteenth-century mural painting *The Last Supper.* In Cox’s piece, she, a black woman, stands center naked, taking up the position of Christ before he is betrayed and martyred. Her body is fully exposed, as she holds her arms open and apart in a gesture of sacrifice. A white cloth is draped across her arms and behind her back. Cox foregrounds her alienation and nudity with a gaze outward that refuses to meet the gaze of her audience. On both sides of Cox are black and brown male disciples. The disciples conspire against her; their eyes are averted suspiciously; as Cox holds the position of the one to be sacrificed. The men are clothed in robes and headdresses, further heightening her nakedness and sex.

After the show opened, Giuliani began an impassioned campaign against both Cox’s work and the Brooklyn Museum. His response pitted artistic practice against notions of social decency and religious tolerance. In this case, *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* was condemned by Mayor Giuliani as “anti-Catholic” and “disgusting.” His crusade against Cox’s work and attempts to create a board to supervise standards of decency in New York City–supported art followed a larger, nationally publicized attack on black British artist Chris Ofili for his work, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), a mixed-media piece that incorporates elephant dung. Ofili’s piece, also shown at the Brooklyn Museum, was curated in 1999 as part of an exhibition titled *Sensation,* featuring the art of emerging British artists. In response to Ofili’s piece, Giuliani attempted to censor the Brooklyn Museum’s selection of artists, but his efforts were ruled unconstitutional in court. The controversies arising from Ofili’s and Cox’s art have become far too familiar to artists, art administrators, and curators, as right-wing forces directed several attack campaigns against the arts during the last decades of the twentieth century. In both the Ofili and Cox cases, Giuliani’s rage was targeted at black artists and their revision of Western religious narratives, precisely because these artists connected religion and its iconography to colonialism and the subjugation of nonwhites.

Unsurprisingly, the controversy and media attention surrounding Cox’s *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* offered a cultural cachet and visibility that increased the artist’s marketability and desirability in the New York art scene. The controversy produced celebrity-status for the artist. Throughout the ordeal, Cox was outspoken in defense of her work and took on many conservative ideologues in the local media. The growing debate that ensued around her art and Giuliani’s actions turned Cox into a media spectacle as black woman and artist provocateur. For example, she participated in a debate about the First Amendment with the then-president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Later that fall, a solo exhibition of Cox’s work called *American Family*—a tongue-in-cheek revision of American family visual narratives that included images of the photographer with her
sons whose father is white and also the photographer surrounded by naked, doting men—opened at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York. The work in the show referenced her Jamaican American upbringing, her Catholic school education, and her sexual practices and fantasies. Acknowledging how the exhibit capitalized from the controversy around the artist, Jo Anna Isaak, in the introduction to the catalogue of the show, writes: “With American Family—a veritable minefield of taboo topics from the miscegenated family album to the erotic display of her own beautiful body—Cox, the latest artist to be subjected to New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s censure for her controversial Yo Mama’s Last Supper, is likely to raise more than eyebrows.” A crowd of hundreds lined up outside of the gallery on the night of its opening, hoping to get a glimpse of the artist-turned-celebrity and to be part of the scene.

Giuliani’s outrage toward the Brooklyn Museum over the Committed to the Image show and his attempts to regulate city-sponsored art exhibitions were dismissed by art critics, scholars, and some city officials alike with admonitions that once again Giuliani was attempting to be a “culture cop.” Yet Cox’s work was also treated with a suspicion by many of her defenders, even as they supported her right to artistic freedom and practices. Some journalists and cultural critics, while bashing Giuliani’s response and attempts to regulate the arts, described her work as lacking nuance, “corny,” “anti-WAW (White Art World),” and self-indulgent. The issue for many became one of taste, that is, even art of poor taste should be defended based on one’s right to free expression. It is quite apparent that Giuliani’s and local Catholic leaders’ disapproval of Cox’s work had very much to do with the centrality of a naked black female figure in it and her attempts to disrupt dominant religious and historical narratives. As Michael Eric Dyson framed the issue in an op-ed piece: “Could it be that the outrage caused by Cox’s art is linked to the fact that a black woman dared imagine God looking like her: ebony-skinned, dreadlocked and naked before the world?” Giuliani’s response was quite reactionary and in many ways uncomplicated, driven by his purported standards of morality, racial biases (such as the stop-and-frisk policy of the New York Police Department under his mayorship), and political showmanship. The response from many art critics and proponents of freedom of expression, who distanced themselves from both Giuliani and Cox, is more troubling in the ambivalence and disregard that they expressed toward the photographer’s work. They too expressed hesitance, and occasional revulsion, at the sight of a naked black female body placed at the center of artistic debates and visual narratives. The intermingling of sensationalism, reactionary moralism, and intellectual or journalistic ambivalence toward representations of the black female body extends beyond the realm of art to public culture in general and even to black cultural criticism.

One of the primary issues at stake in Renee Cox’s art and embedded in the various reactions to Yo Mama’s Last Supper is the problem of the visible black female body or, more precisely, that the black female body always presents a problem within a field of vision structured by racialized and gendered markings. The troubling presence of the black female body, especially the unclothed body, frames this study. As Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper reveals by what spills over and out of its reception, the black female body functions as the site of excess in dominant visual culture and the public sphere at large. The explicit black female body is an excessive body (from the Hottentot Venus to Josephine Baker to Millie Jackson, Pam Grier, and Serena Williams in her cat suit). The public responses to Cox’s work, as well as other late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century controversies over black women’s bodies and body parts, demonstrate the continued currency and relevance of the black female figure as one that registers as excessive in public culture.

Given this discursive and symbolic structuring of black female corporeality, my project is to theorize the strategic uses of the body by black female artists and cultural figures. To this end, I aim to develop a theory of “excess flesh” to articulate the visual and discursive breaches that these enactments make in dominant visual culture, an important site of engagement with the public sphere. I analyze the art and cultural practices of certain black women, whose works investigate the relationship between visuality and notions of a performing black female subject. My purpose here is to move away from an analysis of how dominant visual culture represents black women to a focus on black female cultural producers’ engagement with the image of black female excessiveness and their critique of the racializing and gendering apparatuses of the visual field. I examine visual and performance works deemed high art, such as the photography of Renee Cox and Ayanah Moor and the conceptual art of Tracey Rose, as well as the cultural work of black women in mass art and black popular culture, namely Janet Jackson and Lil’ Kim. I choose these different sectors of cultural production to examine how they inform the reception of black female embodiment as excess flesh. As demonstrated in the controversy over Renee Cox, the framing of a work as art—even when considered offensive—lends a certain privilege and autonomy not afforded cultural production in mass entertainment culture. At the same time, mass entertainment and popular culture produce meaning
about blackness and gender through large-scale dissemination and a constant streaming of visual information that deserve investigation.

The chapter proposes the following questions: Can the enactment of excess flesh by black female cultural producers trouble the particularities of being racialized and sexualized as black women in the visual field? Can hypervisibility be a performative strategy that points to the problem of the black female body in the visual field? Can visibility be deployed to redress the excessive black female body? If so, what are the limits of such redeployment?

The conceptual base of excess flesh as a performative strategy is in feminist performance theory, black women's artistic traditions of exploring identity and history, and the long and mired history of documenting difference through visual technologies. Excess flesh borrows from these histories and forms of cultural engagement in acknowledging the performative potential of visuality. Elinor Fuchs and Rebecca Schneider have analyzed the performative art of (primarily white) women performers who use their unclothed bodies as media to uncover gendered norms and dominant social relations. In her much-cited study of "explicit body" performances of women artists, Rebecca Schneider analyzes how feminist performance art that relies on the naked female body exposes the layers of meaning coded in female embodiment:

Contemporary feminist performance artists present their own bodies beside or relative to the history of reading the body marked female, the body rendered consumptive in representation. In this sense, the contemporary explicit body performer consciously and explicitly stands beside herself in that she grapples overtly with the history of her body's explication, wrestling with the ghosts of that explication.11

Borrowing from Schneider and extending her study to consider black women's engagement with performance and visuality, I argue that black women's bodily enactments signify beyond "explicit." The explicit body performances of white female artists and cultural producers are, as Schneider points out, in relationship to norms of idealized white femininity. These norms mimetically posit white women in direct relation to the idealized figuration while black women historically represent negation within this structuring system. Within classic visual narratives and historical discourse, whether rendered asexual in the figure of the mammy, ambivalent or sexually submerged as in the trope of the passing woman, or bestial as in representations of the Jezebel, black women are produced through visual signs as in excess of idealized white femininity. Through various renderings in visual culture the black female body and the sexual imaginary associated with that body not only set the boundaries around which idealized white femininity is understood and visualized, but as art critic Lorraine O'Grady argues, both the black female and the black male function in dominant representational codes "to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief."12 In other words, the black woman as excess establishes the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity.

Through an explication of excess flesh enactments, I zoom in on a productive look offered by black female cultural producers who construct an identification that acknowledges but does not adhere to racialized and sexualized aberrance. A form of what José Esteban Muñoz has theorized as disidentification, the productive look "works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously."13 It is an enactment of the gaze that does not necessarily attempt to heal or redress the naked, exploited, denigrated black female body tethered to the black imago but understands the function of this figuration in dominant visual culture. This productive look lays bare the symbols and meanings of this weighted figure.

My hope is to turn attention to the psychic realm of excessiveness and to conceptualize black women's engagement with hypervisibility as one that moves beyond frameworks that understand it as a totalizing negation. By hypervisibility, I mean to refer to both historic and contemporary conceptualizations of blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible, as underexposed and always exposed, the nuances of which have been depicted in art, literature, and theory. The concept of hypervisibility has particular resonance in contemporary popular culture and mass entertainment where the black body as commodity fetish has a heightened salience. As commodity theorists have argued, the commodity fetish masks power relations and historical contexts that produce systems of inequality and the consumption of difference. Roderick Ferguson points out that the black body as commodity fetish is the surplus of late capitalism and its shrinking labor needs. Using Marx, Ferguson argues that surplus populations are always rendered available for capital exploitations. Ferguson writes: "Both superfluous and indispensable, surplus populations fulfill and exceed the demands of capital."14 In the contemporary context, the plenitude of black bodies in advertising, entertainment, and dominant visual culture generally speaking occlude material conditions based on power imbalances. Specifically, the marketability and desirability of the black body, particularly the black male body, is premised on its very danger and aberration—its ability to move smoothly
along a scale of international recognition as iconic popular figure to one of millions of black bodies in the prison industrial complex. Ferguson argues that in the very production of surplus populations, transgressive formations emerge:

As U.S. capital had to constantly look outside local and national boundaries for labor, it often violated ideals of racial homogeneity held by local communities and the United States at large. As it violated those ideals, capital also inspired worries that such violations would lead to the disruption of gender and sexual propitities. . . . As formations that transgress capitalist political economies, surplus populations become the locations for possible critiques of state and capital.15

As black bodies have become a dominant fixture in marketing strategies throughout the 1990s and turn of the twenty-first century, we see emergent idealized bodies in the form of black celebrities, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. The historical laboring black body has been transformed into the aestheticized body of leisure and wealth accumulation.

Excess flesh, then, is another conceptual framework for understanding the black body as a figuration of hypervisibility. Excess flesh is an enactment of visibility that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection. The use of excess develops out of the distinction that Hortense Spillers makes between the body and flesh in her classic essay, "Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe." This point has been elucidated further in Sharon Holland’s study Raising the Dead in which Holland argues, "Spillers makes a dramatic distinction between body and flesh, using these terms as metaphors for captive and liberated subject positions, respectively."16 Excess flesh is not necessarily a liberatory enactment. It is a performative that doubles visibility: to see the codes of visuality operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its object. Excess flesh does not destabilize the dominant gaze or its system of visibility. Instead, it refracts the gaze back upon itself. To enact excess flesh is to signal historical attempts to regulate black female bodies, to acknowledge black women’s resistance of the persistence of visibility, and to challenge debates among black activists and critics about what constitutes positive or productive representation of blackness, by refusing the binary of negative and positive that Michele Wallace warns us against.17 Such a challenge is not necessarily intertwined with a representational corrective that articulates a "true" or "accurate" framework for seeing the black female body. Yet it does demonstrate the impossibility of a totalizing gaze and highlights the limita-
tions of regulatory systems. Excess flesh enactments, like Renee Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper, suggest that the black female body is always troubling to dominant visual culture and that its troubling presence can work productively to trouble the field of vision.

Renee Cox’s Self-Portraiture and Play with Iconicity

Because idealized projection and fantasy are associated with whiteness in Western discourse, black portraiture and self-portraiture function quite differently in dominant visual representation and canonical art history. Portraits of black subjects by black artists often serve as counternarratives to cultural and discursive meaning associated with blackness and black bodies. They also become ways of creating critical genealogies and archives that speak to very different audiences, as in the photographic work—especially the studio practice—of Charles “Teenie” Harris, who spent his lifetime documenting black residents in Pittsburgh (see chapter 1). Art historian Richard Powell theorizes black portraiture through what he phrases “cutting a figure,” an appropriation of black vernacular expression, that attends to the “aesthetic slippage between expressing a self-representational assuredness and an immodest fragrancy, or between enacting a stylistic transformation and an artistic breakout,” characteristics that he notes in many portraits by black artists. Many of these works play with vanity and excess. Powell argues that these portraits often include aesthetic and discursive severing, cutting, and spaying that reconstitute “black bodies from crude commodities and ciphers into fashionable actors performing in displays and expositions of their own making.”18 These artistic processes contribute to a visual self-making and a transformation of the black figure into flesh. Powell’s conceptualization of “cutting a figure” is akin to what I call the visible seam in much of black cultural practices (see chapter 5). The visible seam is an aesthetic device and a discursive intervention that reveal the gaps and sutures of dominant visual narratives and the underpinning ideologies that maintain them.

In positing herself as the female nude in her photography, Cox comments on the invisibility of the black woman as producer and the vexed imagery of the black female body as subject/object in art traditions. Cox’s work also invokes the routine practices of visually documenting the black female body in medical, scientific, and sociological arenas as the embodiment of abnormality and femininity’s opposite. Analyzing Hot En Tott, another portrait in Cox’s Yo Mama series (one that references the Venus Hottentot), Hershini Young writes that Cox’s photograph
reclaims the black woman’s (sexual) subjectivity from the scientific gaze that dissected and reduced it to beast of burden and mechanism of labor. . . . Her gaze does not allow for modesty or shame at her nakedness but instead directly challenges the viewer—look at me, look at my body, and look at the imperial specters that have dictated how I have traditionally been viewed.19

Cox, like many black women artists and performers whose works demonstrate an intentionality in the presentation of the black female body, employs theatricality in her highly stylized, color-saturated photography to frame hypervisibility as a racialized construct with gendered implication and particularities. *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* is representative of the aestheticized bodies and formal composition of much of Cox’s work.

*Cousins at Pussy Pond* (2001) is another work that shows Cox’s engagement with Western historical narratives, the exclusion of artists of color in art historical traditions, and the marginalization and objectification of racialized bodies in Western visual culture. Consisting of a large-scale photograph that was included in the *American Family* show, the piece is a revision of Edouard Manet’s *Le Dejeuner sur L’Herbe* (1863). According to Jo Anna Isaak, there is much significance in Cox choosing to reimagine a piece by Manet, given that

Manet’s paintings are frequently subjected to this play of art upon art perhaps because Manet himself began the process of using art to call attention to art by lifting its veil of illusion and openly acknowledging its properties, its prior pilfering, and whether he intended this or not, its ideological underpinnings.20

In Cox’s photographic remix of Manet’s painting, she sits on a blanket with two muscular black men in front of a lake. She is nude while her companions wear loincloths. Cox looks out at the audience as the men holding spears stare at her in delight. Using Jennifer DeVere Brody’s readings of artists who reinterpret or queer Manet’s *Olympia*, Cox’s reinterpretation of Manet can be read as an “act of translation” that unpacks the “visual rhetoric” embedded in his work as exemplar of Western art traditions and cultural discourse.21 Cox’s revelation of such visual rhetoric comes from substituting signs of European-ness with that of African-ness, such as the spears held by the male models and their loincloths.

Cox’s photography works at the sites of convergence between performance and visuality as she restages and revisions many iconic pieces in the history of European art. Cox engages with this history through contemporaneity, as her images reveal the influence of mass culture and consumption, black popular and performance cultures, fashion, advertising, and the sports industry. Cox’s earlier work as a fashion photographer influences her artistic practice, particularly in her use of the aestheticized, and typically muscular, body as primary subject for her photographic work, such as Cox’s *Baby Back* (2001), in which the photographer stages her body in a fantasy scene of S-M play accentuated by her red pumps and satin whip. *Baby Back* is a revision of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Le Grande Odalisque* (1814) in which a white female nude reclines on a chaise longue. In Ingres’ oil painting, the woman is surrounded with orientalist iconography. Her hair is wrapped in a patterned scarf with fringes; the chaise lounge is covered in tapestries, and she holds an ornament with peacock feathers. In Cox’s revision, her title is a word play that invokes the consumption of meat, baby back ribs, a popular grilled dish in southern and African American traditions. “Baby back,” even more relevantly for this study, invokes black vernacular and popular culture in which black women’s buttocks are referred to as “back,” such as the popular 1991 rap song “Baby Got Back” by Sir Mix-a-Lot.22 Cox’s invocation of the slang “back” shows the influence of black popular culture and vernacular culture on contemporary art. Mass entertainment and popular
cultural forms, especially the rise of hip hop in the last decades of the twentieth century, have resulted in shifting visual aesthetics for many black and non-black cultural producers. Thus, Cox’s remixing of canonical art such as the work of Manet is also an announcement of an aesthetic shift for representing race and gender, an aesthetic that is steeped in the visual lexicon of consumer culture and everyday practices.

The iconic and much-discussed rear of the black female also centers Cox’s *Black Leather Lace-Up* (2001). In the photograph Cox magnifies her buttocks by photographing her body angled in such a way that makes her behind dwarf the rest of her body. The artist engages with the aesthetics and practice of S-M, wearing a shiny black corset that laces up her back. Her body appears to strain the laces of the corset. Her back is to the camera and her buttocks are only partially exposed but are positioned in such a way that the width of her rear reaches the outer edges of the camera’s frame. She leans away from the camera with her head down; we see her arms up to her face. Cox’s laced and confined body glistens under the theatrical lighting and is covered in body oil, referencing both pleasure and pain.
marketing culture. They are hyperactualized in muscular form and posture, and their facial gestures are ironic and knowing, as they play with historical narrative and artistic form. Cox engages with the aesthetics of iconicity by working with the stylistic tools and visual signs of dominant form. Yet, the substitutions and remixings of Western art canon that operates in Cox’s art destabilizes the singularity and privilege of the iconic in Western discourse.

Similar to Cox, works by other black female photographers such as Carrie Mae Weems and Carla Williams center the black female body as sites of inquiry into the structuring principles of racialized and gendered markings. These practices reveal the imposition of the Western gaze in framing the black female body as spectacle, aberrant and pathological. Artists like Cox, Weems, and Williams explicitly engage with the long and often brutal history of visually documenting and framing the black female body. Their works comment on the double bind placed on black female subjects in the visual field: that is, their blackness is tied up in the display of a denigrated sexual positioning that is both abject and desirable. She—the iconic and denigrated black female—is the object of pornographic, scientific, and ethnographic looks that continually render her aberrant.

**Framing the Black Female Body: From the Image to the Performative**

That black women’s bodies are rendered excessive is now a truism of sorts in black cultural criticism, gender studies, and one might venture to say American public culture, more broadly. The last few decades have seen numerous scholarly and cultural projects redress dominant representations of black women’s bodies. The specter of the “Hottentot Venus”—Saartje Baartman, the much-written-about Khoisan (South African) woman exhibited as a spectacle in nineteenth-century Europe—casts a broad shadow over both cultural production and scholarship on the black female body: representation as excessive and degenerate, as well as the body’s commercialization. Many black female artists have used their media and bodies to reflect explicitly on the production and circulation of Baartman as “Hottentot” and the representational significance of her figuration historically. South African conceptual artist Tracey Rose attempts to render a visual depiction of Western fantasies of black female savagery and exoticism that were projected onto the body of Baartman in her performance photograph Venus Baartman (2001). In the color photograph meant to resemble a diorama akin to those found in natural history museums, Rose performs the role of black female savage—unclothed and untutored—as visualized through Western scopic regimes. Venus Baartman depicts the artist in “nature,” walking through a field of high grass, crouched over, on the hunt and hunted. The title of the works conflates the historical woman with the commodity spectacle whose body performed as excess while Baartman was alive and in death. Baartman in performing the “Hottentot Venus” constituted the being of excess flesh for audiences of the period, that is, her flesh and body registered excess. Rose’s piece performs an enactment of excess flesh as she points directly to historical context and racial and gender coding. Venus Baartman also centers the relationship among the visual, the performative, and the audience. In Rose’s work, the audience is assumed to be familiar with the historical narrative of Baartman and can therefore interpret irony and reinsertion in the contemporary image.

Baartman’s international circulation and her historic and contemporary importance to both scholarship and artistic practice necessitate that investigations into the representations and meanings of the black female body function as a diasporic inquiry. In studying the various meanings and invocations of the black female as excess from a diasporic framework, it is also important to attend to the different ways in which blackness and black womanhood are coded historically and geographically. In other words, the black female body does not have the same social, economic, and cultural meaning in different locations and times. With that precaution toward generalizing this racialized and gendered position, it is still important to address the public imaginary, psychic meaning, and circulation of the black.
female body to make sense of how this social body continues to resonate as a site of abnormality and dark fantasy through historical recurrence.

Black feminist scholars across disciplines have broadly examined the discourse of pathology that frames black women’s bodies and sexualities in the visual field and the public sphere. Of note, legal scholar Dorothy Roberts’s study *Killing the Black Body* examines social and legal policies in the United States aimed at regulating black women’s bodies, especially their reproductive choices. Hazel Carby in “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” looks at the “moral panic” over black women from rural and southern regions who moved to urban areas in the early twentieth century. Carby analyzes how early twentieth-century social reform pathologized black women as lacking moral virtue and prone to laziness and deviance. Carby analyzes how one of the solutions to resolving this moral panic (in addition to creating “lodging houses” to keep black women off of the streets at night) was “training schools to make black women ‘more efficient.” Here, a practice of efficiency serves as the counterpoint to black women’s presumed excessiveness. Efficiency in this context meant putting black women’s bodies to use as laboring bodies that support systems of inequality, often as domestic labor to whites and upper-class blacks.

One important arena for investigating how the image of black female excessiveness operates and gets reproduced is the history of photography and the creation of racial taxonomies that relied on photography to document racial and sexual differences. In *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams examine the history of the use of visual apparatuses to probe and document these darkly coded figures, particularly the unclothed black female body. Resisting a homogenizing discourse of black female victimhood, the authors attempt to read agency as “the act of confronting identity and taking control of the image,” in many of the subjects of photographic study.

In an earlier piece on representations of black women in photography, Carla Williams recalls her discovery of a now well-known daguerreotype of a nude black woman touching her genitals, circa 1850s. Most likely intended for private collection by a wealthy white of the era, Williams sees this explicit daguerreotype as “a crucial development in the visual depiction of African women.” In studying the image, she argues for the possibility that this woman could be bringing pleasure to herself, as her hand on her genitals suggests, in similar terms of self-portraiture, that is, “self-sufficient, highly personal, and exploratory.” Williams makes a distinction between the photographic nude and erotic imagery: “unlike a photograph of a ‘nude’ which is thought to be classic and formal and idealized, the specifically erotic image is naked and dark, animalistic and fleshly.” Williams uses the coded language of black female sexuality to describe the operations of the erotic. In reading the possibility of pleasure experienced by the photographic subject, Williams suggests that the woman’s pleasure is beyond the reach of the photographer and the various historic audiences of the image.

Williams emphasizes the importance of revisiting historical representations of the black female body and of resisting a reobjectification of these subjects by reducing them to silent victims who had no control over the visual reproduction of their bodies. For Williams, mapping this lineage is significant because of what she describes as the cultural imperative in black communities to cover—to hide one’s flesh and de-emphasize black female corporeality, in other words the practice of respectability, as a response to dominant culture’s probing, dissecting, and displaying of black female bodies. Williams, who is both a writer and a photographer, disidentifies with the cultural imperative to cover up the black female body in her photographic practice, while recognizing that because of historical and discursive forces, self-portraiture for the black female artist is necessarily problematic.

Considering the power of the counterdiscourse of respectability and silence that drives black female practices to resist the dominant gaze and systems of exploitation based on black female visibility, Evelyn Hammonds writes:

Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a “void” or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women’s bodies are always already colonized. . . . Historically, black women have reacted to this repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility.

Hammonds points out that these silences and ellipses have often been used to avoid the persistence of the dominant gaze to look upon and frame the black female body through discourses of deviance and excessiveness. Underlying Hammonds’s statement is the irresolvability of the black female body as troubling presence in dominant visual culture. It is not a problem that can be “fixed” through proper dressing or rendering oneself invisible. Thus, excess flesh enactments not only reference dominant visual culture’s ambivalence at times, hostility and desire at others, toward black female corporeality, but excess flesh enactments also acknowledge without conforming to the cultural imperative of blacks to promote a visibility of respectability and uplift.
Debates about the merits of various strategies of visibility and respectability have long preoccupied marginalized groups and have exhausted academic discourse specifically with regards to organized struggles in the civic and public domain. Peggy Phelan’s 1993 study Unmarked registers an important moment in the study of visibility politics. The much-cited and rigorously debated study cautions politically oppressed and minoritized groups of the limitations of visibility as a strategy against dominant structures: “Visibility and invisibility are crucially bound; invisibility polices visibility and in this specific sense functions as the ascendant term in the binary. Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda.” 29 Many performance theorists and scholars writing on the practices of subjects and communities of color have pointed out the dangers of going “unmarked” by dominant political, judicial, economic, and social systems that have rendered marginalized populations already invisible, such as the masses of brown and black peoples who labor in the service industries of Western metropoles. Equally important is the critique that Evelyn Hammonds and other black feminist scholars have offered of how the strategy of invisibility and the “politics of silence” that black women have deployed to counter the penetrating gaze of dominant visual culture have helped maintain black female marginalization. 30

Hammonds argues that black women’s practices of going unmarked in the realm of sexuality and bodily politics reinforce the taboo of black female sexuality and hegemonic ideologies that encode their bodies with racialized and gendered meaning. Yet she cautions against an uncomplicated embrace of visibility to counter the damage of silence done to the black female body and black sexualities and argues, “visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a ‘politics of articulation.’” 31

Embracing both Phelan’s and Hammonds’ skepticism of visibility as a political strategy while acknowledging the enforced invisibility placed on racialized subjects, I argue that understanding systems of visuality as necessarily troubling structures makes viable a different set of questions about black visibility. The question becomes how do the terms of engagement change in performative practices that are rooted in the trouble of visibility?

Excess flesh as an enactment, while not necessarily resistant, can be productive in conceiving of an identificatory possibility for black female subjects that refuses the aberrant representations of the black female subject in dominant visual culture. Excess flesh offers the possibility of particularizing the spectraphoria that Maurice Wallace argues frames the black masculine figure in the public sphere, and I would add intensifies the gaze upon the black female subject. By spectraphoria, Wallace refers to a cultural vision that frames black men “through the spectral and the spectacular in racialist representations.” 32 I would maintain that, with different gendered implications, “spectraphoria” also captures the black female body as ontologically aberrant. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, identification is the process by which the subject comes into being through a recognition and alienation of self, facilitated by the reflection of an idealized image. 33 Psychoanalytic theorists from Frantz Fanon to David Eng and Kaja Silverman have revealed in their writings that the process of identification for all subjects is not facilitated by an ideal ego. Equally important for my purpose here is how their writings—with respect to their distinctively different projects—demonstrate the significance of the imago in the process of subject formation as enunciated by Lacan. 34 About this, Silverman writes, “Lacan sharply differentiates the gaze from the subject’s look, conferring visual authority not on the look but on the gaze. He thereby suggests that what is determinative for each of us is not how we see or would like to see ourselves, but how we are perceived by the cultural gaze.” 35 It is to be understood without explication that “the cultural gaze” stands in for white male positonality in looking relations. This is abetted by a symbolic order that structures white men with perception and authority. Moreover, in much of the scholarship on visual culture and race, including my own work, the cultural gaze so defined is the psychic and symbolic impetus for divergent art practices that redress its subjugation of others as curious objects of scopophilic play.

South African conceptual artist Tracey Rose, influenced by late twentieth-century women’s performance photography and video art, takes on optics and the power of looking in her art. Much of her work engages directly—often confrontationally—with the dominant cultural gaze, as well as the multiple looks of the artist and her audiences. TKO is a black-and-white video installation projected on a translucent scrim. In the video Rose, naked, shadow-boxes with a punching bag that holds a camera. Three other cameras are positioned in the makeshift room where she boxes. The soundtrack is a mixture of pain and ecstasy as she becomes breathless from punching and dodging the bag. Her breathlessness leads to shrieks, then to sounds of exhaustion and moans, and back to slow, loud breathing. The reference to violence, self-mutilation, and aggression is heightened by the fact that we can never see the artist’s entire figure. We catch glimpses of her face, her torso, her pubic hair as she struggles with the bag. Her performance of excess flesh is oddly through a lack of revelation. Spectators can never
see the artist’s body in its entirety. Nor do we get a static shot of the artist. Instead, we witness fleeting glimpses of body parts accompanied by her sounds of effort and struggle. The video installation also references how pain and captivity get aligned with black female bodies historically and in contemporary culture. Rose complicates projects that simply frame black women as victims of a masterful gaze by occupying the hypermasculine and hyperviolent realm of boxing. In TKO Rose sets up the circumstances under which she struggles, whimpers, and cries. Performing as boxer, Rose inflicts pain and dodges it.

In a series of performative photographs and a video installation entitled Ciao Bella, Rose takes up various renderings of excessive dark female bodies and sexualities. The artist costumes herself, in the theatricalized manner of Cindy Sherman, to explore visually female archetypes. Through her performance of an eroticized abjectness, she emphasizes the exaggerated genitalia, à la Venus Hottentot, in tropes of the black female other. She meticulously references early feminist video and performance art in her work. In particular, Rose’s work references the explicit body performances of feminist artists like Carolee Schneeman and Anne Sprinkle. An Artforum review describes Rose as “pushing herself beyond the point of physical exhaustion, parodying racial stereotypes, or overlaying sex with violence and pleasure with pain, Rose locates herself among women who have previously confronted themselves (and others) in their art.”

Rose’s practice engages with the imago of black female excessiveness through the performative and expands our understanding of its impact. Rose’s play with historical iconography and contemporary context complicates the conceptualization of the cultural gaze, one that acknowledges the heterogeneity of twenty-first-century visual culture and audiences. In Rose’s work, as well as many of the other artists discussed here, the performative of black female excess combines the haunting presence of historical terror with a tongue-in-cheek satire and the aesthetics and tone of contemporary popular culture. To use Powell’s term, it is a cutting and dissecting of the imago as structured through dominant visuality. Lorraine Morales Cox, in looking at the “performative turn” in the work of artist Kara Walker writes of the importance of “looking at performance within the field of the visual.” The performative aspect of Rose’s work allows for the audience to engage materially, spatially, and corporeally with the imago that bears such psychic weight. About Walker’s performance of historical memory, Cox writes: “With the insertion of her own contemporary body, Walker more directly addresses the past through her present self, both as a two dimensional rep-

resenatation as well as a more directly visceral presence through the theatricality of her actual body.” Such artistic practices privilege the performative component of visual narrates and in so doing turn excess flesh into a strategic enactment and not a being unto itself.

Mass Culture and the Spectacle of Black Female Excess

Rose’s work reveals the influence of earlier women artists but also the ways in which art markets, popular culture, and mass consumption speak across various fields and industries in contemporary visual culture. So far, I have discussed the operations of excess flesh within the art industry. The contemporary art market is a sphere in which excess flesh might be folded into ongoing debates of artistic freedom, challenges to canonical art history, and the politics of institutional funding. Excess flesh enactments, framed through notions of artistic freedom, are folded into recurring issues that have emerged throughout the last decades of the twentieth century with regard to artistic standards, government funding, and notions of social decency. Even as artists like Cox and Rose maintain positions that challenge the racialized and gendered norms of art history and the art market and as their works demonstrate their investment in mass and popular cultural forms of production and practice, they are read as artists within traditions and histories of art making and reception; and their works get read within that domain as art.

The fissures and limitations of excess flesh emerge when the concept is used to discuss the range of engagements and performative utterances of black female cultural practitioners in the larger domains of mass culture and black popular culture. By mass culture, I mean to invoke its usage within cultural studies to refer to the scale and reach of cultural production and dissemination targeted at the widest sectors of populations, regions, and societies both nationally and internationally. This is not to suggest a homogeneity or sameness in thinking among audiences and sectors of mass culture. In fact, the notion of the global—as in global localization—evidences both the scale of distribution of mass cultural ideas and goods and the ways in which specific communities and groups appropriate and create context-specific meaning out of these goods. My use of black popular culture grows from Stuart Hall’s influential essay, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” in which Hall defines black popular culture as a “contradictory space” that marks difference and commodification. Hall writes that like all histories of popular culture, black popular culture has roots in traditions,
In the following pages, I look at two different popular cultural figures and the production and circulation of excess flesh enactments. The first reading is Janet Jackson’s 2004 Super Bowl performance in which her breast was revealed and circulated instantaneously to television’s largest audience. The second reading is of the rapper Lil’ Kim, focusing on her late 1990s–early 2000s music videos, performances, and lyrics. In many respects, my analysis of Lil’ Kim is an obvious move given that Lil’ Kim is commonly cited in studies and criticism of black popular culture and black female sexuality. Because of her familiarity as topic in black cultural studies and the fact that her recording and performing career has waned throughout much of the last decade, my choice may be seen as dated, which in many ways reveals how we distinguish the value and relevance of that which is deemed as art (à la Cox and Rose) and that which is rendered as fleeting popular cultural products. However, Lil’ Kim’s excess flesh performances, which recite earlier excessive black female performers like Betty Davis and Millie Jackson, also push the boundaries of the more socially acceptable excessive performances of contemporary hip-hop and R&B performers such as Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Ciara. Also important is to consider Lil’ Kim’s popularity and circulation during the late 1990s and early 2000s primarily among blacks of different ages, youth, urban, and queer communities.

Excess flesh performances in mass culture produce a sharper lens to see the operations of the discourse of captivity and capital that frames the black body in the field of vision. The visible black body is interpreted through the discourse of commodification and the simultaneous punishment of circum-Atlantic trades in the flesh and the structures of racialization that emerges through these practices. Art historian Lisa Collins calls the workings of this discourse on the black figure “economies of the flesh” in her study of black female artists’ engagement with historical narrative. The black body enters the field of vision through a visual economy of flesh and trade. Hortense Spillers theorizes how the captive body of the Atlantic slave trade informs contemporary discourses about the flesh and the visibility of the black female body. Spillers writes:

the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as prime commodity of exchange. While this proposition is open to further exploration, suffice it to say now that this
open exchange of female bodies in the raw offers a kind of Ur-text to the
dynamics of signification and representation that the gendered female would
unravel.\textsuperscript{40}

One of the most captivating aspects of late twentieth-/early twenty-first-
century popular culture is how the once denigrated but utilitarian body of
chattel slavery manifests itself as the idealized fetish object of contemporary
transnational capital, often with black cultural brokers as its producer—a
dynamic taken up at greater length in the next chapter with an analysis of
black urban fashion and advertising. In many cases, black cultural brokers
market and brand themselves as product, pitch person, and corporation.
The most sensational crystallization of this growing position in dominant
popular culture is the rise of the hip-hop mogul. In examining the emer-
gence of the hip-hop mogul, Christopher Holmes Smith considers social,
economic, cultural, and political forces that allowed for the emergence of
the hip-hop mogul during the 1990s—the boom years of the Clinton presi-
dency.\textsuperscript{41} The successes of young black male filmmakers and music-video
 producers, the evolution of the iconic rapper into media entrepreneur (i.e.,
Jay-Z, Sean Combs, and others), and the various positions of power that
blacks occupy throughout sports, media and music industries have changed
the ways in which media critics and scholars must think and write about the
relationship between production and reception in cultural theory. While
several connections can be made between the black body as commodity in
contemporary settings and historical uses of the black body as consumption
good, it is important to acknowledge a significant structural change in the
realm of entertainment arts in which many black entrepreneurs and artists
are now producers of such goods.

The interplay between corporate interests, black cultural figures as bro-
kers and performers of racialized spectacle, and historical legacies of capital
and captivity surfaced in mass culture through the 2004 controversy over
black popular musician Janet Jackson’s Super Bowl halftime performance.
In this case, national and international audiences witnessed one of the most
sensational and publicized displays of the spectacular and deviant represen-
tations of black woman as excessive in contemporary memory. During
the airing of the largest televised event annually, Janet Jackson performed a
medley of songs with young white pop musician Justin Timberlake in part
to promote her new album. As they performed their final number—Timber-
lake’s hit song, “Rock Your Body,” Timberlake, who is a generation younger
than Jackson and grew up studying the moves of the Jackson family and
other black musicians, reached across the body of Jackson and ripped away
the clothing covering her right breast, while singing the lines, “I’ll have you
naked by the end of this song.”\textsuperscript{42}

The immediate reaction by CBS, the network channel that broadcast the
event, and media outlets nationally was one of shock, anger, and confusion.
The sense of outrage was expressed, most virulently, by male politicians,
media executives, and cultural figures. Ironically, Spike Lee (the subject of
representational criticism as discussed in the introduction of this study)
called the performance—specifically the bare breasting—a “new low” in media spectacles by entertainers. After the show Timberlake smiled and called it a “wardrobe malfunction.” Yet a couple of days after the event and after the escalation in media response—including the announcement of an investigation by the FCC—Timberlake disavowed his role in the performance, stating that he had gotten word of the change in the performance when he arrived for the show. Even more ironically, Timberlake emphasized his alarm over the revealing of Jackson’s breast in an interview, stating, “I was completely shocked and appalled, and all I could say was ‘Oh my God, Oh my God.’”

Timberlake’s relationship to the performance is particularly striking. After the spectacle Timberlake and media coverage transformed him from a seducer who announces his intention to divulge Jackson’s body to an unsuspecting victim who was the injured party, assaulted by Jackson’s breast. According to postevent publicity, Timberlake only agreed to perform after Jackson personally requested that he duet with her, suggesting his reluctance to participate. Second, MTV, CBS, Timberlake and later Jackson pointed to Jackson as being the mastermind behind the “stunt” (Jackson’s choice of words during her videotaped apology), a ploy in which Timberlake agrees to perform a simultaneous seduction of and attack on Jackson’s eroticized body clothed in tight leather, vinyl, and chains. In other words, deeming Jackson as the masterminds, reinforces the innocence of Timberlake, who had no idea what was in store for him. Third, Timberlake denies any possible pleasure derived from the performance by emoting a response of shock and disgust. As the aftermath of the incident continued to grow with an increasing public outcry for someone to be punished, Timberlake’s story solidified into one in which he reluctantly agreed to perform an attack on Jackson’s ready and willing body. It is an attack that in the end victimizes him, as Jackson is represented as the dubious seductress and predator of the national audience’s sense of moral and codes of conduct.

Doina Mounsef offers a close analysis of “Nipplegate” (the media catchphrase to describe the Super Bowl performance and fallout) by looking at obscenity debates and other public controversies over exposed breasts. Writing on shifting cultural notions of the obscene and the role of female nudity in defining the boundaries of decency, Mounsef states, ”Jackson’s slight is a performative excess that moves the activity of viewing from a transparent relationship of meaning and expression to a denial of significance and identification, creating the conditions for a profound loss of meaning, and absence of referentiality.” While Mounsef’s piece acknowledges how race complicates Jackson’s performance, her analysis does not fully engage with how racialized sexuality constitutes the Super Bowl show as a different and heightened social breach. Racialized hypersexuality typically frames the dominant viewing public as the victim of the wanton ways of the woman of color whose performance, while titillating, threatens the social fabric of white heteronormativity and public decency. In her analysis of the spectatorial ambivalence toward the hypersexualized Asian woman’s body, Celine Parreñas Shimizu writes, “hypersexuality leads to a traumatic viewing experience. In denying one’s own pleasure from the sight of pathologic sexuality, the spectator is made perverse.”

Excess flesh performances in mass culture threaten white reproductive through its invocation of miscegenation rooted in historical rape of black women, as well as contemporary fantasies and practices of interracial sex. In the particular case of “Nipplegate,” Timberlake and others responded to Jackson’s excess flesh performance by configuring the rapist/seducer (Timberlake), the promisk (MTV and CBS), and the general public (audiences of the Super Bowl) as the victims. Sara Ahmed’s theory of affective economies explicates how shared emotions among normative subjects are produced often through the production of marginalized subjects/other as victimizers who disrupt the normative subjects’ positive attachment to sameness: “The ordinary or normative subject is reproduced as the injured party: the one ‘hurt’ or even damaged by the ‘invasion’ of others. The bodies of others are hence transformed into ‘the hated’ through a discourse of pain.”

In a commentary Carla Williams places Jackson’s breast exposure in the historical context of representations of black women’s sexuality and the lack of ownership (for the most part) that black women have had over producing and controlling representations of their bodies. Williams writes:

It was fine if her record company was selling her sexuality and no one was complaining, but when the public finally cried foul everyone backed away to leave her twisting alone in the media wind. So now Jackson solely to blame. It’s a familiar trope in American culture—the oversexed black woman, now even willing to whip her tit out on national television to sell some records. She has to be stopped.”

Williams’s response suggests how social discourse narrates a relationship to the black female body that insists upon her punishment when she ventures (intentionality aside) to engage in excess flesh performances without the endorsement or sponsorship of dominant visual and commodity culture. Similar to the response to Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper, Jackson’s bodily performance—for a different and much larger audience—provides
controversy. Not unlike those who tepidly defended Cox, some of the critics and writers who spoke out in support of Jackson did so with skepticism, arguing that her publicity ploy was an attempt to reignite her diminishing career. For example, Frank Rich, in a tongue-in-cheek essay in the *New York Times* entitled “My Hero, Janet Jackson,” writes:

You can argue that Ms. Jackson is the only honest figure in this Super Bowl of hypocrisy. She was out to accomplish a naked agenda—the resuscitation of her fading career on the eve of her new album’s release—and so she did. She’s not taking much remorse, either. Last Sunday she refused to appear on the Grammys rather than accede to CBS’s demand that she perform a disingenuous, misty-eyed ritual “apology” to the nation for her crime of a week earlier. By contrast, Justin Timberlake, the wimp who gave the English language the lasting gift of “wardrobe malfunction,” did as he was told, a would-be pop rebel in a jacket and a tie, looking like a schoolboy reporting to the principal’s office. Ms. Jackson, one suspects, is laughing all the way to the bank.46

Cox’s transgression was one that disrupted dominant religious narratives. Too, Jackson’s breach was sacrilegious as she was seen as disrespecting the rituals and etiquette of the sports industry’s and advertising industry’s most sacred moment—one that mixes religion, patriotism, and masculine competition for international audiences. More important, Jackson was discussed in similar terms as the attacks on Cox. Both were seen as black women who strategically and willingly used visibility as tools for the promotion of their careers.

The Hip-Hop Music Video and Technologies of Excess

While there are many similarities between the Cox and Jackson controversies, I am more interested in the differences between excess flesh enactments in various arenas of cultural production. In the example of Janet Jackson’s performance for an audience of many millions, she must deny her performance and is punished for the enactment. The role of Timberlake and the display of interracial intimacy animated the fury over the performance. In black popular culture, excess flesh enactments are often read as culturally specific. They are contained as the excesses of black popular culture for black audiences. This is most clearly evidenced in the hip-hop music video genre of the 1990s and early 2000s where the shiny, bouncing, minimally clothed black female body is ubiquitous within the form. It is a black female body in motion as hypersexed vixen that brands this otherwise male-dominated cultural production.

The hip-hop music video genre, popularized by notable black music video directors Hype Williams, Little X, and Paul Hunter, to name a few, has been applauded for technological and aesthetic innovation while at the same time thoroughly criticized for portraying black women in some of the most over-the-top and explicitly reductive representations in contemporary popular culture. The salience of these images has led to a system of classifying character tropes in this genre with women as extras referenced as “video vixens” and “video hoes.” The music video has become the symbol of black female undervaluation as individual subjects, and overrepresentation as surplus populations within black cultural representation. These performers exist in a precarious relationship between being and enacting excess flesh. They exist in multitudes. The commonly used fish-eye lens of many of the videos that emerged in the mid 1990s–mid 2000s frames body parts: large butts accessorized in lingerie, shiny legs, navels, cleavage; faces are often excluded or blurred. The dance, too, is excessive. They bend over and fully expose their buttocks to the camera. Their fleshy thighs and jiggly buttocks captivate the camera. They are autoerotic, driving themselves to inappropriate levels of ecstasy. They appear in various manifestations of excess flesh surrounding the iconic male rapper. Often the lyrics dissect these figures. “Back that ass up,” “I like it when you do that thang,” “Shake that thang,” and “Is there any room for me in those jeans” are just a few of the lines from popular rap songs.

The music video serves as a medium for the continual circulation and “global touring” of the black female performing body, in historical referentiality to Baartman.47 Through analogic and digital video, the bodies multiply, reproduce, and perform continuously. These videos show the distinctions between excess flesh enactments in mass culture and black popular culture. While MTV commonly runs videos of male rappers, BET has created special programming that broadcast explicit or uncut versions of the more tamed versions that air on MTV. BET’s late-night show *Uncut* airs the hybrid genre where music videos and pornographic videos merge.51 Mireille Miller-Young looks at the burgeoning industry of hip-hop pornography, in which some well-known male rappers, like Snoop Doggy Dogg, capitalize on the popularity of black women as excess flesh in music videos and culture at large. Miller-Young looks at how softcore hip-hop music videos and hardcore hip-hop porn rely on the reproduction of black women’s sexualized bodies to authenticate the masculinity of black male rappers and
porn actors. While these videos and performances reproduce in most cases heteronormative and misogynistic codes, Miller-Young argues that “black video models and sex workers mobilize their sexualities in the marketplace of desire for their own interests of access, opportunity, mobility, and fame.”

The hip-hop music video has been a familiar target of critique by black public figures, scholars, and cultural critics who have focused on the representations of black women in the genre. In particular, black feminist scholars and cultural critics have examined the precarious positions of black females as audience, artists, and objects of desire/disgust in hip-hop music and videos. Joan Morgan considers the representation of black women in hip-hop in relation to heteronormative intimate relations between black women and men. Considering the power relations and the specter of violence and domination that color black heterosexuality, Morgan asks how a young black woman steeped in hip-hop can emerge with a feminist conscious and a body politic that sees the self as anything other than aberrant. Morgan works to articulate a position that she describes as hip-hop feminist, a position that claims “the powerful richness and delicious complexities inherent in being black girls now—sistas of the post–Civil Rights, post-feminist, post soul, hip-hop generation.” It is a position that she acknowledges is replete with contradictions and describes her own feelings of being seduced by the lyrics of many male rappers, lyrics that in the end often reduce black women to be splayed out, prepped, and ready for penetration.

Inspired by the excess flesh of the “video ho,” artist Ayana Moor created a photographic series entitled Still. Through the series, Moor dissects the music video by capturing still images of the “video ho” from popular music videos. In Still, the excessive performances of female video performers are framed as discreet photographic moments. The women performing as eye candy take center over the male rapper. The series consists of four digital still images titled: Clap, Face, Lean, and Glow. In Lean, a young female dancer is captured in the midst of a dance in which she leans backward with her legs spread apart. Her arms are outstretched and her midsection is bare. She stares at the camera with her lips pursed. She is caught in a moment of extraordinary feat where her midsection seems suspended in space. Behind her, we can see the headless bodies of others who cheer her on. Glow, another still, is a close-up of the face of a video performer as she looks out with her mouth half open. Her face, hair, and shoulders are made radiant by the light frozen at this moment. Behind but darkened by her light are others dancing and partying. Moor, in an accompanying statement, writes:

![Figure 3.7. Ayana Moor, Clap, photograph, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.](image)

Captured frames imply moments unintended by the larger music-video narrative. Compositional choices reduce the depiction of once-dominant male performers to supportive background visuals, if they are represented at all. The images focus exclusively on women offers a second look at the so-called music-video vixen. Formerly images based in time, the video characters, now frozen, permit unconventional portraits. . . . Within the feminist critique of hip-hop, is there room to consider women’s embrace of sexually provocative performance forms?

Moor’s take on portraiture mirrors art historian Powell’s assertion about the ways in which black artists create disruptive portraits of black subjects through severing, splicing, and cutting black figuration from dominant representation. Moor’s process of generating the still image from the video performance is a component of her interventionist strategy in which she takes a photograph of video in real time as it plays on a television. For Moor, it is an attempt to frame a moment of dialogue between video performer and the artist as audience member and consumer. In some sense, it is a contemporary form of Pittsburgh photographer Charles Harris’s attempts to capture the sidemen and audience as opposed to photographing the black iconic entertainer (see chapter 1). Moor questions the possibilities of
the "video ho" to engage and perform sexual pleasure that does not simply and solely reinforce her overdetermination as always already hypersexed being. This reading is critical in moving cultural discourse away from the pejorative reading of the music video form and the reproduction of black female performing bodies as aberrant. Moor visualizes these bodies not as a state of being but as one of enacting, offering new possibilities of seeing pleasure and play in the hip-hop music video, even while attending to the ways in which excess performance plays into dominant conceptions of racialized sexuality.

Ayanah Moor’s video’s *Baby Got Back* (2004) takes us back to the earlier reference of Sir Mix-a-Lot’s rap song, “Baby Got Back” and Cox’s similarly titled *Baby Back*. Moor’s video is quite striking in how it deviates from the music-video form while adhering to the song’s lyrics. The video is minimalist in its composition of a close-up frame of a black woman in a black t-shirt and a white background. The woman recites Sir Mix-a-Lot’s lyrics rapidly and with emphasis on references to body parts and features. As she demonstrates lyrical dexterity (rapping with more speed and precision than the original version of the song), she expresses pleasure and desire with smiles and hand gestures. In one part, the rapper slows down and enunciates each word to emphasize her deviation from white beauty aesthetics: “When it comes to females, Cosmo ain’t got nothing to do with my selection.” Along these lines, Tricia Rose writes that Sir Mix-a-Lot’s song expresses “both an explicit desire for black women’s protruding behinds and at the same time mock[s] the fashion industry for celebrating anorexic-looking white women.” In remixing Sir Mix-a-Lot’s song, Moor cites and queers the heteronormativity of its lyrics while still rendering the black female back a fetish object. Moor comments on her position in an artist statement:

In contrast to MixAloit’s rap and lively musical arrangement, I revisited the tune via an acapella rendition. The gender politics of this humorous ode to the derriere shifts when recited by a female narrator. Just as MixAloit enthusiastically blurs the line between objectification and celebration of black woman’s bodies, the new gendered speaker playfully inserts queer identity into hip-hop’s hyper masculine aesthetic. Often criticized for misogynistic lyrics, the change of commercial rap’s male face expands such critiques to a larger American society whose women continue to confront sexism and fight for gender equality. In this work I invoke additional popular modes of performance and representation: the global popularity of karaoke and the tension it evokes when compared to drag performance. Equally I welcome associations with the genre of documentary, when the work is viewed as an impassioned confessional. Feminizing the orator in this video work both queers otherwise heterosexual lyrical content and offers praise of the representation of black women’s bodies in mainstream media.

Moor considers the spectatorial position of black female audiences of hip-hop music and videos. Do black women identify with the male rapper or the multitudinous women who adorn the rapper as body parts for his consumption? And how do black queer women negotiate and express desire in these heteronormative and masculine sites? In considering these questions, Andrena Clay writes that oftentimes when queer women participate in hip-hop it is through a performative restaging (a concept that she borrows from Jack Halberstam) where “black masculinity is changed in that these women are exploring their masculinity in relationship to the women that they love and have sex with.” For Clay, it is a claim for legitimacy and an expression of desire not afforded through dominant popular culture and public space. Excess flesh in this context serves as an intervention in heteronormative and hypermasculine black popular culture where desire is expressed among bodies marked as such through an appropriation of black masculinity.
What happens when the video vixen is the object, subject, and author of the video such as in the performances of sexually explicit rappers like Lil’ Kim? In the late 1990s/early 2000s, Lil’ Kim served as both an example of hip-hop’s degradation of women and of hip-hop female empowerment. Not unlike Jackson, Lil’ Kim participated in a television moment that centered her exposed breast. In 1999, during the MTV Music Video Awards broadcast on the cable channel, the rapper arrived with an outfit that exposed one of her breasts. A purple star covered the nipple of her exposed flesh. While presenting an award with legendary soul singer Diana Ross, Ross noted the rapper’s outfit. Ross then reached out and bounced Lil’ Kim’s breast to see if the star was secure. I believe that this occurrence did not receive the outcry and level of anger expressed about the Jackson incident because instead the Kim incident circulated in entertainment news as evidence of her outrageousness and overdetermined excessiveness. Also, her breast while touched by another woman remained partially covered by the star. Furthermore, the social breach did not involve white entertainers. Instead it was the older black female star—once known as a crossover sexual icon—examining the hypersexed body of a younger generation of black female celebrity.

Lil’ Kim’s raps are known for appropriating the masculine language of sexual conquest, domination, violence, and the power of the penis. Playing on the terms set by well-known male rappers, especially her former lover and mentor Notorious B.I.G., Lil’ Kim positions herself and gains street credibility by using a familiar braggadocio rap narrative structure, at times substituting references to her sexual organs for the lingo of penis common in rap. In her rap “Suck My Dick” (2000), Lil’ Kim imagines herself with a penis and penetrating “niggas” in hip-hop who perform the bottom. Lil’ Kim raps, “Niggas love a hard bitch / One that get up in a / nigga’s ass quicker than an enema / Make a cat bleed then sprinkle it with vinegar.”

She penetrates until he bleeds. Her acts of domination produce pain and pleasure in multiple audiences: “Kim got him in a zone beating they dicks / Even got some of these straight chicks rubbing their tires.” Her role play in this song shifts between a woman queering heterosexual intercourse in which she as woman penetrates the man and occupying another queer position where her sexual identification is unclear but the object being penetrated is enunciated forcefully: that is, the black masculine figure who in heteronormative relationships sexually dominate and exploit black women.

Imagine if I was dude and hittin' cats from the back
With no strings attached

At the end of her fantasy play, Lil’ Kim dismisses: “Niggas ain’t shit but they still can trick/All they can do for me is suck my clit/I’m jumpin’ up and up after I come/Thinkin’ they gon’ get some pussy but they get none.”360 Lil’ Kim reverses the pimp-ho dyad that circulates in hip-hop culture and heteronormative black popular culture. The rapper turns her male partner into one who functions for her sexual pleasure and whose pleasure she denies.

Lil’ Kim visually manifests her penchant for role playing and fantasy construction in her music videos that function as hyperreal, hypersexed exhibitions of excessive tropes. In the video to her rap, “How Many Licks” directed by Francis Lawrence (a well-known black male video director), Lil’ Kim is the prototype of a doll whose function is to provide ecstatic pleasure to male consumers. Lil’ Kim moves between various personas as she packages herself as a series of sexual commodities. She fashions herself as a dominatrix in control of bringing her male audience to orgasm. Her male subjects in the video are framed as in the throes of a painful pleasure over which they have no control. Lil’ Kim’s proficiency at bringing them to orgasmic heights is a self-serving achievement, she declares. Their desire for her simply increases her power and her autoeroticism.

Figuring black female sexuality as technology, the first scenes of the music video show a state-of-the-art factory where a shiny object is being manufactured. In the corner of the video we see “MADE IN THE USA” with an American flag to the right. The following words flash in quick succession: “Back By Popular Demand,” “the original,” “realistic” “Anatomically Correct,” “Fully Edible.” Then we see the pieces of the commodity coming together, culminating with Lil’ Kim’s head being deposited on top of a petite manufactured body on an assembly line. Behind the assembled commodity are partially assembled Lil’ Kim dolls on their way to being fully manufactured commodities as they move along the conveyor belt. These dolls do not bleed nor do their parts have bone, muscle tissue, or sinews. They twist, screw, and pop together with ease, perfectly assembled to serve a precise function. The flesh of the corporeal Kim has become infinitely reproduced in plastic pleasure. We then see the name of the commercial product: “Lil’ Kim/Edible Dolls.”
Lil' Kim comes to life and marches down a runway. The words "Candy Kim" are flashed as she begins to craft a millennial narrative in which she frames herself as the international, multicultural lover/commodity good. Lil' Kim begins the first verse in typical rap braggadocio fashion:

I've been a lot of places, seen a lot of faces
Ah hell I even f*ck with different races
A white dude—he's name was John
He had a Queen Bee Rules tattoo on his arm, uh
He asked me if I'd be his date for the prom
And he'd buy me a horse, a Porsche and a farm
Dan my nigga from Down South
Used to like me to spank him and come in his mouth
And Tony he was Italian (Uhh-huh)
And he didn't give a f*ck (Uhh-huh)
That's what I liked about him

Lil' Kim invokes a top-bottom sexual dialectic and invokes dominant ethnic, racial, and gender tropes in describing her sexual exploits. The "Queen Bee Rules" tattoo that she references on one of her lovers is a homage to Lil' Kim, who also goes by the moniker Queen Bee. She brands John the "white dude" as her possession, referencing the complex history of slaves being named, branded, and raped by their masters. Later in verse one, she recalls another one of the men she conquered: "And this black dude I called King Kong/He had a big ass dick and a hurricane tongue." Lil' Kim uses dominant racial tropes to her advantage as she performs in more excessive and dominant ways than the hypermasculine, hyper-hung figuration of the black male.

Of note is that the sexually ambiguous black male pop singer Sisquö (best known for "The Thong Song") sings the refrain. Sisquö urges on Lil' Kim's stories of sexual conquest with his query:

So, how many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?
(Cause I've got to know)
How many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?
(Tell me)
How many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?
(Oh, oh, oh)
How many licks does it take till you get to the center of the?
(Oh, oh, oh, oh)

Sisquö's question is unanswerable as there is no end in sight of the autoerotic power of Lil' Kim and her endless reproducibility. As Sisquö's cries for more titillation and for relief at the same time, we see Lil' Kim dancing with video vixens behind her. Lil' Kim and the dancers are minimally dressed in silver metallic bikinis and knee-high black boots. They kick their legs open to the side and Lil' Kim rubs her crotch. With each refrain, Sisquö intensifies his plea to know the limits of that which has no boundaries: Lil' Kim's sexually and corporeally enacted excesses.

As the second verse begins, the words "Pin-Up Kim" flash across the screen with a glossy image of Lil' Kim's face underneath the words. She then begins to play out a fantasy of bringing sexual relief to

my niggas in jail
Beat in' they d**ks to the XXL Magazine (uhh)
You like how I look in the aqua green?
Get your Vaseline

Under the images of inmates masturbating to "Pin-Up Kim," we see the words "Dramatization" and "Some Fantasies May Vary." As Lil' Kim brings alive a reimagining of the Jane Fonda Barbarella poster, the words "State and Federal Prison Approved" appear. We then see inmates gathering around the images of Lil' Kim as the artist raps, "Stop, look and listen; get back to your position/Kim got your dick hard, startin' fights in the yard."
Like many male rappers who give “shout-outs” to black men in prison as a way of acknowledging the systemic incarceration and subjugation of surplus populations of black men, Lil’ Kim offers her own shout-out. Hers is one that acknowledges their desire for pleasure, sexual intimacy, and to be recognized through the look of another.

While the song is a playful take on the playa rap in which black male rappers detail their sexual exploits, Lil’ Kim frames herself as both conqueror and sexual object explicitly marketed as such for her own pleasure. In the final verse, we are shown a third commodity object expropriated from the corporeal subject, “Nightrider Kim.” We, as audience and consumers, are told that the commodity is much in demand with the words “Get yours while supplies last.” She rhymes:

After three bottles I’ll be ready to fuck
Some niggas even put me on their grocery lists
Right next to the whip cream and box of chocolates
Designer pussy, my shit come in flavors
High-class taste niggas got to spend paper
Lick it right the first time or you gotta do it over
Like it’s rehearsal for a Tootsie commercial

At the end of this verse as the song begins to wane, Lil’ Kim pulls up in a car next to an unsuspecting young black man. The door of the car opens and the man is sucked in as if zapped by a space machine. Next to his abduction we see, “She doesn’t satisfy you. . . . You satisfy her.” One of our final images includes all three commodities with “Collect All Three/Taste the Difference.”

While performing inside the world of her own making, one in which she is infinitely reproducible, and in which she marks the beginning and end of sexual desire and pleasure, there are no restrictions on her performative excesses and the power she derives from sexual enactment as commodity form. Yet, in the realms of black popular culture and mainstream American culture, limits are placed on Lil’ Kim’s excess flesh performances. For one, Imani Perry points to the visual signs that construct Lil’ Kim’s fantasy play in the “How Many Licks” video. Perry notes that each of the dolls manufactured in the video is designed to imitate white standards of beauty. Perry writes:

The video stands as an apt metaphor for her self-commodification and use of white female beauty ideals. The video closes off its own possibilities. The doll factory image might have operated as a tongue-in-cheek criticism of image making or white female beauty ideals, but, instead, the video functions as a serious vehicle for Kim to be constructed as beautiful and seductive with blond hair and blue eyes. To be a doll in American popular culture is to be perfect, and she will satisfy many male fantasies as many times as she is replicated.

Perry’s critique raises an important question about Lil’ Kim’s performative utterances: are the visual signs of white female beauty and pornographic figurations the outer limits of Lil’ Kim’s excessive enactments? Perry points to Lil’ Kim’s transformation through plastic surgery, color contacts, and blonde weaves as mimicking not just any notion of white female desirability but specifically the pornographic body of a Pamela Anderson type. The phenotypic changes in Lil’ Kim occurred gradually as her celebrity status grew larger, and she moved, in some degrees, outside of hip-hop culture into wider spheres of American popular culture. Her facial features shifted as her nose became pinched and her cheeks sat higher; Lil’ Kim’s breasts became exponentially larger; and her hair extensions were longer and straighter, often blonde. Susan Bordo describes “cultural plastic,” a concept that she applies to popular performer Madonna, as “a construction of life as plastic possibility and weightless choice, undermined by history, social location, or even individual biography.” Through MTV appearances and fashion endorsements that often aligned her with a self-referential and camp aesthetic in the entertainment industry, Lil’ Kim appeared to be carving her figure and in so doing carving out a place for herself in American popular culture as predictably shocking and even safe in the ways that she performed excessiveness. One example of this is Lil’ Kim’s endorsement of MAC Cosmetics’ Viva Glam campaign, which is a fundraising tool for MAC AIDS Fund, a position that aligned her with other former spokespersons including black drag queen RuPaul, Boy George, and Pamela Anderson. Might Lil’ Kim’s plastic surgery and performance be a version of what Powell describes as “cutting a figure” in black portraiture by using her body as the medium? Her practice, though not redemptive or resistant, nonetheless engages with play, ostentatious display, and historical narrativity, features discussed in Powell’s theory of black portraiture aesthetics.

The slippage of excess flesh enactments arise in reading Lil’ Kim through such a framework as she increasingly manufactured her body on notions of eroticized white female bodies throughout much of the 2000s. Yet and still, there, in my estimation, is a curious appropriation of plastic surgery and visual signs of white femininity in Lil’ Kim’s refashioning of her facial
features and body parts. Her hyperbolic invocation of white pornographic fetish parts—such as oversized breasts, blue contact lens, and exaggerated hair length—point to her economic success, that is, the ability to purchase implants so large that they distort the proportionality of her body. In part, Lil’ Kim’s transformation is a sign of the boom period of the late 1990s–early 2000s that Christopher Holmes Smith describes that produced the hip-hop mogul as a result of economic, cultural and technological shifts that led to massive wealth accumulation for a few in historically underrepresented groups. One could read Lil’ Kim’s refashioning of her body parts as signaling the unnaturalness of white beauty, that is, the construction of beauty standards and the technologies and industries that create and maintain these standards. In so doing, Lil’ Kim’s enactment of excess flesh has transformed into an entirely different performance of difference. It is a performance that destabilizes the being of excess flesh and corporeal attachment to one that turns race and gender into plasticity, highly manufactured and purchasable goods. Lil’ Kim has relegated herself to a familiar spectacle who is no longer spectacular.

While Lil’ Kim’s career has faltered throughout much of the last decade, partly because of a criminal conviction in which she attempted to cover up the criminal acts of a black male rapper, Lil’ Kim resurfaced in 2009 on one of the most-watched network television shows of the year, *Dancing with the Stars*. Lil’ Kim’s body and body parts often became the subject of discussion for the television show’s judges over her performance as ballroom dancer. One judge coined her “the bionic booty.” After one performance, the judge announced, “Your booty can do no wrong.” In this respect, Lil’ Kim circulated in mainstream popular culture as the being of excess flesh, a representation that overshadowed her performance on a performance-driven television show.

As I have examined in this chapter, excess flesh enactments produce very different results depending on the cultural realm of circulation and the position of artist/cultural producer vis-à-vis structural hierarchies of art, commercial culture, or racialized popular culture. The different readings and responses largely have to do with the relationship between performer/artist and audience and the ways in which authorship is understood within those various domains. In each instance, the black female body has been overdetermined and these cultural practitioners have worked to differing impacts to destabilize this overly familiar figuration. The examples of excess flesh enactments here discussed have focused primarily on a fashioning of the black female corporeal figure through nudity or exposure of body parts. In the next chapter, I focus on the strategic deployment of the clothed black male body in hip-hop fashion and advertising. Hip-hop fashion companies, many owned by black men in the hip-hop industry, have turned the excess associated with black masculinity into big business. They have done this through turning the idealized and despised hypermasculine trope of black heterosexual masculinity into a very popular marketable good, associated with a wide range of fashion apparel and accessories.

Contemporary black entertainers attempt to perform (and articulate) the ways in which black aesthetic practices have transformed dominant commercialized popular culture in the United States and internationally. Black male stars like Sean “P. Diddy” Combs, Jay-Z, Russell Simmons, Kanye West, and Pharrell Williams have ventured into new commercial cultural forms meant specifically to deracialize explicitly the vestiges of blackness from hip-hop. For example, hip-hop mogul Sean Combs’s most recent MTV shows have focused on creating music bands with primarily white audiences. Black women performers, however, have been positioned and have positioned themselves quite differently in these cultural realignments. In the early twenty-first century, black women continue to be marked by blackness rooted in a legacy of a racial past and their bodies continue to bear these psychic and corporeal scars in dominant visual culture.