No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Commodification, Performance, and Mis- and Disembodied Black Masculinity

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

Despite the fictitiousness of their fixedness, in the popular cultural imaginary, masculinity and maleness are often conflated, while blackness is frequently gendered male. Through a critical analysis of various sites of mis- and disembodied black masculinity, specifically advertising and corporate branding, sneaker culture, and masculine identified queer women, No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Commodification, Performance, and Mis- and Disembodied Black Masculinity examines how and why racialized and gendered performances of authenticity that are maintained in the absence of the bodies they are commonly associated with work to expose the myth of entrenched corporeal scripts, and provide the possibility for re-configuration and re-imagination of identity.
Dedication

Peewee!
Acknowledgments

To all of those who have had any role, large or small, in helping this project come to fruition, thank you.
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Preface

“No – B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants” and similar assertions of authenticity have become standard caveats present on online sites, particularly those selling goods that are prone to unauthorized reproduction. Although the frequency with which I peruse websites (specifically those devoted to the discussion and procurement of sneakers) undermines my ability to pinpoint when I first noticed this expression, “No B-grades, Fakes, or Variants” or some variation, is a phrase that I have unconsciously ogled thousands of times. Only recently, however, has this emphatic assertion of authenticity struck me as something more complex than merely a rhetorical strategy used to quell consumer anxiety over imposter goods. Initially, my personal (albeit far from casual) fascination with sneakers and sneaker culture was something that remained separate from my academic interests. Over time however, I began to unconsciously (presumably because of my studies) approach sneakers and sneaker culture with a more critical eye. I found myself constantly intrigued and engaged by the issues regarding race, gender, consumption, authenticity, even sexuality that emerged on blogs, in music, and during casual observations of everyday cultural and social negotiation particularly for black male youth with regards to sneakers. I began writing about tennis shoes seeking intellectual respite from the projects that I had undertaken previously, only to realize almost instantaneously that my analysis of sneakers as a palimpsest upon which disembodied black masculinity is written, was merely another point on the same
trajectory of intellectual inquiry I sought to escape. Sneakers and sneaker culture were the spaces within which the issues of race, masculinity, performance and commodification that inform the crux of my intellectual interests become most lucid. *No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants*, then, is a concession to this interest, a project that embarks on an exploratory inquiry into various sites of mis-and disembodied black masculinity.

Methodologically, *No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants* relies on textual analysis and close reading of secondary sources. Chapter One “‘Can’t Believe Reebok Did a Deal With a Psycho’: Fifty Cent, Commodification, and Branding Black Masculinity” makes use of primary sources such as song lyrics and advertisements as well as various secondary historical and cultural sources. Chapter Two, “No, B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants” Similar to the preceding chapter, No B-Grades, Fakes and Variants incorporates a myriad of secondary book sources, as well as primary sources such as advertisements. The relationship between sneaker culture and the internet cannot be overstated, as the two inform each other. With much of the culture being based around exclusivity and becoming increasingly global, the internet and websites are often the only way to connect what would otherwise be a disjointed social and economic venture; it is only logical that the methodology of this chapter mine from the very source that inform its culture. “No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants” relies on the dynamic fodder of web-based sources, such as sneakerpimps.com and YouTube. Finally, Chapter Two uses sneakers, which in this case serve as a primary source, to be read as “text,” to highlight the ways in which certain
productions of black masculinity are packaged. The final, chapter, is entitled “‘I’m Just Like a Nigga, I’m Just like A Man’: Women, Disidentification, and the Performance of Black Masculinity in Daniel Peddles The Aggressives.” This chapter also utilizes a close viewing of Daniel Peddle’s The Aggressives and buttresses this main source with various secondary works.

*No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants* draws upon various disciplines including Black Studies, American Studies, Gender Studies, Performance Studies, and Cultural Studies, and aspires to contribute meaningfully to each. Situating itself at the nexus of the aforementioned disciplines, *No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants* is a work that is influenced, informed, and indebted to numerous texts, from various disciplines and fields, each of which has proven vitally important to its production, however there are works whose concepts and frameworks more directly, more saliently resonate within the pages of this modest endeavor; therefore their mentioning is essential.

Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans Gender and the New Racism* is an exploration of the ways in which African Americans experience racism in gendered ways. Collins manages to adroitly incorporate a sophisticated balance of historical as well as contemporary accounts and popular culture references of the ways in which African Americans are constantly negotiate intersecting issues of race class and gender.
bell hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* offers one perhaps one of the most concise, eloquent, and indeed intellectually generative articulations of the relationship between blackness and race that informs *No-B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants*. Again hooks’ words clearly elucidate some of the more nebulous ideas around black identity and commodification. Consider the following passage:

> Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it offers a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture ethnicity becomes the spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.¹

Hook’s notion of the” new delight’ that blackness underlines the ways in which issues of difference became misappropriated and vetted through means that relegate racial identity for African Americans to a limited set of, often highly problematic, characteristics made recognizable, reproducible and palatable for wide array of consumers; a sort of erogenous zone, that can be entered and exited from the safety of one’s couch, offering both psychic and physical distance from actual black bodies and black life. However it is

imperative that this phenomena be explicated for its broader applications and implications. The “otherness” that hooks refers to is not merely located in the racialization, but perversion as well. Indeed this perversion, or the distortion of identity, is what makes the “Other” available for African Americans and other people of color to partake in the “new delight” with the same ease as their white counterparts *No B Grades, Fakes or Variants* offers another inquiry into the consumption of black masculinity production and consumption of difference that hooks outlines. While Collins and hooks works offer important grounding information about blackness in relationship to race, gender, and representation, the broad focus of the respective works doesn’t allow for more nuanced assessments of the ways in which representation and gender work in a more unconventional manner. In order to make more general assessments of the way in which race and gender work, issues such as transgendered identity and queerness, for example, are mentioned in passing, obscuring much of the development that these issues fully require.

Considering *No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants* is a project particularly concerned with masculinity, and more specifically masculinity without men, Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* proved to be invaluable in prompting many of the initial, critical interrogations into masculinity in the absence of male bodies. Broad in scope, Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* addresses many of the how’s and why’s of the seemingly irreconcilable concept of masculinity without men. Halberstam’s work
interrogates various manifestations of female masculinity including tomboys, drag queens, and stone butches. Perhaps because of the ambitiousness of *Female Masculinity*, in terms of its effort to address a gaping hole in the literature regarding accessible scholarship on the complexities inherent in gender identity and performance, her work only peripherally addresses issue of masculinity in black women, and while her work does have a chapter devoted specifically to performance entitled “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance,” it is less concerned with performances of everyday life, particularly performances that are gendered and raced,

Where Halberstam’s assessment of racialized performances falls short, Jose Munoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, intercedes. *Disidentification* offers an important intervention into the ways that what he refers to as “minoritarian subjects” negotiate identity and activate it not through a binary acceptance or rejection model of constructionist or essentialist, but rather “at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short circuit.” In other words, disidentification, for the minoritarian subject, is a practice that neither dismisses nor incorporates mainstream identity categories but rather works through and within them to enable articulations, representations, and performances of self. Munoz’s disidentification is the framing theory for Chapter Two, “‘I’m Just Like a Nigga, I’m Just like A Man’: Women, Disidentification, and the Performance of Black Masculinity in Daniel Peddle’s *The Aggressives*.” In keeping with the logical progression theme that undergirds both the
larger intellectual production and methodological approach of this project, the chapters, too, are constructed and ordered in an effort to showcase the logical progression of analysis of the sites mis and disembodied black masculinity that are of concern in *No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants*.

Chapter One, “‘Can’t Believe Reebok Did a Deal With a Psycho’: Fifty Cent, Commodification, and Branding Black Masculinity”. This chapter establishes some of the foundational concepts regarding commodification and black masculinity that will recur throughout work. Using rapper Fifty Cent as a site of archetypal black masculinity “Can’t Believe Reebok Did a Deal With A Psycho” is a chapter focused primarily on how the literal, physical branding of black bodies marked the initial stages of a process of commodification of black bodies and identity that is inextricably related to more current figurative branding (like a product) and promotion of various scripts about black masculinity for widespread consumption. “‘Can’t Believe Reebok Did a Deal with a Psycho’” is also concerned with the larger issue of advertising and commodity fetishism.

Chapter Two, “No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants: Sneakers, Performance, and the Politics of Racial Authenticity” hones in on many of the issues of disembodied black masculinity that were presented in Chapter One. Through an analysis of the ways in which masculinized racial authenticity becomes performed through the procurement of specific sneakers, as well as sneaker culture more broadly, Chapter Two interrogates the complicated interplay between the corporeal and the material in constructions of identity.
Using Thorstein Veblen’s concept of “conspicuous consumption”, this chapter argues that sneakers signify in the form of cultural currency that is central to performances of “authentic” black masculinity. Finally, Chapter Three, “I’m Just Like a Nigga, I’m Just like A Man’: Women, Disidentification, and the Performance of Black Masculinity in Daniel Peddles *The Aggressives,*” explores how black masculine identity continues to function within bodies, while simultaneously complicating notions of entrenched corporeal scripts; masculine identified queer women of color is an important site for exploring this phenomena. It would be erroneous to state that issues of masculinity and females have gone unexplored. Indeed, black women and masculinity has been a subject of scholarly engagement, however the particular tenor with which these explorations have been undertaken might in fact obfuscate the very nuances of identity, “I’m Just Like a Nigga, I’m Just Like a Man” is concerned with analyzing. With blackness being gendered masculine, discourse surrounding black women and masculinity is often centered upon examining, critiquing and disproving historical and prevailing notions of African American women as inherently masculinized. Indeed, this type of work is vitally important in relation to larger projects concerned with African American women and the expansion of conceptions of what constitutes black humanity. In this sense these scholarly endeavors are kindred intellectual projects to *No B-Grades, Fakes or Variants.* However, these articulations of humanity can come at a cost, as they have the potential, however inadvertently, to perpetuate cycles of invisibility, silence and liminality in
regards to black identity. Black masculine women exist “I’m just like a Nigga, I’m Just Like a Man” aspires to not only interrogate issues of self identified black masculine women but also examine the ways in which the spectrum of black masculine identity in female bodied people- from tomboy to trans-man-are all essential in critical investigations to blackness and maleness in women.

_No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants_ is an intellectual project that seeks to trouble the perpetuation of the commodification of black bodies and identity, and expose how and why conceptions of racialized and gendered authenticity that are maintained in the absence of the bodies they are commonly associated with work to expose the myth of entrenched corporeal scripts and provide the possibility for re-configuration and re-imagination of identity.
Chapter 1: “Can’t Believe Reebok Did A Deal With a Psycho:” Fifty Cent. Branding Blackness Commodification and Consumption of Black Masculine Identity

An intricate and perverse relationship exists between blackness, commodification, and consumption. Using David Crockett’s framework for assessing the role of blackness representations in advertising to explicate rapper Fifty Cent as a site of archetypal black masculinity, I contend that blackness (scripts), particularly black masculinity, though reliant on the corporeal, works in the absence of black male bodies, and become increasingly usurped and employed by mainstream culture to brand products and in turn make claims about identity. In his work entitled “Marketing Blackness: How Advertisers Use Race to Sell Products”, David Crockett outlines a succinct and illustrative framework for the ways in which commodities and race work in mutually constitutive ways. Crockett’s framework is preceded by how blackness in advertisements functions almost exclusively figuratively as he states “Advertisers construct a version of blackness, particularly as expressed by youth, that functions to set trends in the mass market - not to be served as a segment apart from the mass market”\(^2\). Despite various claims about the increasing buying power of African Americans, African American’s consumptive habits and the like, the recognition and subsequent marketing of products to a viable black constituency of consumers is, at times, of peripheral importance in terms

of advertising. Blackness (in relationship to consumer culture) remains most prominent and valuable as a tool for the transference of “cool” or difference; concepts that becomes conflated with blackness and veiled as youth culture. In other words, direct and pointed marketing towards viable black markets can be ignored while scripts about blackness are perpetuated in order to sell products.

Outlining his framework Crockett states that blackness representations, or scripts are infused into advertisements for one of two purposes; making claims about either the viewer or the product. Crockett goes on to break these two categories down into smaller subcategories. Under *claims about the viewer* (consumer) Crockett states that these representations either make claims about the consumer as similar or different than what is being portrayed. In terms of *claims about the product*, Crockett explains that blackness is central to these claims or blackness is incidental to the claims. Finally, Crockett breaks down the four subheadings of consumer as similar/ different and blackness as central/ incidental once more, giving the following four strategies as explanations of the ways in which blackness is employed: Casting for Equality, Building Cultural Capital, Living Diverse Lifestyles, and finally Consuming the Other. Although each of these four subcategories offered by Crocket provide their own unique insight into the role of blackness in the process of branding “Consuming the Other” is that which is most pertinent to the analysis being undertaken here. Derived from bell hook’s concept of “Eating the Other”

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3 ibid,251.
Crockett explains his concept of “Consuming the Other”, which is comprised of three, more specific sub groupings, “Black Style, Vernacular, and the Cool Pose”; “The Hyperathletic Black Body”; and “The Black Cultural Essence”, as “coattailing on cultural epicenters”. In other words cultural signifiers are appropriated by brands in order to make specific claims about a company or product; claims-making that is endemic to the very strategic and complicated process of branding.

Branding is an essential part of the process of commodification, and like commodification, despite its connotations, branding is not an inherently nefarious practice/or phenomenon. Branding serves important delineating functions for consumers and removes the guesswork out of the purchasing process through reputations of reliability, functionality, etc. Consider the function of logos. Though often used interchangeably with brand, it is worth highlighting the difference between the two. Logos are part of the larger branding process; signs that are readily recognizable, and infused with meaning and value. The name and/ or logo provide the essential values of the company -its identity- and the perception it customers have of it- its ‘image’. The relationship between consumers and brands is one of mutual value reinforcement. In other words consumers (supposedly) accrue display “worth” by purchasing certain

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6 Ibid,13.
brands, and brands, simultaneously, accrue value via the people who consume them. Michael Chevalier and Gerald Mazzalovo in their work Pro Logo: Brands as Measure of Progress articulate this dynamic in terms of a contract stating “a brand is a contract, one which is implicit in nature and governs the relations between a given company and its customers. This relationship is two dimensional: it is not only economic in nature, but also over time, creates emotional ties…and above all a capacity for reciprocal influence…7 The language and functions of branding are applicable to the ways in which racialized and gendered scripts function as and within commodity culture. As Crockett explains, in his assessment of the role of blackness in advertising, blackness functions as a brand. However it is a very specific representation of blackness, particularly black masculinity that is being employed and branded. Crockett’s designations of “Black Style, Vernacular, and the Cool Pose”; “The Hyperathletic Black Body”; and “The Black Cultural Essence” that are outlined under the larger heading of “Consuming the Other” reveal how corporeal and corporate bodies work both independently and in conjunction to produce and reinforce particular representations of radicalized masculinity that is being branded as authentic. Although there are a number of bodies working to produce and perpetuate particular portrayals of blackness that aid in the project of branding black masculinity, in the contemporary moment rapper/actor Fifty Cent is the most central

7 Ibid,15.
figure promoted in advertising culture contributing to particular representations of black masculinity that are branded.

Fifty Cent, for various reasons, serves as an archetype of a specific black masculinity, a racialized black masculinity marked by excess in terms of violence, misogyny, physicality, criminality, and hyper sexuality. Fifty Cent’s attainment of a multi-million dollar shoes shoe deal with Reebok (which speaks volumes to his popularity; his marketability) as well as with Vitamin Water are both examples of and reinforcement to this problematic conception of black masculinity as authentic. Although Fifty Cent is arguably the most illustrative contemporary figure highlighting the perverse relationship between black masculinity and the larger culture of advertising, appropriation, both the history and historical process of black (specifically male) bodies being characterized by masculine excess and subsequently transformed into commodities is lengthy.

The process of commodification of black bodies began with the forced migration of Africans from, in many cases, the African interior, to the West African coast. Once at the coast enslaved Africans were typically housed in dreadful slave castles and herded into dungeons that provided little in the way of meeting the basic human needs. Enslaved Africans could be held in dungeons for months. For many the only reprieve from the stale air, bodily fluids, and overall decay and ubiquity of death was during the march out of slave dungeons down to the Atlantic Ocean. From there enslaved Africans were then
“packed” like cargo into huge slavers (slave ships) set to begin the long journey through the Middle Passage (the term used to refer to the span of the Atlantic between the West African Coast and the various points of disembarkation throughout the New World). For those who survived the journey, their arrival upon the New World shores of what was to become the United States of America, marked the next phase of the de-humanizing and subsequent commodity making process. Once integrated into plantations and other systems of labor slaves were, despite the myriad of everyday examples that were evidence to the contrary, viewed and treated as chattel and “literally considered tools for labor and procreation that were evacuated of thought and culture. It was practically unimportant whether they could think beyond accomplishing a series of menial tasks demanded of them.” In an effort to justify their (black bodies) continued exploitation and need to be controlled, various scripts or narratives were constructed regarding black bodies. These scripts, overtime, became so entrenched in the collective white psyche (as well as in the psyche of many non-whites) that certain gendered types or caricatures regarding black people emerged. For black men two specific caricatures prevailed; the buck and the brute. It should be noted that some scholars use the terms brute and buck interchangeably. Donald Bogle clarifies at least one reason for this in his work entitled

Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in

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American Films as he states “just like the coon stereotype could be broken into
subgroups, the brutal black buck type could likewise be divided into two categories: the
black brutes and the black bucks. Differences between the two are minimal.”

Although Bogel’s assertion regarding the minimal difference between brutes and bucks is
important, as it speaks to the ways in which the white mind conceived of black
masculinity (regardless of subtle differences) as overwhelmingly threatening and
therefore in need of containment, in terms of nuanced analysis, these subtleties are
important and should not be downplayed, but rather, more closely scrutinized. Indeed, it
is within this nuance that the insidious qualities marking profuse, albeit erroneous
conceptions of black masculinity are anchored.

The buck caricature is most commonly understood in terms of his hypersexual
proclivities. Despite accusations of his insatiable sexuality the Buck was not inherently
threatening, indeed his excessive sexuality, when properly channeled through the
paternalistic guidance or control (which took a variety of forms from forced deference, to
breeding, to lynching) of white men was harmless. If, however left uncontrolled, the buck
could be disastrous in terms of the maintenance of white hegemonic rule. Similar to the
buck, the brute caricature of black men was marked by uncontained hyper-sexuality,
however the brute’s was, more threatening and sinister as he was not only marked by
salacious longings, but his insatiable sexuality was often (mis)directed towards a central

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10 Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in
component of white hegemonic rule; the white female body. In film depictions of the brute such as, Gus from W.D Griffith’s 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*, he is almost always marked by a particular set of specific yet ambiguous characteristics: dark skin, tall, muscular build, with a short cut or bald head.\(^\text{11}\) Representations of the brute as having a set of specific yet ambiguous physical attributes is of note, as it arguably served a dual purpose in terms of white control of black bodies. The ambiguity of these qualities left all black men vulnerable to potential white male accusation (and subsequent retaliation), while at the same time the distinction of these qualities served to reinforce fear and anxieties about the brutes physical threat, which in turn justified the continued control of black bodies.

Indeed the brute, like the buck, symbolized the projection of white’s deepest fears (particularly those of white men) on black bodies. White men had two main anxieties embodied by the black brute that Ronald L. Jackson II in his book entitled *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* explains as “first:, theft of his woman by a maniacal, heathenish, and inherently violent Black male body, and second, the possibility that she might be masochistically excited by his sexual nature and accept him despite his flaws, which might eventually lead to miscegenated offspring, hence defying the code of White racial purity.”\(^\text{12}\) Jackson

\(^{11}\) Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*,108.

\(^{12}\) Ibid,41.
contends that these historical scripts of black masculinity exemplified by the brute and the buck have evolved into the formation of two contemporary caricatures; the thug and the pimp, that have come to greatly inform modern day articulations and understandings of authentic black masculinity.\textsuperscript{13} According to Jackson, “The thug or ruffneck is a contemporary manifestation of the contumacious brute image, and the thug image is enjoying an epoch in which it is able to captivate audiences of rap fans throughout the world”\textsuperscript{14}. Indeed the thug possesses many of the destructive capacities of the brute, as both showcase behavior is characterized by an utter inability to adhere or adopt the standards of civility and decorum that are outlined and enforced by the larger society. Like the brute, thugs are marked by a super-charged sexuality, though for thugs, as opposed to bucks (and by extensions, pimps), their sexual behavior is not a major marker of their personality, but rather one additional way in which they exhibit a larger persona marked by a lack of restraint. Thugs can also be understood as contemporary manifestations of brutes through, there shared volatility. The brute was naturally, out of control, similarly the thug is an inherent renegade.\textsuperscript{15}

Similar to the thug, the pimp, which has taken on an iconic status in terms of authentic articulations and exhibitions of black masculinity, is founded upon historical tropes of black male bodies. Again, Jackson makes the connection between modern

\textsuperscript{13} ibid,104.
\textsuperscript{14}ibid,110.
\textsuperscript{15} ibid,112.
stereotypes of black masculinity with their historical predecessors as he states “in consonance with the minstrel brute, the black stud, playa, mack, and pimp images are all Black bucks trying to come to terms with masculinity. A common scapegoat used to justify these roles is emasculation”\textsuperscript{16}.

Perversely, the pimp image that is founded on historical caricatures of black masculinity, such as the buck, recreates the very system of corporeal control that it is founded upon. Pimping works similarly. Black men, when pimping “correctly” (as there does exist a “correct way”; the most misogynistic way) are the owners of (black) female bodies.\textsuperscript{17} The black female body is therefore property that can be controlled, exploited, disregarded, sold.\textsuperscript{18} Physical violence is endemic to the culture of pimping. Pimping is also inhumane in its treatment of women emotionally, as they are commonly referred to as “Bitches”, ho’s, tricks, skeezers, skanks, and whores; all names that are clearly evoked to denigrate, despite being “allegedly considered affectionate nicknames”\textsuperscript{19} Perversely, pimping parallels the very historical enslavement that is central to these modern performances of black masculinity.

A similarity between pimping and the historical system of slavery is also evident through the inherent imbalanced power relationship where each party is, supposedly,

\textsuperscript{16} ibid,118. 
\textsuperscript{17} ibid,120. 
\textsuperscript{18} ibid,120. 
\textsuperscript{19} ibid120.
occupying their natural station. There are a multitude of historical accounts where enslavement is understood as a divine burden where white control of black productive and reproductive capacities was viewed as benevolent duty of whites. The archetypal relationships between pimps and prostitutes are often articulated a similar way. Consider one pimp’s articulation of the ideal exchange between himself and the women that he exploits as he states “I supply the food. I supply the shelter, and I supply the medical bills. I supply everything. All she gotta supply is the money.”

Although presented as an egalitarian exchange the very nature of pimping suggests an imbalance.

Although the hegemonic system domination enforced by whites over back bodies during slavery (and through reconstruction and the nadir) might align in various ways, it is imperative that these parallels not overshadow the initial point that the pimp, in all of his exploitive shenanigans and irresponsibility, is a buck inspired modern day caricatures of black masculinity. A caricature that, like the thug, has become profuse in the minds of the American media, popular culture and indeed consumer culture, and like their brute and buck precursors, need white intervention. Indeed, thug and pimp conceptions of black masculinity, with the proper channeling, can not only be contained but perhaps more importantly and more insidiously, have profit producing potential.

Rapper Fifty Cent represents a hybridized version of the contemporary thug pimp articulations of black masculinity, conveniently packaged into one black body. Indeed,

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20 Ibid,121.
Fifty Cent exhibits the same excess (physical, sexual, violent, and materialism) that is the mark of both historical and contemporary representations of black masculine types. Consider Fifty Cent’s promulgation that “I don’t know what you heard about me/but a bitch can’t get a dollar out of me/no Cadillac’s, no furs, you can’t see/ that I’m a mutherfucking p.i.m.p!.” So go the lyrics to the Fifty Cents 2003 song simply entitled P.I.M.P, a clear indication that Fifty Cent has willingly adopted the pimp persona as a marker of his masculinity. While Fifty Cent’s relationship to pimping is more figurative as it suggests the adoption of a persona, as opposed to active engagement in pimping, Fifty Cent’s life prior to his popularity (and in many ways, still) is in alignment with many of the conventions of the thug.

Born in New York City’s Jamaica Queens in 1975, Fifty Cent’s (whose given name is Curtis Jackson the III) life story is one that can be understood in terms of a ghettoized Horatio Alger- like narrative of ascent.21 Marked by many of the tragic conventions of modal depictions of ghetto black life including absent and drug addicted parents, adolescent crime and prison time, Fifty Cent has little recourse in terms of avoiding much of the rejection of larger society that is essential to thuggish masculinity. In his song “Hate It or Love It”, Fifty Cent candidly reflects on some of the more troubling experiences of his youth stating

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Comin' up I was confused, my mama kissin' a girl/Confusin' occurs,
comin' up in the cold world/Daddy ain't around, prolly out committin' felonies/My favorite rapper used to sing ch-check out my melody/I wanna live good, so shit I sell dope/For a fo' finger ring, one of them gold ropes/Nanna told me if I pass I'll get a sheep skin coat/If I can move a few packs and get the hat, now that'll be dope/Tossed and turn in my sleep at night/Woke up the next mornin' niggas done stole my bike/Different day, same shit, ain't nothin' good in the hood/I'd run away from this bitch and never come back if I could.22

The myriad of hardships Fifty Cent’s verse reveals were capped by an event that took place later, during his adult life. Fifty Cent’s involvement in a 1999 altercation in which he was shot nine times, including twice in the head, was the chief tragic event marking the contours of his life thus far. 23 But just as the tragic conventions of black ghetto life mark Fifty Cent’s life trajectory, so to, do the more joyous ones. Fifty Cent, through hard work (read Horatio Alger), was able to land a million dollar recording contract, platinum selling albums and subsequent multimillion dollar endorsement deals.

It is this combination of tragedy and triumph that in many ways cast Fifty Cent in such an auspicious light regarding marketing, as he promotes the underdog mentality that

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22 “Hate it Or Love It” 50 Cent Lyrics http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/50cent/igetmoney.html(date accessed 12/20/2008)
23 Reece, “Biography for Fifty Cent” (date accessed 12/20/2008)
so many Americans find attractive, while simultaneously embodying particular scripts about excessive black masculinity. However it should be noted that there is more at work in terms of Fifty Cent’s successful marketability, than merely his underdog charisma. Again Crockett’s analytical concept of “Consuming the Other” and its specific sub-categories) is useful in revealing some of the more nebulous nuances of how Fifty Cent and by extension excessive black masculinity that is conflated with (authentic blackness)

In his 2003 hit song entitled “Stunt 101” Fifty cent proclaims “I can’t believe Reebok did a deal with a psycho.” Fifty Cent’s declaration of disbelief regarding his shoe deal with Reebok is ostensibly, merely a boastful promulgation of good fortune. In actuality, however Fifty Cent’s endorsement deal with Rbk is an example of “Consuming the Other” that is marked more specifically by “Black Vernacular Style and Cole Pose” and “Hyperathletic Black Body”. Consider Rbk, a smaller division of the athletic giant Reebok, self declaration as “street-inspired and designed for young men and women who want the style of their gear to reflect the attitude of their life.”

Rbk’s branding statement is replete with racialized coded language such as “street inspired”, “gear”, and “attitude”, which make Fifty Cent the perfect credibility -fostering face for the brand. Indeed, Fifty Cent offered for not only Reebok, but for the whites who purchased his shoes, imagined entrance into the erogenous and exoticized zones of black bodies through the comfort of not only their homes, but now their sneakers. Fifty’s

Cent’s G6 (a reference to private planes like the G4) sneaker now allowed for the consumption of not just a benign cultural commodity, but rather, the black masculinity that the shoe, via Fifty Cent, embodied. bell hooks cogently outlines why otherness appeals and therefore is consumed by whites in the larger society as phenomena which she terms “Eating the Other”:

Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it has offered a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.25

In terms of hook’s preceding assessment of cultural consumption Reebok would be the dull dish, with Fifty Cent clearly serving as the “spice”, as ultimately the shoe becomes a placeholder for black masculinity that can be readily consumed to appease the palates of whites and blacks alike. Here Crockett’s concept of viewers/consumers as similar/different to blackness representations

Fifty Cent’s lyrics to his hit song “I Get Money” begins with the following: “I

take quarter water sold it in bottles for two bucks/ Coca Cola came and bought it for billions, what the fuck?”

Although there is no explicit reference to what Fifty Cent is referring to, and hyperbole is a standard convention of many lyrics, Fifty Cent’s promulgation of Coca Cola’s multi-billion dollar purchase of Glaceau, the parent company of Vitamin Water, (and his subsequent multi-million dollar profit) is accurate, and factual.

Although he appeared in a number of print ads, Fifty Cent’s first, and arguably most popular television ad for Vitamin Water, is that which will be explicated in terms of Crockett’s “Consuming the Other”. The commercial begins with two older white men in tuxedos going back and forth commentator style before a symphony begins as one states, “Welcome to a televised performance of the national symphony, we’ll be hearing Beethoven’s Ninth, and the conductor Shimitzu Matzuka, will be replaced by a relative newcomer Curtis Jackson, also known as the rapper Fifty Cent.” While Fifty Cent’s is being announced the viewer is privy to a back shot of Fifty walking in behind the stage. Indeed the commercial’s employment of moments of humor such as the use of particular black vernacular phrasing is a clear example of Crokcett’s category of (BSVCP) and an appearance by Fifty Cent’s dj, DJ WhoKid about which the commentators state “One more change, this one for the first viola chair, DJ who Kid”, aligns with the Black Style,

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Vernacular and Cool Pose that Crokcett outlines. Fifty Cent and his plain white t-shirt and backwards baseball cap, can also be understood as an example of Black Style, and the Cool Pose, as his lack of adherence to the conventions of dress (tuxedos) in this case, or music, at commercials end the symphony begins to play Fifty Cents own hit song, “In Da Club”, lends credence to a certain type of defiance or cool that the company is trying to market.

Although unintentional, Fifty Cent’s branding relationship with Glaceau was born from his advertising campaign with Reebok. Allegedly, when Fifty was scene posing with a bottle of Vitamin water in a print ad, he was seen drinking Vitamin Water and subsequently approached by company representatives. The branding relationship between Vitamin Water and Fifty Cent appears more organic, as Fifty Cent’s actual relationship with the product precedes his endorsement. This scenario illuminates, the insidious cyclical nature of branding as the interplay between consumption and production is mutually constitutive. In other words what Fifty Cent consummes, i.e. Vitamin Water, lends to his ability to be consumed (consider his almost grotesque, yet idealized physique). In this instance the role of the “Hypermasculine Black Body” category of branding blackness offers insight. Fifty Cent states that his consumption of Vitamin Water began as a health based decision. These narratives or testimonials even when unmarked by embellishment still work to conform to the nefarious contours of the

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27 Howard, USA Today
branding process. Despite Fifty Cents self professed consumption based upon actual appreciation and preference for the product, Vitamin Water is infused with scripts outside of functionality that inform consumers’ decision to purchase. Fifty Cent, despite his endorsement deals and commodification, is after all, still a consumer.

Blackness as a brand is a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon in terms of quests for transformation and uplift. Indeed the functioning of blackness in new spaces outside of the bodies with which it is most commonly associated ultimately means a new frontier with which to combat the erroneous stereotypical and problematic conceptions of black identity that continue to prevail in the minds of individuals, societal structures and the collective psyches of larger communities. Despite the challenges presented by these neo-sites of blackness, they (the sites) can serve as an equivalently transformative space. Certainly a shift in perspective illuminates the countering potential of branding blackness. Indeed blackness functioning in spaces outside of the black body not only undermines longstanding and abiding notions of entrenched corporeal scripts, but also works to underscore the complicated, malleable, and ephemeral quality inherent to identity. Branding blackness means the spaces and places that have are seemingly benign can potentially become battlegrounds for interrogation, re-imagination and reconfiguration of identity. Blackness as a brand invites a refreshing optimism, an optimism that must be tempered, yet not overtaken with the realistic notion that it will assuredly take active and
earnest efforts to catalyze and sustain these possibilities for reconfiguration and re-
imagination; possibilities that similar to blackness itself, are boundless.
They got me folk! I paid five hundred a piece for about four pair, I ain’t never really perpetrate fraud on nothing man, I liked ‘em because of the colors.”

The preceding quote is from a YouTube clip entitled “Big Boi wearing Fake Retro Air Jordan’s”. In a “here to set the record straight” style response rapper Big Boi, from the rap duo Outkast, addresses rumors that he was donning “questionable” kicks during a May 2009 performance at the self proclaimed “world ‘s largest touring sneaker and street based art show”, Sneaker Pimps. As Big Boi’s promulgation that he was “got” (i.e. duped) suggests, initially his response was one of candor, even mild embarrassment. Holding up a picture of himself wearing the very same shoes that spawned the questions he states “I ain’t even know, man. When them J’s first came out, I ain’t have the money to buy them shoes when they first came out, so when I got me some bread- it was way after the fact -I
bought me some, the freshest color ever!”.  

However, Big Boi’s candor quickly and seamlessly shifts to unapologetic bravado, even arrogance as he abruptly retorts “I don’t even walk man, I drive the car - fuck the shoes nigga, look at the car muthafucka!” Then, holding up the same photograph it becomes evident that Big Boi is posing in front of the unmistakably imposing grill of a Rolls Royce Phantom. The juxtaposition of images is as telling as it is striking. Against the backdrop of his several-hundred-thousand dollar Phantom, Big Boi’s shoes become even more pronounced in a way that can be described as cartoonish, grotesque even, as their gaudy colorway (the various color combinations in which each style of sneaker is officially released) and poor make menship (at least as it would appear to the eye of the knowledgeable and scrutinizing sneaker consumer) glare in relationship

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31 Ibid.
to the more muted and refined elegance of his Rolls Royce.

If critiques cast at Big Boi are solely born of the incongruence between what he purchased (the fake sneakers) and what he should be able to consume (presumably based on his celebrity status and his own articulations of wealth) then, theoretically, any number of things, including his Phantom should have quieted these criticisms. Big Boi’s shoes should amount to minutia in relationship to his car (not to mention his career), and yet, as his YouTube retort reveals it is the inauthenticity of his sneakers that elicits criticism and in turn warrants response. Big Boi’s use of the picture in which he is wearing the same shoes from the performance a month earlier is clearly a calculated move to quell questions about inauthenticity; his sneakers and his own.

While allegations of fake sneakers, indeed, the notion of fake sneakers themselves, may seem like an absurdity, as Big Boi’s YouTube response suggests and as he, himself asserts (in an interview with CNN about Sneaker Pimps conducted less than a month prior to his YouTube video response), “You can really tell a lot about a person through the shoes…” Sneakers, tennis shoes, gym shoes, kicks, trainers; all semantic variations for effectively the same, seemingly mundane commodity, have come to occupy an important position within current articulations and portrayals of African American male authenticity and identity; a position that can be linked to a broader history

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of feet as a significatory site of contestation within African American vernacular culture. Using Thorstein Veblen’s concept of “conspicuous consumption”, to explicate phenomena such as the relationship between performance gear and its transferability to performances of racialized and gendered identity, and the politics of exclusivity and the policing of race and gender, I argue that African American men’s consumption of sneakers does not (as Veblen argues) merely convey messages about their pecuniary status, but can perhaps be more accurately understood, as a display of cultural currency in the form of racial authenticity that informs identity fashioning projects.

In his 1899 work, The Theory of the Leisure Class: The Economic Study of Institutions, Thorstein Veblen introduces the idea of conspicuous consumption. The concept of conspicuous consumption is derived from another concept of Veblen’s; conspicuous leisure. The notion of conspicuous leisure was one used to analyze the behavior of elites in rural Europe, however, as Storey and Turner in their assessment of Veblen’s work explain “Urbanization changed this: in the company of urban strangers, conspicuous leisure was no longer a sufficient means to display one’s pecuniary strength. The anonymity of urban life demanded a more obvious display of power and status”.33 Indeed clothing, and footwear are perhaps the most culturally pervasive displays of consumption (everyone wears clothes), and because of this conspicuous consumption with clothing is one of the most obvious means of conveying messages about status and

identity. Although Veblen’s larger work and the concept of conspicuous consumption more specifically, is an assessment that pertains to the behaviors of elite classes in Europe, Veblen’s concept has important explicating implications for current phenomena like black masculine authenticity in relationship to consumer culture. Considering that western masculinities are, in part, articulated and constructed in relationship to the ability to control objects, coupled with the fact that marginalized masculinities are barred from arenas of labor and production that would enable more grandiose purchases and subsequent displays of consumption, Veblen’s conspicuous consumption makes sense in terms of illuminating the disconcerting interchangeability between the language and theory of products and consumption (specifically that of sneakers) with that of black masculine identity.

**Performance Gear**

Though Sneakers are still referred to and used in relationship to their practical origins, as goods that aid in ones performance in particular athletic engagements and can be found housed under categories such as functional apparel and performance gear, they are often purchased, worn (and now even manufactured, as seen by the upsurge in “lifestyle” sneakers) for activities other than those for which they were created. However, when sneakers are utilized or consumed for purposes which have no explicit relationship to athletic engagement they are, arguably, operating very much as they were created; as “performance gear”, or apparel that aids in performance. Therefore it is not
necessarily sneakers that are shifting in function/meaning but rather notions of performance in relationship to them. When performance is used in relationship to tennis shoes it most commonly refers to athletic or physical activity. Again Veblen’s conspicuous consumption is useful here as he explains the disaggregable relationship between a commodities intended utilitarian function and the ways in which it may be utilized.

Even in articles that which appear at first glance to serve for pure ostentation only, it is always possible to detect the presence of some, at least ostensible, useful purpose; and on the other hand, even in special machinery tools contrived for some particular industrial process, as well as in the rudest appliances of human industry, the traces of conspicuous waste, or at least the habit of the habit of ostentation, usually become evident on a close scrutiny.  

Keeping the dual nature of goods that Veblen describes above in mind, interrogations of the ways in which sneakers serve as performance gear or functional apparel, particularly in relationship to black masculine identity, through more abstract notions of performances of identity, are those of most salient concern in this work. Performance is an inherently amorphous concept, ephemeral and fraught with contradiction, it can prove itself difficult to define. Yet, despite the challenges that arise with trying to restrain performance within linguistic confines, there have been a number

of useful articulations of its meaning. Joseph Roach gives a concise recount of the ways in which, in its theoretical articulations, performance is understood as he states it (performance) is “the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins.”

Roach’s assessment is illuminating in relationship to the authenticity that is the focus of this paper. Performances of self are often marked by a discourse of autonomy and individuality that are inherently colored by the concepts of authenticity and originality; however as fellow performance theorist Richard Shechner explains performance is composed of “restored behaviors or “physical or verbal actions that are not- for-the-first time, prepared or rehearsed” also referred to as “twice behaved behaviors”.

Both Shechner and Roach’s definitions of performance are founded upon the idea that people’s behaviors and identities are and always have been in a process of becoming that has no beginning. Sneakers act as surrogates. Again Joseph Roach is useful as he explains “surrogation” stating that into the cavities created by death and other forms of departure, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives.” Although Roach is concerned with people, it seems that sneakers are acting as “material surrogates” for an inchoate and ever-fleeting (departing) black masculine authenticity. In relationship to surrogation Roach goes on to state that “the intended substitute cannot fulfill

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expectations, creating a deficit or actually exceeds them creating a surplus.” When these material surrogates, such as sneakers are used (conspicuously consumed) to communicate ideas about their purchasers/wearers, these accouterments of identity, like the bodies they adorn, come with their own inscribed and imposed scripts. Scripts that work in concert or discord with existing scripts of authentic black masculinity to either more staunchly entrench (surplus) or undermine (deficit) its social and cultural significance.

As the Big Boi scenario reveals sneakers have taken on a significance that, though still infused with and contingent upon scripts about athleticism, has transcended the arena of the court. Indeed “J’s”, as they are often endearingly referred, are just as much recognized for the ways in which they convey messages about a (largely) gendered racial aesthetic of authenticity as they are for their relationship to the iconic athlete upon which social and cultural significance was (ostensibly) initially founded. Even sneaker companies such as Nike understand (though perhaps not in these same terms) this duality of performance that the sneakers underscored particularly for young black men, as evidenced by their marketing and advertising. In arguably, the most popular (and prototypical, as these commercials can be seen as early predecessors to Nike’s fascination with commercials featuring prominent athletes and small cartoonish sidekicks such as Afernee Hardaway’s Lil’ Penny commercials of the 90’s and more recently Kobe and LeBron’s Lil D commercials ever created by a sneaker company, Nike’s use of the

38 Ibid.
character Mars Blackmon underscores the conflation between athletic performance and performances of authentic black masculinity.

Mars Blackmon, a character played by Spike Lee, from his 1986 film (his first feature length film) *She’s Gotta Have It* in many ways represented a folk presence in the film, a presence that often becomes the loci of notions of black authenticity. In his work *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* J Martin Favor expounds on this concept of the folk, as well as the relationship of the folk to issues of racial authenticity. According to Favor, the term folk initially referred to rural, urban, and Southern, blacks. Favor goes on to explain that, positioning the folk as the loci for authentic representations and performances of blackness was not arbitrary. Indeed lauding black vernacular culture was a pointed strategy of larger anti-racist projects as it resisted notions of “crushing assimilationism and/or naturalization of African American cultural inferiority” in favor for an “assertion of cultural pride and political power”. Favor goes on to contend that the folk, though initially associated with the rural South, began to be associated with African Americans in the urban North through that via artistic productions such as music and poetry associated with folk culture northern African Americans are able to blacks are able to transcend insurmountable hardships. Over time folk and authentic become conflated as they both come to connote ideas about

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 6.
42 Ibid, 70.
“unique” cultural productions of African Americans born out of specific classed, and to a lesser extent geographic locations.

Unlike Nola’s (the movies female protagonist) other suitors, Mars was unapologetically unrefined. He was a bike messenger with a unique stylistic flair that included a biker hat with a flipped up bill, large black frames and as his “Fifty dollar sneakers and I ain’t got no job!" promulgation reveals, sneakers, and a perturbing tendency to repeat himself usually in his attempts to beseech Nola with such phrases as “Please baby baby baby Please baby baby baby, Please”!

Nike understands the marketability of Mars. With his common man appeal and idiosyncratic repetitiveness, coupled with his affinity for Jordan’, Nike launched its Mars Blackmon themed campaign in the eighties. The Jordan/Mars Blackmon commercials were all aesthetically similar. Each commercial was shot in black and white, and took place in a nondescripts gym where only Jordan and Mars were present. In a commercial for the Jordan V’s Mars opens the add stating “Yo, Mars Blackmon here with my main man Michael Jordan” followed by, “Yo, Mike, what makes’ you the best player in the universe?” Blackmon continues by asking Jordan a series of questions, in hopes of getting an answer to his own inquiry about Jordan’s athletic prowess, the most important being “Is it the shoes, “a

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43 Spike Lee, She’s Gotta Have It, 1986.
44 Ibid.
question to which Michael Jordan dryly, almost robotically responds, “No Mars.” 46

Despite Jordan’s nonchalant protest, Mars simply resigns himself to his own suggestion that “It’s gotta be the shoes”. 47 At the commercials end Nike runs a brief tongue- and -cheek blurb stating “Mr. Jordan’s opinions do not necessarily reflect those of Nike, Inc.” 48 In the arena of advertising sneakers are working as a palimpsest upon which specific about black masculinity are being inscribed. The interplay between Jordan and Blackmon throughout the commercials and the simultaneous transference of athletic ability conveyed by Jordan and folksy cool implied by Mars onto the shoes becomes the space through which the materiality of the shoes enables the communication of scripts black masculine authenticity via the sneakers. The commercials themselves seemed harmless however the implications for the undercurrent reverberated in ways that were anything but innocuous. Consider the following:

For 15 year old Michael Eugene Thomas, it definitely was the shoes…

Thomas was found strangled on May 2, 1989. Charged with first degree murder was James David Martin, a basketball buddy who allegedly took Thomas’s two-week-old Air Jordan basketball shoes and left Thomas’s barefooted body in the woods near school. Thomas loved Michael Jordan,
as well as the shoes Jordan endorses, and he cleaned his own pair each evening.  

Although this incident took place almost two decades ago, and similar incidents of youth violence around apparel (like Starter jackets) that were highly publicized in the late 80’s and early 90’s are less so now, the death of Michael Thomas marks just one point (albeit a very tragic one) one the lengthy a continuous trajectory of the insidious ways in which consumption, particularly of sneakers has material implications for black masculine identity. For James Martin his inability to consume the right sneakers was not merely an unfortunate result of what was presumably limited financial means but indeed an affront, one that barred his entry into the heavily policed boundaries of authentic black masculinity. Indeed, the concept of exclusivity in relationship to identity politics is transferred onto sneakers

**Politics of Exclusivity**

Exclusivity is a relatively recent phenomenon in sneaker culture. That is, at a certain point in history sneakers came with a very unique narrative, one that was marked by familiarity and simplicity and often accompanied by the words Sears and Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars. Sneaker aficionado Bobbito Garcia expounds on the nascent era of sneakers production stating “Converse dominated the basketball market through the

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50’s and sixties with just one model, namely the canvas Chuck Taylor Signature which was only available in black and white. The narrative of austere tennis shoes is one of yesteryear. Now sneakers, in every imaginable color and style, are the norm. Indeed the rise in sneaker boutiques and specialty stores merely catering to sneakers (and special edition ones at that) is further proof of the ways in which sneakers, their consumption, and the cultural messages they communicate, has and continues to evolve. The increased online exchange in sneakers has also contributed to anonymity in the act of consumption that has engendered heightened displays of conspicuousness. Due to the disenabling of the limited accessibility and exclusivity that are so endemic to sneaker culture specifically and conspicuous consumption in general there has been a consumptive backlash against the readily consumable, be it in terms of economics or accessibility. Simply put, if it’s available to everyone it loses its value and by extension its appeal.

The phenomena of exclusivity with sneakers is very much applicable to conceptions of gendered and racialized authenticity which may explain, in part, the (however unconscious) appeal of the conspicuous consumption of sneakers as a means to communicate or perform an authentic identity. Like with the most desirable sneakers, only certain people have access into realms of realness, and often these gatekeepers police these boundaries with inflexible rigidity consciously or unconsciously knowing

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that their own authenticity is contingent upon the maintenance of another against which they can constantly juxtapose themselves. However paradoxically, it is through the existence and subsequent policing of imposters or “fakes” that authenticity appears to most readily manifest. Indeed this hyper-policing or politics of exclusivity exposes the “myth of authenticity”, a point that author, Regina Bendix expounds upon stating “the notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic.\(^{51}\)

When identity becomes reliant and conveyed through means such as conspicuous consumption the performances of authenticity become exponentially more complicated, because as a phenomenon that is configured from without, authenticity via conspicuous consumption is reliant upon the approving gaze of others. Indeed, the scopohilia that conspicuous consumption is supposed to engender is essential to its ability to communicate messages about identity. If authenticity is a phenomenon from without, predicated on exclusivity, where those who make claims to it may be its most strident supporters, but in actuality have little autonomy in controlling its ephemeral nature (outside of their stringent adherence to its code in hopes that their efforts will insure its (authenticity’s) inflexibility, then they too are susceptible to its capricious nature. As was the case with Big Boi, this hyper-conspicuousness comes at the high cost of heightened

vulnerability to critiques of inauthenticity, exposure, and ultimately exclusion from the very realm into which they seek to gain (if not maintain) entry.

Like the boisterous espousals, such as those pronounced by many mainstream hop artists when they attribute the misogyny, gratuitous violence, and hyper-consumption that plagues their music as merely an example of “real talk” or “keeping it real”\textsuperscript{52}, to seemingly innocuous advertisements of merchandise through the hackneyed promulgation of “one hundred percent authentic, no b-grades, fakes, or variants,” both reveal that the rhetoric of authenticity is omnipresent. Furthermore as Veblen’s work underscores, the use of adornment, of objects, to convey aspects of identity are not an altogether uncommon or new phenomenon, nor is it one that is particular to African Americans. However when those who embody or identify with black masculine identity, an identity that has been historically disparaged, socially demonized, politically belittled all the while continuously being commodified and consumed continue to rely on consumption as a tool to communicate ideas about identity, the result is a deleterious cultural cannibalism that perpetuates a cycle of consummability, and ultimately works to foreclose on more complicated and nuanced understandings inherent to authenticity in all of its unique and individual manifestations.

Chapter 3: I’m Just Like a Nigga, A Special Kind of Man”: Women and the Performance of Masculinity in Daniel Peddle’s The Aggressives

“I’m just like a nigga; I’m just like a man.”53 Despite an ethnic appearance that is easily read as non-black, and the presence of physical markers of femaleness that undermine this statement, for the viewer (who can get past the ease and matter-of-factness with which the racial epithet, nigga, is employed), something within the preceding assertion by Chinese-American butch identified lesbian Flo, is, upon utterance, comprehensible. Flo is one of six individuals within Daniel Peddles’ 2005 documentary entitled The Aggressives. A self proclaimed “female counterpart” to Paris is Burning, The Aggressives is a “striking and illuminating documentary” that is the “culmination of five years spent uncovering the no apologies lifestyle of six self defined aggressives, as they define their dreams, share their most intimate secrets and reveal their deepest fears.”54 The Aggressives, though not without its controversies and shortcomings is important as it provides a cinematic intervention into the larger realm of media that is overwhelmingly devoid of candid portrayals of diverse sexual and gender identities. It should be noted that, although Flo, Marquis, Keisha, Rjai, Tiffany, and Octavia identify as “aggressive”, they also supplement this identity with a myriad of other sexual and gender identities

54 Peddle, The Aggressives.
such as transgendered, stud, femme, lesbian, butch, dyke, and faggot, that speak to the complexities with which their aggressive identity is understood. However, even within all the intricacies of identity that are articulated by each of the women in the film there remains a thread of commonality beyond (but perhaps related to) “aggressive”; a reliance on a shared conception and performance of a stereotyped black masculinity. This shared (problematic) conception of black masculinity is perhaps, the space within which Flo’s aforementioned assertion “I’m just like a nigga” becomes recognizable.\textsuperscript{55} Though Flo is the only woman of the six in the documentary to explicitly liken herself to a “nigga”, in more latent ways the term “nigga” and all the racialized gendered, and stereotypical connotations that inform and are informed by its use are adroitly employed and readily exhibited by all the women in the film. Nigga becomes an all encompassing word for a racialized masculine type, whose problematic manifestations are evident in the absence of the black male body (as showcased by each of the individuals in The Aggressives), yet still rely on it for their perpetuation.

As female bodied people with masculinized identities, each of the women in The Aggressives are forced to reconcile two ostensibly incongruent characteristics; masculinity and femaleness. Therefore, a reliance on a black masculine stereotype (for example the active adoption of specific fashion associated with black men, fashions that have become infused with scripts about a particular type of masculinity) through serves a

\textsuperscript{55} Peddle, The Aggressives.
reconciliatory function, as identities that might otherwise be imperceptible, become recognizable. However these racial, sexual, and gender minorities negotiate these identities not through a of capitulation or rejection but rather through what scholar, Jose Munoz terms disidentification. Munoz expounds on the concept of disidentification stating

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded meaning of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification. Thus disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority, it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. 56

This paper argues that the subjects of the Aggressives exhibition, and performance of particular black masculinity rooted in stereotype is an enactment of disidentification as a way to negotiate and articulate gender identities that would otherwise be imperceptible. Each of the subjects in The Aggressives disidentifies in specific ways. Indeed, aesthetic authenticity, occupational precariousness, and finally

56 Jose Munoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 31.
through the negotiation of racialized gendered dialectics, that each of the women in *The Aggressives* highlight the intricate relationship between authentic racialized gender performance and the propagation of the black masculine stereotypes.

Aesthetic authenticity is one such way in which hegemonic black masculinity becomes intrinsically recognizable for onlookers, while at the same time serving the function of authentication for its possessors (masculine women of color), through the perpetuation of stereotypes. Aesthetic authenticity in the case of the women in *The Aggressives* refers to any type of gendered and racialized (black masculine in this case) outward expression of identity that is most commonly conveyed through things like fashion, posturing, gestures, etc. which have been accepted as emerging from and being primarily maintained by (though not always) a specific group. One of the most recognizable ways in which black masculine aesthetic authenticity is conveyed by the women in *The Aggressives* is through the ubiquity of the doo rag. At some point in the film each of the women has on a doo rag, and only once, is there a clear indication that it is being worn for its intended purpose. In her article entitled “If You Don't Have A 'Do,' Why Wear A Doo Rag?; White Suburbia's New Import: An Inner-City Hair Tamer; The Urge to Tie One On” Shelly Branch discusses the doo rags’ evolution as she states “The doo rag (also spelled du rag, 'do rag, and do rag) has over the years seen multiple iterations. The crudest were indeed fashioned from women's nylon stockings, hence the term ‘stocking cap’. Those flesh-colored versions were typically tied in a knot on top to
keep a man's hair curly, or tight. Today's predominant style has long tails that wearers skillfully bind in all sorts of knots."\textsuperscript{57} However, just as the physical appearance and material construction of the doo rag has shifted over time, so too has its function. Branch clarifies this point as she states that initially “doo rags were most commonly worn by black men between trips to the barber, either to preserve a style or cover up hair too kinky to comb.”\textsuperscript{58}

There are several indications that the doo rag has transcended its functional purpose. For example, in one scene from the film Keisha dons a doo rag adorned with an intricate rhinestone pattern. It is clear that this pattern is merely for aesthetic purposes - the doo rag in this case is merely an accessory worn, for what can be assumed is an effort to achieve a certain style, another clear indicator that doo rags have evolved past their intended purpose. Though there is a certain trendiness that is associated with doo rags being worn outside of their intended function, fashion is not the only alternative purpose it serves. For example, Flo, whose close cropped straight hair is unaffected by the doo rag’s taming ability, still relies on it for an alternative function. While tying her doo rag she states “I don’t like my hair”.\textsuperscript{59} Surely there exist a plethora of options available for Flo to address the issue of hair she finds displeasing, however the doo rag is her remedy of choice. Why? With doo rags and their unchecked casual wear, primarily by black men,

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, 6.
\textsuperscript{59} Peddles, \textit{The Aggressives}. 
there has emerged an association between the product and a type of black masculinity. The doo rag becomes the marker black masculine cool that is in certain ways contingent upon either appearing to (or actually) not needing to conform to the standards of attire explicitly and implicitly reinforced by the dominant society.

However ubiquitous, doo rags are not the only markers of aesthetic authenticity in the film. The women in *The Aggressives* also serve to reinforce erroneous conceptions of authentic black masculine aesthetics, and by extension perpetuate problematic notions of black masculinity, through the casual adoption of prison culture fashion. For some time prison culture has been adopted and stylized, particularly by urban youth, so much so that phenomena such as sagging pants and sneakers without shoe strings are viewed as merely an unsightly fashion choice of many youth, unconnected to any larger cultural and political moment. However there is a subtly that exists in prison inspired fashions like sagging pants and lace-less athletic shoes, that is absent when actual prison wear becomes fashionable. Indeed, the donning of actual prisonwear signifies towards narratives of imprisoned bodies, primarily black male bodies in explicit ways to the extent that the prison shirt comes to stand in for black masculinity even when black male bodies are absent. In one scene in the film, Tiffany, while preparing to engage in actual illegal activity (selling ecstasy pills), adorns (however ironically) a bright orange oversized button down shirt with a left breast patch that reads “federal prison”. When she

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turns the viewer notices the back of her shirt reads in black letters “inmate #” followed by a series of indecipherable numbers. In certain ways the stylization of prison garb speaks to larger phenomena of the glorification of criminality, and again reinforces erroneous stereotypes regarding black masculinity even when the black male body is not present.

For Marquis, a twenty-something year-old African American female with an intensely masculine presentation and a youthful face, aesthetic authenticity and the subsequent perpetuation of black masculine stereotype manifests itself more subtly. In one of the film’s more intimate moments Marquis expresses a desire to have facial hair, for what can be reasonably assumed is an attempt to achieve a more authentic masculine presentation. In a tone marked by sadness, embarrassment and frustration, Marquis states “I look like a sixteen year old boy- men grow up and get facial hair; puberty has to hit at some point.”

Although most likely unbeknownst to Marquis, Marquis’ expressed concern over an authentic (or lack of) masculine presentation is indicative of a type of “performance anxiety.” Judith Halberstam goes on to explain the notion of performance anxiety as it is experienced in various types of conscious performances such as sexual intercourse or comic representations like those displayed by drag kings (female bodied people who theatrically perform as men) as “anxiety that emerges when masculinity is marked as performance rather than natural.”

61 Peddle, The Aggressives.
from trepidations over comic representations, Halberstam’s conception of performance anxiety is still applicable. Marquis’s anxiety, though to some degree attributable to concerns about authenticity, should also be viewed as two-fold as it is a product of both a perceived inability to perform masculinity but also (perhaps an unconscious manifestation or distress over) the performative (as opposed to naturalized) nature of masculinity which works to foster “a neurotic fear of exposing the theatricality of masculinity.” In order to assuage these anxieties, Marquis employs alternative physical means to produce an aesthetically authentic masculinity including bearing down on teeth in an effort to produce a more masculine looking jaw line. Marquis’s quest for an authentic masculine aesthetic are not readily racialized. It is only when these racially benign markers of masculinity are coupled with clearly racialized ones such as adhering to stereotypical gendered and racialized fashion (doo-rags, sneakers, baggy pants) does the relationship between aesthetic authenticity and authentic black masculine performance becomes clear.

Similarly that same, performative aspect rings throughout Octavia’s swagger. “When you see me you see a little dude in me - that hard just roughing up look… just dress like a dude, got a dude ways.” The resoluteness of Octavia’s statement “When you see me you see a little dude in me” reveals the complex relationship between identity

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63 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 236.
64 Peddle, The Aggressives.
and performance as her declaration that “You see a little dude in me” reveals confidence that her masculinity will assuredly be readily recognized by anyone’s gaze. It is important to note that Octavia’s declaration of readily recognizable masculinity is supplemented by her assertion that she “just dress like a dude”, again lending credence to the notion of an identifiable masculine aesthetic, that is undoubtedly racialized. Whether through t-shirts with playing cards that say “hustler”, orange prison jump - suits, doo rags, grills (gold and diamond studded teeth overlays), or baggy clothing and sneakers, aesthetic authenticity is overwhelmingly conveyed through and adherence to stereotypical conceptions of black masculinity.

Along with aesthetic authenticity, the adoption and/or exhibition of caricatured black masculinity become recognizable, through the women in The Aggressives tenuous relationship to work, criminality, and prison. Within the film, only half of the individuals, Rjai (whose occupation is never explicitly revealed, Marquis, who joins the army, and Keisha who models and messengers part time), appear to have income that is due to some legitimate venture. The remaining three women, Flo, Tiffany, and Octavia are at some point all engaged in illegal activity or are unemployed due to previous encounters with the law. For Marquis, Rjai, and Keisha, despite engaging in legitimate means of income production, there is a certain “hustler’s ambition” mentality undergirding their attitude towards work. For example consider Marquis’ initial reasoning for entering the army as she states “It’s a big door opener for me, it’s opportunity, know-what-I-mean, it’s so
much you can get from going to the army, I want to go to college, I want to play ball, I know I can’t do that— you know like with my mom’s income - so of course going to the army to get me a little extra help, I could use the change, they give you twenty-eight thousand like when you leave to go to college— so that is pretty good - that is why I decided to go.65 Although social and economic ascent are common reasons for enlisting in the military, Marquis’ are more complex as the film later reveals. Here, the persona of the “Army Strong” ad quickly dissolves into a street hustler mantra as Marquis states “I could care less about America, America don’t give a fuck about me— I’m just a pawn in order to help somebody else with a bigger picture here and I know this - but of course imma get my piece of the pie while I’m here too- make some bread.”66 The preceding statement by Marquis highlights the “means to an end” attitude that is a mark of the hustler’s ambition mantra central to authentic performances of stereotypical black masculinity. The attitude that informs the hustler’s ambition is not in itself problematic as it is founded on a stringent alignment with the qualities of resourcefulness and self determination that have historically aided in quests for uplift. However, over time, there has become a perversion of these characteristics, as hustling has now synonymous with an active engagement in illegal activity, (particularly selling drugs), yet there seems to be no moves taken to reconceptualize blackness particularly masculinity with the perverted image of hustling, but rather an acceptance and embracement of the existing association.

65ibid.
66ibid.
Unlike their counterparts who engage in tenuous albeit legitimate work, Flo, Octavia, and Tiffany showcase the ways in which a hegemonic black masculinity works to caricature their identities through the maintenance of conceptions of black masculine criminality. For Flo, although she is never shown engaging in illegal activities, the effects of criminal activity are visible in terms of her work (or lack thereof) as she states “I got into a lot of criminal stuff, right now I’m on probation for three years, right now you know, I’m looking for a job.” Not only is Flo’s exhibition of black masculinity caricatured through unemployment, but her employment can be understood as the product of another stereotype; black masculine criminality. However, unlike Flo, Tiffany and Octavia are shown engaging in illegal activity. Prior to a drug sell Tiffany provides information about her previous job history stating, ‘Last time I had a job I was doing credit card scams under their nose, I’m going in there to sell some pills and some weed make some money and dance, and see the drag queens.” The degree to which illegal activity becomes intertwined with a racialized masculinized authenticated identity is that much more problematic because living outside the parameters of legal society has become marked by indifference or even pride, as opposed to disdain or remorse.

Beyond the selling of drugs, even the relationship to rethinking criminal activity for more legitimate ventures implies an exaggerated stereotype of black masculinity as

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67 Ibid. 
68 Ibid. 
rehabilitation comes not in the form of stopping, but slowing down or in this case selling
drugs less frequently. Consider Tiffany’s assertion regarding the frequency of her drug-
dealing as she states “I’m not out there like I used to be.”\textsuperscript{70} Unlike Tiffany, Octavia’s
tenure selling drugs without legal repercussion is, at least based on the film’s depiction,
much shorter. From prison Octavia states “I was selling drugs in the Bronx - I made a sell
to an undercover cop and got arrested.”\textsuperscript{71} After a two- year prison stint, Octavia states “I
had enough - I’m finding me a fucking job and work - I ain’t selling no fucking drugs no
more.”\textsuperscript{72} Whether through menial legitimate employment, illegal activity, or
unemployment the women in \textit{The Aggressives} proliferate stereotypes of black
masculinity as they solidify longstanding conceptions of black masculinity as
manifesting, in regards to work, through qualities such as laziness and criminality.

Finally, beyond the concepts of aesthetic authenticity, and occupational
precariousness, the women in \textit{The Aggressives} caricature black masculinity through the
exhibition of antagonistic, misogynistic and hegemonic relationships to femininity,
specifically that of black women in the film. As was previously mentioned black
masculinity and femininity work dialectically to constitute one another. For Octavia we
see various stages of relationships with black female partners. Initial purviews into
Octavia’s love life gives insight into how hegemonic black masculinity functions. Going

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] Peddle, \textit{The Aggressives}.
\item[71] Ibid.
\item[72] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
on to describe her perfect partner, Octavia states “My ideal girl is light-skinned caramel complexion- no darker than caramel complexion, keep they hair done, nails done.”

Octavia’s description of her ideal partner, though seemingly innocuous, is replete with racialized ideas of femininity and womanhood, and in turn works to reinforce ideas about black masculinity. In regards to skin color, dark skin (in terms of beauty standards which are set in relation to whiteness), is viewed as de-feminizing and therefore not desirable. Octavia’s comments about hair and nails are also telling, as they reinforce the idea of black womanhood’s value being contingent upon (among other things) an adherence or likeness to prescribed beauty standards (set in relation to whiteness).

Unlike male-bodied people whose mere biology (supposedly) is a strict marker of masculinity, for Octavia via her partner’s embodiment of stereotypical racialized notions of gender, she is able to juxtapose her identity with her partners and in turn convey and possess the masculinity in which she is invested.

Later in the film Octavia is imprisoned for selling drugs in the Bronx to an undercover cop. While in jail Octavia proclaims that “the aggressive girls is in control in here, the effeminate females is just the one that just takes cares of them wash the clothes, cook and stuff like that, other than that the aggressive girls are in control, tell a girl what to do it, when to do it. You got to call them bitches, hoes, come here hoe-grab them up

73 Ibid.
and stuff ‘cause they like that.” 75 This exhibition of violence and dominance works to cast Octavia into the space of black masculinity that might not otherwise be afforded her based on her sex. Although assuredly feminine women can and do exhibit domination and violence it is usually understood as an aberration and transgressive, casting them within a realm of undesirable de-feminization even momentarily as it undermines the meekness and passivity associated with “true femininity” lest it disrupt the space with which black hegemonic masculinity is articulated and understood. The degree to which Octavia not only accepts but seems to prefer and enjoy domination and violence associated with black masculinity reinforces her possessive investment in black masculinity.

Prison culture in this instance illuminates the degree to which binary ideas of gender are pervasive and internalized. Octavia’s comments about feminine women in jail also underscore the importance of domesticity in women as a point of opposite reference for masculinity. Octavia’s stint in prison also sheds light on the way that black masculinity works to erroneously aggregate notions of strength with physical dominance and violence as she attests “most of the girls in here they want you to beat them up and stuff I don’t know why you can’t be nice to them in here-you can’t respect them like, oh how you doing- talk to them, have a decent conversation.”76  Finally, in an exchange

75 Peddle, The Aggressives
76 Ibid.
between herself and her girlfriend Shanay, Octavia states the following: “I don’t get enough sex. I am a nympho, I have to have it all the time, I don’t get enough sex, I’m mad.” “She’s not freaky enough - I wanna do everything and anything- this is what I want to change about her -to be a freak.”\textsuperscript{77} In response to Shanay’s perturbation with the critique of her sexual unwillingness, Octavia proposes an interesting “compromise” saying “you find a girl we have a threesome and I can fuck her in her ass with the dildo.”\textsuperscript{78} Although the scene is shot as good natured banter between partners, a more insidious misogynistic undertone is present. At the conversations end there remains an air of tension, as even within the parameters of what can be assumed is a committed and loving relationship, Octavia’s seemingly harmless interaction with her partner is marked by hyper-sexuality and disrespect that not only buttress the assertion that there exists a reliance of masculine stereotype by the women in The Aggressives as a means to convey their own identities, but also lends credence to the idea that modern stereotypical conceptions of black masculinity are closely linked to historical caricatures; an idea which Ronald L. Jackson substantiates as he states “the thug or ruffneck is a contemporary manifestation of the contumacious brute image.”\textsuperscript{79}

Black masculinity is also caricatured via the evocation of black male player.

While sitting in the Village, Keisha’s phone unexpectedly rings. Glancing at her phone

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Jackson, Scripting the Black Masculine 112.
she energetically exclaims “Motorola two-way paging - Give it to me! A clear reference to hip-hop artist Jay-Z’s hit song, “Give it To Me.”80 Then, as if imparting a coveted secret, Keisha states “some of you ladies are working for your ladies. C’mon now, if you’re gonna be aggressive - do it right.”81 Keisha’s cautioning against “working for your ladies” (as opposed to them working for you) is a subtle hint towards pimping, an aspect of black masculinity that has, sadly, taken on iconic significances in regards to authentic articulations and exhibitions of black masculinity.

Similar to Keisha, Rjai’s dealings with women, while not marked by blatant disrespect or misogyny, do imply more subtle issues with fidelity and commitment. In one scene from the film Rjai and her fiancé are discussing Rjai’s indiscretions. “I’ve never seen Rjai as the player type - I’ve heard the stories” to which Rjai coyly replies “I’m not a player I just crush a lot.”82 Rjai’s tongue in cheek response to her partner’s inquiries, is, similar to Keisha informed by a hip hop reference (Big Punisher’s 1998 song “Still Not a Playa”) again reinforces the playa mentality commonly associated with stereotypical conceptions of black masculinity that undermine ones ability or desire to ever completely commit to one woman.83 While walking down a nondescript street on their way to dinner, Tiffany and her friend Naz stop to examine a reprint of Lil’ Kim on

80 Peddle, The Aggressives.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Jackson, Scripting the Black Masculine Body, 112.
the cover of KING magazine. In the photo Lil’ Kim, with her wet body, full breasts, and spread eagle posturing, symbolizes uncontained black female sexuality. Naz holding the picture states “I don’t like her face, what you think” to which Tiffany replies “I’d bang this cooch out,” Naz retorts, “That Bitch look like sex to me, I’d fuck her all day long.” Afterwards Naz suggestively places the picture up to her face so to make Lil Kim’s crotch parallel with her mouth while vigorously gyrating her tongue in what is an obvious simulation of oral sex. After the exchange we see the two friends casually walk into a McDonald’s accompanied by the poster, of course. The exchange between Naz and Tiffany reveals the imposition of a sexualized gaze upon black female bodies (read: “that bitch look like sex to me”). Through the objectification of black feminine sexuality, stereotypical black masculine sexuality, and the misogyny that is founded upon, is revealed through sexually dominant, often violent (read, “I’d bang that cooch out”) relationships to black female bodies.

Arguably, more than any of the other women in the film Flo highlights the complicated relationship between problematic notions of authentic black masculinity founded in hegemonic relationship to femininity, particularly black femininity. Though each of the film’s individuals, due to their marginalized sexual and or gender identities is relegated less visible if not invisible and voiceless within the confines of the dominant gender and sexual order, Flo’s identity and subsequent marginalization offers unique

84 Peddle, The Aggressives.
insight because of her race.

Asian racial identity, similar to, but in a converse fashion to black identity which is inherently masculinized across sex, is overwhelmingly effeminized regardless of sex. Allan Luke goes on to explain the difficulties faced by Asian men in terms of being recognized as masculine as he states “In Western representations of masculinity we are defined in terms of absence, lack or silence. In this kind of sexual environment we are invisible - not present, without a place or a ‘name’…” Although the author of the preceding quote is speaking specifically about the effeminization of Asian males (as he conflates masculinity with maleness), his contentions are relevant to Flo’s specific dilemma regarding performing masculinity.

Considering the ways in which Asian men are relegated invisible in terms of masculinity, it can be safely assumed that for an Asian female bodied masculine person, who lacks even the physical markers of maleness, the difficulties in understanding, articulating, and performing masculine identity become even more acute. As Flo clearly does not embody the demureness passivity, and hyper-femininity that (though obviously not necessarily actual characteristics of Asian women) become authentic markers within a larger (stereotypical) context of Asian women, Flo has little recourse in terms of identity validation. It would appear that only through the dissociation with her racial and

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ethnic background which is showcased through her contention that she is “just like a nigga” is Flo able to articulate her masculinity. Flo’s assertions that “I am just like a nigga - I’m just like a man, I love the ladies,” takes on even more complicated meanings. Flo’s likening of her identity to that of a “nigga’s” is vital to understanding the degree to which she has an investment in and therefore adopts a compensatory performance of stereotypical black masculinity. It is clear that the term “nigga” in this instance is employed in a gendered way. This statement reinforces the homogeneity of black masculinity as it suggest that “real” black masculinity, in this case being a “nigga”, equates to loving (and perhaps more accurately, “fucking”) the ladies and therefore is defined by a degree of hyper-sexuality. “I’m attracted to black girls ‘cuz they got the body - they got body, but they attitude- the worst, I feel like they came out the same womb or something, they all act alike-they all be flippin’.” Flo’s two-fold assessment of black women is important to note. On the one hand Flo is attracted to the black female physique, while on the other hand this attraction is negatively tempered by prevailing notions of black women as attitude-ish or emasculating. Although each of the women in the film express varying degrees of weariness over potential or experienced emasculation Flo does so in the most explicit terms. In another scene from the film Flo states that due to adolescent incarceration she is having difficulty finding work. She laments her

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86 Peddles, The Aggressives
87 bell hooks, Black Looks, 89.
88 Peddles, The Aggressives.
inability to buy flowers and take women out to dinner and open doors for them (the epitome of masculine chivalry) and the figurative emasculation that comes with this inability to fulfill a masculine ideal. Unlike male-bodied people who can re-assert undermined masculinity through the wielding of an actual phallus, Flo when figuratively emasculated cannot reposition herself with such ease back into the sphere of black masculinity. Otherwise silenced within the racialized gender hegemonic hierarchy it would appear that through an unflinching commitment the performance of a particular racialized masculinity, that is marked by ambivalence and tension in relationship to women, particularly black women (as black women are the only women she expresses attraction to) Flo has a voice. However, Flo’s achievement of voice is contingent upon the propagation of erroneous, limiting, and harmful conceptions of black masculinity.

Each of the six women in Daniel Peddles 2005 documentary entitled The Aggressives adopt and perform masculinity, specifically black masculinity, that work to inform their ability to articulate and negotiate their own unique gender identities. Through an aesthetic authenticity, precarious relationships to work, consumer adornments such as baggy pants and doo rags, and finally contentious, sexualized engagements these women in The Aggressives have crafted a new identity on old notions. This nominal degree of self-identification and expression serves to not only perpetuate the same system of confinement and restriction (regarding identity) that those who

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89 hooks, Black Looks, 94.
employ/adhere to it are trying to escape, but simultaneously obfuscates possible avenues through which the complexities of identity can be explored.
Afterword

What about black men? While Black men and black male bodies are integral to mis- and disembodied masculinity in that they are necessary to make it recognizable, in a project that is explicitly concerned with mis and disembodied masculinity any extended discussion of black men/male bodies may seem tangential, ill placed even. Operating from the, perhaps, erroneous premise that a more than referential mention of black men in this project would undermine the very claims about black masculinity that I sought to redress, I have been careful to avoid sustained discussions of black men/male bodies. Why and to what end then, do black men appear the most germane and logical subject of No B-Grades Fakes or Variants’s conclusion? An unexpected encounter might serve to illuminate the reason and the relevance of this seeming analytical departure. While casually walking back to campus from the barbershop I heard someone shout "hey bug eyes!" Despite not seeing the source of the salutation I was instantly aware of both the identity of the caller as well as my position as its intended referent as "bug eyes" was a moniker of endearment that had been bestowed upon me by a campus Christian proselytizer. I greeted the gentleman, whose name I did not know, and we engaged in casual conversation. Not far into our exchange, my acquaintance asked me about school, and the conversation eventually veered towards my thesis. I responded to his inquiry about my research interests with "I do work on mis and disembodied black masculinity." Initially his was a look of confoundment, but as I began to explain how companies perpetuate specific scripts about black masculinity through the calculated promotion of specific personas such as Fifty Cent in order to brand their products, and so on. He appeared intrigued. As I continued to talk, however, his attention seemed to drift and I noticed that he began to rub his chest lingering at his nipples and
replied somewhat suggestively "what about black male bodies?" Somewhat vexed by both his rubbing and his sudden disinterest I repeated that I was, actually, more interested in mis-and disembodied black masculinity." Seeking to avoid what felt like an impending awkward pause, or perhaps worse, an equally awkward continuation, I abruptly ended our exchange and made my way to class. While walking to class, mildly discomfited, I pondered his query, “What about black male bodies?” I scoffed, thinking to myself irritated “what about them?” As I sat in class the question lingered, but my relationship to it shifted from irritated to intrigued. The more I mulled over his query the less it felt incongruent with my work. I began to think about my acquaintance as the subject of his own inquiry. Although I had seen this man countless times, it was only recently that he became visible to me. As I considered the various locations this gentleman occupied both physically and socially his invisibility became that much more perplexing. Indeed, there were any number of factors, including his physical position at one of the busiest intersections around campus, as a middle aged African American man there was also the incongruence of his race and age with that of the larger campus community, his class position, as well as his dynamic and active engagement with passersby that ran counter to the hoards of silent and disengaged students who walked past him daily, that should have contributed to his hyper-visibility. Although this gentleman is merely one example of a hyper visibility/ invisibility regarding black masculinity, social issues such as staggering incidences of incarceration, drug abuse, mental health issues and homelessness, many of which effect African American men at disproportionate rates suggest a larger cultural phenomenon regarding black masculinity. If No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants, indeed masculine women, sneakers culture, and advertising and branding were all spaces where black masculinity appeared was my work somehow was a Was
my work, one that was interested in marginality, doing so via the perpetuation of marginality of its brethren? Does a project on mis- and disembodied masculinity serve the function of perpetuating this ocular subjugation of embodied black masculinity? Potentially. However, I believe that this reading might be an overly reductive an myopic reading. While No B-Grades, Fakes or Variants offers a set of embryonic purviews into issues of mis- and disembodied black masculinity specifically, its salient concern is still black masculinity, a subject of study that, despite an upsurge in texts about black men and masculinity, is still marked by a dearth of works devoted to its analysis. No-B Grade’s Fakes, or Variants is therefore an endeavor that is undertaken in solidarity with, as opposed to at the expense of more critical interrogations of black men. Indeed embodied black masculinity and the alternatives of black masculine identity that exists are critical to more critical, complicated, expansive and inclusive representations that appear in mis and disembodied sites.

Simultaneously mis- and disembodied masculinity in advertising culture and branding, masculine women, material culture and sneakers sites can work to either substantiate insidious, limiting, and reductive readings of identity, or challenge the fixedness of identity to the corporeal and aid in more legible scripts of self-authored identity. Black masculinity is a produced, sustained, dismantled, and reconfigured for better or worse by both the corporeal and the disembodied, and effort to hierarchize their essentiality to this project are merely exercises in futility. No B-Grades, Fakes, or Variants is, then, a work concerned with "dis", "mis", and "just" embodied black masculinity and the ways in which each of these sites/types of black can and must be locations of re-imagination, the possibility of self crafting; this is at stake however and wherever black masculinity manifests.
References


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The Aggressives. Dir. Daniel Peddles. Seventh Art Releasing, 2005