Introduction: Disrupting Dissemblance

Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation explores what exercises of sexual citizenship look like, particularly their manifestations through the trope of transgressive behavior, in post-1960s black women's texts. The book's title is taken from Shirley Chisholm's 1968 congressional campaign slogan, "Unbought and Unbossed," and her eponymous 1970 autobiography. As the first black congresswoman and first black to campaign for United States president, Chisholm—in her position in the political arena and her progressive stance on abortion and the rights to the freedoms of citizenship—embodies a particular transgressive subjectivity. One grounded not solely in her political disposition but also in her very presence physically and ideologically within an almost exclusively white and male-dominated political terrain. At the time she wrote her autobiography, the House of Representatives had 435 members: 417 white men, 10 women, 9 blacks; and so, Chisholm herself, as black and a woman in Congress, "ma[d]e it add up right."[1]

While inspired by Chisholm's political motto, this book is *not* about politics—not, that is, in the electoral or legislative sense.

Nor is it about Chisholm, who, willing to go against the proverbial grain and challenge the status quo, is a remarkably dynamic figure that certainly merits scholarly attention. This book gravitates off of her notion of "unbought and unbossed" as it encapsulates the spirit and essence of *transgression* (an inherent refusal to be encumbered, unapologetic resistance to "containment," and repudiation of racial/masculinist domination or hegemony) that characterizes post–civil rights black women's literary and cultural production. *Unbought and Unbossed* critically examines the ways black women writers of the post–civil rights era deploy black women characters that transgress racial/gender/sexual boundaries, particularly those relating to black heteronormative gender and/or sexuality, and challenge paradigms of black womanhood and female sexuality. Writers such as Toni Morrison, Ann Allen Shockley, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Gloria Naylor negotiate black women's historical positionality as racial/communal symbols of Victorian propriety and their expressions of individuality in a postmodern society precisely, I argue, through the trope of *transgressive* black women whose various enactments of recalcitrance and purported misconduct defy communal sanctions and problematize notions of a unitary black community. To this end, these characters illustrate the inefficacy of a strategic politics of silence surrounding black female sexuality, or "dissemblance," as a viable conduit for black sociopolitical advancement in a postmodern society.[2]

By "transgressive," I mean those unmediated performances, enactments, or instantiations of (mis)behavior characterized by a deliberate "violation" of certain racial, gender, and sexual sociocommunal boundaries whereby the enactor transcends, if not destabilizes, established normative and acceptable behavior. Neither transhistorical nor static, transgressive behavior signifies and might best be understood as conduct marked by a defiance, inversion, or traversal of prescribed norms or conventions. At the center of this work, then, are black women who participate in various transgressive acts at the very crux of which is *sexuality*: adultery, promiscuity, interracial sexual intimacy,

circumvention of marital sex, sexual violence, same-gender loving, and/or other politics of the intimate. In their deliberate (mis)conduct, they are radical agents who depart unapologetically from proscriptive social and sociocommunal definitions of black womanhood and interlocking circumscriptions governing black female sexuality.

Unbought and Unbossed analyzes representative texts in the sociocultural and historical moments of their productions—informed by and in direct response to the political struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—elucidating the ways they disrupt the myopic representations of black women and the silence about their sexuality in the American literary and cultural imagination. Through the trope of sexuality, this study examines characterizations of black women who not only diverge from stereotypical images imposed by ideologies of "whiteness," but also rebel *unapologetically* against constructions of female identity imposed by black nationalism that constitute what I call the "classical black female script": that is, black women's expected racial loyalty and solidarity, sexual fidelity to black men, self-abnegation, and idealization of marriage and motherhood. The "script," discussed at greater length in chapter 1, is (in)formed simultaneously at the interface of two overarching ideologies: the "cult of true womanhood" with its principles of piety, sexual purity, submissiveness, and domesticity; and, second, culturally specific tenets of uplift and obligatory service propounded by black nationalism and nationalist discourse generally.[3] Constituted in response to persistent stigmatization, the classical black female script, as well as black women's adherence to it, was also part of an effort to "normalize" black womanhood and, in turn, black identity in the face of pervasive stereotypes. It is precisely because post-1960s characters "violate" these socially and communally mandated codes of conduct governing black womanhood and racialized sexuality that their purported misbehavior is perceived as threatening to community mores, aspirations, and advancement.

Drawing upon black feminist, critical race, and performance theories, literary theory and criticism, and theoretical

discourses on gender and sexuality, *Unbought and Unbossed* analyzes these characters' transgressive behavior, particularly in regard to their sexuality, as a means to create a (post)modern black (female) identity. I argue that these deliberate enactments of recalcitrance, "illicit" sexuality, and intimate "misconduct" undermine nationalist exigencies of creating communal boundaries through black women, if even for uplift purposes, by circumscribing their sexuality. Not only do these subversive acts destabilize and render obsolete black politics contingent upon essentialist or unitary constructions of community, racial representations, and black womanhood, but they also significantly mark a postmodern moment. This book elucidates that the sexual longing, desire, and intimacy enacted in these texts function metonymically for another aspirational desire: a progressive black identity with racialized gender and sexual politics reflective of the sociopolitical temporal moment. Put another way, sexuality in its various instantiations in these post–civil rights texts operates not simply as a trope but rather as a signifier of postmodern blackness that encompasses a desire for, and efforts toward, a more complex black identity ungoverned by outmoded, rigid politics that are overdetermined by race or attendant conventions concerning gender and sexuality.

In the post–civil rights era, "racial politics [could] no longer be premised on models of unmediated representation or of monolithic racial community," as literary scholar Madhu Dubey asserts; what differentiates "postmodern from modern black intellectual and cultural production is its quest for a politics of difference that eschews essentialist constructions of community."[4] What these post–civil rights texts and their transgressive characters reveal is not a wariness or denouncement of "blackness" or community. On the contrary, these authors and texts embrace black culture and racial/communal consciousness even to the extent that they illustrate that nationalist and feminist politics may well, and sometimes do, intersect and conjoin in meaningful rather than tensional ways. They do, however, contest and excoriate narrow constructions of community that,

in their privileging of race and rigid deployments of "blackness," largely preclude more complex, modern practices and discourses on racialized sexual politics and gender that could enrich and empower the community. The narrow constructions and outmoded dictates governing gender and sexuality succeed, paradoxically, in doing the precise opposite of their strategic design: they endanger and compromise rather than protect or advance various individuals—especially women—and the very community itself.

It is no mere coincidence, then, that this phenomenon, this very endangerment, is embodied and inscribed textually in these post–civil rights novels as devastation and racial, physical, and sexual violation. Sexualized violence against black women's (and, to a far lesser extent, men's) bodies and the accompanying communal upheaval, destruction, and/or tragedy punctuate the texts under examination. Whether Renay's college date rape in Shockley's *Loving Her*; Meridian's molestation at a local funeral home in the eponymous novel by Walker; Eva's sexual violation with a "dirty popsicle stick" and subsequent rape in Jones's *Eva's Man*; or the vicious gang rape of Lorraine of "The Two" in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, these black women characters confront a sexual conundrum riddled with sexual entanglements along a vexed and thorny continuum. Even as they engage in transgressive behavior marked by sexual agency and autonomy, the central focus of this book, these narratives are saturated with female sexual vulnerability (emblematic of a larger *communal* vulnerability, sexual dehumanization and/in a *racial* historical past) so that, even in their adherence to communal dictates governing sexuality, these women encounter nonetheless a sexual quandary. Not only does this speak to the inefficacy of a "politics of silence," but it also makes transparent a detrimental corollary: palpable and entrenched danger, as well as what is at stake in the absence of a progressive black sexual politics with which to meet contemporaneous exigencies.

In calling attention to sexualized violence, in no way do I attempt to overshadow or undermine the *transgressive* behavior,

sexual agency, or empowerment of these characters or, moreover, to suggest that transgressive behavior operates alternatively or as an intrinsic reactionary stance to sexual(ized) aggression or violence. Nor do I postulate that sexual vulnerability is a prerequisite or, for that matter, conduit for liberatory black female sexuality. Since transgressive behavior, sexual empowerment, and sexual vulnerability are not entirely discrete categories, I am interested in how they imbricate in a Hegelian sense. For, if "sexual violation" constitutes part of a "legacy of racialization," as literary and queer studies scholar Darieck Scott posits, how does (racialized) sexualized violence interface with transgressive behavior—or, in what ways, if any, does transgression in these post–civil rights literary productions operate?[5] To what extent does black women's transgressive behavior, whether expressed as recalcitrance, sexual excess, or subversion of established norms, serve as a medium by which to broach and transgress a complex, albeit at times fractured, past and to navigate—as autonomous subjects—the temporal moment? And, read collectively, how do Morrison, Shockley, Walker, Jones, and Naylor, as literary and sociocultural activists, shift paradigms of black womanhood and female sexuality; and, how do they attend to the concrete issues governing black women of the post–civil rights era and beyond without essentializing the totality of black women's experiences?

Unbought and Unbossed begins its analysis with post–civil rights novels of the twentieth century (while offering critical comparative analysis of other literary, sociocultural, and historical moments) to establish a nexus in which literary texts, movement ideologies, and the politics of identity and representation intersect to provide a broad interdisciplinary discursive framework for analyzing these complex dynamics. At its very core, this book is grounded in critical race studies, black feminist theory, and representations of black womanhood. As such, it is in dialogue with a multidisciplinary cadre of pioneering black feminist scholars, particularly Darlene Clark Hine, Patricia Hill Collins, Paula Giddings, bell hooks, Deborah McDowell, and

Mary Helen Washington, who have produced landmark work in these intellectual arenas. In its conceptual orientation and grounding in interdisciplinary literary and cultural studies, this book is in concert with scholars who have advanced scholarship on constructions of black womanhood, race, and their intersectional affinities with political desire and/or nationalism: most notably, Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate, Ann duCille, and Madhu Dubey—and, more recently, Candice Jenkins and Lisa Thompson.[6]

While this book follows in this literary scholarly tradition, *Unbought and Unbossed* begins its analysis with post–civil rights novels of the mid- to (early) late twentieth century, explicating the ways the political movements mark a postmodern moment and, in turn, affect characterizations of black womanhood and account for themes of "the transgressive" in black women's literature. In fact, the authors deploy postmodernist techniques, in conjunction with a racialized gender politics governing sexuality, that create an ideological and aesthetic tapestry—a black postmodern paradigm—that offers a less monolithic set of representations of black womanhood, sexuality, and black sexual politics generally. Put another way, it is precisely the ideologies, discourses, and aesthetics of postmodernism that these writers infuse with a racialized gender politics concerning sexuality to interrogate notions of subjectivity, identity, politics of differences, power differentials, and freedom/liberation (with continuity and community). They do so to address and broach their particular conditions as black women, since movements such as feminism and black nationalism did not fully encompass or speak to their intersectional identities, experiences, or exigencies.

The heart of the book, which makes notable intellectual interventions, examines a conglomeration of texts of the 1970s and early 1980s that take on different *registers* embedded in the larger notion of transgression. In its focus on texts of this radically and politically charged moment, it seeks to redress a paucity of scholarship in African American and black feminist literary and

cultural studies, which have given little critical attention to the interesting *interregnum* period between black nationalism and multiculturalism. As these texts are situated in the post–civil rights, (post) nationalist age of burgeoning multiculturalism, radical discourses on race, systematic oppression, and racist marginality—symptomatic of and deeply rooted in the black nationalist/black aesthetic tradition—represent an ideological and paradigmatic shift. The rising institution(alization) of multiculturalism—as a largely conservative canonizing discourse that recognizes race, particularities of racial/ethnic culture (articulated within a rhetoric of "diversity"), and pluralism—subsumes, if not consolidates, in ways that produce a particular narrative. At the very crux of such narrative is a racial integrationist discourse, an overarching "feel-good" melting-pot mystique that leaves little room (or, for that matter, *tolerance*) for radically critical or critically radical modalities of race and its intersections with other attendant (identity) politics.[7]

Second, *theorizing* black women's transgressive behavior, while simultaneously examining various manifestations of transgression—or what I often refer to as *racialized gender transgression*—this book challenges "mainstream" discourses and theories of transgression, whereby the nexus of race and transgression, especially where black (female) subjects are concerned, typically falls into an abyss of critical inattention.[8] This book analyzes and elucidates black female transgressive behavior and sexuality—while paying particular attention to periodization, politics, and aesthetics of the (late) mid-twentieth century—to expand understandings of the nexus of gender, sexuality, race, and transgression. In its analysis of postmodern characterizations of black womanhood, black female sexuality, and the ways that both feminism and nationalism imposed constructions of black womanhood that inform post–civil rights authors' characterizations of them as transgressive, this book diverges from previous scholarship in this regard and in its utilization of sexuality as a trope and axis of interrogation of hegemonic power, politics of passion, and female (subversive) erotic pleasure.

I deploy the term "transgressive" (and by extension "transgressive behavior" and "transgression") to indicate the ways these black women characters operate out of a particular and strategic politics, agency, and deliberateness that challenge or, at the very least, call into question what constitutes "normativity," while simultaneously destabilizing conventional paradigms governing race, gender, and sexuality. In this regard, political scientist Cathy Cohen's notion of "deviance" resonates as particularly salient. In her landmark essay "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," Cohen argues for an analysis and paradigmatic shift that, building upon discourses and frameworks in African American studies and queer theory, centers those vulnerable and marginalized subjects who—in their deliberate refusal to conform to established "normativity"—embody a deviance that resists socially and sociocommunally prescribed "heterogendered" and "'normalized' understandings and behaviors."[9] Such individuals embody this subjectivity, complicating power relations, regulation/regulatory processes, and "normativity"; and, their deliberate agency in opting out of conformity to the "fundamental concepts/behaviors" governing "desire, pleasure, and sex" provides the basis for transformative politics and the very paradigmatic shift Cohen proposes. Like Cohen's, my work on transgressive behavior and representations foregrounds those (black women) subjects who unapologetically subvert the established sociosexual "norms." While I recognize that multiple valences of representations of black womanhood and blackness operate as transgressive—with blackness signifying, within the literary and sociocultural imagination, anomaly, debasement, resistance, or excess—I do not present black women's transgressive behavior and racialized (gender) transgression as indicative of or coterminous with aberrance, abjection, deviance, or perversion. Nor do I situate them as pathological in ways that fortify or reaffirm heteronormativity, black debasement, or the purported norm. Rather, I read the manifestations of transgressive behavior as grounded in black (female) subjectivity that not only challenges

putative normative modalities governing race, gender, and sexuality, but, as stated previously, as also emblematic of desire for and gestures toward a black postmodern moment.

In its problematization and analysis, then, of the ways race and sexuality intersect in constitutive and formative ways, *Unbought and Unbossed* is also in conversation with interlocutors, such as Cathy Cohen, in black sexuality and queer studies: particularly Roderick Ferguson, Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, Darieck Scott, Siobhan Somerville, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and, most recently, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman. These scholars theorize the complexities and intersections of blackness, sexuality, gender, and "transgression," whether notions of transgression manifest as or are articulated within the rhetoric/realm of a politics of deviance, aberration, erotic disarticulation, shame, abjection, or choice in their foundational work.[10]

Roderick Ferguson's work on African American racialized sexual positionality and aberration has particular purchase, especially his explication of the ways in which sociological schools of thought constructed blackness, vis-à-vis the discursive, canonical, and aesthetic, as "corporeal difference" and outside the norms of both heteronormativity and patriarchy.[11] Not only does he argue that heteronormativity, universalized with whiteness, "is not simply articulated through intergender relations," but also "through the racialized body" with African Americans embodying "gendered and eroticized properties" and nonheteronormativity.[12] With blackness imputed as such, Ferguson theorizes the complexities of black representation and positionality:

> I theorize African American nonheteronormative difference as a way of thinking [about] discourse and contradiction in tandem. [. . .] Hence, in saying that African American culture is a site of contradiction, I do not mean to suggest that sociology is not contradictory. I simply mean to suggest that *African American culture's own particular contradiction of being racialized as nonheteronormative produces nonheteronormativity as a site of rupture*.[13]

Problematizing black nonheteronormativity as contradictory and essentially as rupture, Ferguson's assessment is consequential and resonates with my own readings of black women's transgressive behavior, and black transgression generally, as not emblematic of black "anormativity" or with "the black body" at a tangible or "atmospheric level," as literary and black queer studies scholar Sharon Holland avers, that "produce[s] a narrative of degradation to which that body is perpetually mired."[14] In this book, I repudiate notions of inherent black social/sociosexual pathology or perversity and, rather, read transgressive behavior and transgression as vehicles of disruption, a destabilization of sorts, that turns the putative "normative"/"heteronormative" on its proverbial head. *Unbought and Unbossed* thus situates transgressive behavior and transgression as a destabilizing (and, thereby, *differentiating*) agent, site of analysis, and locus of desire that is dialogic: encapsulating a dynamic at once transcendent, in that it emblemizes subversion and troubles what constitutes the "norm," and also transformative in that subjects *traverse* circumscriptions, *disrupt* established tradition, and *circumvent* conditions that seek to compromise them—as black women—in sexual, racial, and gender domains.

Unbought and Unbossed concerns itself with racialized sexuality, particularly as it relates to black women, and how the very stigmatization of "blackness" informs representations of black women through the trope of sexuality along a continuum rather than bifurcated trajectories. I base my critical analyses methodologically and conceptually on representative novels, cultural texts, and theories read within/alongside a larger sociohistorical, cultural, and political context to explicate the degree to which stereotypes and constructions of black women's sexuality are inscribed in black women's literary and cultural production. At times, I utilize contemporary popular culture (as is the case in the next section on transgression) to elucidate the extent to which these dynamics are not isolated in particular (con)texts or confined in a temporal vacuum that comes to a halt in the 1980s.

Unbought and Unbossed is, then, not so much invested in situating transgression hierarchically or in quantifying transgressive behavior—as in what makes one behavior or instantiation of transgression more transgressive than the next. This book, more fruitfully, explicates the nexus of race, sexuality, and transgression by interjecting discourses on transgression with race and gender, and theories of race, gender, and sexuality with black female transgressive subjectivity. As such, it explicates the extent to which transgressive behavior and the methodical deployment of transgressive characters and sexuality operate as a mechanism to contest absolute constructions of "blackness" that, whether inadvertently or deliberately, seek to approximate the gender-sexual politics of larger society. What these texts and a sustained analysis of them illumine is the confluence of race, transgression, and sexuality; or, the degree to which sexuality, and by extension (racialized) sexual transgression, functions, I contend, as a *strategy* of power, *site* of contestation, and *locus* of erotic agency, pleasure, and subversive politics. And, too, they make visible the dynamic interplay of differences, subject positions, and identity politics that constitute black identity and should, concomitantly, inform black racial politics and community in a postmodern moment, as well as critical approaches to analyses of these. For, it is imperative "to think critically about African Americans and African American culture without simply essentializing the category of blackness" or "fixing, reifying, or separating race, gender, and sexuality in the name of their political serviceability to racial blackness," as literary and black queer studies scholar Dwight McBride insightfully avers.[15]

While this book marks a significant departure from the existing scholarship on representations, it is, in part, rooted in and reflective of the larger sociocultural and political milieu/changes occurring at this particular historical juncture (civil rights, black nationalism, women's liberation, gay and lesbian rights, and the sexual revolution especially) that have informed these authors. This is of particular significance since the novels of this era function not simply as literature or fiction but rather

as bodies of knowledge that speak to, and have inscribed in them, larger sociocultural, historical, and political phenomena. As such, they are not merely texts but sites of interdisciplinarity, as well as foundational precursors for much of the subsequent theoretical discourses on black feminism, race, gender, and sexuality.

As "some of black women's most dangerous issues were first aired in the 'safe' space of the arts," these post-1960s authors offer textual interventions, broaching some of the most vexed, if not sensitive, racial/communal/sociopolitical dynamics of the era.[16] This gives credence to the degree to which black women's literature should not be disregarded or reduced merely to the imaginative and fictive. For it, as literature in black racialized contexts especially during particular historical moments, speaks powerfully to the social, political, and experiential climate in which it was written. And, too, black women's literature of this era sets a precedent for much of the historical and theoretical discourse that follows. Post-1960s black women's literary production thus constitutes a rich, deliberate site—a *repository*—that expands our ways of considering interdisciplinarity and, importantly, the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and nation, as well as elucidates the ways that literary texts, history, and sociopolitical movements and theories conjoin meaningfully.

Black women's literature, these novels, and the transgressive black women characters in them transgress boundaries precisely because of the various dynamics that complicate the texts and should also govern our readings of them. Not only does this illustrate the complexity of the novels—which may be deconstructed using race theory and cultural studies approaches, feminist epistemologies, and theoretical discourses on gender and sexuality, among other points of analyses—but it also situates these literary narratives within a larger continuum and sociohistorical, political, and cultural context. The novels, while drawing heavily on African American history, culture, and traditions, assume *extraliterary* meanings and significance, thereby serving as complex sites that offer insight not only into

black women, the subjects of the literature, but that also expand our very epistemologies of race, gender, sexuality, and the politics of identity in a postmodern temporal landscape.

In its reframing or reconceptualization of this cadre of post–civil rights texts, *Unbought and Unbossed* elucidates the nexus of racialized gender and sexual transgression, and the very ways the writers featured employ erotic characterizations, "theatricalities" of desire, and sexual(ized) black women's bodies to reconstitute black women's positionalities, identity politics, and (sexual) subjectivity, while attending to their exigencies in the post-1960s era and beyond. What becomes transparent, and this book makes evident, are the ways in which these post–civil rights writers destabilize outmoded paradigms governing sexual politics, animating formulations—vis-à-vis representations, theoretical discourse, and transgressive embodiment—of a post-1960s black politics on liberatory sexuality, or what we might consider a distinctly *postmodern black feminist sexual revolution*—discursive, transformative, and emblematic of the post–civil rights temporal/ideological/cultural landscape.

Unbought and Unbossed thus presents other manifestations that illumine the ways that race, gender, and transgression imbricate in relation to black (women's) bodies to demonstrate the *transhistorical* dimensionality of these dynamics, their reach and temporal ubiquity, and how race and sexuality—coupled with gender—collide in historical and contemporary moments that necessitate critical examination. Enlisting movement ideologies, literary and cultural texts, and politics of identity, this book aims to invigorate intellectual thought, pose possibilities, and reverberate what is at stake—and the (counter) stances—if stereotypes dictate comportment, representations, and intimate performances; mediate or govern politics of passion in private and public (racialized) spheres; or reduce any, every, or *all* black sexual expression to perversity rather than situate it along a continuum: one that is not only afforded black women's white counterparts but that is also constitutive of the nature and range of the existential human (sexual) condition.

"Black Is, Black Ain't": Race, Representation, and Transgression

> *[A]ny black American, simply by virtue of his blackness, is weird, a nonconformist in this society.* —AMIRI BARAKA

Black people have, one might argue, always been "transgressive," depending, that is, on how we conceptualize transgression. Manumitting one's self in light of enslavement, disenfranchisement, and legal disownership of self is in many ways transgressive, as is refusing marginalization in a society wherein blackness is deemed inferior. While black people, specifically African Americans, have historically had a complex and precarious relationship to "the transgressive," discourses on black racialized identity and transgression are few and far between. To critically explore the nexus of blackness, which has invariably been marked as unconventional and outside the "normative," and transgression is at once a complicated and consequential endeavor. Such an undertaking necessitates an explication of "transgression" and how it and racialized blackness—and, by extension, black womanhood—converge. And, too, it warrants an elucidation of the ways that black identity, as well as constructions of black womanhood, and "the transgressive" have intersected at various moments in somewhat vexed and constitutive ways.

Significant critical attention has been given in recent scholarship to transgression, which might be characterized generally as "symbolic inversion": any conduct or "act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or [. . .] presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms."[17] Others problematize transgression as "not merely breaking a code" or "rebelling against normative social or cultural constraints" but, rather, as the "very pulse that constitutes our identities" and sense of subjectivity in the face of "a constant, if discontinuous negotiation with the transgressive otherness by which we are formed and informed."[18] While such conceptualizations are valuable and provocative, they are neither universal

nor representative, especially when considered in racialized contexts. What happens when such theoretical notions are applied to black people who, by virtue of their blackness, have functioned historically as the very quintessence of difference: as the embodiment of that "transgressive otherness" by which identities and boundaries have been formed and informed?

Transgression within a racialized context functions, then, dialectically: as that which, located and operating outside the "norm," also simultaneously affirms, defines, or completes it. This is especially so for black people. For, in order for "whiteness" to signify racial/sexual purity, enlightenment, and acceptability, constructions of "blackness" within the American and larger Western imagination came to embody both denotatively and connotatively an entirely different set of meanings and semiotics: as intrinsically licentious, impure, ignorant, and abject.[19] Or, put another way, blackness, at various historical moments, became the entity by which conceptualizations of civilization, national identity, (non)universality, and progress were constituted precisely vis-à-vis racialization—or, with the strategic association of African Americans with "non-normative gender and sexual practices and identities (as the woeful signs of social lag and dysfunction)" in a culture wherein "heteronormativity" and "universalized heteropatriarchy" functioned as signs of order, national identity, and progress.[20]

If transgression is, as Michel Foucault asserts, "an affirmation of division [. . .] insofar as division is not understood to mean [. . .] the establishment of a separation" but rather "retaining that in it which may designate the existence of difference," black identity—whether through mythologies, stereotypes, or social constructions of race—has operated as that very "existence of difference" and antithesis of "normativity" precisely in order to affirm, uphold, and/or preserve it.[21] Herein lies the irony, peculiarity, and complexity undergirding black identity and transgression. Because black people have been characterized historically as "outside" the realm of normalcy—as abject and outside the law (and heterosexual/patriarchal "normativity")—they

have served as "the transgressive" background against which established normality has been constituted. Yet, black people's very attempts at social advancement, as well as their efforts to enter into the American body politic and attain first-class citizenship, have paradoxically also been instances marked by transgression. Blacks, in their efforts to gain freedom, enfranchisement, and equality, as well as to "normalize" blackness, were in essence transgressing their relegation to a marginalized status. When mainstream theorizations and discussions of transgression fail to address its racialized contours or complexities, especially where black identity is concerned, they are not merely elisions. Rather, they call attention, I argue, to the ways blackness has been conflated with transgression and, furthermore, marked indelibly as always already transgressive to the extent that it appears "fixed" like a naturalized trope. Moreover, in not addressing the nexus of blackness and transgression, particularly in relation to the "normative," such accounts neglect the history and conditions—inherent in the construction of an "enlightened West," and especially the building of an American democratic republic or nation—that required the fundamental debasement, relegation, and stigmatization of black people. Thus, black people serve as the "indispensable sacrificial lamb vital to [. . . the] sustenance" of American democracy; and, "black subordination constitutes the necessary condition for the flourishing of American democracy, the tragic prerequisite for America itself."[22]

Ruth Landes helps to further elucidate and problematize black women's relationship to established convention. In *The City of Women* (1947), Landes theorizes, explicitly and implicitly, race, gender, and sexuality as intersecting, and, perhaps even more consequential, she elucidates the extent to which these are punctuated by *culture* and, in turn, mediated by the particulars of *positionality*. Even as this text engages Brazilian and not an exclusively American culture, Landes, as an American anthropologist, provocatively examines race relations and black women's subjectivity and sexual freedom; and she problematizes

what, in essence, constitutes "conventionality," especially in terms of gender and sexual "norms." In so doing, she elucidates the degree to which convention is static: that is, never entirely fixed, culturally absolute, or "globally 'normativized,'" which also offers insight into conceptualizations of convention and transgression and particularly how black women's bodies and sexualities are situated within the practices and discourses of the West and beyond.

And so, while black people occupy a complex and precarious position in relation to transgression, this relationship is far more vexed and complicated when compounded by gender. In her gendered analysis, Katharine Kittredge observes that transgression is accompanied by terror and danger, and "[w]omen, especially, understand that once they have moved outside of society's behavioral/sexual boundaries, there will be no return and no alternative place of safety."[23] Furthermore, "the alienation that follows transgression gains power because it cannot be clearly seen: the boundaries of acceptable behavior shift over time, place, and circumstance; and the dangers that lie 'beyond' are un-spoken."[24] Her analysis, while important, necessitates far greater problematization and begs a racialized gendered analysis. While neither acceptable behavior nor transgression is transhistorical, black women have long experienced having no place of safety, let alone "alternative" spaces; moreover, the association of black womanhood with hypersexuality, excess, and as being outside behavioral, moral and sexual convention has certainly transcended shifts in time, place, and circumstance, accounting, in part, for the exclusion of black women from constructions of femininity and "true" womanhood. Rather, black women have been cast as embodying the polarized opposite of an idealized white womanhood in order to sustain such a construction as a model, if even illusory and contrived, of "normative" womanhood. Black women, as "other" and outside the parameters of acceptability and protection, became associated with "illicit" and "overt" sexuality, which in turn subjected them to discursive and corporeal

sexualized violence, abuse, and attacks on, as well as defamation of, their bodies and character.[25]

Such circumstances surrounding black womanhood, particularly the correlation between and conflation of black women's bodies as sexually degenerate and pathological, are not, however, limited to particular historical moments, nor are they restricted to particular (con)texts. Instead, this phenomenon is a transhistorical occurrence, as a number of relatively contemporary events illumine. In his highly criticized (and later repudiated) remarks, radio personality Don Imus referred to the almost exclusively black Rutgers women's basketball team during their 2007 NCAA championship game against Tennessee as "some rough girls" and "nappy-headed hos"; whereas "the girls from Tennessee," a more visibly white female team, in Imus's estimation, "all look cute." Imus's invectives evoked vicious stereotypes at the heart of which were racialized and sexualized conceptualizations of black women's bodies, as well as their character, that render them always already transgressive and, even within a twenty-first-century context, vulnerable. His comments expose the systematic defamation of black women as both licentious and invariably linked with "illicit" sexuality, regardless of their status, as well as the persistent attack on black women and their bodies contemporaneously. Moreover, his references to them as "rough," in juxtaposition to the designation "cute" he used to describe the Tennessee players, represent deeply racist/sexist conceptualizations of black women ideologically and aesthetically as largely outside the beauty status quo and realm of femininity as less-than-female—as practically "female-masculine" bordering masculinity—and, thereby, ineligible for protection.

Similarly, during the 2004 Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show featuring Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake, a "wardrobe malfunction" accounted for the exposure of Jackson's breast at the precise moment Timberlake sang, "I'm gonna have you naked by the end of this song." Responses to the singers' performance, whether incidental or a calculated choreographed gesture, inevitably diverged. While there are various

factors to consider, such as the performers' obvious age difference, most transparent were their racial and gender differences: Jackson, an African American female pop icon (and sister of the global pop sensation—the "King of Pop"—Michael Jackson), and Justin Timberlake, a former "boy band" group member and breakout white male performance artist. The singers' performance and the public's response to it revealed a particular vulnerability of both an intimate and public nature. Jackson experienced castigation and a lack of sympathy not at all commensurate with her sexualized exposure. Conversely, Timberlake was considered, by and large, a relatively innocent "bystander" who was simply unaware or duped. As such, he, though having actively pulled on Jackson's clothing, did not encounter the same degree of criticism or suffer ramifications to the extent that Jackson did.[26]

These instances are not, however, limited to the interracial realm but also occur in intraracial contexts, as the controversy surrounding Nelly, rapper and music entertainer, reveals. In his highly contentious and controversial video *Tip Drill*, black women appear partially nude, especially in comparison to the fully clothed male rappers donning athletic jerseys. Nelly's swiping of a credit card in between the "posterior" (a.k.a. buttocks) of a woman caused an uproar of enormous magnitude, as did his obtuse and degrading misogynist lyrics. Not only did students at Spelman College plan a boycott of his charity performance, but he was scathingly excoriated by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In some ways, Nelly's career still suffers from this incident. What his video and its subsequent public condemnation expose is the extent to which perceptions and stereotypes of black women, womanhood, and blackness generally are entrenched in various segments, including the black community, and perpetuated in troublesome ways. Disseminated are constructions of black masculinity and manhood as regulatory—dictating the terms of their sexuality and desires through women, whose bodies and sexualities are governed by and accessible to (multiple) men. Some rappers, in turn,