THE PROBLEM WITH PUSSY POWER:
A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SPIKE LEE’S CHI-RAQ

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THE PROBLEM WITH PUSSY POWER:

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Thesis

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

“Make life a misery for them, and they’ll give up trying soon enough. No man is ever going to get satisfaction if the woman doesn’t choose that he should.”

--Aristophanes, Lysistrata

Released in December of 2015, Spike Lee’s latest film, Chi-Raq examines gang violence, sexuality, and power structures. The film is a modern day adaptation of the ancient Greek play Lysistrata by Aristophanes set against the backdrop of gang violence in the Southside of Chicago. In his play, Aristophanes gives readers the character of Lysistrata, the matriarch who brings the women of Athens together in an effort to end the Peloponnesian war. These fictional women swear an oath to withhold sex from their husbands until a peace treaty is signed. Named after her Athenian counterpart, the Lysistrata of Chicago’s Southside heads a ‘no-sex’ protest designed to end gang violence. Lee’s matriarch is Black, hypersexualized, and angry. Fueled by the guilt of her romantic relationship with gang leader, Demetrius “Chi-Raq” Dupree, Lysistrata coins the phrase “No Peace, No Pussy” in dissent of the senseless gun violence plaguing her community.

These narratives – which cut deep across time and culture – propagate the idea that women can use the magnetism of their sexuality to control their sexual partners, their relationships, and their households. However, the female portrayals created by Aristophanes and Lee take this notion a step further in stating that a woman’s desired
body will grant her enough authority that she will become a major figure within her community’s political dealings. This concept of the mystical and enchanting feminine allure – often referred to as “pussy power” – assumes that the value of female sexuality is greater than the value of a woman’s mind. The works of Aristophanes and Lee not only speak volumes to how women are viewed and depicted in male-dominated cultures, they also suggest that men are so base as to relinquish any moral or political fight in order to fulfill their carnal desires. The content of Lee’s film underscores the perception that women exert a great deal of influence within their relationships, households, and communities because of their physical attractiveness. Other slang terms and contemporary notions such as the “friend-zone” (a man that is placed in a platonic role within a woman’s life despite his desire for a sexual relationship), the “dog-house” (men experiencing a lull in their sex life due to an unhappy female partner), and “blue balls” (when a man experiences a prolonged state of sexual arousal because a woman no longer wishes to engage in sex acts), all disseminate the misguided understanding that women are the controllers of physical intimacy.

Because the women of *Chi-Raq* understand they have no power to commandeer the guns or disassemble the gangs themselves, they find power in controlling male access to sexual intimacy. As this form of protest is employed, Lee effectively commodifies the bodies of his Black female characters. In this film, race, gender, and class intersect highlighting a marginalized narrative which necessitates our attention. As Collins (1990) states, “examining the links between sexuality and power in a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression should reveal how important controlling Black women’s sexuality has been to the effective operation of domination overall” (p.164). Lee’s work leaves the impression that women control when, where, and how often sexual
activity occurs, which reinforces the idea that a woman’s sexual agency grants her authority outside of the proverbial bedroom. Unfortunately, the “power” that is gained through acts of intimacy is restrained and short-lived.

In contrast to this concept of pussy power is the reality that women’s bodies are often used against them, whether it is in the form of sexual violence or the rhetorical practice of slut-shaming. This thesis gains relevance in light of the election of Donald Trump as U.S President. Due to Trump’s leaked comments – laughing that his status as a celebrity allows him to sexually assault women and grab them “by the pussy” (Drum, 2016) – female constituents co-opted the pejorative term. Phrases such as “this pussy grabs back” and other protest chants, shed light on the contemporary movement regarding female sexuality and agency. In the aftermath of President Trump’s hot mic controversy, the media, politicians, celebrities, and women in general responded with anger and disgust. “Some Republicans withdrew their support for the presidential nominee. Athletes fought back against Trump’s defense that the remarks were common ‘locker room’ banter. Women powerfully responded by speaking out about their sexual assaults” (Puglise, 2016). In response to Trump’s unprecedented election and inauguration roughly 3 million women nationwide responded by marching on their perspective cities.

It is evident, then, that the issue of a woman’s sexuality is hotly contested and as I shall argue in this thesis, pussy power is a falsehood. As evidenced by the socially constructed notion of the prude/slut dichotomy, rampant rape culture and victim blaming, it is clear that women do not have the ability to freely wield their sexuality, much less use it for political or social gain. In 2017, women are still fighting to control their own bodies, dismantle rape culture, gain equal participation civically, and maintain respect as
contributing members of the workforce; thus, pussy power is little more than a penurious attempt to quell a woman’s germane frustration with the state of her inequity.

Because mass-mediated images of women, particularly Black women, as sexual objects are deeply ingrained and are continuously perpetuated within dominant culture, an examination of Lee’s 2015 film is crucial. Through the of lens feminist media theory and with an understanding of feminist standpoint theory, this thesis will work to explore the problematic portrayals of female sexuality, political influence, and socioeconomic power presented in *Chi-Raq*. This study will juxtapose real-life sexual situations and the mediated fictional portrayals of intimacy by examining the complex nature of gender roles and the inadequate access women have to roles of social, political, and economic power, answering the research question: How does Spike Lee’s commodification of Black women’s bodies in the film *Chi-Raq* reinforce the false notion of pussy power while creating constraining images of womanhood and power?
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many communication scholars through cultural and rhetorical criticism have examined media portrayals of Black women, and how these images operate within dominant culture (Boylorn, 2008; Brooks, 2004; Collins, 1990; Griffin, 2014; hooks, 1989, 1993; Scodari, 2012; Utley, 2010). Because the film was released in late 2015, there has been no significant academic analysis of *Chi-Raq*. The following literature review includes an explanation of feminist media and feminist standpoint theories, and examination of rhetorical analyses applied to media representations of Black women, the background of social power and feminism, and an examination of sexual politics and the notion of pussy power.

Feminist Media Theory

Scholars have thoroughly examined mediated images of women’s devaluation from a feminist perspective (Arthurs, 2003; Boylorn, 2008; Brooks, 2004; Collins, 1990; Dorsten, 2012; Foster-Singletary, 2012; Gauntlett, 2008; Griffin, 2014; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1993; Mulvey, 1989; Pasko, 2002; Radway, 1983; Sewell, 2013; Scodari, 2012; Steeves, 1987; Steiner, 2014). This examination has led to the development of feminist media theory. This theoretical framework is grounded in the concept that mediated
representations of girls/women “result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies” (Steiner, p. 361). In cogitating the ways women are devalued throughout media, it is critical to examine the sexualized portrayals of women. As Pasko (2002) states, “the sexual objectification and commodification of women reinforces notions of possession, authority and aggression in masculinity” (Pasko, p.65). This manifests in the Western beauty ideal which acts as sort of a rule book for conformity; pitting women against themselves and each other in a lose-lose competition that plays on their anxiety and body image issues. This truth is reflected within dominant culture, as women continually perform their gender in ultra-feminine ways, preparing their bodies and altering their faces, so that they may be deemed adequate for the male gaze. As many scholars argue, the image of women in media is created for the attract a male audience (Arthurs, 1998; Collins, 1990; Hammers, 2006; McAlister, 2015; Mulvey, 1989, Pasko, 2002; Scodari, 2012; Steeves, 1987). Mulvey (1989) writes, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (p. 808).

Additionally, feminist media theory considers the role of sex/gender as it intersects with other socially constructed dimensions. The term “intersectionality” was coined in 1989 by American critical legal race scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality is a sociological theory that explores why/how individuals face oppression due to overlapping identities. Steiner (2014) writes, “feminist media theory…applies philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts of media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and to reception” (p. 359).
Media and dominant culture play a defining role in how both men and women view ideal beauty and gender portrayal. Scholars use this theoretical framework to analyze media as a system of gender ideology (Arthurs, 2003; Boylorn, 2008; Brooks, 2004; Collins, 1990; Dorsten, 2012; Foster-Singletary, 2012; Gauntlett, 2008; Griffin, 2014; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1993; Mulvey, 1989; Pasko, 2002; Radway, 1983; Sewell, 2013; Scodari, 2012; Steeves, 1987; Steiner, 2014). Feminist media theory, therefore, works to question hegemonic ideologies as they are perpetuated in dominant culture and requires critics to look beyond the goal of increased female representation within media to find the root of oppression by gender, class, race, and sexual preference.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Developed by socialist feminists in the 1980s and originated by Nancy Hartsock (1983), feminist standpoint theory was developed as an extension of Marxist theory. Many scholars agree that while Marxist theory has its limitations and flaws, it served as the needed framework for such a theory (Collins, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987). Hartsock explains, “like the lives of proletarians in Marxist theory, women's lives in Western capitalist societies also contained possibilities for developing a critique of domination” (p. 368). Feminist standpoint theory operates under a key claim that states that the female experience is systematically and structurally different from the male experience and that these differences produce knowledge and perspectives that are unique and complete. Standpoint theories seek to understand what we know when we look from a subordinate’s social location; as men are the dominant and privileged group within our culture, women are the subordinate group and thus this particular standpoint theory seeks to gain knowledge from the female experience.
Feminist standpoint theory works to evaluate the power struggles that exist between men and women and the inequality these power struggles produce. As Harding (1997) states:

They [feminist standpoint theorists] have wanted to identify ways that male supremacy and the production of knowledge have co-constituted each other in the past and to explore what heretofore unrecognized powers might be found in women's lives that could lead to knowledge that is more useful for enabling women to improve the conditions of our lives. (pp. 382-383)

Her writing is a response to Hekman’s (1997) evaluation of feminist standpoint theory. Hekman argues for “recasting feminist standpoint theory in terms of the epistemology of the ideal type.” She believes that doing so “can make a significant contribution to contemporary feminist theory” (p. 362). Her criticism on the tenets of feminist standpoint theory and its theorists (such as Collins, Harding, and Hartsock) prompted responses from Harding (1997) and Hartsock (1997). Their debate involving a feminist standpoint mainly focused on the parameters of the “politics of difference” and the concept of truth or “true reality.”

As much debate surrounds the utility of feminist standpoint theory, theorists agree that individuals have multiple standpoints and note that while women often experience the same social position as members of a marginalized group, not all women will have the same experience (Allen, 1998; Hallstein, 2000; Harding, 1991, 1997; Hartsock, 1983, 1997; Hekman, 1997; McClish & Bacon, 2002; Wood, 2005). One area of contention within the scholarly debate surrounding feminist standpoint theory is the idea of difference. As Hallstein (2000) explains, “most feminist scholars recognized the differences among women yet felt a dilemma in giving up on the notion of commonality as they feel giving this notion up would make it difficult to forge a united front in the political battles of feminism” (p.3). However, Brenda Allen’s (1998) discussion of her
multiple standpoints in the article “Black Womanhood and Feminist Standpoints” is important to consider in this debate. As a feminist scholar and educator, she describes the challenges she faces as a Black woman in academe and uses her narrative to illustrate the consequences of searching for commonality among marginalized groups (i.e. women). As Allen reflects on her experiences in her role as an educator, scholar, and faculty member she states, “I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual” (p. 580). As May (2012) discusses intersectionality and multiplicity, she emphasizes that difference often perpetuates the idea of a hierarchy among women: “Some Women are perceived as ‘angrier’ (or as inappropriately angry) in comparison to other women; likewise, some women are expected to show docility or compliance via smiles or silences to other women because of intertwined factors of race, class, sexuality, and ability” (p. 80). The discussion and recognition of intersectionality is essential in the development of feminist theory. As Hallstein remarks:

Viewing all women as sharing the same essential nature and/or forms of oppression, then, is viewed as exclusionary and essentialist, and it privileges the position of the dominant group – most often western, white, heterosexual, middle-class women – at the expense of experiences and positions of women of color (pp. 2-3).

As feminist standpoint theory evolves, it attempts to recognize both commonality and difference as core tenets. Scholars are careful to note that standpoints are not merely perspectives. Wood (2005) reinforces this by stating that “feminist standpoint can but does not necessarily arise from being female” (p. 62) and Harding (1991) argues that “standpoints are socially mediated; perspectives are unmediated” (p. 276, footnote 9). Despite the confusion and disagreement surrounding the interpretation of feminist standpoint theory, Hallstein (2000) calls attention to the fact that communication scholars
across different areas of study and scholars in varying disciplines such as “philosophy, sociology, history, social work and the biological and physical sciences” (p. 2) are employing feminist standpoint theory in their research, illustrating the value and utility of this theory.

Media Representations of Black Women

Scholars have closely examined, critiqued, and analyzed the limiting media representations of Black women within dominant culture (Boylorn, 2008; Brooks, 2004; Collins, 1990; Foster-Singletary, 2012; Griffin, 2014; hooks, 1989; hooks, 1993; Sewell, 2013; Scodari, 2012;). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) discusses the objectification of Black women as others in her book Black Feminist Thought. In this text the notion of either/or dichotomous thinking is explained. Keller (1985) describes this thinking as the manner in which people, things, and ideas are categorized in terms of their difference from one another (as cited in Collins, p. 68). Robin Boylorn (2008) expounds upon this either/or dichotomous thinking and observes that:

Black women [in media] are either extremely educated or a high school drop-out, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly. Her relationships with men are always daunting, because either she is too educated and independent to need or want a man or she is desperate and lost without him, incapable of going on and willing to fight, cheat, or lie to get or keep him (p. 418).

Collins’ work delineates four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood that were ushered in through the dominant ideology of the slave era. She comments that these images each reflect “the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (p. 71). She notes that these overwhelmingly
stereotypical portrayals of Black women as “mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women’s oppression” (p. 67). An exploration of these controlling images is necessary for research and analysis on media representations of Black womanhood.

**The mammy.** The mammy, as described in Collin’s text, is the obedient, faithful, domestic servant. “Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women’s behavior” (p. 71). These mammy images are present in media such as Kathyrn Stockett’s (2009) book *The Help*, which was subsequently adapted into a script and made into a film. In her critique of the work, Tikenya Foster-Singletary (2012) states, “despite Stockett’s use of two black narrators, black bodies and black lives remain marginalized, even pathologized” (p. 96). As the two Black female narrators are imaged as mammies in a ‘positive light’, the Association of Black Women Historians stated that “*The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers...[making] light of black women’s fears and vulnerabilities, turning them into moments of comic relief” (as cited by Foster-Singletray, p. 96). Patterson, Kinolch, Burkhard, Randall, and Howard (2016) note that the mammy emerged as a way to normalize black women taking care of white families. They note, “in doing so they [the mammies] sacrificed their own families and themselves in ways that prioritized white families and their needs” (p. 67). Christopher Sewell (2013) traces images of Black women from the mammy to the matriarch and writes, “Her maternal instincts made her the most domesticated and dutiful slave; she embodied the archetype of a protector. Although she was a slave, the Mammy
became the prototype of white domesticity; she would later become everything the white woman wanted to be able to do in their homes by the 1950s and 1960s” (p. 311). The mammy is the idealistic Black female figure, introduced through slavery and slave culture, she is silent, obedient, faithful, and admired for her qualities of true domesticity.

**The matriarch and the welfare recipient.** Images of the matriarch and the welfare recipient are closely tied, as the image of the single Black mother is constant and ever-present. Collins notes that “portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children” (p. 74). This is examined in Griffin’s (2014) study of the film *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” by Sapphire.* Her critique is based on the film’s lack of any positive depictions of Black mothers. She goes on to explain that the mother characters represented in the film/novel are often represented as being blameworthy and shameful, “[the social worker] Ms. Weiss’ professional disgust in reaction to Mary’s abusive and neglectful parenting is backed by the social institution of the government which discursively pathologizes Mary and subsequently reaffirms negative perceptions of Black mothers” (p. 189). Collins argues further that images of blame-worthy mothers are successful and perpetuate long-standing stereotypes of Black households. She remarks that in continually reinforcing the idea that Black women have failed to pull themselves up by their boot-straps media has fostered the creation of this “controlling image of the welfare other” and continually stigmatizes her as “the cause of her own poverty and that of the African-American communities” (p. 77). As members of the working-class Black mothers struggled for welfare rights in the 1970s, the image of the welfare queen was produced. Often due to their socioeconomic status, Black mothers did not have the option
to stay home with their children; yet if they wished to participate as stay-at-home mothers (like their white counterparts), they were painted as lazy and entitled, further tightening the double-bind faced by women of color. Nadasen (2002) says this of the struggles of the welfare rights activists during this time:

Welfare rights activists demanded the right to choose to be mothers or to enter the world of work outside the home…They opposed work requirements forcing women to accept employment when they preferred to stay at home...They demanded higher welfare benefits or "special" grants for items they needed so they could properly take care of themselves and their children. They demanded the right to control their own reproduction, choosing for themselves when and how to take birth control, have an abortion, or be sterilized. And they demanded the right to control their own organizations (pp. 277-278).

These activists were required to work against the controlling stereotype of the welfare recipient. But as media continue to showcase Black mothers as blameworthy, they ignore the systematic inequity faced by Black women and children furthering the bootstrap myth and reinforcing stereotypes of the welfare queen.

**The Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman.** The image of the sexually objectified Black woman dates back to Sarah Bartmann, the “Hottentot Venus.” As a Black woman, caged and put on display at side shows in Europe, Bartmann’s body was exploited as an example of “exotic sexuality” (Brooks, 2004, p. 2). For centuries, Black women’s bodies have been sexualized, cast as exotic and erotic. Continually put on display as primal and animalistic Collins states that “all Black women are affected by the widespread controlling image that African-American women are sexually promiscuous and potential prostitutes” (p. 174). Because Black women’s bodies have been co-opted through mediated images a dilemma has been created. As many Black women, specifically Black female entertainers, attempt to use their sexuality as a means to control their own bodies they often risk being viewed as only sexually objectified beings. Not
only are Black women’s bodies commodified but this commodification occurs under the function of the white male gaze, Christine Scodari (2009) observes in her examination of the "Star Trek" prequel film. The representation of the Black female character Lt. Uhura in the 2009 film altered drastically from the portrayal of the character in the late 1960s television series. Scodari notes that the contemporary adaptation of the character as a light-skinned Black woman, engaging in romantic relationships, and filmed in her undergarments, departs from the groundbreaking and revered characterization in the original series. In the prequel film, Lt. Uhura’s story line focuses on her relationship with Mr. Spock (portrayed by a white actor). This appeal to the white male audience works to create an either/or dichotomy as Collins writes, “race becomes the distinguishing feature in determining the type of objectification women will encounter” (p. 170). Alice Walker notes, “where white women are depicted in pornography as ‘objects’, black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit” (as cited in Collins, p. 170). As Black women’s bodies are sexualized, objectified, and dehumanized across media, the meanings attached to their bodies seeps into societal perceptions of Black women.

Social Power and Feminism

**Power struggles.** Freeman’s (1970) essay *The Building of the Gilded Cage* creates a foundational understanding of hegemony and how it operates within dominant culture. Her essay delves into the long history of the patriarchy in order to demonstrate how prevailing ideologies condition women. Freeman discusses the act of social control – a
mechanism utilized in order to maintain the status quo – and writes that:

the socialization process, the climate of opinion in which people live, the group ideology (political or religious), the kind of social structures available, the legal system, and the police are just some of the means society has at its disposal to channel people into the roles it finds necessary for its maintenance (p.1).

Of concern to this study is the notion of hegemonic masculinity, or the practice of legitimizing male dominance within a society. Cloud (1998) notes that much of feminist practice focuses on understanding personal issues of power within sexual and familial relationships, thus echoing the sentiment that the personal is political.

While the fundamental goal of feminism appears simple enough – to treat women as individuals with social, economic, and political rights – a tension arises when we look to the focus of different movements within feminism and conflicting ideologies concerning the movement. Early feminist ideology was grounded in the belief that rights dwell within the natural person and that a government’s purpose was to protect a citizen’s natural rights. Campbell’s (1983) work is a survey of the rhetoric of two social movements and argues that these movements, one from 1848 and the other from 1963, are one rhetorical movement. “The ideological problem is a conflict posed by the concept of ‘womanhood’ or ‘femininity’ on the one hand, and personhood on the other, a conflict that has its roots in the origins of feminism” (p.101). Early feminists viewed womanhood as denying them personhood. White womanhood was fashioned in the early 19th century to fill the domestic role and as Campbell remarks, all women were affected by this shift in social perception. Some women began to cling to this sense of femininity and female power as they attributed their ‘domestic nature’ to the true superiority of women. In contrast, early feminist ideology was grounded in the belief that rights dwell within the natural person and that a government’s purpose was to protect one’s natural
rights. Herein lies the tension that exists between the notions of ‘womanhood’ and ‘personhood.’ Understanding this distinction between personhood and womanhood is key as it will also help to explain the differences among the second and third-waves of feminism.

**The second- and third-wave.** Snyder (2008) examined popular and academic literature focused on third wave feminism in order to create a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental differences between the second and third waves. She concludes that there are four key differences between the movements and many scholars agree (Borda, 2009; Campbell, 1973, 1983; Collins, 1990; Fixmer & Wood, 2005). Specifically, third-wave feminists view their movements as a more multi-cultural effort that recognize the intersectionality of race and gender, while second-wave was a movement primarily for and by white feminists. Third-wave feminism was a more identity-oriented movement focused on the individual whereas second-wave feminism focused on the efforts to obtain workplace freedoms and reproductive rights. Finally, the third-wave was less rigid and judgmental than the second-wave. Third-wave feminists felt more open to claiming erotic pleasure, enjoying aspects of femininity, and embracing girl culture. Fixmer and Wood (2005) discuss how third-wave feminism departs from the second-wave: “Third wavers grew up in a post *Roe v. Wade* era that reflected passage of Title IX and the gains of the Civil Rights and gay liberation movements. Thus, many third wavers assume the law itself is not the major barrier to equity” (p. 247). The article goes on to state that while second-wave feminists believed the personal to be political, third-wave feminists believed less so. Again, Campbell’s (1983) notion of personhood versus womanhood is applicable. As the second-wave of feminism focused much of its
attention on women being treated as a person first-and-foremost, the third-wave was less about legal obstacles and more about individual identity and sexual freedom. As Snyder (2008) puts it, “third-wave feminism rejects grand narratives for a feminism that operates as a hermeneutics of critique within a wide array of discursive locations, and replaces attempts at unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (p. 176). In considering how feminism operates in our modern era the feminist movement is beginning to push away from notions associated with mainstream or “white feminism” and embrace the experiences, narratives, and voices of feminists with intersectional identities.

**Black feminist thought.** As previously discussed in this literature review, the intersection race, gender, sexuality, and class create unique standpoints for women of color (Collins, 1986, 1990; Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1983, 1997, Hekman, 1997; hooks, 1990). Black feminist thought, originated by Patricia Hill Collins in the late 1980s, explores this intersectionality by offering knowledge from the standpoint of the black feminist. Collins (1986) outlines the three key themes of Black feminist thought: the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking of oppression, and the importance of defining culture. She states that taken together these key themes “have made significant contributions to the task of clarifying a Black women’s standpoint of and for Black women” (p. S24). She states, “Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge” (1990, p. 221). hooks (1990) calls for Black women and other women of color to employ the feminist liberation movement as a means to eradicate domination in all forms. She underscores the importance of recognizing the layers of dominance that subjugate women of color and other oppressed minorities.
When considering the term feminist as an identity and feminism as a movement it is necessary to reflect upon the history of the struggle, the fundamental differences in feminist theory, the debates within the scholarship, and the extant intersectionality of a woman’s identity.

Sexual Politics and Pussy Power

De Beauvior (1949) first argued that women are constructed as “others” within dominant culture causing their gender to be forcibly tied to their identity. She expounds upon the subject of gender and identity writing, “If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman’; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is man is obvious” (p. 25). Not only is this true for women but of course for people of color as well. Therefore, women of color face this double-bind – of being othered for both their gender and their race. “African-American women inhabit a sex/gender hierarchy in which inequalities of race and social class have been sexualized” (Collins, 1990, p. 165). As Black women experience this double-bind, Black men have had greater opportunity for success and also act as oppressors of Black women. This notion seems to echo the early thinking of de Beauvior who wrote, “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (p. 26). In her work Collins (1990) discusses the effects of sexual politics on Black women’s relationships. She discusses what Black women have become not because of Black men but for the sake
of them. Her work further explores the sexual violence and injustices faced by Black women as their bodies have been commodified and co-opted. Feminist and poet Audre Lorde (1984) explores female-sexuality and eroticism in her work, calling for women to disentangle their eroticism from its cultural misuse and encouraging them to uncover the power that lies within their erotic nature. She writes:

> When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of the creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives (p. 89).

Her work explores the idea that in recognizing this “life-force” within women, they are able to experience a freedom. However, she cautions that this sort of enlightenment cannot be achieved by women who continue to function within exclusively Western male tradition. Her work, while extremely philosophical, underscores the limitations of female sexuality under an oppressive patriarchy.

Bay-Cheng (2010) discusses the rhetoric surrounding women’s sexuality. She remarks that this discourse is often negative as it considers the dangers of female sexuality (unintended pregnancy, infection, varying forms of coercion and objectification, and sexual dysfunction) and therefore perpetuates the notion that sexuality is inherently dangerous. Hammers (2006) expounds on this idea of female sexuality being “inherently dangerous” by recognizing the fact that vagina is a topic we have been conditioned to avoid; “the vagina has been constructed as the most secret, most dangerous, most taboo aspect of the female body. The vagina has been not only disavowed, but also has been demonized by the few discourses that do include it” (p. 220). Not only is the vagina “the most-taboo aspect of the female body,” it is the most vulgarized, hence the very visceral reaction to the word ‘pussy.’ In her work Pasko (2002) writes of exotic dancers. She
explores the ‘power’ they yield and concludes that, “while dancers may have the power to pick and cultivate customers in the club, their power ends with their departure from the dance stage. Dancers feel particularly susceptible as they leave the club or when they offer back-room dances” (p. 62). When women’s bodies are commodified in such a way, they are viewed as public property, open to scrutiny as well as physical touch, it is difficult for a woman to assume a role of power outside of their sexual role.

This literature review examined feminist media and feminist standpoint theories and explored media representations of Black women, including the stereotypes of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the Jezebel. It also considered social power, the fundamental differences between second-wave and third-wave feminism, gained an understanding of Black feminist thought and the history of women in protest, explored sexual politics within dominant culture and examined the notion of pussy power. When female sexuality burdens women with a false sense of power, sexual acts and women’s bodies become commodified. This is clearly viewed in Spike Lee’s 2015 film *Chi-Raq*. This contemporary iteration of the Greek play *Lysistrata* illustrates women holding a sex strike to bring about social and political change. For this reason, the film provides us with the perfect artifact for analysis as it follows the narrative of women who actively commodify their bodies. It is necessary to understand the difference between the empowerment these fictional characters’ experience as agents of change within their community versus the real-life limitations women experience as members of our society.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

“History is a long, long time. Its raw material is an awesome garbage heap of facts, and even the man who aspires to be nothing more than a simple chronicler still must make decisions about perspective” (Black, 1970, p. 109). Perspective is one essential tool within a rhetorician’s kit, for it allows the critical scholar to undertake an exploration of discourse, media, or text in a critical manner. The function of the rhetorical critic’s analysis within the field of communication is to explore the associated meanings of an artifact and how those meanings operate within our culture. As Kellner (2009) writes, “we are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its institutions, practices, discourses, images, and spectacles” (p. 5). A critical analysis delves into a realm of deciphering and decoding messages. Rhetorical criticism is not necessarily concerned with intent of the creator of the message, rather it seeks to disentangle the meanings derived from text and media. Kellner further states, “critical media/cultural studies also help teach media consumers and citizens to better read, decode, and critique media culture in order to become literate readers, critics, and ultimately producers of their own culture, society, and individual identity” (p. 6).

Furthermore, meaning is rarely straightforward, the complexity of media is what makes it worthy of examination. As Brummett states, “texts are sites of struggle over
meaning” (p. 93). Meaning is derived through the reinforcement of dominant culture, the socialization of consumers, the influence within popular culture, and the ideological leanings of cultural systems. The role of the critic is to explore these meanings, to consider the implications of these meanings, and to demonstrate the power associated within various meanings. Brummett points out that “the critical scholar must be prepared to dig into texts, to think about the ways that people are being influenced as well as entertained, informed, and so forth by texts” (p. 96). As Foss (2009) explains, rhetorical critics are different from critics of popular culture as they do not solely examine the quality of an artifact. Rather, she states, “rhetorical critics are interested in discovering what an artifact teaches about the nature of rhetoric…” (p. 7) The role of the critic, as Grossberg (2009) points out, is “self-reflective.” He recognizes that the “analyst is also a participant in the very practices, formations and contexts he or she is analyzing” (p. 43). Because mediated images, like that of television and film, are ever-present in the digital and technical age their saliency and cultural influence is heightened.

Film is a useful artifact because as Thornhamn (1999) notes, “films are ‘texts’ – complex structures of linguistic and visual codes organized to produce specific meanings” (p. 10). In considering a film as an artifact, it is important to note that media do not exist within a vacuum but within a context. As Nilsen points out, “if criticism is to be socially as well as intellectually responsible it must continually relate speeches to their social consequences through application of principles that reflect the values society seeks to realize” (p. 178). It is crucial to understand the value system, culture, society, and ideology in which a text resides. One way to consider context is by looking at original context, the one in which the text or media was created. Kellner writes, “a critical/media studies aims at making connections between texts and contexts… and
specific texts, practices, and audiences” (p. 8). The critics work is in understanding how text operates within its dominant culture. Another way to understand the context of an artifact, is through the critic proposing or revealing a new one. Brummett writes, “by suggesting that a text be viewed in an entirely new context of the critic’s proposing, the critic can often fulfill the important function of showing people more of the ways in which life is made meaningful” (p. 112). Put simply, not only does the rhetorician consume, decode, and critique media but they help to reveal pertinent implications derived from it.

It is vital to point out that a critic is not concerned with how an actual audience interprets media. However, communication criticism does carry out the task of examining how audiences may be influenced by media, what sorts of meanings are conveyed by media and texts, and how that media is influenced by a society’s cultural norms and values. And while the task is a difficult one it is crucial. As Nilsen argues, “the very fact that the effects [of texts] are difficult to evaluate would seem to make it all the more important that the critic attempt such evaluation, that he [or she] make speculative judgements about results, both long-term and short-term” (p. 174). Media, particularly film, reflect the values of their consumers. As Rushing and Fritz (1978) state:

Societal values and film are related in two fundamental ways. First, film and society reciprocally influence one another. By projecting collective images of a culture, by serving as symptoms of cultural needs, and by symbolizing trends, dramatic media both reflect and create societal events. Second, socio-political processes, like film, are structured and perceived as essentially dramatic. Film is clearly a potent vehicle for symbolizing socio-political change (p. 64).

By understanding how film operates within a context, how this context is influenced by societal and cultural values, and how these values alter representations of Black women, sexuality, femininity, and power, this thesis will work to disentangle the meaning derived in *Chi-Raq*. As demonstrated through previous literature, it can be argued that the
rhetoric surrounding female sexuality is problematic. As media reflect societal attitudes and accepted ‘norms’ it holds great influence over how individuals interpret messages and images. Applying feminist standpoint theory to the film Chi-Raq, this thesis will seek to explore the portrayals of female power and sexuality. This film will be analyzed in three layers.

The first layer of analysis surveys the dialogue and discourse of Chi-Raq. This will include looking to the statements made by the women, about the women, and to the women of the film. By examining the language used throughout the film, my analysis will seek to understand how Black women are viewed, created, and represented by their peers, themselves, and particularly their Black male counterparts. Doing this as the initial examination is key as it will allow me to start by applying feminist media theory. This theory asks critics to examine the manner in which gender and femininity are depicted as an ideology within media. This initial inquiry will also require me to understand how Spike Lee’s characterizations of Black women speak to broader implications regarding the stereotypes and generalizations of Black American women.

Guided by Collins’ (1990) text Black Feminist Thought, the second layer of this analysis considers power constructs within the film. As the female characters seize their political and socioeconomic from a patriarchal regime, engage in romantic relationships with Black men, and unify across demographics under the premise of peace and sisterhood, it is important to consider aspects of these relationships and the subtleties presented within them. This section seeks to answer: who is depicted as having control? How do power dynamics shift? How do the female characters in the film garner autonomy? How do the male characters reconcile their desire for female companionship
with their struggle for socioeconomic agency? By answering these questions, this thesis underscores the relational strains placed on women in dominant culture.

Finally, the third layer of this analysis examines the four controlling images of Black womanhood in conjunction with “either/or dichotomous thinking.” I seek to identify the ways women are ‘othered’ and how they are juxtaposed against each other by answering: how are women pitted against each other? How are allied women dis/similar? In what ways are sexualized women devalued by other women? This area of analysis also identifies which of the four controlling images (the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the Jezebel) the Black women are placed into and how their portrayal is limiting. This thesis aims to dissect the roles these women hold and how they function within dominant culture. In particular, the role of the Jezebel is heavily assessed in order to consider in the ways in which Black women are objectified and in which ways they are empowered.

This thesis demonstrates how the “power” garnered through sex and sex acts is limiting and argues that until one can be viewed as a person first and a woman second, female bodies will continue to be commodified. While I believe that female sexuality can be empowering, I argue that it does not afford women economic, social, or political power.
CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS

Kellner (2009) explains how critical analyses of artifacts contribute to a broader understanding of our society and culture, “critical media/culture studies also helps to teach media consumers and citizens to better read, decode, and critique media culture in order to become literate readers, critics, and ultimately producers of their own media culture, society, and individual identity” (p. 6). Therefore, working to decode and uncover the meaning derived from Lee’s film is critical to our understanding of gender, race, and sexuality within dominant culture. Tying the concepts of legitimate sociopolitical power to the intimate reality of a woman’s sexuality creates a convoluted understanding of what it means to have control. Therefore, to further examine the subject of pussy power, this thesis will analyze Spike Lee’s 2015 film *Chi-Raq*, which tells the story of a female led strike purposed to end gang violence, eradicate poverty, and establish equity within Chicago’s Southside. This film provides us with the perfect artifact for analysis as it follows the narrative of fictional Black women whose bodies are used in to gain social, political, and economic power. Thornham (1999) states: “film reflects social changes, but it also shapes cultural attitudes.” (p. 10). The manner in which Black women within this fictional world are able to dominate their male counterparts and achieve a “happy ending” is starkly different from the reality Black women face in our contemporary America. As Gerney and Parsons’ (2014) report, Black women make up
22% of all homicides among women. Additionally, the number of Black women shot and killed by their husband or intimate partner was nearly five times as high as the total number murdered by strangers using all weapons combined. Because Lee’s film touts a reality where Black women are controllers of their personal relationships and communities, it is necessary to dissect Chi-Raq and scrutinize the pussy power trope. Feminist media and feminist standpoint theories will guide this research because, as Steeves (1987) writes, “feminist theories aim to understand the origins and continuing nature of women’s nearly universal devaluation in society” (p. 96). The following analysis will exam, dialogue and discourse of the film, gender roles and power constructs, and controlling images and archetypes. By gaining insight into the rhetorical themes of Chi-Raq, this thesis will serve to cultivate understanding of broader societal implications regarding gender, race, power, and class.

Chi-Raq Synopsis

As previously noted, Lee’s 2015 film is a modern adaption of the fifth-century Greek play Lysistrata. Aristophanes’ work satirized sexual relations in a male-dominated society. In this play, the title character brings the women of Greece together asking that they withhold sex from their husbands and lovers in order to force the signing of a peace treaty, effectively ending the Peloponnesian war. In order to mount their strike, they sacrifice a bottle of wine to the gods and seize the Acropolis, the fortress that houses the treasury of Athens. Eventually, the Spartan and Athenian leaders come together, develop terms, agree to land rights, and sign a treaty ending the war and winning back their women.
Lee’s iteration of this work places focus on the pervasive issue of gun violence occurring in 21st century Chicago, Illinois. As Sweeney, Schmadeke, and Meisner (2017) report, the 2016 levels of gun violence in the major city left 4,300 wounded and more than 750 dead, the city’s largest number of homicides since 1997. The controversial term Chi-Raq is a portmanteau of Chicago and Iraq, so coined by residents of the Southside to liken their city to a war-zone. The term was popularized through social media and popular culture – mainly hip-hop and rap music – and Lee’s choice to use it as the title of his film brought forth criticism from city residents, council members, and even Chicago’s mayor Rahm Emanuel. By placing this classic work with the context of contemporary America – particularly an impoverished, urban, and violent region of the U.S – while choosing to maintain the classic verse, Lee highlights the timeless themes of violence, power, sex, and corruption. Within his work Lee upholds the part of the traditional Greek chorus through a narrator named Delomedes (Sam Jackson), establishes fictional gangs (the Trojans and the Spartans) to represent the opposing sides of the Peloponnesian war, and reconfigures the character of Lysistrata (Teyonah Parris) as a young, sexualized, quick-witted, and aggressive Black woman.

The film opens to an image of the U.S. map comprised of various red, white, and blue guns. Soon lyrics to the original rap song “Pray for My City” begin to flash across the black screen in bold red print: “This the city of Chi-Raq, get your bed made/ See death around the corner, boy I dodge him like I owe ’em.” As the song ends, an automated voice, accompanied by text repeats “THIS IS AN EMERGENCY.” Then, as maps of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chicago are displayed the viewer is given statistics
regarding the death tolls from the wars in the Middle East compared to the murder rates in Chicago.

The relationship between the title character Chiraq and Lysistrata is established early in the film, they share a kiss while he performs at a rap concert, and they spend the night together at Lysistrata’s home. That evening, after a failed assassination attempt on Chiraq, the extant rivalry between the gangs plays out through an attack on Lysistrata’s home, which is damaged in a fire set by members of the Trojan gang.

The morning after her house is set ablaze, Lysistrata’s character is officially introduced: she is popular, smart, sexy, curvy, confident, and like-able. With an exaggerated aside, Dolemedes presents her the audience:

It all started with a gorgeous Nubian sister. Baby so fine, she made George Zimmerman and Darren Wilson wanna kiss her. As tough as Coffy and sexy as Foxy Brown. Hell, Beyoncé Knowles herself even had to bow down. They call her Lysistrata, a woman like no other. This chocolate brown sister was finer than a motherfucker. She could put fear in a pit bull, made Bruce Lee flee, knocked out Frazier and Ali, then ran Money Mayweather up a sycamore tree. With a mind like Einstein and a truly luscious behind, that gal put gap-goody hurting on all mankind (Lee 2015).

Soon, Lysistrata happens upon a crime scene: the murder of a young girl, Patty, caught in the crosshairs of a drive-by shooting. The crowd in the street is confronted by the child’s grieving mother, Irene (Jennifer Hudson), when she asks “Did ya’ll seen something? You ain’t see nothing?!” pointing to Lysitrata she continues, “You gonna get your day Lysistrata. You and your damn boyfriend, you got what’s coming’.” A shaken and guilt ridden Lysistrata, having nowhere to go, temporarily seeks refuge with the matriarch of her community, Miss Helen (Angela Bassett). Over tea, in her television-free home, Miss Helen attempts to set Lysistrata straight and further piles on the feelings of guilt and helplessness. At a loss for what to do, Lysistrata asks Miss Helen what can be
done to stop the senseless killings. Miss Helen tells her that she needs to create the
environment for change “like an alcoholic, you have to take away their booze.” While
Lysistrata knows she cannot to take away the guns, she realizes she has the ability to take
away her body. Miss Helen then instructs her to research Leymah Gbowee and the
Women’s Peace Movement that helped end the second Liberian Civil War. The guilt by
association and enlightening discussion serve as the catalyst for Lysistrata’s action. She
presents the idea of the sex strike to the women of both gangs, and after initial hesitation,
they share a bottle of wine and vow to abstain from sexual contact with any man.

After attending the funeral of Patty, Lysistrata and her army meet with the
spiritual guide of their community, Father Mike Corridan (John Cusack). He tells them
that he initially thought their plan was impractical but admits that he admires their efforts
and says to the women, “as a man who's taken a vow of celibacy, I know the power of the
sexual appetite. I know this fruit is ripe. But understand, your ruse won't bring a truce.”
When Lysistrata asks, “well, what will bring peace?” Father Mike responds, “How about
a job? Affordable housing. A good education. Purpose, hope.” It is this meeting that
sparks Lysistrata’s idea to raid and seize a United States Armory. Once the women are
victorious in their seizure; they begin to gain national attention. Their protest inspires the
women of Chicago, America, and eventually the world to sex-strike for peace. Much to
the embarrassment of local, state, and federal officials, the protests last three and half
months. Finally, after much negotiation with both the government and the men of
Chicago, the strike comes to an end and all parties agree to the signing of peace accord.

As the buffoonish mayor of Chicago announces:

Every Fortune 500 company has signed the peace accord ensuring that every
person in the hoods of America of employment age is guaranteed a job. And I
don't mean no minimum age neither. New hospitals and mental health facilities will be built by the United States government. And finally, there will be a much needed trauma center on Chicago's South Side (Lee, 2015).

While this scene is intentionally hyperbolic, the tone quickly shifts when Chiraq refuses to participate as he attempts to leave the scene. With Irene’s mother by her side, along with hundreds of other family members of slain Chicagoans, Ms. Helen appeals to Chiraq by telling him a story of the father he never knew and assuring him that he, too, can be a good man. This leads to a confession: Chiraq is the man behind the fatal shooting of Patty. Chiraq achieves redemption as he implores his gang-affiliated counterparts to follow his guidance by taking responsibility for their crimes. Once he is taken into custody, Father Mike states, “he’ll be alright, Chiraq can take care of himself” Lysistrata replies, “that’s Demetrius. That’s not Chiraq.” In this film the Black community, particularly the women, accept the onus for the city’s complex situation, they effectively pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and are able end the social, political, racial, and sexist injustice that has plagued their community for decades.

Dialogue and Discourse in Chi-Raq

Dortsen (2012) writes that, “feminist standpoint theory is a methodology for explicating how ‘relations of domination’ contour women’s lives” (p. 27). Additionally, feminist media theory allows critics to understand how media depict women from a hegemonic ideology while constructing and prescribing roles under a binary concept of gender itself. These theories serve to guide this analysis and garner understanding of how mediated portrayals of women are depicted and reinforced within dominant culture.
Women experience objectification of their bodies everywhere. Whether they participate in sex work, consume media, or simply walk down the street, women’s bodies are assumed to be open to the public. While the objectification of the female body is well documented, considered, and researched, another facet of a woman’s personhood is often held hostage: her voice. Women are subject to constant policing of their voices as systems try to establish how, when, where and to whom they can speak. As Tannen (1991) explains, throughout history women have been punished for talking too much. She notes colonial forms of punishment for talkative girls, “women were strapped to ducking stool and held underwater until they nearly drowned, put into the stocks with signs pinned to them…” (p.111) She furthers that despite that stereotype that women are believed to talk too much, research points to the contrary. While conducting research at an academic conference, it was found that during question-and-answer forums women only contributed 27.4 percent. Therefore, the idea that a woman should refrain from sharing her voice or using certain language is not a new concept. This can be observed in the way women talk about their own bodies. Hammers (2006) argues in her essay that the vagina is a topic we have been conditioned to avoid, “the vagina has been constructed as the most secret, most dangerous, most taboo aspect of the female body. The vagina has been not only disavowed, but also has been demonized by the few discourses that do include it” (p. 220). Not only is the vagina “the most-taboo aspect of the female body” it is the most vulgarized, hence the very visceral reaction to the word ‘pussy’. When a woman adopts the use of this word into her language she is viewed as being vulgar herself. This is apparent in Lysistrata’s characterization. Her hypersexualized appearance is created to accompany the vulgarity of her discourse and dialogue. When she shouts,
“No Peace! No Pussy!” the audience is able to tacitly accept her seemingly inappropriate language because she has already been conceptualized as a sex object.

Despite convincing droves of women (and men) to protests for peace, despite bringing about social change, and despite her passion for the movement Lysistrata’s character is flat. While she is witty, her language and actions center on her sexual prowess and not on her intellect or political cognizance. Rather than create dialogue for Lysistrata which examines the complexities and nuances of gun violence, masculinity, poverty, and education within Chicago, Lee chose to create a male narrator who acts as the moral guide throughout the film. Lysistrata is, in essence, a paper doll, acting as the face of the fight, but unable to voice her considerations. The silencing of women stems back to their early treatment. Freeman (1970) writes on the paradox of ‘all men created equal’:

because there is a longstanding legal tradition, reaching back to early Roman law, which says that women are perpetual children and the only adults are men... But the definition of women as minors who never grow up, who therefore must always be under the guidance of a male (father, brother, husband or son), has been carried down in modified form to the present day and vestiges of it can still be seen in our legal system (pp.1-2).

Freeman’s work draws on the deeply engrained misogyny that prevails in dominant culture. Because women were historically viewed to be akin to children, the ability for them to have and use their voice in conjunction with men is nearly impossible. This policing of women’s voices not only occurs when women are proscribed from using specific language, but in the way they are conditioned to use or stifle their voices.

One force of opposition to Lysistrata’s fight is “The Knights of the Euphrates,” a men’s group who feels extremely threatened by the female cause within Lee’s work. In a council meeting their president, Duke, calls his men to action, “Like the battles of the
past, we will come together to whoop some female ass. Let us not stand for their flappin’ lips or that chronic nagging bullshit. Are we mice or men? We shall redeem the power of our breed with one mighty thrust into the misty mist and the dusky dusk.” As the scene continues the Knight of the Euphrates sneak into the Armory and attempt to “take” the women back (by seducing or coercing them into sex). Here Duke and Lysistrata meet at the ‘front lines’ to discuss the dilemma. Duke asks Lysistrata who her parents are when she tell him she’s an orphan, he replies, “So you never had a pappy to school you on the female way. It takes a man to teach a heffa like you how to behave.” She retorts, “I’m sorry that our effort to reform has left you enable to perform. But even before the strike, that’s what your penial implants was like…soft.”

Duke then enters Lysistrata’s personal space in a threatening manner stating, “you trifling little Black bitch,” which prompts Lysistrata to slap him across the face. While the attempts of her male opponent are futile, this scene is one of many that highlight’s problematic discourse throughout the film. The male reaction to this women’s fight is largely negative, often referring to Lysistrata and her army as crazy, foolish, or childish bitches. Even when they meet with male allies, like the character of Father Mike, they are subject to mansplaining (practice of explaining something to a woman in a patronizing manner). This is unsurprising as Griffin (2012) in her Black feminist autoethnography calls attention to the silencing of the Back women across media. Her exhaustive list of mediated stereotypes, exclusions, and misrepresentations points to the accepted practice of muzzling Black women outside of the ‘safe spaces’ they have created for themselves. She argues for Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as a theoretical and methodological lens for Black female scholars so that they can “critically narrate the
pride and pain of Black womanhood” (p. 138). She notes that “BFA cannot eradicate the repeated failures of dominant society to respect the humanity of Black women nor eradicate the harm that Black women have already and continue to endure,” but states that it can serve as a “conduit to resistant voice and situate Black women as not only knowers, who read dominant culture as a means to survive, but also as known through our own words and expression” (p.150). Her perspective is critical to this analysis as the discourse of this film actively silences the Black female voices it superficially claims to support.

This leads to another glaring issue within the film: the fact that of all the women participating in the protest, the majority of female characters remain voiceless. Lysistrata, Miss Helen, and Irene have the most dialogue of the female characters. Even so, Miss Helen and Irene are minor characters and are only featured in a handful of scenes. Other female characters have little to no dialogue save for lines of support for Lysistrata. Other than the initial planning of the sex-strike, the women are never shown having conversations over the issues being addressed by their protest. On the other hand, the male characters of Delomedes, Chiraq, Father Mike, Trojan gang leader Cyclops (Wesley Snipes), Duke, the Chicago’s Mayor McCloud, and his aide Commissioner Blades are all featured in far more scenes and have the majority of the dialogue within the film. Again, the story as told by Delomedes, is written, directed, produced, and delivered from a male point of view. On the surface, this film seems to tell the story of Black woman’s triumph, a much needed and under-valued narrative within dominant culture. Yet, the discourse of Lee’s film fails to deliver a meaningful fictionalized account of such a Black woman’s narrative. Patterson et al. (2016) argue that Black woman’s narrative has long been
overdue within dominant culture and note that such stories align with Black Feminist Thought (Collins) in a powerful way. They write that Black Feminist Thought “responds to the need for black women to have affirming spaces within a society in which we face intersecting forms of oppression because of our multiplicatively marginalized identity markers, race and gender at the forefront” (p. 57). While Lysistrata is the lead of the film, her narrative is underdeveloped and her affirming space within society is an isolated one. When men meet to negotiate with her, it is not to discuss the issues of rampant violence, systematic poverty, or inequitable public education but to actively chastise her for denying them access to her body. She experiences no real transformation and operates more as a mouth piece for Lee’s implication of the black community. It is the protagonist, Chiraq, who’s internal struggle is followed throughout the film. His journey from arrogant thug to responsible black male figure is the vehicle for Lee’s condemnation of Chicago’s urban community.

Finally, the most troubling discourse featured in the film is the oath of celibacy taken by the women:

I will deny all rights of access or entrance from every husband, lover, or male acquaintance who comes to my direction in erection. If he should force me to lay on that conjugal couch, I will refuse his stroke and not give up that nappy pouch. No peace. No pussy!

Several aspects of the oath are problematic as it, along with the notion of pussy power, discounts the pervasive nature of rape culture blatantly ignores rape culture. The oath which states, “If he should force me to lay on that conjugal couch…” ignores the fact that rape and sexual assault “strip victims of their will to resist and make them passive and submissive to the will of the rapist” (Collins, 1991, p. 167). The film lacks any depiction
of domestic or gendered violence and wholly ignores the toxic hyper-masculinity that fosters such egregious acts. Instead, it creates a fantasy world in which women are free from intimate partner violence as they actively abandon their husbands with no threat to their emotional and mental health or physical safety. As Collins (1991) notes:

The unfortunate current reality is that many Black men have internalized the controlling images of the sex/gender hierarchy and condone either Black women’s rape by other Black men or their own behaviors as rapists. Far too many African-American women live with the untenable position of putting up with the abusive Black men in defense of an elusive Black unity (p. 179).

The title of his film is meant to liken Chicago to a war-zone and raise awareness about the crime and violence happening within the city, yet it ignores the reality of women facing domestic abuse daily, it silences those forced into to sex work, and it squarely places the responsibility of ending all violence on the women of the community.

Gender and Power Constructs

Film, as a medium, must be analyzed, theorized, and examined from a feminist perspective because as Thornham writes:

…films both reflect social structures and changes and misrepresent them according to fantasies and fears of their male creators. The resultant stereotypes serve to reinforce and/or create the prejudices of their male audiences, and to damage the self-perceptions and limit the social aspirations of women (p. 10).

In order to understand hegemonic masculinity, it is critical to understand how female sexuality is defined vis-à-vis the male. The sexual relationships of the female characters are not only important to the narrative they serve as the crux of film’s plot. As Lysistrata brings together her friends, neighbors, and rivals, the allure of the female body is commodified. Impressively enough, Lysistrata has enough social capital to convince sex
workers to give up their livelihood in order to honor the strike. As critic Linda Goler Blount (2016) quips, “apparently, when it comes to social change, [women’s] bodies are all we have to offer” (p. 1898). Lee’s satire, in step with Aristophanes’, attempts to overstate how women are able to use their bodies in order to gain sociopolitical influence. Yet, Revermann (2010) notes, “one crucial thing to [realize] is that putting a woman into a position of political authority, control and power in a comedy is an important part of the humor. It is funny, straightforwardly ridiculous, because it blatantly (and fantastically) defies the reality of the world of the audience” (pp. 72-73). And the reality of the world of the audience is that women of color make up six percent of state legislators nationwide and only seven percent of those serving in Congress are women of color (Center for American Women and Politics, 2016).

Lee’s work simultaneously hyper-sexualizes and desexualizes his female characters. Lysistrata and her female counterparts are desexualized as they are stripped of their own sexual needs. Yet, they are hyper-sexualized as their value is placed squarely on their desirability. It is not their wit, skill, talent, hard-work, or intellect that brings about social change, but their bodies. In the initial stage of the protest, a few women put up superficial attempts to opt-out of the strike. Yet, they quickly agree and take an oath to abstain from sexual acts with little to no resistance. Throughout the film women walk around scantily clad, with pad locks over their vaginas while the men lambast them, often gaslighting them. The men react strongly not because they too see a need to end the rampant violence and brutality within their community, but because they are denied their God-given right to fornicate. By noting the juxtaposition in the male and female response
to life without sex, it is evident that Lee’s work desexualizes women; hinting that they really don’t need to need sex whereas men literally cannot survive without it.

The women find their strength through denying men access to their genitals, yet it could be argued that gang violence, much like sexual assault, domestic violence, and rape, are the result of a hyper-masculine dominant culture. As Collins (1991) notes, “some African-American men feel they cannot be men unless they dominate a Black woman” (p. 186) and furthers that, “many African-American women have had to exhibit independence and self-reliance to ensure their own survival and that of their loved ones” (p. 187). Collins’ work calls attention to issues within Lee’s film. The clearly unhappy male characters are shown as despondent yet still respectful of the woman’s cause. They rarely attempt to assert their dominance save for instances of conversation with the women. While women feel empowered or even liberated when they are able to tap into their sexual prowess and feminine mystique, this empowerment does not transform to palpable roles of power or influence. As Bay-Cheng (2010) notes, "indeed, there is a critical difference between sexual objectification, which discounts women’s sexual autonomy and independent interests, and sexual subjectivity, through which women enjoy a sense of agency and entitlement to sexual safety, desire, and pleasure” (p. 98). The term pussy power implies that women are able to wield authority because they are sexually desired by men. Therefore, men commission this power and have the ability to give it or take it away, refuting the idea that pussy power underscores a woman’s agency.

Film critic Jade Petermon (2016) observes the link between sexuality and power within the male character by analyzing Nick Cannon’s, Demetrius “Chiraq” Dupree. She
draws attention to one instance of Chiraq’s sexuality as it is linked to his feelings of masculinity and power:

In the first scene of Chi-Raq and Lysistrata together, Chi-Raq makes several comparisons between his penis and the gun he is in the midst of polishing. Lysistrata says, “We could have gotten killed. I gotta look at that [she points to his gun] tonight?” He replies, “Out of sight. I got another pistol that’s gonna make everything aight.” This line, like many others, demonstrates Chi-Raq’s awareness that his power is linked to sex and violence (p. 33).

His credibility is hinged on his identity as a gangster, after all he is the leader of the Spartan gang, hence Chi-Raq’s struggle throughout the film to accept the fate he is being handed: his girlfriend has more social capital than he does, his gang becomes ineffectual, and his life of partying, sex, and violence has all but disappeared. In two scenes, the audience sees Chi-raq assert his male dominance over his female sexual partners. This is when he feels most in control, his sense of self is so closely knit to his hyper-masculinity so when it is challenged he experiences and existential crisis. Lee draws the male figures of this film as impulsive, animalistic, superficial, and aggressive and his female characters play on this throughout the film. This is related to Pasko’s (2002) examination of stripping as a confidence game. She writes that, “while the confidence game in exotic dance produces some personal and financial gain, strippers experience considerable social and psychological costs that diminish their feelings of power when they leave the stage” (p. 61). This can be likened to the personal gain felt by the female characters in Lee’s film they experience some social and personal gain yet their livelihoods, marriages, relationships, and, presumably, safety is at stake once they leave they safe space they have created for themselves. As Bey-Chang notes:

women’s sexual subjectivity in the context of a heterosexual interaction is predicated on a certain degree of privilege insofar as a woman who is
dependent—materially or otherwise—on a male partner may not be able to afford alienating him by refusing or attempting to negotiate the terms of sexual engagement. When women lack direct, independent access to sufficient resources, heterosexual relations may not only be a means to embodied pleasure or interpersonal intimacy, but may also serve the pragmatic purpose of meeting basic needs such as food and housing (p. 99).

Spike Lee’s film works to place the vagina on a pedestal and in doing so effectively disregards the reality of women in contemporary culture.

Controlling Images and Archetypes

Griffin (2012) writes in her Black feminist autoethnograph, “I see images of my body held hostage as Other; entrapped in the controlling imagery of the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, matriarch, and the more contemporary welfare queen, hoodrat, freak, crazy Black bitch, superwoman, or some combination thereof” (p. 147). The archetypes Griffin describes are flat characters extant within media. They serve to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Black women in American culture. Boylorn (2008) explains either/or dichotomous thinking by stating that in media “Black women are [depicted as] either extremely educated or a high school drop-out, ambitious or listless, sexy or ugly” (p. 418) this either/or binary continues through many tropes and is ever present in Lee’s film.

When considering the three primary female characters – Lysistrata, Miss Helen, and Irene – the binary is clear. Both Miss Helen and Irene are matriarchs and their identities hinge on their status as mothers. Making their role even more potent is the fact that both mothers have suffered the loss of the child, nearly vaulting them to the level of martyrdom. They are called to Lysistrata’s protest because of their vocalized desire to save the babies. In contrast, Lysistrata is a Jezebel. This evidence by the way she dresses
and her open discussions of sexual desire and activity. Reid-Brinkley (2008) writes that, “Black women’s bodies become exchange resources in a heteronormative black culture. A black woman’s treasure—her body—is to be exchanged for a black man’s protection and honor” (p. 248) and that is exactly what Lysistrata does. When juxtaposing images of Irene and Miss Helen, desexualized prudes, against Lysistrata – the most desired and dangerous woman in Chicago – the either/or dichotomy is clear.

Because Lee’s film is an condemnation of the Black community, his matriarchal figures are pivotal. These women help lead the cause to end violence in Chicago and in the process they bring proper jobs, healthcare, and education to those within the children within their community. As Collins notes that the matriarch is responsible for establishing morality and value within her community and that this controlling image works to blame mothers for systematic poverty and injustice. She states, “such a view divert attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests than anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home” (p. 74). In Lee’s film, the matriarchs are also superwomen who do in fact lift their families and communities from the political and economic injustice that has plagued them for decades, perpetuating the boot strap myth.

Lysistrata as the Jezebel must be analyzed in order to understand how she operates within systems of racial and gendered oppression. In her book *Black Feminist Thought* Collins continues her analysis of the controlling images of Black womanhood. She writes that, “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women…” (p. 77). The contemporary Lysistrata embodies this archetype even while she abstains from sexual acts. Early in the film she engages in sex
acts with Chiraq and continually dresses in a provocative manner to highlight her desirability. I argue that Lee’s characterization of this woman rests on her being sexually aggressive. If she were a merely average woman rather than the hypersexualized, objectified caricature represented in the film, the response by the male group would not initially be as strong. Furthermore, if Lysistrata is hypersexualized, then it makes thought of her abstaining from sex seem so inconceivable, that her female compatriots have no choice but to join her resistance. Lysistrata as a character serves to fulfill a male fantasy. While she brings about much ire within her community, in a short three months, she accomplishes what no male community member, politician, or celebrity can: she turns her city into a utopia. Yet she remains desirable, likeable, and humble. Despite being the catalyst and face of the movement, she is silent/absent for much of the film as Chiraq’s journey is followed. She is humble and willing to be submissive to those men who agree to work with her cause. After all, the end of the strike culminates in a televised “sex off” with Chiraq. In many ways this fictionalized character is a blending of Collins’ controlling images. These harmful stereotypes evolve and change but as Collins notes “the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression” (p. 78).
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

Exploring popular media through feminist media and standpoint theories enables us to look at how messages perpetuate prevailing cultural norms and values particularly in regards to the intersection of race and gender. Film as a medium provides us with culturally relevant ideologies and highlights popular beliefs regarding gender, sexuality, and race. Film works to either reinforce or challenge the status quo and offers a snapshot into specific cultural time and place. Culture influences film content, noting this is essential as we recognize that media are not created, nor does it exist, within a vacuum. The messages, undertones, and meanings within film are consumed by wide ranging audiences, especially in the age of streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. Thus, the meaning derived from such media must be considered.

Spike Lee is known for making politically conscience and controversial films. His position as a Black independent film maker enables him to tackle topics that most film makers would avoid for fear of losing capital. *Chi-Raq* tackles issues of political, social, and racial injustice within Chicago. Lee’s latest film, for all its visual, lyrical, and musical beauty failed to resonate with audiences on issues of gun violence and social inequity. Lee applied a satirical classic piece of literature to a complex issue and in doing so it reinforced dangerous tropes and stereotypes. Thus, we can turn back to and answer the research question: How does Spike Lee’s commodification of Black women’s bodies
in the film Chi-Raq reinforce the false notion of pussy power while creating constraining images of womanhood and power?

We see that Spike Lee commodified Black women’s bodies by turning them into bargaining chips in a political standoff and effectively objectifies the Black female body by assigning an unrealistic almost magical power to her genitals. As Collins’ notes, “race becomes the distinguishing feature in determining what type of objectification women will encounter” (p. 170). The Black women in this film are essentially turned into walking vaginas as their value rests in their perceived sexuality. As Black female scholar Griffin (2012) writes, “The body that I cherish and the mind that I have worked hard to cultivate are continually maimed in song after song, image after image, and plot after plot” (p. 147). Lee’s female characters fulfill the archetypes of the controlling images, matriarch and Jezebel, with characteristics of the mammy and welfare queen present as well. Lee constructs these characters so that they are to blame for the failings within their community regardless of the complexity or systematic reinforcement of such issues and then makes them solely responsible for solving said issues. He also reinforces the idea that Black women are sexually aggressive individuals whose bodies are not their own but rather public property. Lee’s work falls into the common trap of hypersexualizing his female protagonist. By referring to Lysistrata as a “Nubian queen,” he attempts to place her on a pedestal, noting that she is epitome of Black womanhood. Reid-Brinkley notes, “the ‘black queen’ is judged by her commitment to the elevation of black manhood in the context of a racist society. She is worshipped for her ability to maintain her appropriate position within black culture” (p. 247). Lysistrata’s character is wholly concerned with the preservation of the Black men within her community, despite being framed as tool for justice rather than the leader in the fight. Finally, issues of rape, sexual assault, and
domestic violence are blatantly ignored within the film despite the audience’s reality of sexist and dangerous rape culture.

Although *Chi-Raq* calls attention to salient issues of gun violence, crime, and poverty within contemporary America, the film failed to appropriately address the root of these problems. It uses women as both scapegoats and problem solvers under the guise of cherishing Black womanhood. The analysis in this thesis provides a feminist lens to examine and cultivate the derived meaning in Lee’s film. It illuminates prevailing tropes and questions the limiting and controlling images of Black womanhood. This film is a dense artifact which allowed me as a rhetorician and feminist to scrutinize its meanings and question the prevailing cultural stereotypes it presents.
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