

BLACK SEXUAL POLITICS

**AFRICAN AMERICANS, GENDER,
AND THE NEW RACISM**

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BOOTY CALL

Sex, Violence, and Images of Black Masculinity

1997: The film *Booty Call* joins the ranks of a series of Hollywood romantic comedies that explore sexuality, love, and commitment in the 1990s. By following the exploits of four African Americans on a double date, the film examines the intricacies of the booty call, namely, the act of calling or contacting a person for the sole purpose of having sex. Rushon and Bunz, two men with conflicting views on commitment, differ on how Black men should treat Black women. Bunz believes in making booty calls and sees women as good for little else. Rushon has long followed Bunz's advice. But now that Rushon has been dating Nikki, his girlfriend of seven weeks, he questions the logic of the booty call. Nikki and Lysterine, the potential sex partners of the two men, both insist upon safe sex, yet they also differ in their perceptions of sexuality, love, and commitment. Nikki's search for a commitment from Rushon before having sex is far removed from Lysterine's views that booty calls can go both ways. During the evening, Nikki's resistance softens and Lysterine becomes enamored with Bunz. The women are ready, but they will only have safe sex. Thus begins the comedy—the seemingly endless search by Rushon and Bunz for condoms that turn into one disaster after another. Will these men ever get the booty?

Virtually overnight, the term *booty* came to permeate contemporary popular culture. Jennifer Lopez's booty is such an important asset to her career that she allegedly insures her buttocks. To help women who are less well endowed, advertisements sell booty enhancement surgery. A 1992 *Newsweek* article on "Buzzwords" among teenagers identifies *punk* (bad, not hip, uncool), *White* (someone who's bad at basketball), and *booty* (sex) as widely used teenage lingo. MTV shows an hour-long documentary devoted to the history of the booty. Who can forget the impact of hip-hop artist Sisquó's "Thong Song," the soundtrack for a fashion style that had women in the early 2000s proudly showing hints of their thong underwear (covering booty cleavage) under low-cut jeans? The term *booty call* also entered popular vernacular well before the 1997 film of the same name. It is now installed on many college campuses as a term for sex. Like urban legends, stories about African American men who seek booty calls (men who use women for sex and who reject commitment) circulate among African American women. On one campus, an African American female student who worked the front desk of a large dormitory regaled her class with stories of Black men who repeatedly signed in and out on the same night, visiting different women for booty calls. Should we erroneously think that only men make booty calls, women engage in booty calls as well. In this usage, a woman will call a man to come over in the middle of the night for sex (booty).

Two sets of meanings of the term *booty* provide an interpretive context for explaining this fascination with the booty. The first set reflects ideas about property and masculinity. This strand defines booty as plunder taken from an enemy in times of war. The actual booty is a valuable prize, award, or gain that cannot be given away—it must be taken. Thus, because this usage applies to goods or property seized by force, an element of violence is part of this very definition of *booty*. Because men historically have been soldiers, this characterization reflects ideas about masculinity, property, and violence. These meanings of *booty* draw upon images of conquest, warfare, and property that install the term *booty* within a staunchly masculine frame.¹

The second set of meanings of *booty* reflects ideas about sexuality and race. The 2000 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* provides the following meanings: 1. *Slang* The buttocks. 2. *Vulgar slang* a. The vulva or vagina. b. Sexual intercourse. Moreover, the

dictionary speculates on the origins of this usage of *booty*. Describing the etymology of the term, it points out that *booty* may be from African American vernacular English, from the obsolete Black English *booty*, and perhaps may be an alternation of the term *body*. What an interesting series of connections—buttocks, women's genitalia, sexual intercourse, and the body overall—all drawn from Western perceptions of Black people and culture. The constellation of terms that surround the term *booty* not only suggests that women of African descent are ground zero for the meanings associated with the term *booty* but also that historical meanings of Black promiscuity are alive and well in contemporary popular culture. A simple Google search of the term *booty* should dispel doubts—many of the websites clearly link Blackness, sexuality, and African American women.

When combined, these meanings of the term *booty* form a backdrop for contemporary mass media-generated gender ideology, with special meaning for Black masculinity.² In the context of the new racism in which miseducation and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished increasing numbers of young Black men, aggression and claiming the prizes of urban warfare gain in importance. Being tough and having street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity.³ When joined to understandings of booty as sexuality, especially raw, uncivilized sexuality, women's sexuality becomes the actual spoils of war. In this context, sexual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity. For far too many Black men, all that seems to be left to them is access to the booty, and they can become depressed or dangerous if that access is denied. In this scenario, Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty.

Mass media's tendency to blur the lines between fact and fiction has important consequences for perceptions of Black culture and Black people. Images matter, and just as those of Black femininity changed in tandem with societal changes, those of Black masculinity are undergoing a similar process. As is the case for controlling images of Black femininity, representations of Black masculinity reflect a similar pattern of highlighting certain ideas, in this case, the sexuality and violence that crystallizes in the term booty, and the need to develop class-specific representations of Black masculinity that will justify the new racism. In this context, some representations of Blackness become commonsense "truths." For example,

Black men in perpetual pursuit of booty calls may appear to be more authentically “Black” than Black men who study, and the experiences of poor and working-class Black men may be established as being more authentically Black than those of middle- and upper-middle class African American men.

**ATHLETES AND CRIMINALS:
IMAGES OF WORKING-CLASS BLACK MEN**

In 1997, professional basketball player Latrell Sprewell choked P. J. Carlesimo, his coach on the Golden State Warriors. Almost overnight, this three-time all-star became a symbol of what many saw as the worst of basketball. He instantly stood for how skewed professional sports had become, an “indictment of a generation of jocks seen not only as too black but too pampered, too lawless, too greedy.”⁴ For many, Sprewell’s actions also symbolized the contradictions of how Western ideologies depict Black men’s bodies. The combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence has long been associated with African American men. Because Sprewell and similar “bad boy athletes” were “blackening” the sport, their behaviors reflected changing race relations in the wider society. In some ways, the Sprewell incident also marked a turning point in masculine gender politics. Influenced by a White male military model that often defined discipline in terms of the legitimate authority of father figures, Carlesimo’s coaching tradition was in decline. Sprewell was at the forefront of a generation of players who, raised on rap, “see any type of disrespect as an assault on their manhood and a stifling of their creativity.”⁵ In short, Carlesimo was not Sprewell’s daddy, and because both were now in the pros, the father-son coaching style of college basketball no longer applied.

Sprewell, other Black basketball players, and Black people in hip-hop culture signal a reworking of historical representations of Black masculinity, ironically, by using those very same representations in new ways. Historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence. The buck, brute, the rapist, and similar controlling images routinely applied to African American men all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that

routinely translates into wealth and power. Instead, relegating Black men to the work of the body was designed to keep them poor and powerless. Once embodied, Black men were seen as being limited by their racialized bodies.

In the current context of commodified Black popular culture, the value attached to physical strength, sexuality, and violence becomes reconfigured in the context of the new racism. In some cases, the physical strength, aggressiveness, and sexuality thought to reside in Black men’s bodies generate admiration, whereas in others, these qualities garner fear. On the one hand, the bodies of athletes and models are admired, viewed as entertaining, and used to sell a variety of products. For example, Keith Harrison, an African American male model for the Polo clothing line, never speaks but symbolizes a Black male body that should be admired. Similarly, the hip-hop magazine *Vibe* relies heavily on Black male models and athletes to sell gym shoes, clothes, CDs, and other trappings of hip-hop culture. On the other hand, the image of the feared Black male body also reappears across entertainment, advertisement, and news. As any Black man can testify who has seen a purse-clutching White woman cross the street upon catching sight of him, his physical presence can be enough to invoke fear, regardless of his actions and intentions. This reaction to Black men’s bodies emboldens police to stop motorists in search of drugs and to command Black youth to assume the position for random street searches. Racial profiling is based on this very premise—the *potential* threat caused by African American men’s bodies. Across the spectrum of admiration and fear, the bodies of Black men are what matters.

In this context, the contested images of Black male athletes, especially “bad boy” Black athletes who mark the boundary between admiration and fear, speak to the tensions linking Western efforts to control Black men, and Black men’s resistance to this same process. Athletics constitutes a modern version of historical practices that saw Black men’s bodies as needing taming and training for practical use. Given the small numbers of Black men who actually make it to professional sports, the visibility of Black male athletes within mass media speaks to something more than the exploits of actual athletes. Instead, the intense scrutiny paid to sports in general, and to basketball players in particular, operates as a morality play about American masculinity and race relations. Black athletes, and their varying degrees of acceptance and rejection of the types of social scripts

held out by Carlesimo, become important visual stages for playing out the new racism. In essence, the myth of upward social mobility through sports represents, for poor and working-class Black men, a gender-specific social script for an honest way out of poverty. Its rules are clear—submit to White male authority in order to learn how to become a man.

Spectacle is an important component of the depiction of Black athletes, especially in the current climate of mass media entertainment and advertising.⁶ Boxing has long provided this type of spectacle for American audiences. Black boxers in particular are seen as inherently violent and in need of “trainers” who can focus their talent toward victory in the ring. Whereas a string of seemingly violent Black men have provided brutal spectacles for boxing fans, boxer Mike Tyson elevated the image of the Black brute to new levels. Ironically, Tyson also became a hero within hip-hop, representing, according to Nelson George, “a bare-chested, powerful projection of the dreams of dominance that lay thwarted in so many hearts.”⁷ As a result of his physical prowess in the ring and because his force and irreverence earned respect, Tyson is mentioned in scores of rap records. At the same time, Tyson’s behavior in the ring after serving a prison term (for biting off part of another boxer’s ear) makes him a suspect hero. Moreover, Tyson’s history of domestic violence and his rape conviction suggest that the spectacle Tyson provides for White and Black audiences alike may be as much about gender and sexuality as about race.⁸

African American professional athletes reveal varying degrees of acceptance and rejection of this morality play that constructs Black men by their physicality and then markets images of boxers, basketball players, and football lineman (less so, quarterbacks) to a seemingly insatiable public. Black male athletes in high school and college sports, especially those from poor and working-class backgrounds, often have little recourse but to follow the rules. But professional players who are the focus of media spectacles have far more options. Not only do these athletes signal changes in American race relations, superstar athletes are valuable commodities. Todd Boyd describes the new social context for superstar athletes that contributes to this new attitude of defiance:

It is important to understand that Black men, especially young Black men, are held in the highest contempt by a large segment of society. This has always been the case, and this contempt has always been

exposed through sport. Yet, in modern society, these same Black men are often entertainment for the masses. Though it is acceptable for these men to entertain, they are held in contempt for the money they make because of their entertainment.⁹

Black men who earn large salaries but who are deferential and appear to uphold American values are acceptable. The problems arise when players realize their value, their significance to the game, and try to capitalize on their accomplishments. Then they are often held in the highest contempt.

Black male athletes playing professional sports have worked within these politics and have used them to upset both the images themselves as well as the financial arrangements that underlie the exploitation of Black men’s bodies. For example, Julius Erving played professional basketball when the NBA had an image problem. On the court, he was a model of propriety, yet his style of play legitimated Black playground ball (primarily dunking). Moreover, his acquisition of a Coca Cola bottling plant in the early 1980s established him as an entrepreneur. Following Erving’s lead, Magic Johnson became an icon in the symbolic battles between the LA Lakers and his counterpart Larry Bird on the Boston Celtics. Their careers marked a rivalry that persisted into the 1980s and that set the stage for a new era in basketball.¹⁰ Johnson was not just a player; he used his basketball earnings to invest in inner-city theaters and community development.

The rise of hip-hop and its relationship to basketball signals a new set of social relations concerning Black athletes and their unwillingness to put up with the political and economic arrangements of the past. Like Latrell Sprewell, Black basketball players are often described as insolent, unruly, and in need of punishment.¹¹ Sprewell has not been alone in this pantheon of African American athletes that American sports fans simultaneously admire and hate. Sprewell may have choked his coach, but his lucrative contract with the Knicks and his performance on the court bought him respect. Apparently being insolent and unruly is not a problem if a Black man can play. In some cases, the bad boy image may enhance a player’s reputation. Take, for example, how Alan Iverson’s career progressed after he joined the Philadelphia 76ers in 1996. To Iverson’s way of thinking, he was an entertainer, and his quick crossover dribble thrilled fans and helped revitalize the sport. His image, however, made him an antihero. By retaining his cornrows and continuing to hang out with his friends from the

hood, his run-ins with the law provided much bad press. "He was . . . a walking reminder that the days of *cultural* crossover, when black stars such as Julius Erving and Michael Jordan sought and won white acceptance, were over. Iverson was leading a new generation of ballplayers, kids much less interested in acquiescing to white, mainstream taste. . . . It is a constant theme in rap music: Selling out and forgetting where you come from is anathema."¹²

In this context, Black male athletes who refuse to bow down to abusive coaches unsettle prevailing norms of race and gender. They reject the family drama script that says that players should view their coaches as father figures, and that fans should emulate athletes as role models. When basketball great Charles Barkley retired from the NBA in 2000 after sixteen years of professional basketball, he left behind more than impressive statistics—more than twenty thousand points, ten thousand rebounds, and four thousand assists.¹³ Barkley became the first athlete since Muhammad Ali and Bill Russell to question the media's insistence on conferring role model status on Black athletes who modeled deferential behavior. Barkley advised youth not to use him as a role model, but to follow their parents and teachers instead. Breaking ranks with commonsense patriarchal beliefs that young Black men were lost without the firm hand of older men, Barkley pointed out, "My mother and grandmother were two of the hardest-working ladies in the world, and they raised me to work hard."¹⁴ Should there be any confusion, Barkley even made a Nike commercial in which he proclaimed, "I am not a role model." In one interview, he vowed, "I'm a strong black man—I don't have to be what you want me to be."¹⁵

Unfortunately, Barkley became caught up in a media-generated morality play in which he was routinely pitted against other Black male athletes who were far more deferential to White authority. Whereas Michael Jordan refused to condemn the exploitative labor practices used to make the gym shoes that bore his image and from which he profited, Barkley routinely spoke his mind. Take, for example, his comments to the press in a Philadelphia locker room in which Barkley reputedly said: "just because you give Charles Barkley a lot of money, it doesn't mean I'm not going to voice my opinions. Me getting twenty rebounds ain't important. We've got people homeless on our streets and the media is crowding around my locker. It's ludicrous."¹⁶ Barkley also injured his own cause by inadvertently spitting on a little girl while aiming for a courtside heckler who was yelling

racial epithets. As one writer points out, "in the soap opera narrative of sports, Barkley's 'badness' was set against Jordan's 'goodness,'" leaving little room for the complicated, multifaceted Charles Barkley.¹⁷

The father-figure thesis assumes that young Black men need tough coaches who will instill much-needed discipline in the lives of fatherless and therefore unruly Black boys. For example, an incident at Indiana University that led to the subsequent firing of coach Bobby Knight for physically attacking an African American player was not uniformly censured. Many believed that young Black players, lacking male role models in their lives, need the strong hand of a coach, even an abusive one such as Knight. The role model thesis also suggests that Black male youth in general need images of successful, professional Black male athletes as positive role models. Little mention is made of the fact that basketball and sports confine young Black boys to achievements of the body and not of the mind. Most Black American boys will never achieve the wealth and fame of their athletic role models through sports. Keeping them mesmerized with sports heroes may actually weaken their ability to pursue other avenues to success. Moreover, the role-model thesis underestimates the motivation of legions of Black boys who work hard at things for which they think they have a future. Theses of natural Black athletic ability notwithstanding, NBA players rarely get as far as they do without hard work. For example, at 6'4" Charles Barkley is short by NBA standards. He developed his skill through practice. In tenth grade he shot baskets every night, sometimes all night if he could get away with it, and mastered his leaping skills by jumping back and forth over a four-foot chain-link fence.¹⁸ The summer before his senior year in college, Latrell Sprewell made himself into a perimeter shooter by, every day, taking nearly five hundred shots from twelve feet. Then he'd take five hundred shots from thirteen feet, and then fourteen feet, moving a foot at a time until he improved his three-point shooting range.¹⁹

The bottom line for professional Black athletes is that they can reject people who would reject them because their wealth enables them to do so. Todd Boyd describes the new attitude:

When you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you say, "I don't give a fuck," you then become empowered, liberated, controller of your own destiny. This is certainly the case in basketball,

because the players make enough money to be able not to give a fuck, as money is the ultimate source of liberation in capitalist America.²⁰

For Boyd, athletes with money are in a position to critique the very system that allegedly rewards them. This is one reason why figures like Iverson, Sprewell, and Barkley are so hated and revered by Whites and Blacks alike.

Some Black men's bodies may be admired, as is the case for athletes, but other Black male bodies symbolize fear. Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images of that center on Black male bodies, namely, Black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline. The controlling image of Black men as criminals or as deviant beings encapsulates this perception of Black men as inherently violent and/or hyper-heterosexual and links this representation to poor and/or working-class African American men. Again, this representation is more often applied to poor and working-class men than to their more affluent counterparts, but all Black men are under suspicion of criminal activity or breaking rules of some sort.

This image of Black male deviancy crystallized in criminality is far from benign—the United States incarcerates more Black men than any other country. Whereas Black men constitute 8 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise approximately 50 percent of the prison population. By any measure, the size of the U.S. inmate population is enormous—the rate of incarceration in the United States is about 727 prisoners per 100,000 people. The vast majority of other countries incarcerate far fewer people. Most European countries, for example, imprison fewer than 100 people per 100,000 residents, a rate more than seven times lower than that of the United States.²¹

Covering up incarceration on such a mass scale requires powerful media images that reward poor and working-class Black youth who submit to White male authority by using athletics for honest upward social mobility, and punish others who do not. When it comes to representations of Black male deviance, several important variations exist. The thug or “gangsta” constitutes one contemporary controlling image. The thug is inherently physical and, unlike the athlete, his physicality is neither admired nor can it be easily exploited for White gain. The “gangsta” may be crafty, but the essence of his identity lies in the inherent violence asso-

ciated with his physicality. Media representations of African American men as thugs grew in the post-civil rights era. Alan Iverson basically took the “thug” images out of the ghetto and inserted it onto the basketball court.

Mass media marketing of thug life to African American youth diverts attention away from social policies that deny Black youth education and jobs. It also seems designed to scare Whites and African Americans alike into thinking that racial integration of seemingly poor and working-class Black boys (the allegedly authentic Blacks) is dangerous. Who wants to live next door to a thug or sit next to one in school? In this context, the phenomenon in which young African Americans seemingly celebrate elements of thug life seems counterintuitive because looking and/or acting like a thug attracts discriminatory treatment.²² Yet the depiction of thug life in hip-hop remains one of the few places Black poor and working-class men can share their view of the world in public. Raps about drugs, crime, prison, prostitution, child abandonment, and early death may seem fabricated, but these social problems are also a way of life for far too many Black youth.²³

In this context, the work of artists like Tupac Shakur simultaneously affirms the realities of thug life yet critiques its existence and continuation. Tupac symbolized the contradictions of the hip-hop generation. He is routinely pegged as a gangsta rapper, yet his work ranged over several genres of rap.²⁴ Moreover, Tupac symbolized the tensions of an era. “What did it mean to be a child of the Black Panthers, to have a postrevolutionary childhood?” asks cultural critic Michael Dyson.²⁵ Dyson's book-length monograph examines the complexities of Tupac's life, his straddling of the ideals of revolutionary politics, and the materialism that forms the down side of hip-hop culture. Using Tupac's life and death as emblematic of an era, Dyson provides a provocative analysis of the difference between thugs and revolutionaries. Arguing that Tupac lives the “tension between revolutionary ambition and thug passion,” Dyson suggests that revolutionaries and thugs alike share a worldview in which flipping the economic order is the reason for social rebellion.²⁶ They both see problems and they both want change. Yet thug logic undermines the society that the revolutionary seeks to change. “Thug ambition is unapologetically predatory, circumventing the fellow feeling and group solidarity demanded of revolutionaries,” Dyson contends.²⁷

In the political economy of hip-hop culture, as a genre, gangsta rap reflects these tensions between actual thug life and a commodified thug persona that was marketed and sold in the global marketplace. Tupac Shakur's career came to an end when gangsta reality and representation converged. Following a Mike Tyson fight, an unknown assailant gunned him down. In contrast, other gangsta rappers keep a tight rein on separating their personal and professional lives. Take, for example, the contradictions that define the career of gangsta rapper Ice Cube. Ice Cube promoted the Nation of Islam's ideology of self-help and self-respect but also made a bundle "hustling St. Ides Malt liquor in the ghetto."²⁸ His racial politics seem inextricably linked with a dangerous gender ideology that profits from the marketability of rebellious Black masculinity. His 1990 debut solo album *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* deals with racism in law enforcement, sexual irresponsibility, and other social issues, yet the vulgarity and misogyny of his subsequent work is legendary. Despite his protestations that he only uses vulgarities to communicate with people who would otherwise tune him out, he derogates women by counseling his listeners "you can't trust no bitch."²⁹ Ironically, despite this ghetto persona, Ice Cube, actually named O'Shea Jackson, lives in a wealthy White neighborhood, in a gated home, with his wife and three children. He was raised in a two-parent family in a middle-class residential area of south central Los Angeles, has never been in prison, and graduated from the wealthiest high school in Los Angeles.³⁰ Unlike Tupac, whose childhood poverty and ongoing problems with the law exposed him not just to the representations but to the realities of his gangsta persona, apparently Ice Cube knew what a convincing gangsta performance could buy.

In a mass media context that blurs fiction and reality, the effectiveness of attempts by Tupac, Ice Cube, and other Black men to seize the power of the media in order to unsettle representations of Black criminality have come under close scrutiny. Given the potential power of mass media, the language in rap has attracted considerable controversy, especially negative reactions to the widespread use of the term *niggah*. As legal scholar Randall Kennedy points out, the term *nigger* has long been featured in African American folk humor. Before the 1970s, it rarely appeared in the routines of professional comedians and was extremely rare in shows performed before racially integrated audiences. With live shows and a string of albums, Richard Pryor changed all of this. Pryor's political humor

defied social conventions that accepted Black comedians as clowns but rejected them as satirists. Pryor opened the door for those who followed, both in comedy (Chris Rock) and the now ubiquitous use of the term *niggah* within hip-hop culture in ways that contest historical views of Black men as weak and subordinate.³¹ In essence, many Black men aim to do with the term *nigger* what members of other oppressed groups have done with similar slurs. They throw the slur back at the oppressor by changing its meaning. They have added a "positive meaning to *nigger*, just as women, gays, lesbians, poor whites, and children born out of wedlock have defiantly appropriated and revalued such words as *bitch*, *cunt*, *queer*, *dyke*, *red-neck*, *cracker*, and *bastard*."³²

Western traditions of presenting Black men as embodied, sexualized beings foster another variation of seeing Black men's bodies of sites of inherent deviance. Because sexuality has been such an important part of the depiction of Black masculinity, Black men's bodies remain highly sexualized within contemporary mass media. Images of Black men often reduce them not only to bodies (the case of the athletes) but also to body parts, especially the penis. In analyzing the depiction of Black men in *Hustler* magazine, a popular periodical whose primary readership consists of working-class White men, Gail Dines found ample representations of Black male promiscuity. Dines argues that in movies and magazines that feature Black men, the focus of the camera and plot is often on the size of the Black penis and on Black men's allegedly insatiable sexual appetite for White women. Searching for a similar pattern in *Hustler*, Dines found that Black men were most often found in cartoons in which they could be caricatured, and that a major feature of the humor presented centered on the size and deployment of the Black male penis. Using the depiction of King Kong as a frame of reference, Dines observes: "whereas the original Kong lacked a penis, the *Hustler* version had, as his main characteristic, a huge black penis that is often wrapped around the 'man's' neck or sticking out of his trouser leg. The penis, whether erect or limp, visually dominates the cartoon and is the focus of humor. This huge penis is depicted as a source of great pride and as a feature that distinguishes Black men from White men."³³ In this sense, the penis becomes the defining feature of Black men that contributes yet another piece to the commodification of Black male bodies.³⁴

Hustlers or "players" constitute benign versions of the rule breaking associated with gangstas and objectifying Black men's bodies as sex objects.

More refined, the hustler has one foot on either side of the law. The hustler can be a simple "player," one who uses people to trick them out of something that he wants. Players often target women, trading sexuality for economic gain. The image of the Black male hustler works with historical notions of African American men as too lazy to work and in need of the domesticating influences of slavery, sharecropping, boot camp, and prison. Representations of hustlers suggest that African American men would rather live off of other people, very often women, than go to work. The theme of charisma is paramount here, the notion of style that a hustler brings to his endeavor. The prevalence of representations of Black men as pimps speaks to this image of Black men as sexual hustlers who use their sexual prowess to exploit women, both Black and White. Ushered in by a series of films in the Blaxploitation era, the ubiquitous Black pimp seems here to stay. Kept alive through HBO-produced quasi documentaries such as *Pimps Up, Hos Down*, African American men feature prominently in these media constructions. Professional pimps see themselves more as businessmen than as sexual predators, with slapping their sex workers around the cost of doing business. For example, the men interviewed in the documentary *American Pimp* all discuss the skills involved in being a successful pimp. One went so far as to claim that only African American men made really good pimps. Thus, the controlling image of the Black pimp combines all of the elements of the more generic hustler, namely, engaging in illegal activity, using women for economic gain, and refusing to work.

Tying the concept of Black men as sexual predators so closely with ideas about normative Black masculinity raises the stakes dramatically within Black heterosexual relationships. Despite the fact that the film *Booty Call* is a romantic comedy with likable characters, it draws upon these sedimented historical meanings by focusing on promiscuity as a defining feature of Black masculinity. Moreover, it casts the struggle to redefine Black masculinity in class-specific terms, one in which the sexual practices of the working-class character become juxtaposed to those of the middle-class character. The images of working-class Bunz and middle-class Rushon serve as touchstones for a reworking of ideas about sexuality, violence, and Black masculinity in the post-civil rights era. It's no accident that Bunz and Rushon are cast as originating in the same social class, but now belonging to different ones. Bunz wears running clothes and Rushon wears suits. When Bunz finds out that Rushon has not yet had sex with

Nikki, he criticizes Rushon for failing to score. "College has got you too sensitive," states Bunz. "Sensitive?" asks Rushon. "You ain't got no player left in you," answers Bunz. Via his ridicule, Bunz relies on dominant ideas that associate authentic Black masculinity with a hyper-heterosexuality thought to characterize working-class Black men. He uses these ideas to accuse middle-class Rushon of being less authentically Black and therefore less masculine.

Booty Call is situated within a specific historical moment that reflects the convergence of two meanings of booty in which men (and sometimes women) aim to capture the booty (property or spoils of war) via sexual conquest. This placement, however, does not mean that it uncritically replicates these historical meanings. On the one hand, by its very title, *Booty Call* draws upon entrenched historical meanings concerning race, gender, and sexual property. As was the case with the term *freak*, the film invokes ideas about Black promiscuity and the film would be meaningless without this history. One might ask whether this film could even be made with White American actors cast in the starring roles? But on the other hand, *Booty Call* aims to disrupt these very same historical meanings. Here, Black women take the lead in demanding a different kind of Black masculinity from their partners. Nikki, Rushon's love interest, clearly rejects the prevailing association of African American women's bodies with perceptions of Black female sexuality as wild and "freaky." She is not a sexual prude, but her demand for safe sex and commitment speaks to Black women's agency and self-determination. Nikki insists on using condoms because she realizes that "unsafe" sex might leave her with a STD and/or a baby. Although Nikki's friend Lysterine (who is Bunz's blind date) is sexually adventurous, after Nikki's prodding, she too insists upon condoms. She's sexually daring, but her classic line "no glove, no love" draws a line in the sand. These women demand a new kind of Black masculinity in which sexual norms around the booty call and around love relationships merit renegotiation.

One striking element of this film is that, despite their differences, both Black men in *Booty Call* listen to Black women. Neither tries to dominate the women and neither resorts to threats or violence. Rushon has waited seven long weeks to have sex with Nikki, but when she demands that he wear a condom, he gets dressed and goes to the convenience store in search of one. Bunz may be, in the words of Lysterine, a "hoodrat," but when she demands a condom, he joins Rushon in the middle of the night shopping

trips for these essential items. The act of booty call is not a foregone conclusion in this film. Rather, the need to renegotiate the terms of booty calls is debated. In a similar fashion, the reality of gender ideology and dominant ideas about Black masculinity is not the issue. Rather, the terms of Black masculinity are at stake.

The real drama in *Booty Call* does not lie in reconfiguring Black femininity but in challenging prevailing notions of a sexualized Black masculinity. Nikki and Lysterine symbolize versions of middle-class Black femininity of the Black Lady and the Educated Bitch. Neither character has a real internal dilemma in the course of the film. They say what they want and stick to it. However lovable, Bunz also seems incapable of change—he is the timeless, nonhistorical representation of Black male promiscuity. Rushon is the character who faces the dilemma of crafting a new form of Black masculinity that will spare him Bunz's ridicule, but that will also enable him to commit to Nikki. Thus, despite the association of the term *booty* with Black women, the core question of *Booty Call* concerns which version of Black masculinity will win out? Will the working-class version of Black authenticity symbolized by Bunz's incessant search for the booty triumph? Or will Rushon's fledgling efforts to claim a middle-class politics of respectability prevail?

Poor and working-class Black men are also depicted more often as perpetrators of violence. The use of the phrase “black-on-black” violence to describe violence within African American urban neighborhoods invokes images of poor and working-class Black men, not those respectable men from the Black middle class. The phrase also illustrates how the political economy of production, primarily the convergence of entertainment, news, and advertising, converge to produce a racial ideology that circulates in a global context. This phrase originated not in the United States but as part of the end of apartheid in South Africa.³⁵ First used in a 1986 speech to Parliament by then-president P. W. Botha who described “black-on-black” violence as being “brutal murders by radical Black people,” the term appeared in the U.S. press as a frame for reporting on the end of apartheid. In the South African press, Zulus were repeatedly described as “tribes” and the ANC with its Xhosa ethnicity (of Mandela) became redefined as another tribe. Print and broadcast media made little use of politics or economics to explain the violence, choosing instead to install a racial frame of interethnic violence. The term was picked up by the American

press, and it has been used in a similar fashion. As the authors point out, “Labeling all violence among Black people as factional, internecine, and part of ‘blood feuds’ implies a natural cohesiveness or unity among Black people because they are black. The terms used suggest a fight among family members, calling up a long-standing Western image of the tribe as a naturally occurring, familial social structure.”³⁶ “Black-on-black” violence is the site at which the U.S. news media reconstruct Black Africa as “tribal,” threatening, savage, and incapable of self-government and democracy and also Black urban neighborhoods as sites equally incapable of controlling their children and being self-governing.³⁷

The arguments that recast Black people and violence as an inevitable outcome of either biological nature or cultural backwardness are remarkably similar in both locations. In both the South African and U.S. media, news of “black-on-black” violence centers on one type of perpetrator, typically a young, Black male. The struggle against apartheid or against a punitive urban police force, then, is reduced to a “self-perpetuating” rebellion of youth against bona fide authority.³⁸ In an interpretation of social change that sounds eerily reminiscent of how the end of slavery unleashed the controlling image of the Black rapist, within media accounts of “black-on-black” violence, it is the *end* of apartheid that has “unleashed the violence.” Within the South African discourse, Black male youth, inherently violent, moving in gangs, “schooled [by the anti-apartheid movement] only in the struggle,” are said by September 1990 to have discovered that “liberation might yield few benefits for them without the education they eschewed for the flames of revolution.”³⁹ The conditions under which they live, then, are of their own choosing and are the cause, rather than the result, of South Africa's troubles. Black men are transformed from being victims and heroes to being—along with the anti-apartheid movement itself—the root cause of the violence.⁴⁰

Similarly, the gangs that have taken over African American urban neighborhoods represent the outcome of Black youth freed of discipline, primarily that of the punitive father, and of strong social institutions that kept them in place. Within this interpretive context, legitimated White state violence—in the case of South Africa, the apartheid government and for the United States, an occasionally “out of control” police force—although it is often condemned in media texts as “excessive” is also redeemed by its promise to restore order.⁴¹ News stories about violence are

about transgressions of social boundaries, the consequences of those transgressions, and the reestablishment of social order.

Representations that reduce Black men to the physicality of their bodies, that depict an inherent promiscuity as part of authentic Black masculinity, that highlight the predatory skills of the hustler, and that repeatedly associate young Black men in particular with violence converge in the controlling image of Black men as booty call-seeking rapists. Initially, the myth of the Black male rapist who lusted after White women emerged during postemancipation Jim Crow segregation as a tool for controlling Black men who were prematurely freed from the civilizing influences of slavery. While not as necessary to contemporary relations of rule as those during the Jim Crow era, apparently the image of the Black rapist can be revived when the need arises. For example, during the 1988 Republican presidential campaign, George Bush's campaign staff made the behavior of Willie Horton, a convicted African American male rapist who raped a White woman while participating in an early release program, central to his stance on crime. As George Cunningham points out, "George Bush's deployment of the figure of 'Willie' Horton as a black male rapist helped to manufacture the majority that elected him as heir to the conservative Ronald Reagan."⁴² Like Gus, the archetypal Black rapist first seen in D. W. Griffith's 1915 classic film *The Birth of a Nation*, Horton came to symbolize the Black man who was freed *prematurely* not from slavery but from the necessary strictures of prison. As a result, the public needed protection from African American men like Horton whose excessive booty calls placed society at risk.⁴³

SISSIES AND SIDEKICKS: IMAGES OF MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK MEN

In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* was one of the most popular shows on American television. Bill Cosby played the role Heathcliff Huxtable, a physician and father of five children, who was married to Claire, his beautiful lawyer-wife. In the uncertainties of the 1980s, when African Americans experienced increased access to schools, jobs, and neighborhoods long reserved for Whites, Cosby offered a reassuring image to Whites. He was the Black buddy, friend, or Black sidekick that everyone wanted. Resurrecting an image of Black masculinity in service to Whites,

Cosby's image was marketable, nonthreatening, entertaining, and eminently likable. In contrast to the derogated images of working-class Black masculinity, Cosby's squeaky clean image as America's Black buddy or sidekick provided one social script for the types of African American men who would find acceptance in a desegregating America.

The image of Cosby's character set the template for middle-class Black masculinity—he was friendly and deferential; he was loyal both to dominant societal values such as law and order as well as to individuals who seemingly upheld them; he projected a safe, nonthreatening Black identity; and he was defined neither by his sexual prowess nor by any hint of violence. Collectively, each of these features of representations of the Black buddy and Black sidekick intersected with changes in American society. For one, Black buddies typically achieve acceptance through their friendly demeanors and clear deference to White authority. In this regard, Black buddies constitute representations of Black masculinity whose origins lie in that of Uncle Tom, the Negro servant who was domesticated under slavery, and in Uncle Ben, his commercial counterpart developed to sell rice and other consumer goods. Cosby's image drew upon both of these traditions. His role on *The Cosby Show* provided White families with images of a friendly African American who visited their living rooms to entertain them. If the show became too controversial, that is, too closely associated with racial issues, it could be dismissed by turning off the television. Like Uncle Tom, Black buddies are useful only if they are clearly committed to the American way of life.

Within capitalist marketplace relations, just as representations of Uncle Ben were used to sell rice, images of Bill Cosby helped sell products. Cosby was not alone. In this commodified climate, athletes who can be repackaged as Black buddies receive lucrative endorsement packages, make lots of money, and join the ranks of wealthy Americans.⁴⁴ Michael Jordan's clear rejection of any hint of political controversy enabled him to become one of the most successfully managed idols and icons of media culture. Through activities such as appearing with cartoon character Bugs Bunny in the 1996 film *Space Jam*, Jordan carefully constructed a kid-friendly demeanor. At one time, he was the leading candidate on a children's list of the person whom they would most want to invite to a birthday party. Golfer Tiger Woods's mixed-race background and his rejection of a "Black" identity contributed to his success as a marketable commodity.

Part of Jordan's and Woods's success in reaching so many American fans can be attributed to the path blazed by Cosby's image. Cosby's role as a spokesperson for Jello products, especially the numerous advertisements that he made with multiracial groups of children, positioned him as non-threatening and safe. Who could have guessed that one Jello ad could modernize images of Uncle Tom and Uncle Ben by repackaging historical images of Black masculinity to meet the needs of a desegregating America?

Loyalty is another characteristic feature of the controlling image of the Black buddy. As depicted in mass media, there is little danger of Black buddies stealing the silverware, reverting to Black English, or raping the wife. Instead, Black buddies are typically shown as stripped of the seemingly dangerous parts of Blackness, leaving the useful parts as sufficient markers of difference to satisfy the tastes of a multicultural America. Within Hollywood films, for example, the image of the Black sidekick, a specific rendition of the Black buddy image that characterized films in the 1980s, reflects a loyalty that resembles that depicted by the image of the modern mammy. Often portrayed within film by an African American actor whose loyalty to his White male friend rivaled that of the mythical Uncle Tom, the Black sidekick typically lacked an independent Black male identity. Instead, his sense of self stemmed from his relationship to his White friend or work partner. A series of White heroes and their Black sidekicks set the tone in television and film. From Bill Cosby's stint as Robert Culp's buddy in the television drama *I Spy* to Danny Glover playing Mel Gibson's reluctant buddy in the *Lethal Weapon* films to Eddie Murphy who served as Nick Nolte's sidekick in *48 Hours* as well as the sidekick to a cadre of White police officers in *Beverly Hills Cop*, "Hollywood . . . put what is left of the Black presence on the screen in the protective custody . . . of a White lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant, White sensibilities and expectations of what Black people should be like."⁴⁵

Apparently, what "Black people should be like" is being physically Black so that racial integration can be seen but not culturally Black, for example, display any of the behaviors of an assumed authentic Blackness. Thus, being seen as being physically Black yet lacking a racial identity constitutes another feature of the Black buddy image. Michael Jordan's phenomenal success points to the lucrative benefits for those Black buddies who manage to develop personas as "raceless" individuals. Jordan became

a cultural icon and worshiped as a hero in large part because his clean-cut image was markedly different from the cornrowed, tattooed, trash-talking demeanor of "bad boy" ball players. Alan Iverson, Latrell Sprewell, Dennis Rodman, and Charles Barkley cannot be mistaken as anybody's subordinate buddies or sidekicks—Sprewell tried to choke his coach. In the postintegration era, Black men like Cosby and Jordan are accepted with open arms as White America's buddies precisely because they are not like the bad boy athletes, criminals, or other representations of working-class (authentic) Black masculinity. Television shows like *The Cosby Show* and sports provide mass media arenas in which these ideas about race are worked through. Race, especially Blackness, increasingly informs contemporary racial politics, yet, at the same time, race is rendered largely invisible within the fabric of film, television, and sports. Jordan's appeal may be often defined as "raceless," yet as a Black buddy, he projects a certain kind of race, a certain kind of Black masculinity that will be accepted.⁴⁶

Another distinguishing feature of the representation of the Black buddy pivots on mechanisms of containing his sexuality. Like the character of Heathcliff Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, Black buddies are often depicted as asexual Black men. Less emphasis is placed on Black men's bodies within representations of middle-class Black men than characterizes representations of working-class Black men. For example, on *The Cosby Show*, the ability of Cosby's character to dance, shoot hoops, model chiseled abs, or perform in the sack was irrelevant. Moreover, Heathcliff Huxtable's sexuality was safely contained within the sanctity of heterosexual marriage. Occasionally, the show provided shots of Heathcliff and Claire cuddling under the covers, hinting at a safe sexuality but never showing it. Because Cosby's character was presented in a family setting, his children had a role model to emulate. The Cosby kids were not conceptualized as sexual beings either. Everyone was definitely straight.

Appearing on network television during a time of transition, Cosby's character not only was asexual but it was also nonviolent. But if the image of masculinity is one that requires a combination of sexuality and violence for "manly" men, how can one present a film with a White hero who is masculine whose sidekick seems to be too "feminine"? Buddy films must be careful not to emasculate the Black buddy because feminizing Black male images to this degree would detract from male bonding and leave the audience wondering what the White hero saw in his Black buddy. Although

there are films in which this emasculation has occurred (Richard Pryor's stint as a "toy" for a spoiled White boy in the 1982 film *The Toy* comes to mind), most Black buddies are not emasculated to this degree. One way of resolving this dilemma is to eliminate all aspects of the Black buddy's life that would compete with the Black buddy's loyalty to his partner. Many Black buddies are depicted as not having families or any type of relationships, sexual or otherwise, that might distract them from their main purpose of being loyal to the White protagonist or to their jobs. Unlike the Cosby image of the Black buddy who was stripped of these qualities, images of these decontextualized Black buddies can be strong and virile on screen, as long as these qualities are placed in service to the needs of the White hero and, more recently, to legitimate social institutions, especially, the criminal justice system.

In this context, representations of Black buddies may render Black masculinity nonthreatening because expressions of violence and sexuality are placed under White authority. A fine line exists between using the image of the Black buddy to tame the threat of Black male promiscuity and violence and feminizing the Black male image to the point at which it cannot be respected. But how does the interracial buddy drama resolve the issue of the emotional relationships among men so that it does not transform male bonding into homoerotic relationships?

In order to resolve this tension, the Black buddy template often draws upon the family as a frame for explaining appropriate social relationships. This frame can be used in several ways. For one, showing either member of the buddy team in a heterosexual relationship with a woman, especially in a marriage with children, effectively challenges any homoerotic subtext between the two men. Having a wife and children at home takes on special meaning for the character of the Black buddy, for his ability to commit to one heterosexual relationship within a family unit is a sign of his ability to assimilate. Another use of the family frame defines the relationship between White hero and his Black buddy. Film critic Jacquie Jones suggests that, in mainstream cinema, the subordinate roles that Black buddies accept have traditionally been the province of women, children, and/or pets. Explaining these patterns, Jones suggests that many of these films replicate family relations in that "the Black male assumes the role of the boy; the Black women, the mother; and, of course, the White male, the father."⁴⁷ Hazel Carby takes a different view. Analyzing Danny Glover's

participation within contemporary films, Carby sees not father/son bonding, but an imagined brother-to-brother bonding created in the White male imagination. Using films in which the actor Danny Glover played Black buddies or sidekicks, Carby analyzes the nature of support that the buddy provides to his White hero. In films like *Grand Canyon* and *Lethal Weapon*, Glover acts as "father confessor and psychological counselor to white men. . . . Glover has become identified as the one who manages to persuade white men to recognize, understand, and express the truth about themselves to themselves."⁴⁸ Finally, because the men enter into a fictive kin relationship as brothers, they are not sexual competitors for the same women. Here American assumptions that heterosexual relationships should occur between people of the same race effectively leave the White hero and the Black buddy confined to White and Black women, respectively. No fights over women as booty will tarnish the brotherhood. This theme of African Americans having the emotions and expressiveness to help Whites get in touch with their better selves is a recurring theme in American cinema. Typically, this emotional nurturing was done by the mammy figure, but selected men could also do this expressive caring function. Whatever the family scenario, whether they are cast as immature boys or as appropriately subordinate yet caring younger brothers, Black buddies perform the emotional labor long associated with women. This placement feminizes them.

Representations of Black buddies have been joined by yet another non-violent, asexual image of middle-class Black masculinity, namely, the "sissy." Standing in contrast to the seemingly authentic Black masculinity of the criminal, the Black athlete, and even middle-class Black buddies (who may have been subordinate, but at least they were heterosexual), representations of Black masculinity of the "punk," the "sissy," or the "faggot" offer up an effeminate and derogated Black masculinity. Representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that border on ridicule. Often the representation of the gay character works to support the heterosexuality of other males. For example, *Car Wash* (1976) introduced Lindy, an openly gay character. Dramatized as a "queen," Lindy was swishy, limp-wristed, and exhibited an exaggerated, affected feminine style. Around him, all of the other male characters were not just heterosexual, but emphatically heterosexual. To frame Black male heterosexuality, the other characters were married, had girlfriends, dated women, hired prostitutes, or flirted with the women customers. As one ana-

lyst points out, "Lindy is tolerated as part of the public world but only because he reinforces the purity of heterosexuality by presenting homosexuals as defiled and deviant."⁴⁹ Black gay men depicted in feature films continue to serve as humorous foils for the exploits of other more important characters, background characters that lend "color" to the film.

Analyzing contemporary media, Marlon Riggs identifies how Black manhood has become juxtaposed to the Negro faggot in contemporary Black cultural production:

I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. My life is game for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, "Afrocentric" black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed, it's a testament to weakness, passivity, and the absence of real guts—balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a black gay man because, by the tenets of black macho, black gay man is a triple negation. I am consigned, by these tenets, to remain a Negro faggot. And, as such, I am game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped, and bashed, not just by illiterate homophobic thugs in the night but by black American culture's best and brightest."⁵⁰

This "punk," "sissy," or "faggot" may have its roots in an emasculated Uncle Tom, but it also operates as a new representation in the post-civil rights era.

Given the virtual absence of representations of gay Black men in the past, these new representations enjoy a visibility within contemporary Black popular culture that is surprising. Representations of "sissies" and "Negro faggots" suggest a deviancy that lies not in Black male promiscuity but in a seeming emasculation that is chosen. Avowedly heterosexual African American men routinely deride gay Black men, primarily through ridicule (the running skit "Men on Film" on the popular television show *In Living Color* that poked fun at two Black male "sissies") or through outright homophobic comments (comedic routines by Eddie Murphy and other Black male comedians that border on homophobic vitriol). A running joke throughout movies concerns the theme in which a very large Black male prisoner threatens a boy with rape. In one memorable scene from *House Party*, a 1990 feature film by African American brothers Reginald

and Warrington Huddlin, the teenaged protagonist lands in a jail cell with a big Black man who wants him to be his girlfriend. The audience is encouraged to laugh at the possibility of an adolescent boy being raped or "punked" by a Mike Tyson-esque character. Within straight Black male culture, special derision is saved for Black representations of "punks," the males who were sexually conquered by other men.

In contrast to representations of Black gay men in contexts with Black heterosexual men, images of Black gay men in settings with African American women present a very different picture. In these films, Black gay men become surrogate women, with the benefits and liabilities that this implies. As opposed to the derogated "punks," they become depicted as nonthreatening, lovable "sissies." For example, African American director John Singleton's 1993 film *Poetic Justice* contains the stereotypical gay Black male hairdresser who provides comic relief for the real heterosexual drama. This theme of gay Black buddy to women, a part that helps Black women gain insight into Black masculinity, is a recurring theme.⁵¹ Placing Black gay men in female settings creates space for this stereotypical foil; the gay Black buddy/sidekick typically helps African American women and is routinely accepted by them and liked.

Because images of Black gay men as "punks" often are used to justify male violence upon identifiably gay Black men, such images do foster homophobia and hate crimes. But this is the tip of the iceberg because the impact of these representations goes further. Many Black men who are gay or bisexual hide their sexual orientation, preferring to pass as straight. There have always been Black men who passed, but what is different now is the emergence of a new subculture among Black gay men. Benoit Denizet-Lewis describes this phenomenon: "Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs and its own name: Down Low. There have always been men—black and white—who have had secret sexual lives with men. But the creation of an organized, underground subculture largely made up of black men who otherwise live straight lives is a phenomenon of the last decade."⁵² Most of the Black men who are on the Down Low (DL) date or marry women and engage sexually with men that they meet in bathhouses, parks, the Internet, or other anonymous settings. Most DL men do not identify themselves as gay or bisexual, but primarily as Black.

On the one hand, the sexual practices attributed to the Black "sissy" do not constitute a credible threat to White heterosexual men because the presence of Black gay sexuality constitutes a feminized and therefore non-threatening Black masculinity. Representations of Black gay sexuality operate as further evidence that Black men are "weak," emasculated, and "feminized" in relation to White men. Black gay sexuality is depicted as reflecting male submission or capitulation, especially those men who are penetrated like women. When joined to the broader theme of the Black buddy or sidekick, "faggots," "punks," and "sissies" constitute the extension of the seeming symbolic emasculation of middle-class Black men associated with images of Uncle Tom and Uncle Ben. "Sissies" can be accommodated within the norms of Black assimilation because Black buddies pave the way for them.

On the other hand, Black gay sexuality might present a threat to Black heterosexual men for this exact same reason. Within the universe of Black masculinity, gay Black men pose a threat to a beleaguered Black male heterosexuality that strives to claim its place at a table dominated by representations of White-controlled masculinity. Within Black popular culture, the widespread caricature of Black gay men, thus making this sexuality visible, works to uphold constructions of authentic Black masculinity as being hyper-heterosexual. The stigma attached to Black gay sexuality is less about depicting this form of sexuality than it is in using an emasculated Black gay sexuality to establish the boundaries of both White masculinity (which is assumed to be heterosexual) and Black male heterosexuality. Thus, representing Black gay sexuality as Black male emasculation simultaneously threatens heterosexual African American men, upholds Black male hyper-masculinity (the invisibility of DL Black men and their redefinition as Black heterosexuals), and protects hegemonic White masculinity. Ironically, Black gay men can simultaneously gain acceptance, provide humor, be erased, and pose a threat.

Despite considerable pressure to use the image of the faggot or sissy for ridicule and humor, some films and television shows do dispute these representations of Black gay men. For example, the original Showtime movie *Holiday Heart* (2000) is one of the few films that try to depict gay Black men in a nonstereotypical fashion. Directed by African American director Robert Townsend, actor Ving Rhames plays the title character of Holiday—a church-loving, flamboyant gay drag queen. After Holiday's

longtime lover passes away, Holiday is left alone and grieving. So when a homeless drug addict, Wanda (Alfre Woodard), and her young daughter, Niki (Jessika Quynn Reynolds), require Holiday's help, he moves them into the apartment next door to his own. The three form an unconventional family until Wanda brings home a new drug dealer boyfriend who changes everything for the worse. Wanda's inability to avoid drugs threatens to further break the trio apart. The character of Holiday helps heal the damaged Black family. This film moves depictions of Black gay men away from extreme stereotypes, yet it still positions Black gay sexuality within the framework of being the emotional ballast for the sufferings of others.

Some media contestations are more confrontational. For example, through comedy, the four Black and Latino gay men in the 2001 play *Punks* strive to disrupt the negative associations of the term itself. Because it is less subject to the strictures of programming for a mass audience, cable television has also broken from the stereotypical depiction of Black gay men. For example, in its 2001 season, the HBO series *Six Feet Under* introduced the character of Keith Charles (played by actor Mathew St. Patrick), a gay Black male cop whose White male lover David Fisher was one of the main characters. Resisting the temptation to portray Keith as the sexual Black "buddy" for David as White hero, the series instead focuses on their stormy relationship in negotiating different approaches to homosexuality. In addition to its depiction of a Black lesbian couple, the first season of HBO's original series *The Wire* introduced the character of Omar, a gay Black male gangsta who seeks revenge on the drug dealers who brutally murdered Brandon, his gay Black lover. Again, the treatment on *The Wire* breaks with stereotypes. Omar is dark-skinned, violent, and in no way appears to be the stereotypical "sissy." Moreover, the gay Black male relationship is between two working-class Black men, thus challenging the association of gay sexuality with Whiteness and/or with middle-class men.

As was the case for representations applied primarily to working-class and poor Black men, collectively, the representations for middle-class Black men also help justify the political economy of the new racism. All seem designed to exert political control on those African American men who do achieve middle-class status and to discourage far larger numbers of African American men from aspiring for social mobility into the middle class. The complex and narrow representational space saved for middle-class African American men speaks to the ways in which ideas about bud-

dies and sidekicks, punks and sissies coalesce within discourses of Black male assimilation in the post-civil rights era. Assimilated, middle-class Black men are somehow seen as being less manly, as subordinates. Their place is assured at the middle-class table, just as long as they recognize their place of serving the needs of White-run organizations. Moreover, the deference needed to become a Black buddy takes its cues from discourses of emasculation, the popular discourse on the sissy.

When combined, images of the buddy and the sissy both construct middle-class Black men as less manly—the former because he has been emasculated by the White world, the latter because he exhibits a sexual identity that symbolizes a chosen emasculation. When presented with this narrow frame of images by institutions of formal education, Black boys of all social class often reject school. In the universe of many African American boys, studying not only identifies them as “White-identified, sellouts,” excellent school performance is the domain of “girls” or “punks.” Masculinity is associated with use of the body, not the mind. Girls and “faggots” are the ones who submit to the will of the teacher, the principal, and avowedly heterosexual boys. In this context and without developing some alternative frameworks, the more educated Black boys become, the less manly they may feel. The alternative of becoming “bad boys” in school may seem like a more realistic option. One study of fifth and sixth grade Black boys found that many were labeled troublemakers and written off by school personnel as early as age ten.⁵³ When combined with the competing code of the street within African American working-class urban culture, staying in school and doing well is a real accomplishment.

Ironically, holding up educated African American men as role models to Black male youth may actually aggravate this situation. The thesis of role modeling assumes that young Black men lack role models that will show them their possibilities and how to behave to get there. Working-class disadvantage is routinely seen as an outcome of the absence of middle-class Black role models. But what if working-class Black boys are familiar with these representations of middle-class Black men and simply reject them?

Through Black working-class eyes, Black elected officials, businesspersons, corporate executives, and academics may resemble “academic sidekicks” or “intellectual punks.” These are the men who increasingly fail to defend African American interests because they fail to defy White male power. Instead, they tolerate and in many cases collude in reproducing the

conditions in the inner city. Staying in school and studying hard moves them closer to images of Bill Cosby selling Jello or Michael Jordan talking to Bugs Bunny or Tiger Woods refusing to claim Blackness at all. If the “academic sidekick” or “intellectual sissy” becomes seen by African American boys and young men as the price they have to pay for racial integration, it should not be surprising that increasing numbers of young Black men reject this route to success.⁵⁴ With a vacuum of images of Black men of whatever sexual orientation who stand up to White officials, who take principled positions on social problems that affect African Americans, and who clearly have the interests of African Americans at heart, why should poor and working-class Black boys emulate middle-class Black men? In their eyes, when Latrell Sprewell choked his coach, he stood up to White power. In Todd Boyd’s words, “When you reject the system and all that goes along with it, when you say, ‘I don’t give a fuck,’ you then become empowered, liberated, controller of your own destiny.”⁵⁵ This stance may work for rich Black professional athletes, but it is a dangerous posture for Black boys with no degrees, no skills, and a whole lot of attitude. Charles Barkley may not be a role model, but neither are these representations of middle-class African American men.

CLASS-SPECIFIC GENDER IDEOLOGY AND THE NEW RACISM

Under the new racism, these class-specific representations of Black masculinity and Black femininity serve several purposes. First, these representations speak to the importance that ideologies of class and culture now have in justifying the persistence of racial inequality. Within the universe of these representations, authentic and respectable Black people become constructed as class opposites, and their different cultures help explain why poor and working-class Black people are at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and middle-class Black people are not. Authentic Black people must be contained—their authentic culture can enter White-controlled spaces, but they cannot. Representations of athletes and criminals, bitches and bad mothers refer to the poor and/or working-class African American men and women who allegedly lack the values of hard work, marriage, school performance, religiosity, and clean living attributed to middle-class White Americans. In essence, these representations of Black

masculinity and Black femininity assail unassimilated Black people, pointing out the ways in which such poor Black people are “untamed” and in need of strict discipline. In contrast, representations of sidekicks, sissies, and modern mummies describe the space of respectability for newly accepted Black people. These Black people are different from middle-class Whites, but these representations of middle-class Black people are not a threat to power relations. Social mobility, or lack thereof, becomes recast in terms of the unwillingness of poor and/or working-class Black people to shed their Blackness and the willingness of middle-class Black people to assimilate. These respectable Black people must be denuded of Blackness—they should be seen but not necessarily heard.

Under the color-blind ideology of the new racism, Blackness must be *seen* as evidence for the alleged color blindness that seemingly characterizes contemporary economic opportunity. A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated. The total absence of Black people would signal the failure of color blindness.⁵⁶ At the same time that Blackness must be visible, it also must be contained and/or denuded of all meaning that threatens elites. Rejecting traditional racist discourse that sees racial difference as rooted in *biology*, these representations of criminals and bad mothers, of sidekicks and modern mummies work better in a context of desegregation in which cultural difference has grown in importance in maintaining racial boundaries. Poor and working-class African American men are not *inherently* inclined to crime, such images suggest. Rather, the *culture* in which they grow up, the authentic Black culture so commodified in the media, creates images of criminality that explains the failures of racial integration by placing the blame on the unassimilability of African Americans themselves. The joblessness, poor schools, racially segregated neighborhoods, and unequal public services that characterize American society vanish, and social class hierarchies in the United States, as well as patterns of social mobility within them, become explained solely by issues of individual values, motivation, and morals.

Second, when combined, these class-specific images create a Black gender ideology that simultaneously defines Black masculinity and Black femininity in relation to one another and that also positions Black gender ideology as the opposite of normal (White) gender ideology. Providing a mirror image for mainstream gender ideology of dominant men and submissive women, the Black gender ideology advanced by these representa-

tions depicts Black men as being inappropriately weak and Black women as being inappropriately strong. This hypothesis of weak men and strong women takes class-specific form. For example, representations of Black men reinforce ideas about Black male immaturity, irresponsibility, and, until domesticated, unsuitability for full citizenship rights, yet does so in class-specific ways. The cluster of representations for Black working-class men deems them less manly than White men and therefore weaker. Because these men do not participate appropriately in society (absent fathers, criminals, etc.), they weaken it. They are also deemed less capable of undertaking the tasks of strong men, for example, exhibiting the self-discipline to study hard in school, work in low-paying jobs, save their money, and support their children. Their strength lies in their violence and sexual prowess, but only if these qualities can be harnessed to the needs of society. In contrast to this site of weakness, representations of middle-class Black men who may be doing well but who pose little threat to White society present another dimension of weakness. Because they fail to confront the new racism, the sidekicks and sissies represent emasculated and feminized versions of Black masculinity. In contrast, class-specific images of Black femininity reinforce notions of an inappropriate, female strength. Whether working-class “bitches” who are not appropriately submissive, bad mothers who raise children without men, or “educated bitches” who act like men, this Black female strength is depicted and then stigmatized. Not even the modern mummies and Black ladies escape this frame of too-strong Black women. Such women may receive recognition for their strength on the job, but it is a strength that is placed in service to White power and authority.

This Black gender ideology constructs this thesis of weak men and strong women by drawing upon heterosexism for meaning. Representations of the Black male “sissy” that mark the boundaries of Black male heterosexuality and those of the “manly” Black lesbian that fulfills a similar function for Black female heterosexuality constitute an outer ring around the heterosexual family drama of weak men and strong women. Unless these ideas are challenged, they can aggravate homophobia within African American communities. As Harlon Dalton points out:

My suspicion is that openly gay men and lesbians evoke hostility in part because they have come to symbolize the strong female

and the weak male that slavery and Jim Crow produced. . . . Lesbians are seen as standing for the proposition that "Black men aren't worth shit." More than even the "no account" men who figure prominently in the repertoire of female blues singers, gay men symbolize the abandonment of Black women. Thus, in the Black community homosexuality carries more baggage than in the larger society.⁵⁷

If Dalton is correct, this excess baggage of homosexuality helps explain patterns of homophobia within African American communities.

Finally, this Black gender ideology helps justify racial inequality to White Americans and suppress resistance among African Americans. Depicting and demonizing "weak men and strong women" enables White Americans to point to the damaged values and relationships among Black people as the root cause of Black social disadvantage. At the same time, when internalized by African Americans themselves, this same Black gender ideology works to erase the workings of racial discrimination by keeping Black men and Black women focused on blaming one another for problems. Within this logic, class-specific gender ideology becomes a convenient explanation both for the persistence of Black poverty and for deeply entrenched racial discrimination. By demonizing poor and working-class African Americans, these representations quell long-standing political threats that African American citizenship raises for White elites. African Americans are blamed for their poverty and powerlessness. At the same time, representations of middle-class Blacks discourage them from using their literacy, visibility, and money to support African American interests. Weak Black men who are willing to accept subordinate roles and strong Black women who place their strength in service to White-controlled institutions become the gold standard for measuring Black middle-class acceptability. Together, class-specific representations of Black masculinity and Black femininity aim to counter the threats posed by Black men and women who have too much freedom and too many opportunities in the post-civil rights era, at least, defined as such by those in power.