Corporeal (isms): Race, Gender, and Corpulence Performativity in Visual and Narrative Cultures

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates the ways that the Black female body has been constructed using corpulence as a central narrative that reflects anxieties about race, gender, class, sexuality, and national identity. It identifies how the performance of corpulence through the Black female body has particular ideological meanings that have been articulated through visual and narrative cultures. Corpulence is operative in defining rigid boundaries in regards to identity, which are built on constructed notions of whiteness and Blackness. Moreover, this study identifies corpulence as a facet of identity and illuminates how it intersects with race, gender, class, and ethnicity to render Black women non-existent and relegate them to the bottom of American society. Through an intertextual analysis of several popular texts, this study illuminates the varied ways that the discourse involving corpulence reflects narratives that deploy race, gender, and class as signifiers of “authentic” American identity and restrict the social, economic, and political mobility of the Black female body.

The analysis begins with a historical examination of how pertinent size has been to the construction of the Black female body in visual and narrative cultures and how this particular construction has worked to establish ideals regarding difference. It briefly dissects the historical ‘Mammy’ construction of the Black female body in an effort to identify how the physical attributes of this particular construction serve to nurture
whiteness in general. The primary interest is to identify the function of corpulence in the construction of this caricature and analyze how it was composed as a signifier of ‘Blackness’ that was used to establish, promote and sustain white supremacy through visual culture.

A brief historical analysis of this imagery led to an identification of how corpulence has been appropriated and used in Black folklore as a means to comical effect. The internalization of inferiority in Black cultural productions has led to the further assassination of the Black female body using corpulence as a primary weapon of choice. This study illuminates the ways in which corpulence is performed in Black folklore as a means to denigrate and assault the Black female body. Moreover, it traces this assault through analyses of such practices and rituals as ‘Yo Mama’ jokes (playing the dozens/snapping) and the use of the gendered ’fat suit,’ which has historically been worn by many Black male comedians. By performing a gendered and racialized ‘grotesque fatness,’ these comedians perpetuate notions of difference that mark Black female bodies inferior and pathological. Such practices and internalizations perpetuate the myth of an overindulgent, cantankerous, and ‘lazy’ Black female body that prevents itself from acquiring the ‘American Dream’. Thus, these practices continue to relegate Black women to the bottom of the racial hierarchy and marginalize them from constructions of nationality and ‘American’ identity.

Conversely, this study also analyzes the ways that Black women artists have engaged in corpulence politics. It analyzes various forms of visual and narrative cultures in order to identify how Black women perform corpulence. Black women have used literature, film, television and music as a way of articulating ideals about their own
bodies and identities. Consequently, cultural and identity theorists such as Toni Morrison and contemporary celebrity figures such as Queen Latifah and Mo’Nique have been invested, whether indirectly or proactively, in corpulence politics. This study analyzes the corpulence politics of these artists, while drawing attention to the tension between their own self-constructed bodily performances and external appropriations.

Through an analysis of corporeality, this study identifies how the body is still used as a central location for the inscription and dissemination of ideology; however, its fluidity allows for the performativity of identities such as corpulence.
For Mom, Dad, and marginalized Black bodies around the world
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Billionaire celebrity phenomenon Oprah Winfrey graces every cover of her self-published magazine, \textit{O} magazine. Winfrey’s visibility every month of the publication has been interpreted by some as narcissistic; however, I propose that it can be liberating for not only Oprah but the Black female image as well. Moreover, her body is autonomous and her solo performance on the cover is perhaps the only instance where Oprah Winfrey is not ‘shared’ with her audience and the general public. The co-opting and appropriation of Winfrey’s persona and public identity is evident in the consumption of “Mammy” qualities and characterizations that America has loved for so long. In \textit{Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism} (2005) sociologist and cultural critic Patricia Hill Collins argues, “A good deal of Winfrey’s success lies in her ability to market herself within the familiar realm of the mammy”(p.142). Part of Oprah Winfrey’s appeal can be attributed to her giving behavior and her talk show’s willingness to take on the concerns, issues, and likes of the American middle-class white woman. Moreover, Winfrey has been apologetic in terms of her fluctuating weight, which allows her audience to move into spaces that many would deem personal.

On the January, 2009 edition of her magazine, an image of Oprah from a 2005 edition is pasted alongside a current image of her in an effort to demonstrate her weight gain over the four year period. In the original image, Oprah is clothed in a white, fashionable and torso-revealing sweat suit as she smiles to the camera; however, in the
2009 image, she is fully clothed in a less revealing lavender sweat suit as she looks to the right rather than straight into the camera and at her readers. Further, she admits in the accompanying article, “So here I stand, 40 pounds heavier than I was in 2006. (Yes, you're adding correctly; that means the dreaded 2-0-0.) I’m mad at myself. I’m embarrassed. I can't believe that after all these years, all the things I know how to do, I’m still talking about my weight. I look at my thinner self and think, "How did I let this happen again?" The fact that Oprah felt the need to apologize to her audience is revealing because it reflects that notion that she may not view her body as autonomous as one would think. The question must be asked, “For whom does Oprah lose weight?” I am not labeling Oprah as a “Mammy” figure; however, one of the main components of the construction includes the ability to forego personal aspirations and desires for others: namely, the white community.

I view Oprah Winfrey’s weight “issue” as a central part of her celebrity persona and the fascination with her as a public figure. Moreover, body size has been a pivotal aspect of the construction of the Black female body in American visual and narrative cultures. Mammy’s weight must be taken into consideration when assessing her identity and character.

Feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo (1993) have produced work that deals with the female body and western culture. Bordo argues that women are held to unattainable expectations when it comes to body size, which impacts their own bodily perceptions. Kathleen LeBesco’s scholarship also has been instrumental in merging body size with women’s lived experiences. The anthology that LeBesco edits with Jana Evans Braziel, *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (2001), begins the examination of “fat
in spaces between subjectivity and subjection” (p. 8). In *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (2004), LeBesco suggests that we should redefine the way that we look at body size. Her work has been monumental in the struggle to bring gender, size, and corporeality to the forefront of feminist scholarship.

Conversely, many Black feminist and Critical Race scholars are invested in analyzing how *race* and gender are crucial to any engagement of corporeality. They have investigated the intersection of race and corporeality as it relates to history (Davis 1983; D. White 1985), hip-hop culture (Morgan 1999; Perry 2003; Pough 2004), reproductive rights (Roberts 1997), violence theories (Richie 2005), film (duCille 1998), legal theory (Crenshaw 1995; Williams 1995; Wing 1997), hair and color politics (Craig 2002, Nowile 1996), and sexuality (Collins 2004; Hammonds 1997; E. Francis White 2001). This scholarship varies in approaches, however, all of the scholars seek to understand how the Black female body is constructed and treated in American society. Most of these scholars trace the devaluation of the Black female body to the European conquest of Africa and the economic exploitation of Black bodies in general. The objectification of the Black female body in visual and narrative cultures has been traced to the specific exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, the South African woman whose body was constructed as pathological and deviant by 19th century scientific racism (Gilman 1985; 88).

Janell Hobson’s (2005) research is one of the more recent studies that analyze the construction of difference that took place using Saartjie Baartman’s body. She argues, “The popularity of the Hottentot Venus Exhibition gave rise to the numerous cartoons featuring Baartman’s prominent behind, grossly exaggerated for comical effect” (p. 36). Hobson makes a very important point regarding the appropriation and adaptation of
Baartman’s body to visual culture. Her body was manipulated and distorted for comical effect. The power that elite white males have held as owners and operators of media outlets throughout history has allowed them to continuously destroy real Black bodies for ideological purposes. Moreover, the corpulence that was added to Baartman’s body is indicative of the exaggerated and distorted Blackness that has been added to the Black female body in general. This study contributes to this scholarship on race and corporeality and analyzes how corpulence also has served historically as a signifier of race. This dissertation will mark corpulence as a signifier of race in similar ways that skin color and hair texture have been studied as racial signifiers (Craig 2002; Mercer 1994; Rooks 1996).

Many scholars have identified the complex ways that visual and narrative cultures are used as means of disseminating ideology regarding identity and racial signification. In Black Feminist Thought (1990), Patricia Hill Collins identifies the use of “controlling images” to perpetuate the discrimination of Black female bodies (p. 69). She argues that it is crucial to identify the ways that the media is used to construct and disseminate such imagery that controls the mobility of Black women. Sociologist and cultural critic, K. Sue Jewell (1993) also analyzes the interplay of constructions of Black womanhood and visual culture and contends that the physical attributes afforded Black female bodies in popular culture are actually instrumental in articulating and disseminating the ideology of the dominant culture in an effort to maintain racial hierarchies and the unequal distribution of wealth in America. Jewell argues that the construction of Black female bodies as “Mammy” in visual culture is the most prominent of all the cultural images of Black bodies that are perpetuated by the mass media and that “…two of mammies most
endowed features are her breasts and buttocks…in mammy these features are extremely exaggerated. The unusually large buttocks and embellished breasts place mammy outside the sphere of sexual desirability and into the realm of maternal nurturance (Jewell, p. 37).

Mammy is so entrenched in American culture that she is the visual symbol and emblem of Black womanhood and anything that is contrary to that is ignored because it does not fit the stereotype. Moreover, her physical attributes function in her construction as “Other.” In Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation (2003), Michael Harris explains that multiple forms of iconography of Black bodies such as the Mammy image, “…silenced the black voice and controlled the black body by the invention of an economic system and a white ethnicity built around a central blackness that benefits and helped define whites” (Harris, p. 89). The dominant group, in visual and narrative cultures, has grotesquely distorted the care-taking responsibilities of Black enslaved and post-reconstruction domestic workers in an effort to define notions of whiteness.

According to this damaging construct, the Black female body exists as the difference on which other bodies are judged and revered. In describing the role of Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) in the celebrated film, Gone With the Wind (1939), M.M. Manring (1998) argues that “the most prominent character in Gone with the Wind has no real function beyond maintaining white southern ladyhood” (Manring, p. 39). From post-reconstruction Mammies to made-over mothers on contemporary television sitcoms and reality shows, one characteristic of this representational Black female body has been constant: its corpulence. Therefore, the “double jeopardy” (St. Jean, 1998) description of race and gender afforded Black women is no longer a viable description of the multitude of experiences that intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability, and
corpulence create. Since women’s bodies are scripted with social and political ideological narratives, Black female bodies serve as an antithesis to ideal notions of identity. Therefore, Mammy’s ‘fatness’ functions as an important instrument to use in such ideals because the ideal body is the white thin female body that has been perpetuated in visual and narrative cultures. Loaded with scripts of pathology and deviance, the Black female body’s possession of extra weight, via Sarah Baartman’s buttocks or Mammy’s stomach, adds to her inferiority role in American society. Weight becomes a weapon used against these bodies and Black communities in general.

This research intervenes in discussions of body politics by identifying corpulence as another facet of women’s identities that drastically shapes their lived experiences. Thus, I illuminate how race, class, gender, sexuality, and corpulence intersect to create particular ideological and social meanings, specifically those surrounding identity and nationality. Moreover, my scholarship contributes to existing studies on the Mammy construction by specifically analyzing how the created corpulent physical attribute of ‘Mammy’ contributed to nation building and Black female marginalization in constructions of American identity. Moreover, I will identify how corpulence still functions in the post-9/11 definitions of national identity. For example, although the arguments of feminist theorists such as Bordo and Lebesco are beneficial to our understanding of gender and corporeality, they still rely heavily on a monolithic analysis of the female body that is centered more on the experiences and reality of white female bodies. On the other hand, Black feminist theorists have yet to identify how corpulence has historically functioned in our understanding of Black female body constructions. Therefore, Fat Studies and Black feminist theories presently lack a thorough investigation
of weight, gender, race, and performativity in regards to visual and narrative cultures. Fat Studies is increasingly becoming interdisciplinary; however, intersectional theory is needed to accurately engage in studies and discourses on the body. This research identifies and explores a specific gendered-racialized performativity of corpulence in visual and narrative cultures. The aim is to carefully trace this performativity of corpulence from the inception of these cultures to contemporary constructions and articulations. This study identifies performativity as the ways that the body carries, reflects, and performs narratives.

I specifically explore the gendered-racialized performativity, as it has historically been articulated in Black folklore and humor, in the second chapter of my dissertation, “Yo’ Mama’s So Fat! Race, Gender, Class, and the Folklore of Corpulence.” I begin by analyzing how gender and race have been performed by male bodies. My historical analysis of early blackface minstrelsy reflects the gender and racial privilege of white males when performing marginalized identities in American narrative and visual cultures. Identifying this history is crucial when assessing how African American men have taken advantage of their male privilege in performing female identity. Moreover, I connect this historical performativity with the performance of corpulence as a marginalized identity. Therefore, I examine the ways that African-Americans have internalized a denigrating perception of corpulence and use it as a means of signifying inferiority. Black cultural traditions such as ‘playing the dozens’ or ‘snapping’ have been sites for this performativity. I specifically identify how external constructions of corpulence, especially on the Black female body, have led to a disturbing appropriation of inferiority among African-American performers. Central to this chapter is the history of this
comedic performance of corpulence by African-American male comedians and actors. Male comedians such as Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry perform a ‘fatness’ that is scripted on a maternal Black female body. Male privilege and race intersect to create a particular performativity of corpulence that is an extension of the ‘Yo’ Mama’ jokes and mark the maternal and matriarchal Black female body laughable and inferior.

This dissertation also adds to the understanding of this gendered-racialized corpulence performativity by identifying a tension between external constructions of the maternal and matriarchal Black female body and the self-constructed ideals of this body by African-American women. There exists a self-constructed ‘Mama’ figure in Black cultural productions, which perpetuates the myth of strength and endurance of Black female matriarchal bodies against adversity. This elevated motherly figure has been appropriated by many contemporary figures such as Toni Morrison, Queen Latifah, and Mo’Nique.

Thus, I explore how African-American women have engaged in corpulence politics as a viable counter to the external interracial and intraracial male constructions of the Black female body. The third chapter of my dissertation, “The Bluest Eye Sees the Fattest Body: Reading Corpulence Identity in the Literature of Toni Morrison,” investigates an early engagement with corpulence politics in literature, but one that has yet to be examined. Many Black women writers have used literature to reclaim the mutilated Black female body. In *Granny Midwives & Black Women Writers: Double Dutch Readings* (1996), Valerie Lee identifies the effort of Black women writers to reconfigure the Black female body. She states, “Rejecting an essentialized body, black
women writers have been making an effort to theorize the multiplicity of black female subjectivities and to write the bodies of all ‘colored girls’ in their canon” (Lee, p. 56). Moreover, body size has been a critical component of Black women writers’ reclamation of their bodies in their work. Lee continues, “Perhaps more viciously assaulted than brown skin tones or nappy edges have been the constructions of black hip size” (p. 63). Rearticulating body size has been a discursive strategy employed by Black women writers in such canonical texts as *The Color Purple* (1982) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983).

In her 2001 study, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, Trudier Harris analyzes the presence of a nurturing “strong” Black woman in African-American literature. Harris argues that “those comforting images range from the large black woman who keep black men in line for white Americans, to the very large black woman who are eternally happy to be in the kitchen making pancakes for their white charges, to the mammy figures specifically conceived to provide broad bosoms of comfort for whites” (Harris, p. 2). Harris’ study identifies how African-American writers can perpetuate externally defined representations of the corpulent Black female body in their work; however, she neglects to analyze how identity theorists, such as Toni Morrison, posit corpulence as another facet of Black women’s identities that intersect with race, gender, and class to form specific notions of ‘Blackness’ in American society. Moreover, by simplifying the study of the Black female body to the apparent ‘mammi-fication’ of Morrison’s character, Pauline Breedlove, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Harris misses the very important social meanings of corpulence that the character Miss Marie provides the reader of the text. My examination of Morrison’s novel illuminates
the corpulence performativity posited throughout the text. Moreover, I analyze how Miss Marie acts as a figurative ‘Mama’ for the protagonist in the text, which counters the ‘Mammified’ characterization of Pauline Breedlove. In her novel, Morrison further illuminates the tension between ‘Mammy’ and ‘Mama.’ This dissertation provides another way of envisioning the corpulent bodies of Morrison’s subjects by analyzing how corpulence is yet another facet of difference in the text on which whiteness is actually constructed and affirmed.

In identifying and examining the Mammy and Mama ideals, I capitalize these terms in an effort to distinguish between the actual constructions and individuals who may really possess characteristics of these bodies. For example, a Black woman who was actually enslaved and forced to labor in a white household and serve as a nanny to the children, may have been referred to as ‘mammy;’ however, as bell hooks (1981) argues, “It is not really important that there are black women who resemble the mammy stereotype, it is important that white people created an image of black womanhood which they could tolerate that in no way resembled the great majority of black women” (hook, p. 84). Hence, corpulence has been central to the actual construction of Black female bodies.

This tension between ‘Mammy’ and ‘Mama’ serves as a pivotal foundation for my analysis of corpulence performativity in the body of work of musical artist and actress Queen Latifah in the fourth chapter, “Give Me Body! Black Nationalism, Gender, and Corpulence Performativity in the Work of Queen Latifah,” of my dissertation. Latifah’s early work in music, television, and film clearly reflects her appropriation and engagement with a self-constructed figurative matriarchal Black female body. Latifah’s
corpulent body served as the location from which history, wisdom, knowledge, culture, pride and reason were reflected and disseminated. For example, her 1988 hit single, “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children,” set into motion what was to become an important facet of her visible star persona in Black cultural productions. In the song, Latifah appropriates a figurative maternal figure as she redefines the traditional way of mothering by advancing her body as an authoritative ‘Mama’ or ‘Mother Africa’ to the Black community. Here, and in many other texts, Latifah proactively takes on the duties of ‘mothering’ history, wisdom, knowledge, culture and pride to the Black community. In Color By Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television (1999), Kristal Brent Zook argues that Latifah intervened in mainstream and masculine narratives on the Fox network in the 1990’s with a “radical womanist persona”(68). By analyzing these early productions of Latifah such as her albums Black Reign (1993) and Order in the Court (1998), and her book, Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman (1999), targeted to young girls to improve their self-esteem, I identify how Latifah has engaged in the performativity of corpulence, which is gendered and racialized. Conversely, I examine the existence of a tension between Latifah’s womanist ‘Mama’ persona and an emerging ‘Mammy’ persona that is contemporarily being consumed on a wide scale. In this sense, my work complicates simplistic readings of both Latifah’s early work and her current work as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ portrayals of the corpulent Black female body. It also extends the discussion of Latifah as a chief proponent for women’s rights by analyzing her corpulence performativity.

and actress Mo’Nique’s corpulence performativity has been more palpable than Latifah’s in that she has successfully, proactively and single-handedly created and fostered rhetoric that involves direct challenges to the ways that society views body size. Moreover, I identify how she has reclaimed and re articulated ‘fatness’ in her comedic performativity of corpulence. However, the tension that Mo’Nique creates between some of her work and her personal corpulence politics has yet to be investigated. For example, feminist scholars such as Sirena Riley argue against a denigrating presentation of corpulent bodies in visual culture. In “The Black Beauty Myth,” she argues that Mo’Nique’s representation on the popular sitcom The Parkers reflected, “…ghetto women with no class, talking loud, wearing bright colors and tight clothes”(Riley, p. 367). This research identifies the ways that this television performance of Mo’Nique is situated within the rhetoric that she has created involving corpulence politics. I attempt to implode the rigid boundaries regarding discriminatory readings of corpulent bodies in visual and narrative cultures. Why is the thin body of Tracee Ellis Ross, as Joan Clayton, on the equally popular sitcom Girlfriends not given the same criticism about wearing “tight clothes” that Mo’Nique’s corpulent body is? What does this reveal about the existing readings of these bodies, even in feminist scholarship? This work adds to existing scholarship that seeks to engage in corpulence politics; however, I challenge our thinking about how corpulence is constructed, treated and read as abject.

While Mo’Nique is proactive in rearticulating corpulence identity, it is clear that her body is still viewed as a threat to the fabric of American society. By analyzing the anxieties surrounding race, gender, and class that the corpulent Black female body evokes, my project concludes as an extension of, and addition to, the existing scholarship.
that identifies such corporeal issues as eating disorders and body dissatisfaction as pertinent to understanding Black women's experiences (Bass 2001; Thompson 1994; Witt 2002).

Overall, I extend feminist analyses of the relationship between visual and narrative cultures and women's lived experiences by combining textual analysis, discourse analysis, and intertextuality. Black feminist theory and cultural criticism will be the approaches utilized when examining the multiplicity found within social categories. As Valerie Smith (1998) has suggested, I am “theorizing Black feminisms” as a strategy for reading my subjects and texts (Smith, p. xix). I borrow from Black feminism and Critical Race feminism’s practice of reading intersectionality as I employ an analysis of corpulence performativity that takes into account race, class, gender, sexuality, and is interdisciplinary in nature.

The research identifies the construction of the figure ‘Mama’ as an intricate part of Black cultural identity, yet a site of contested meanings of Black female corporeality and subjectivity. In an effort to identify the tension that exists between the traditional ‘Mammy’ caricature and the self-constructed ‘Mama’ persona, it is crucial that I analyze my subjects and texts without rigid definitions of how spectators read images. Therefore, pivotal to my approach is feminist film theorist Judith Mayne’s idea of negotiated readings, that is, the assumption that “…a purely dominant reading would presume no active intervention at all on the part of the decoder, while a purely oppositional reading would assume no identification at all with the structures of interpellation in the text” (Mayne, p. 93). My project seeks to acknowledge and understand the complexity of corpulence politics and performativity.
My project also borrows from Critical White Studies in that it examines how whiteness and Blackness are powerful social constructions that depend on each other for their power and existence. These constructions establish and maintain the social order in America, which socially, politically, and economically immobilizes the Black female body. Therefore, I employ ‘whiteness’ in a way that treats it as an American institution and power that hinders the mobility of Black bodies in society. In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (1998), George Lipsitz argues that whiteness “is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (Lipsitz, p. vii).

Using Critical White Studies and Critical Race feminism, I analyze how constructions of racialized and gendered corpulent bodies fall outside of definitions involving nationality and ‘American’ identity. Thus, the corpulent *Black female* body is not only the antithesis to this social order, but a threat to it as well.

This project does not seek to undermine contemporary health and science discourses and concerns about obesity. Moreover, this project aims to add to the critical and cultural studies interest in corporeal politics. Thus, it is a way to engage in the historical and contemporary constructions and meanings of body weight as it humanizes corpulent bodies in the effort to diminish discrimination and prejudices. This study adds to health and science discourses of body weight because it renders bodies tangible as it takes into account race, class, gender, and other crucial factors on one’s lived experiences.
CHAPTER 2

“Yo’ Mama’s so Fat!” Race, Gender, Class, and the Folklore of Corpulence.

Folklore scholar and author Daryl Cumber Dance (2002) maintains that “there is probably no body of materials as rich and informative, as interesting and entertaining, as tragic and painful, as humorous and healing, as honest and imaginative, as provocative and disturbing, as broad and diverse, as universal and distinctive, as African American folklore”(xxxiii). According to Dance, in order to learn about a people, one must examine its traditions and folklore. Ironically, Dance did not fully include examples of the practice the “Dozens” in her anthology because she insisted that the vulgarity that characterizes the practice is too bold for print (Dance, 2002, p. 549). The practice of degrading and insulting one’s opponent is so risky that verbal prowess is not easily garnered. The ‘dirtier’ the put down, the more skilled the player is deemed to be. Historically, the ritual has been practiced mainly by Black males and many have argued that the tradition is a defense mechanism against the hostile nature of racial discrimination (Dance, 2002, p. 540).

The tradition fits into this specific project due to its nature of demeaning, through performing, a specific racialized gendered identity. In general, Black female identity is targeted in the practice, but a figurative Black maternal figure is especially rendered vulnerable by its vulgar nature. In this chapter I will illustrate how the traditional practice “the Dozens”, or “Yo’ Mama” jokes, foster a discourse of ridicule in visual and narrative cultures against specific racialized gendered identities that originally took place in early
American blackface minstrelsy and that continues to be appropriated in contemporary Black humor. Thus, I briefly identify this racialized gendered identity and analyze how corpulence intersects with it to construct specific performativities in the work of contemporary male artists such as Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry. Important to my thesis is the practice of performing and containing marginality from a more dominant bodily identity.

Recently, there has been a plethora of work done on blackface minstrelsy that attempts to analyze its function in regards to American identity and culture. For the most part, blackface minstrelsy serves as a reminder of an ugly past because of its societal context in a nation that was engaged in slavery, oppression, and discrimination. As one of the earliest forms of entertainment, minstrelsy is an important form to analyze because of its connection to American social relations. I am concerned with minstrelsy because of its reflection of power relations via performativity. Therefore, my concern with blackface minstrelsy is primarily bound to its performative nature and the practice of performing identity and fostering and disseminating ideals about difference in American visual culture. Blackface minstrelsy’s bodily performance of identity is important to this specific project because it historicizes, as it problematizes, the act of privileged bodies exploiting the “Other” in an effort to define difference and nationality. Thus, white male performativity of Black male and female identities should be linked to how Black males exploit their own gender privilege by performing ideals of Black female identity and marginality.

Marginality has been a theme of performance throughout the history of blackface minstrelsy. Conversely, definitions of American identity were constructed and forged via
minstrel performances. The performances were a form of “release” as Eric Lott (1993) describes in *Love & Theft*, but they were also a way to define American nationality during a pivotal moment in United States history (Lott, 1993, p.43). In helping to define boundaries of race and ethnicity, early blackface minstrelsy has been instrumental in the articulation and dissemination of such boundaries. Many scholars, such as Michael Rogin (1998), have argued that groups such as the Jewish population played to minstrel audiences by performing a “Blackness” that helped to designate their working-class position as superior to groups of color (p. 49).

In his work on early blackface minstrelsy and antebellum American popular culture, William Mahar (1998) admits that “probably few Americans thought much about African American culture as a distinctive element for the interpretation of the American experience, because there was still precious little to identify as ‘typically’ American in the 1840s” (p. 98). Interestingly, Mahar suggests that what constituted American and American culture during this time was not only being performed but contested as well. Even though he argues that themes and traditions of African culture were appreciated and incorporated by many blackface performances during this era of cultural production, Mahar denies the racism, sexism and classism reflected in such performances. He continues, “Regardless of the musical styles of the various songs discussed thus far, it is clear that early minstrel shows created an essentially male-dominated performance environment both in the subjects treated and in the control performers exerted over the treatment of class, gender, and race” (p. 266). When femininity was present in early antebellum minstrelsy, it was the performativity of “the aspects of female behavior they wished to use as subjects for satire” (p. 266). Therefore, performances of female identity
subscribed to patriarchal ideals and were vulnerable to the embodied power of white males.

Further, Eric Lott argues that there were very few female performers in the history of minstrelsy and that representations of Black women reflected violence on and dominance over these specific bodies. He states, “On the most immediate level, collective white male violence toward Black women in minstrelsy not only tamed an evidently too powerful object of interest, but also contributed (in nineteenth-century white men’s terms) to a masculinist enforcement of white male power over the Black men to whom the women were supposed to have ‘belonged’(Lott, 1993, p. 152). Lott’s assessment is complex because it offers a glimpse of minstrelsy that interweaves race and gender. On the other hand, Mahar’s analysis attempts to separate the peformativity of Black male identity from female identity in general. He concludes by suggesting that early minstrelsy was more insensitive to gender realities than it was to racial realities (Maher, 1998, p. 266). I would contest this conclusion based on the primary subjects of my project and the intricate way that identity is formed and functions in visual and narrative cultures. The intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality create an identity that is subject to simultaneous racist and sexist performativities. Moreover, minstrelsy serves as a beginning to how marginality, specifically a gendered ‘Blackness,’ is actually performed and articulated in American visual culture. Unfortunately, the legacy of Black humor and African American folklore practices have presented and perpetuated such specific racialized and gendered performance. Thus, the imitated bodies of Black women have repeatedly been regurgitated as a mockery of both Black male and Black female identity and social relations.
Contrary to Mahar’s theory, I propose that the racism, the mere performativity of ‘Blackness’ inherent in early blackface minstrelsy has not only defined the practice but also merges with sexism and classism to continually reproduce a performativity that functions to implicate both male and female bodily realities in contemporary visual culture, regardless of the gender and racial identity of the performer. I analyze early blackface minstrelsy with specific forms of Black humor in an attempt to deconstruct the degrading practice of performing a marginalized identity through a privileged body.

In addition to gender and race, corpulence intersects with such performativities to express an extreme ‘Other.’ For example, the caricature of Mammy’s weight functions to relegate her status and position in American society. Moreover, corpulence acts as an indicator of inferiority in the constructions of nationhood. Mammy’s construction as a ‘fat’ Black woman is indicative of how much she departs from ideals of what it means to be an American. Through blackface minstrelsy and early films, such as D.W Griffith’s racially violent Birth of a Nation (1915), Blackness is antagonistically defined as anything un-American. Therefore, the ‘fat’ in Mammy’s identity must be evaluated as a facet of difference that places her at the extremes of ‘Black’ identity. Because ideals of nation have traditionally been inscribed on female bodies in visual culture (duCille, 1998), physical appearance reflects rigid boundaries of American identity. For the most part, the corpulence of Black women in their representation in visual culture displaces value from their bodies to those of the thin white woman. Such portrayals as Scarlett O’Hara and Mammy in Gone with the Wind (1939) reflect this power relation. Overall, the performativities in early blackface minstrelsy dictated how race, gender, class, and
sexuality should be performed, while they distorted and manipulated how non-whites behaved in a society that was increasingly becoming Americanized.

Reproducing Minstrelsy: Black Humor and the Performativity of Gender

Folklore, merged with humor, has been a staple in Black culture since the arrival of African bodies on distant shores. Mel Watkins (1991) argues that, “African-American laughter, in particular, has been something of a mystery, a dilemma, or, quite often, a source of irritation for mainstream Americans from the time blacks first arrived in the Colonies in the seventeenth century” (Watkins, 1991, p. 161). However, the practice of laughing when one is oppressed is precisely the reason that Black humor is so unique and intricate. Black people in the New World had to, as the folk expression says, “laugh to keep from crying” due to the inhumane and demoralizing nature of slavery. Traditionally, humor interwove with folklore to create a specific form of release and entertainment for Black people in America.

Obviously, voice is one of the primary mediums for the self-expression of a community that has traditionally relied on oral culture. Coupled with the oppression of a people, bodily articulation is also essential for understanding a humor that is unique to marginalized experience. How one uses and fashions the body is especially important when one lacks resources and power in a society. African-Americans have been extremely creative in using the body to express creativity and protest the boundaries of a racist society. Moreover, humor has played a part in bodily performance. In essence, the voice can be viewed as a part of the bodily expression of African-Americans. Therefore,
jokes, as well as performances, can be viewed in the spectrum of Black folklore. This “folk tradition, for numerous reasons, may present a much more honest, objective, and direct reflection of a people than can be found in what those in the academy usually designate history, or sociology, or literature” (Dance, 2002, p. xxxvi). Thus, I feel that it is imperative to explore humor in an effort to identify the ways that sexism and corpulence performativity have played a part in Black cultural productions. I focus on the verbal prowess ritual, the Dozens, to analyze the folklore of corpulence performativity as articulated in Black humor.

The origins of the Dozens are still heavily debated in folklore and cultural studies circles. Some describe the practice of putting one’s opponent down with a particular verbal prowess as cultural retention. Moreover, most will agree that the practice in America started during the era of slavery within the African Diaspora. In his forward to the text *Snaps*, Quincy Jones argues, “Playing the dozens is a sociological condition transformed into an art form. It’s a deep part of our culture, an oral tradition that dates back to the griots of Africa” (Percelay, 1994, p. 8). A very popular rendition of the ritual’s origins is that “after the trip through the middle passage, scurvy ravaged many of the slaves. The twelve most damaged were put together and sold at a bargain rate” (Percelay, 1994, p. 8). Mona Saloy, who studies folklore and humor, agrees and argues that the damaged bodies were sold by the dozens because of their differing anomalies (Saloy, 2006). I find this interpretation very useful to my project due to the nature of the ritual. Thus, ‘fatness’ as a primary weapon of choice for insult in the game can be viewed as an anomaly, a mere devalued characteristic that is perceived as an affront on the person at
the other end of the put down. Therefore, corpulence is established and cultivated as an anomaly by the performers of this ritual.

The Dozens, or “Yo’ Mama” jokes, have been a ritual practiced by Black males as a way to combat their oppressive plight as well as a rite of passage into manhood. In the verbal contest, “two combatants face off in the presence of an audience to put each other down. They may attack each other individually or attack members of the other’s family. So popular is the attack on one’s mother that the game is sometimes referred to as (talking about) ‘Yo’ Mama’ (Dance, 2002, p. 539). Thus, the maternal figure is a prominent figure in the ritual. The aim of the performer is to undermine the subjectivity of the revered and loved ‘Mama’ figure in the African-American community. Ironically, the most popular way to do that is to accuse her of being too ‘black’ and/or too ‘fat.’ Therefore, Black males verbally perform a practice that is saturated with constructions of the maternal figure as the antithesis to European notions of beauty. Mama is constructed as the epitome of Blackness, due to her corpulence that is characteristically anti-American and ‘ugly’.

The Yo’ Mama jokes specifically blend race, class, gender, and corpulence in an articulation of humor. The Black male participants perform Black female identity as a marginalized identity. Similar to how European groups performed “Blackness” as a path to “authentic American” identity, Black males possibly gain authoritative status and are empowered through the performance and containment of a more marginalized identity, such as that of a corpulent Black female.

The sexism and racial self-loathing imbedded in the Dozens ritual have scarcely been mentioned by those practicing and studying it as simply folklore. Even Daryl
Cumber Dance marks how vulgar the practice is, however, she does not venture to analyze the obvious racist and sexist nature of the practice. Other researchers and admirers of the practice contend that the practice is not insulting and is a positive form of release for Black males. Jones continues, “Don’t think this form of expression is negative. It’s a skill that requires verbal creativity, memory, humor that enables us to deal with the pain in our lives. It’s a serious art and tradition. It’s part of our folklore”(Percelay, 1994, p.8). Although I agree with Jones that it is yet another art form that Black males have mastered in the face of adversity, I would questioned his apparent neglect of the ritual’s violent nature against the Black female body. The Black female body is held in containment by Black males who are credited with mastering the articulation of its existence and worth. Therefore, I conclude that the Dozens is one of the first forms of Black humor to use corpulence as a way to annihilate the Black female body and render it grotesquely inhuman. The ‘funkiness’ Blackness embedded in Black female bodies is identifiable through its uncontrollable ‘fat.’

I propose that the Dozens have had a direct impact on Black comedic performativity in visual culture. The two merge on a dangerous path to destruction and degradation in regards to race, gender, class, and sexuality. The “Yo’ Mama So Fat” aspect of the Dozens is articulated through the comedic bodily performances of artists like Martin Lawrence and Eddie Murphy. The ‘Yo’ Mama’ jokes and the new gendered performativity of Mama as grotesquely ‘fat’ reflect a tension that is not easily detected upon first glance. Historically, Black male comedians have adorned specific gendered identities and characterizations in an effort to make comical a feminized version of the Black body. I begin my analysis with a historical perspective of this character.
‘FLIPPING’ THE BLACK BODY: GENDER INVERSION AND BLACK HUMOR

Figure 1. Flip Wilson on *Ebony* magazine (December, 1970).
She walks in with her tight printed pink dress with matching hosiery, handbag, and knee-high boots. As she struts toward the stage, the television audience roars with laughter and delight as she takes a seat and crosses her legs with a sassy hyper-confidence that fills the studio. Geraldine Jones, comedian Flip Wilson’s alter ego, was one of the most popular images on American television during the 1970’s (Figure 1). The character was the most visible racialized gender inversion during the time and reflected the act of feminizing the Black male body made popular during early blackface minstrelsy.

In the 1970’s, there was a hyper-visibility of the Black body on television for the first time in American history. However, most of these images were identified as problematic by many cultural theorists and activists. Situation comedies such as Good Times, The Jeffersons, That’s My Mama, and What’s Happening! reflected a tension in visual cultural consumption. On one hand, African-Americans were happy to see their image being portrayed on television and thrilled at the reality of African-American actors and actresses working in the arena, however, many questioned the validity of the imagery and interrogated the seemingly perpetuation of age-old stereotypes and representations. One show that gained considerable popularity with audiences of all races and ethnicities was The Flip Wilson Show, which aired from 1970-1974.

Born in poverty in New Jersey, Flip Wilson appeared in such comedy shows as Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In before, and while, starring in his own groundbreaking variety show. On the show, viewers tuned in every week to delight in the antics of his most famous and requested character, Geraldine, a masculine Black woman with overbearing sassiness. Even though Wilson did not use a fat suit, his body was
manipulated to the point that he appeared to be both man and woman with a deep, but squeaky, voice and tight fitting clothes to outline the masculinity of Wilson’s body. Geraldine shared the stage with many celebrity headliners from other popular comedy shows during the time such as Dick Martin, Ruth Buzzi, Lily Tomlin, Tim Conway, and Roy Clark. Thus, it is fair to assume that there was a good chance that the specific audiences of these shows, *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, and *Hee-Haw* respectively, consumed Geraldine as well because they may have tuned in to see their favorites guest appear on Wilson’s show. My point here is that Geraldine was being consumed on a wide scale by a great majority of America and Wilson was one of the most popular Black bodies on television during this time.

The popularity of Flip Wilson and his variety show is evident in the visibility of Wilson in various locations within American popular culture during this time. Wilson graced the cover of such magazines as *Life*, *Time*, and *Ebony*. This visibility reflects Wilson’s crossover appeal and illustrates the consumption of both Flip and Geraldine by multiple identity groups and communities. Geraldine was being widely consumed in both African-American humor culture and mainstream popular culture. For example, this merger of humor cultures is reflected in one 1971 episode of the show when Flip Wilson is joined on stage by comedians Ruth Buzzi, Lilly Tomlin, and Tim Conway. In the scene, Geraldine bombards Buzzi’s timid character in an office where she yells at the character, answers the telephone, and argues all at the same time, “If I keep it like this I won’t have room for my television set! I don’t care who you are, we’re busy! I am not on YOUR time; I’m on my coffee break!” In this scene, which is typical of the show’s portrayal of her, Geraldine’s sassiness affirms Buzzi’s character’s obedience and
femininity. Thus, while Geraldine insists that she is all ‘woman,’ her aggressiveness is humorous because it is deemed unfeminine and masculine.

This specific racialized gender performance has remnants of 19th century minstrelsy because it feminizes the Black male body and simultaneously masculinizes the Black female body, suggesting the same gender abnormality that elite white males inscribed on Black bodies during and after enslavement. Ironically, Wilson’s actual voice was higher-pitched than the one he gave Geraldine, which he claimed he mimicked from the actual high-pitched voice of Butterfly McQueen, the actress who played a domestic servant in many films during the 1930’s, 40’s, and 50’s. According to Wilson, Geraldine’s sassiness was supposed to be empowering to her and women in general. She was named after a childhood crush of his and she was supposedly meant to stand for a no-nonsense woman who takes care of herself in a time of women’s liberation and civil rights (Robinson, 1971).

Geraldine was not only consumed on a weekly basis through viewers of The Flip Wilson Show, she was heavily commodified in American culture through the selling and buying of products such as a doll that resembled Flip Wilson on one side and him as Geraldine Jones on the other (Figure 2). Thus, the doll, made by Shindana Toys, relevantly reflected the ironic twist that was this specific gender performativity. Geraldine became Wilson’s alter ego on national television and in the American psyche. Wilson was performing a complex identity, which permanently fused a racialized femininity with masculinity in his overall public persona and celebrity legacy. Life Magazine’s interest in Wilson was so interwoven with Geraldine that it headlined his interview as, “Wherever he goes, Geraldine and Killer (her imaginary boyfriend) travel
along too” (“Wherever he goes, Geraldine and Killer travel along too,” 1972).

Interestingly, Geraldine became bigger than life. She was a character that Wilson will always be associated with no matter how many years have passed.

The containment of the female body by the male body in such performativities is crucial when analyzing the power relations of the performer and the performed. Wilson has argued that he is somehow freeing women in his satirical portrayals; however, the mere reality of his privileged male identity performing a marginalized identity in order to liberate what is oppressed can be contested. Ideally, the identity should be able to be free on its own and not be performed through a more dominant identity to survive. Moreover, the humor in the gender performativities speaks volumes because if Geraldine were a real woman who acted in the same aggressive and boisterous ways of her male performer, she would be ostracized and devalued in American society as antithetically masculine. This particular gender performance is problematic because the more dominant male body actually contains and controls female identity in the performance. Therefore, this containment disallows for a totally free woman to be portrayed because, in reality, it has nothing to do with an actual woman or her concerns and issues.
“I’m a Lady!”: The Regurgitation of Geraldine in Contemporary Visual Culture

Other images contemporize Geraldine’s bold persona and perform racialized gendered identity. I focus on two of the most popular black comedians in mainstream visual culture today, Martin Lawrence and Eddie Murphy. Because I specifically want to identify their gendered corpulence performativity, however, I would like to briefly mention comedian and Academy Award winner, Jamie Foxx’s gender performance when he was a regular on the sketch comedy show, In Living Color (1990-1994). Because of Foxx’s increasing popularity as a comedy actor, it is safe to argue that his history of comedic performances appealed to American audiences. Foxx joined the Keenen Ivory
Wayans-created show in 1991 and spent about three years performing comedy sketches with a multi-racial cast. One of Foxx’s most popular characterizations was of a young loved-starved and hopelessly homely woman, Wanda (Figure 3). For the role, Foxx altered his appearance by wearing a blond wig and feminine attire such as dresses and high heels. Further, Foxx’s bodily performance was a far cry from his own identity because in an effort to show how grotesque Wanda was intended to be, he stuck out his lips, which were coated in thick lipstick and lip gloss, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his padded buttocks. The performance was that of a female who was drastically masculine in appearance. Wanda’s attempts to get the attention of a member of the opposite sex were always met with resistance and humor. On one episode, Wanda desperately goes after a character, played by Tommy Davidson, as he squirms to get away from her. Ironically, everyone except for Wanda is aware of her freakish appearance and behavior. Her apparent masculinity is the backdrop and foundation of her constructed ‘ugliness’; however, she presents herself as trying to be fully feminine. The humor in the character results from the obvious embodied masculine performance of Foxx who poses as woman in a society that is obsessed with gender ideals and roles. This gendered performance is an example of how Black male comedians are encouraged to take on abstract forms of femininity to gain laughs from the American public. Foxx’s performance as the freakish and horridly ‘ugly’ Wanda is one of several such portrayals of the hyper-confident and racialized ‘man-woman’ who is oblivious to the laughter targeted to its body and presentation.
Figure 3. Jamie Foxx as ‘Wanda’ on In Living Color (1993).

Stand-up comedian and actor Martin Lawrence continues the tradition of this specific gendered performance with his popular characters Sheneneh and Big Momma. Sheneneh graced the screen in the early 1990’s when Martin Lawrence broke ground with his popular television sitcom show, Martin (1992-1997) (Figure 4). Considered one of the most popular and talented comedians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Lawrence’s comedic performance possessed an Africentric flavor in the past. For the most part, his targeted audience was a Black one, which is evident by the jokes made on the show. Many of his jokes were ‘inside’ and were unique to Black culture and Black humor. Moreover, due to his groundbreaking role in a “New Jack” form of comedy, he has been heralded as one of the first hip hop comedians. The cultural references made in his early stand-up routines and his television show were unique and specific to Black
cultural forms. For example, one of the most obvious culturally specific references Lawrence has made in his work was naming his 2000 stand-up comedy film and his entertainment company, Run-eldat, which is Black vernacular usage that refers to the control and dissemination of information. It is an alternate pronunciation of ‘run and tell that.’ Thus, the primary racial and ethnic make-up of the audience was perhaps slightly different than that of Lawrence’s contemporary filmic phenomenon, Big Momma. I note this to emphasize the patterns of consumption of such gender portrayals and the popularity of corpulence specific racialized performances. Therefore, Lawrence has received popularity in the Black community and has recently crossed over with several film projects that showcase multi-cultural casts and universal themes. Both Sheneneh and Big Momma have been consumed on a wide scale.

Similar to Flip Wilson’s female alter ego, Geraldine, Sheneneh was alongside Martin Lawrence’s male character, Martin Payne, for the duration of the television series. A sharp-tongued character who lived next door to him with hopes of pushing his girlfriend out of the way and taking him for herself, Sheneneh was simply a sassy Martin in lipstick and hair weave. According to Krystal Brent Zook (1997), she was “a stereotypical caricature of a ghetto ‘homegirl’” (Zook, p. 57). Adorned with huge earrings and long nails, Sheneneh was not portrayed as poised as Martin’s significant other, Gina, was portrayed. Her portrayal was one that was more rambunctious than the other women characters on the show. Zook argues that Sheneneh’s economic autonomy and Martin’s use of “drag” masked the “antiwoman hostility” reflected on the show (Zook, 1997, p. 54). I would argue that Lawrence’s use of drag was precisely a reflection of such hostility. With protruding buttocks and sloppily applied make-up, Lawrence modified his
body far more than Wilson did in decades before him. His gender performance was a manipulated representation of female identity, which drew on its grotesqueness to articulate humor. Therefore, Sheneneh’s feminine identity collided with Martin’s masculine identity to reproduce the racialized man-woman identity that America loves to laugh at. Drag strives to present an illusion; however, the man-woman gendered performativity of Black comedians such as Wilson, Foxx, and Lawrence lacks illusion and draws on the reality of this particular identity collision for humor.

Lawrence’s portrayal of Sheneneh not only reflected a collision of ideal racialized feminine and masculine identity, it demonstrated that Lawrence’s male privilege was at play. Therefore, the character was not simply an example of Lawrence in “drag” as Zook argues; it is a specific performativity of racialized gender marginality. This performativity of marginality is even more pronounced when Lawrence adorns a fat suit and portrays a ‘fat’ Black matriarch in his Big Momma’s House films.

Figure 4. Martin Lawrence as ‘Sheneneh’ on Martin (1992).
PERFORMING ‘FATNESS’: CORPULENCE, RACE, GENDER, MAMA NOTIONS AND CONTEMPORARY FILM

Martin Lawrence gained crossover appeal later in his career and after he appeared in motion pictures. *Big Momma’s House* (2000) was a characterization unlike any he had performed before. Traditionally, Lawrence’s portrayals of a maternal figure, mainly his own mother in his sitcom and stand-up comedy routines, were without a corpulent identity and far from the Mammy caricature. However, Big Momma was a feisty rendition of the Mammy caricature whose corpulence was spotlighted for humor. In the film, Lawrence’s character, Malcolm Turner, is an FBI agent undertaking a criminal investigation in the home of a real “Big Momma.” He constructs a costume modeled after the real body of Big Momma in an effort to pass as her. Even though he uses the fat suit as a guise, fatness in general is ridiculed and scorned in the film. Make-up was added to the body and face of the actress who played the real Big Momma in an effort to highlight the fatness of the character. Consequently, this addition gave an appearance of ‘fatness’ and nothing else; the woman looked distorted to the point of appearing subhuman and unreal. Moreover, this ‘fatness’ was established early on in the film as grotesque when Malcolm is found hiding in the bathroom at the time that Big Momma rushes in to defecate and shower. He simulates a vomiting gesture as she uses the toilet and disrobes before getting in the shower. Meanwhile, the camera zooms in on her naked body from behind to capture her corpulent back, thighs, and buttocks. When he finally is able to
escape the torture that he feels witnessing a ‘fat’ woman shower, he runs and says to his FBI partner, “I done seen a lot of scary shit in my day but damn that was a lot of ass!”

Malcolm’s reaction to Big Momma’s corpulent frame establishes the tone of the film. Even if one were to attempt to read against the grain of the film, this treatment of Big Momma’s body undermines any subjectivity she, or Malcolm’s portrayal of her, may attempt to have throughout the film. This aspect of the film is continued in the sequel to the film. For this project, I primarily focus on *Big Momma’s House 2* (2006) because of the series transition from a primarily Black environment, with Black main characters, cast, and setting, to a predominantly white setting and main characters. Big Momma moves from her Black surroundings to a wealthy white area, and the construction of difference is more visible. Therefore, Blackness is constructed using the visibility of whiteness and the illusion of gender. Malcolm’s portrayal of Big Momma is masked by the film’s dominant trope of traditional Mammy caricature. In general, Big Momma’s ‘fat’ is not simply a facet of her identity, it is the basis for the humor in the film. Thus, Big Momma is too fat to jump, run on the beach, and dance. For when she does, it causes turbulence within the environment and warrants condemnation from those around her.

In the sequel, Malcolm is now married to his love interest from the first film of the series and they are expecting their first child together. Moreover, as an FBI undercover specialist, his white family is unaware of his mission and the rebirth of Big Momma. When he first arrives at the Fuller’s house as a nanny, he finds it in total chaos and disarray. The children are both unruly and dysfunctional. As Big Momma begins to know them, it is obvious that she is not the nanny that she tried to pretend to be. Malcolm is at first unaware of and unwilling to do the basic duties of housekeeping. However, he
quickly catches on to these duties and decides that he can actually exploit them in his job as FBI specialist. For example, early on in the film, Malcolm, as Big Momma, goes to investigate Mr. Fuller (Mark Moses), whom he suspects of criminal activity, by visiting him on his job. As he enters the tight security line, he sets the sensors off. Realizing he is under tight scrutiny, he then fakes a scenario in which the child needs to be changed. While in an office alone, and pretending to use it as a changing room, he logs onto computer equipment to further investigate the father; however, the security team believes that Big Momma is simply attending to the child.

Even though Malcolm’s adorning of the fat suit is intentional and there are challenges to the historical filmic Mammies, Lawrence’s portrayal still perpetuates an image that is recognizably caricature and counter to any possible Mama subjectivity. The character quickly turns into Mammy to the white family while the film portrays a corpulence performativity that is in line with many of the traditional and hindering cultural imagery of Black womanhood. The film relies on specific shots and scenarios of Big Momma’s racialized gendered corpulence to construct and articulate humor. Therefore, the maternal aspect of the character merges with gender, race and corpulence to perform an identity that is the foundation of the Yo’ Mama jokes in the Dozens ritual. The film can be viewed and treated as a moving and visual performance of the practice. ‘Fatness’ is the punch line throughout the film and it is heavily depended on for the film’s comedic survival.

Corpulence is especially exploited after Malcolm dives into the role of Big Momma full circle. After being accosted by the matriarch of the family about not performing her duties correctly, Big Momma begins to present herself as the typical
Mammy caricature. Even though Malcolm is intent on staying in the house only to finish the FBI mission, he becomes totally invested in his performance and role as Big Momma. Thus, the viewer gets a glimpse into how a modern mammy interacts with her white family. Moreover, a weak narrative overrides the film in an effort to reinscribe traditional constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and corpulence. The corpulence performativity that results from this is demeaning to both Black males and Black women.

The first scenes that exploit Big Momma’s racialized corpulence identity are when she spends the first day with the family. First, she offers to help the daughter and her friends learn how to move and sway to the beat. Big Momma contends, “I was at their last practice. I can stay and help.” As she helps the girls and Mrs. Fuller (Emily Proctor) move their hips, it is evident that her Blackness is needed to boost the white characters’ rhythm and rhyme. Thus, Big Momma is constructed as the bearer of everything that is considered ‘Black’ and she is depended upon to lend the white characters ‘Blackness’ when it is wanted. Traditional stereotypical ethnic notions such as dance and white interpersonal relationship expertise are borrowed from Big Momma throughout the film. In another scene where Big Momma is taken to a spa populated by thin “Victoria’s Secret models,” one of the wealthy white attendees insists, “You know, while we got her here, we should get Big Momma’s advice,” to which Malcolm, as Big Momma, takes time away from gazing at the women to answer, “Ya’ll want my advice. Well alright.” The humor in the scene is articulated through the act of Big Momma comforting the white women and nurturing them. Also, constructions of the hypersexual Black male are in place in this scene and throughout the entire film. Malcolm finds it hard to control himself as Big Momma when he encounters the models who disrobe in front of him. It is
quite awkward that Big Momma would request “the one with the perky…” to give her a massage. Moreover, as a family man himself, Malcolm’s constant, and often inappropriate, attention paid to the thin female characters in the film plays into the stereotypical notion that Black males have an increased sexual appetite (Collins, 2004, p.102).

Malcolm claims the role of Big Momma most when Molly (Kat Dennings), the teenage daughter of the Fullers, calls him for help and he literally leaves in the middle of an FBI operation to oblige her. His superior orders him to stay, “You are not going anywhere and that’s an order…we are in the middle of this investigation!” He replies, “I gotta go. Look I promised that child that I would be there for her. Don’t nobody mess with Big Momma’s babies! Nobody!” This dialogue is disturbing because it gives credit to the notion that Big Momma as Mammy, and not as Malcolm the FBI agent, consumes the character and the film’s narrative in general. The viewer is fostered into inquiring on the well-being of the white family rather than provided a developed narrative regarding Malcolm’s own family. When Big Momma arrives at the club to assist Molly, she is bombarded with problems that the teenager and her boyfriend are having. Molly is a character that benefits from having Big Momma in the house. The film highlights her troubled background and gives credence to Big Momma’s role as Mammy when she finds resolution in her life on the heels of Big Momma’s advice and mothering. This narrative undermines any satirical elements the film might possess because Big Momma as the “fat” Black maternal Mammy is overwhelmingly on display and serves as the main narrative of the film. Moreover, a racialized and gendered fatness permeates the punch line in the film.
As with any image, Mammy has evolved and the manipulation of her persona has been so slick that the distinction between character and caricature is blurred in popular culture. African-American male comedians have taken the asexual and nurturing construction of Black womanhood to a heightened level. Moreover, corpulence has been the sustaining trope that defines the asexual Black female “Momma” representation.

Big Momma upsets societal gender norms to the extent that African-Americans are portrayed as pathological and subhuman. Lawrence’s male privilege allows him to inhabit a feminine identity and his wicked sense of humor enables him to inhabit the fat suit. In a 2006 interview with *Jet* magazine, Lawrence says of the fat suit, “You know, it’s just not normal to walk around with that big face and big neck attached to you every day” (Collier, 2006, p. 60). Interestingly, his fat-loathing portrayal disturbingly undermines historical and progressive Black body articulations in visual culture, such as those presented by Cicely Tyson, the first Black actress to wear her hair natural on television, by normalizing a white ideal that depends on thinness as one of its most prized metaphors.

In one of the most televised scenes used to advertise and promote the film, Big Momma is seen running on a beach with long blond beaded braids and a gold bathing suit, which showcases her large frame and her cellulite disproportioned thighs (Figure 5).
As onlookers are encouraged to gaze in disgust, Big Momma finally rests alongside a row of thin blond white female bodies, which serve to highlight her large, Black frame as grotesque and abnormal. A close-up camera shot of her buttocks captures the gaze of the viewer. Obviously, this scene is an appropriation of the famous scene from the film, *10* (1979), which exploited white actress Bo Derek’s thin frame and portrayed her as possessing the “perfect 10” body (Figure 5). Part of the film’s popularity was due to Derek’s thin, white body and her cornrowed hair, which, according to popular culture and her bio on the Internet Movie Database, she was credited with “popularizing” and making “fashionable.” Derek’s notoriety in the mainstream media evoked debates within Black communities that challenged the white-privilege and hegemonic power of Derek’s body and her appropriation of a traditional ‘African’ hairstyle. Many took offense to the negation of Cicely Tyson’s body politic that involved wearing her hair natural and in cornrows.
Moreover, Tyson was the first celebrity figure to wear cornrows, which caused a fashion and political trend amongst African-Americans nationwide. Tyson graced the cover of the August 1974 edition of *MS.* Magazine as “the first young Black actress to face film and television cameras with hair unstraightened …almost single-handedly, she proceeded to glamour a second hairstyle; the intricate hair braiding, often called cornrows” (*Ms.* Magazine, 1974). Tyson has been revered as an iconic figure that forces her body to be political through her work and her personal style, which challenge European beauty ideals. She has graced the cover of *Ebony* magazine five times and in the May 1974 edition she is said to have “cut her hair into a short, natural style, and unveiled it just before the cameras rolled” (*Ebony*, 1974, p. 38). Through her work and her personal body politic, Tyson became a metaphor for a complex and dignified proud Black female body.

The disapproval of Bo Derek’s popularity and negation of Tyson’s accomplishments and body politic were illuminated in the February 1981 edition of *Ebony* magazine (Figure 6). A picture of Tyson with her hair in a single braid graced the cover and was accompanied by the caption, “Cicely Tyson Talks About: Love, Sex, Fame and the ‘Bo Derek Look’ Rip-Off of Black Beauty.” This edition of *Ebony* validated the debates that were taking place in Black communities regarding race, beauty, and white privilege. Tyson was asked, “…you were among the first to wear the cornrows and braids, long before Bo Derek was ever discovered. How do you feel about the cornrow style being attributed to her?…does it make you angry?,” to which Tyson eloquently replies, “Angry? I don’t direct energy in that way. Most of the anger that blacks emitted
toward her came from the fact that she was getting the credit, but I don’t know if she ever came out and said that it was her idea” (Ebony, 1981, p.139).

Figure 6. Cicely Tyson on cover of Ebony magazine (February, 1981).

I provide a glimpse of this popular historical debate in an effort to illustrate how Lawrence’s Big Momma transcends the realm of comedy and ventures into personal and political spaces. Thus, not only does Big Momma render corpulent Black female bodies animal-like, grotesque, and inferior, she reverses and de-politicizes Tyson’s performative
Black body politic, which served as a metaphor for Black female bodies in general. Therefore, the fat suit is relevant to the deviation from Tyson’s body politic, because it serves as the *marker* for Big Momma’s deviance. Lawrence depends on ‘fatness’ to gain laughs from his audience. There is nothing funny about Big Momma’s size and the racialized gendered corpulence is constructed to make a mockery of the Black female body. By replacing Bo Derek with Big Momma’s aging corpulent Black body, Lawrence is normalizing the white female body as ideally beautiful. Consequently, he is affirming and rendering whiteness as normative and superior. The abnormality that the corpulence provides to the scene is pronounced. It is the *corpulence* that exaggerates the Black female body and renders it grotesque and monstrous. It may not be politically correct to laugh at Blackness on screen in movie theaters; however, Lawrence succeeds in making the Black female body laughable with his exaggerated incorporation of corpulence.

Moreover, the laugh and bias are directed at the corpulence, which is deemed a universal condition. One might argue that it is very hard to detect the site of the laughter as the black female body; however, there is no doubt that one cannot detach Big Momma’s outrageous ‘fatness’ from her ‘indivisible blackwaniness’(duCille, 1996, p.64).

In the end, the joke is on the Black female body, including Ms. Tyson’s, which many fought hard to affirm and which Lawrence pronounces grotesque, ugly and downright laughable. Whiteness is again associated with femininity and the corpulent Mammy has been resurrected as the epitome of pathology. Whiteness is inscribed on the white female body, as is Blackness on Black female bodies. Hence, the debate is larger than Tyson and Derek and it speaks to privilege, hegemony and gendered bodies. The braids became popular on Derek’s body because of her whiteness, which is valued in
American society. Consequently, fuller lips on white mega-celebrity Angelina Jolie are deemed sexy; however, the same lips are demonized on Black bodies. A thorough examination of the “hypervaluation of whiteness” (Harris, 1995) is crucial in determining how gendered bodies are used as sites for multiple political and ideological narratives.

To ignore Lawrence’s portrayal of corpulence is to ignore an important realm of body politics. Big Momma de-sexualizes the Black female body to the point that it is stripped of its complexity and dignity. For, as bell hooks argue (1998), “rarely do we articulate a vision of resistance, of decolonization that provides strategies for the construction of a liberatory, black female body politic. Black female bodies are almost always framed within a context of patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualization. They are de-aestheticized and de-eroticized” (hooks, p. 65). If there is a critique of the Mammy caricature within the film; it is overshadowed by the constant emphasis on the corpulent body for humor. For Lawrence has failed to establish any corpulence subjectivity in his *Big Momma’s House* series.

The film ends with a return to Big Momma and the cheerleading squad. Big Momma is now forced to perform at the actual cheerleading competition. As the girls finally get the dance moves down, Big Momma cartwheels her way into the hearts of the cheering crowd. When the toddler of the white family appears on top of the cheerleading pyramid ready to take a tumble, Big Momma rushes to catch him. He falls onto her breast as he moans, “Hi Big Momma. That was fun! Let’s do it again!” Big Momma leaves the white family in repair as is evident in her good-bye note to them, “Sometimes we lose our way but if we are lucky the good Lord sends someone to bring us home. Make no never mind about it, loving people is hard work…but if we grab hold of each other and hold on
there is nothing more beautiful in the world. You angels are my heart and I will never forget you.” The fact that Big Momma’s presence permits the mute white toddler of the family to literally speak, articulates the constructed super strength of Mammy in the white household, even in 2007. Once again, Mammy ‘mothers’ whiteness as she constructs and affirms its superiority.

The “Fatty” Professor and (Norbit)ly Obese Rasputia: Eddie Murphy’s Gendered Corpulence Performativity.

Comedian and actor Eddie Murphy’s theatrical fascination with performing ‘fatness’ began with his corpulent character, Sherman Klump, in his The Nutty Professor series. Murphy produced the first of the series, The Nutty Professor (1996), with legendary comedian Jerry Lewis, who wrote and starred in the original The Nutty Professor (1962). Lewis’ film presented a socially inept science professor who consumes his own miracle concoction to become the ladies’ man and social butterfly, Buddy Love. Murphy manipulates the original script by adding corpulence to the main character and relying on the ‘fat’ narrative to bring in extra laughs from his audience. Buddy Love becomes an ideal version of Sherman Klump, whose corpulence prevents him from being a ‘real’ man with sex appeal and autonomy from the grasp of his corpulent mother’s overbearing love. I will briefly discuss the corpulent performativity in the first and most popular film in the series, The Nutty Professor (1996), since the sequel merely extends and perpetuates the same narratives and themes. These narratives and themes are of
importance when analyzing the gendered racialized corpulent performativity of Murphy in his most contemporary work, *Norbit* (2007).

Eddie Murphy has long been known as a performance comedian since his film, *Coming to America* (1988). Murphy has capitalized on the illusion of performing multiple characters under the guise of make-up and special effects. However, *The Nutty Professor* was the first film to showcase Murphy performing gender in a multifaceted way. Murphy not only plays his main character, Sherman Klump, but he also performs the overbearing mother and vulgar grandmother of Klump as well. These characters primarily take a backseat to the male corpulent performances of Murphy, as he concentrates on Sherman’s personal narrative of obesity, love, and masculinity. They do, however, contribute to Klump’s predicament of being a morbidly obese, sexual inadequate adult male. This narrative of emasculation solidifies his predicament and reflects how corpulence is possibly rendered a ‘feminine’ characteristic, especially in the American psyche. Moreover, males who are corpulent are perceived and treated as children and lack masculinity in visual and narrative cultures. Therefore, Klump’s occupation as professor is undermined by his obese stature. He is constantly referred to as “fat” and his co-worker considers him inadequate due to his obesity. This is evident in the co-worker’s constant ridicule of Klump as childlike and ‘fat.’ The merging of the two references is a mainstay in the emasculation narrative because the viewer is fostered to view Klump’s obesity as being one with his childlike behavior and inadequacy.

The outspoken fat-loathing of Klump’s coworker may instill in the viewer the notion of Klump as inadequate due to his obesity; however, the origins of the obesity are presented as familial, particularly matriarchal in nature and nurture. Scenes of Sherman
with the family primarily take place at the dinner table where greasy and high-fat foods are abundant. The first table scene takes place when Sherman brings his love interest, Carla (Jada Pinkett Smith) home to meet his family. A very embarrassed Sherman is exposed to the vulgarity of his family. In essence, Sherman’s own ‘funk’ is exposed in the reflection of his family’s performance and behavior at the dinner table. A close-up of Carla’s shocked face opens this scene as multiple plates of varied foods are brought to and passed around the table. Throughout the scene, the camera catches close-ups of Carla’s face as she witnesses the pathology that is presented in the Klump’s eating ritual. Not only does the family over-indulge in eating the food, they reflect a vulgarity that is heightened by a particular attention to the body. Like the Big Momma’s House series, this vulgarity is a constant theme in both Nutty Professor films. Behaviors such as the constant use of profanity, belching, and extreme flatulence are characteristics of the Klumps in general and serve as both a performance punch line and reflection of the “funkiness” and primitiveness that Sherman seeks to move away from. Sherman’s embarrassment of his family is evident in the close-up shots of his face and the acts of pleading he does with his family. For Sherman, family traditions and practices contribute to his sorrow.

A highlight in the film is the construction of mothering that presents Sherman as a weak “mama’s boy” who cannot escape the crutches of his mother’s apparently overbearing love. As Sherman is shown attempting to diet and control his eating patterns throughout the film, he is constantly provided food by his mother. Even when he tries to turn down his mother’s cooking, she asks, “Sherman I cook all of this food. Is that all that you are going to eat?” Even in a nightmare, Sherman dreams that his mother is holding a
bag of food and enticing him by insisting, “Sherman, I brought you some nice fried
chicken…You look fabulous.” This narrative is reflective of the mythology that implies
that Black mothers are the origin of pathology in the Black community and pass on bad
values to their children. Also, the mythology has insinuated that Black women are
dangerously emasculating to Black men (Collins, 2004). Here, we see this damaging
mythology being reflected on screen. Sherman has been reared in a way that has formed
his unhealthy eating habits and his reliance on his mother and, as a consequence, his
adulthood is challenged by his stagnation in childhood. Overall, the rearing of Sherman
aids his sorrow, which is primarily caused by his ‘fatness.’ Therefore, the film posits
‘fatness’ as the major hurdle in Sherman’s life. His sexuality is hindered because of his
insecurities about being corpulent. His “mama’s boy” identity, coupled with his corpulent
stature, creates a very frightened man who has been socially inept in dealing with
members of the opposite sex.

In spite of Sherman’s weaknesses, Murphy has created a character that possesses
humanity and evokes sympathy from the viewer. Thus, there is a critique of the
discrimination within the film that Sherman faces due to his corpulence. In addition to the
consistent close-up camera shots of Sherman’s face when he grieves his condition and the
backlash that it creates from society, Sherman is constructed as a likable and
sympathizing human being with feelings and emotions. Ironically, Murphy resorts to the
practice, the Dozens, to articulate Sherman’s humanity and critique the discrimination he
faces in society. The nightclub scenes serve as the climax of the discrimination and
reflect the powerful critique of the specific weightism that is directed toward Sherman. In
the first nightclub scene, the viewer witnesses Sherman and his date enjoying the evening
out until the comedic act turns verbally violent. As Sherman bends over to retrieve something that he dropped on the ground, the comedian on stage spotlights his body and exploits the situation by making cruel jokes about his corpulence. Here, the viewer witnesses how Sherman’s corpulence is viewed as emasculating to him and in American society in general. Sexuality is merged with ‘fatness’ to create a very specific reading of masculinity. The comedian yells to his crowd, “Who is sucking whose titties over here?...The last time this brother felt a breast, it was in a bucket of KFC!” The comedian’s assumption that Sherman and his date’s pairing is awkward due to their different body statures reflects how corpulence is not only feminized but also rendered deviant on male bodies. Sherman’s inadequacy in his own mind and the mind of the comedian is due to his weight. Therefore, this emasculinization of Sherman’s body is due to the feminization of his corpulence. The reference to his sexuality, and specifically his breasts, ensures the feminization of Sherman’s corpulence in this scene. Moreover, the ending close-up shot of his sullen and hurt facial expression ensures his humanity and point of view.

Sherman, acting as the popular ladies man, Buddy Love, returns to the nightclub days later and avenges the cruelty that was directed toward him. Love undermines the comedian’s act by interjecting with his own comedy and hurling insults directed toward the very awkward gap-toothed skinny comedian. Murphy’s use of the Dozens ritual attempts to showcase the true comedic and verbal prowess between the two men as it functions to identify the thin statured Love’s masculinity. After the comic comes out on stage and hurdles sexually challenging jokes at the men in the audience, Love proceeds to defeat the comic in the Dozens ritual with extreme put downs such as, “Your mother is so
fat, after sex I rolled over twice and I am still on the bitch!’’ The positive response from
the audience is evidence that the comedian’s vulnerability has been exposed. Thus,
Sherman’s very humiliating moment at the hands of the comedian is avenged by Buddy
Love as both on screen and off screen audiences are encouraged to applaud Love’s
destruction of the performer. The narrative further affirms the vengeance when Love
returns to his table to meet a supportive Carla who tells him, “That was amazing! I can’t
believe you did that! I only wish Professor Klump was here to have seen it!’’ Here, the
vulgarity and gender specific nature of the Dozens are seemingly overlooked by the
film’s point of view for the instant gratification and vindication it provides in honor of
our main character. These powerful scenes, along with the construction of Sherman
Klump’s humanity in the film, encourage a full critique of the discrimination that this
corpulent male endures. The film treats corpulence as a ‘female’ issue, as demonstrated
in the emasculation of Sherman and the gendered nature in the Dozens ritual. Sherman is
a sympathetic figure because his ‘fatness’ is unwarranted and located within a male body.
Ironically, Murphy would actually perform the nature of the dozens more than ten years
later through his female character, Rasputia, in the film, Norbit (2007). Like Martin
Lawrence before him, Murphy enacts the ritual of the Dozens by merging race, gender,
sexuality and corpulence.
Eddie Murphy’s sharp-tongued character, Rasputia, in the 2007 release, *Norbit*, differs drastically from the compassionate and friendly Sherman Klump. Unlike Big Momma’s asexuality, Murphy’s corpulent Black female character is full of overt and deviant sexuality. The character is an embodiment of the traditional Black female bodily constructions, Sapphire and Mammy, that Patricia Hill Collins (2004) outlines in *Black Sexual Politics*. Rasputia’s unpleasant characteristics function to mark the corpulent Black female body as inferior and the unwanted occupier of space in American society. Her large frame apparently occupies more space than those around her can stand, but her existence also figuratively occupies space that has been possessed by rigid Eurocentric beauty standards in the American psyche. I treat the film *Norbit* as violence against
women because it constructs and renders the Black female abject. Thus, it creates, as it fosters, a culture of hatred toward a body that is specifically racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, and corpulent.

The Internet Movie Data Base summarizes *Norbit*’s plot as, “A mild-mannered guy who is engaged to a monstrous woman meets the woman of his dreams, and schemes to find a way to be with her.” Already there is a contrast established before one even views the film. Disturbingly, the choice of words functions in this project. Rasputia’s “monstrosity” is a construction that reflects her corpulent racialized, gendered, and sexualized identity. Moreover, the visual advertisements for the film supplement the narrative. For example, the movie poster displays a very frightened and small Norbit, played by Murphy, under the nearly naked and large Rasputia, also played by Murphy (Figure 7). Rasputia, clad only in a pink negligee with her protruding dark brown thigh monopolizing the image, is oblivious to the obvious pain she is inflicting on Norbit. However, his terrifying face gazes directly to the viewer of the image and not only suggests this pain but implies the fear that Rasputia’s “monstrosity” evokes. The irony of the image plays into one of the film’s main themes. Rasputia’s attempts at possessing any traces of femininity have failed despite her traditionally feminine pink and very sexy attire. Moreover, the characterization of Rasputia is a direct attack on traditional constructions of femininity and female identity. Perhaps this would be progressive if the characterization was a critique of patriarchy and actually functioned to interrogate those gender constructions that hinder the overall mobility of women; however, Rasputia works to affirm the same constructions that white patriarchy relies on. Thus, the character simulates the gender constructions that were established to render Black bodies deviant.
The film, which traces the life of a scrawny and childlike Norbit, focuses on his unbearable and forced marriage to Rasputia, a large woman who loves wine, food and fighting. As an orphaned child, Norbit became estranged from another orphan friend and crush, Kate, played by British actress, Thandie Newton. Suffering in his miserable marriage to Rasputia, the adult Norbit is finally reunited with Kate and eventually marries her after Rasputia’s cheating and vindictive ways catch up with her.

As in *The Nutty Professor*, the emasculation of Norbit is a prominent narrative throughout the film. However, unlike Murphy’s previous film, *Norbit* posits a young woman who violently abuses her love interest. Rasputia verbally and physically infantilizes Norbit every chance she gets. Moreover, because she is both larger and taller than he, Norbit appears to visually occupy the role of an innocent child even more. She is even referred to as subhuman and derogatory epithets such as “gorilla” by the surrounding characters, encouraging the viewer to possibly perceive her body as subhuman by further affirming the monstrosity of her character. Also, a Godzilla effect is a recurring theme throughout the film as Rasputia’s large stature and frightening ways literally clear rooms. Close-up and low shots of Rasputia frame her as larger than those around her. This construction of her as monstrous further functions to emasculate the main character as it also humanizes him.

As the promotional theater poster of the film establishes, Norbit finds himself under Rasputia, both literally and figuratively. Norbit is, in some way, tackled by an eager and sex-crazed Rasputia on a day-to-day basis. The prominent bedroom scenes illustrate this. As Rasputia attempts to entice Norbit on their wedding night and each night afterwards, shot after shot captures her half-naked body standing in the doorway to
the bedroom. As the camera zooms in on her corpulent frame to affirm how awkward such a body is in this intimate scenario, Rasputia charges to the bed and onto a very frail Norbit who is shown trying to grasp for air under her massive body. Norbit’s repulsion is intended to be shared by the viewer as the narrative encourages the spectator to sympathize with him and his pain. Close-ups camera shots of Norbit’s cringing face with the back of Rasputia’s body facing the camera solidify the point of view in this scene. If the offensiveness of Rasputia’s character was misread in this scene, Murphy re-articulates the theme in another scene as Norbit watches a pony struggle to carry a corpulent female child. He cries as he sympathizes with the animal, “I understand your pain pony.”

Rasputia’s overpowering and sexual intrusiveness paints a different picture of sexuality; one that deems Norbit as innocent and childlike. Moreover, her sexuality is deemed more deviant than anything, especially as it relates to Norbit. Her bodily “funk” is articulated through a hypersexual and evil persona. The fact that Rasputia would even dare to desire and have sex as a corpulent woman is a contradiction to Eurocentric constructions of gender. On the other hand, her sexual appetite is overbearing and unhealthy, which is demonstrated in the adulterous affair she has at the expense of her husband’s heartbreak. This scene merges Rasputia’s hypersexual behavior with her evil ways to paint a picture of her as an undeserving sexual being. When Rasputia flirts with her aerobics instructor and he decides to exploit her attention for his own benefit, the two end up in the bedroom of her and her husband. Norbit is visibly shaken and hurt when he returns home to find his wife and her suitor interacting with each other. The shot reverse shot from Rasputia to Norbit captures this tense meeting. The close-ups camera shots of Norbit’s face highlight his pained reaction. He yells, “Rasputia we took vows. You
cheated on me!” which she denies while chasing him through the house and throughout the neighborhood. When he finally crashes into trash cans and falls she stands over him and yells, “That’s what your stupid black ass gets!” This scene is indicative of how Rasputia’s construction as ‘monster’ shapes the viewer’s reading of Norbit. Even though Norbit was forced to marry Rasputia, he nonetheless tries to honor his wedding vows and is hurt that she does not. Rasputia’s denial of her affair, coupled with the abuse of her husband that followed, marks her act and sexuality as deviant and pathological. Thus, the sexuality articulated from her corpulent frame is further deemed funky. Also, any behavior deemed unfeminine for female bodies are deemed ‘funky’ or “what is held in check when trying to assimilate into mainstream society” (Lee, 1996, p. 54). Rasputia’s reluctance to fit into a traditional feminine gender role marks her as funky.

Moreover, similar to the Klump’s tendency to pass gas and embarrass Sherman in The Nutty Professor, Rasputia lies about being pregnant and then uses gas as the source of her concocted stomach discomfort insisting, “I ain’t with no child! That was gas!” Again, we see Murphy writing intrusive behaviors such as these onto corpulent characters. There is something to be said when you have close-up shots of corpulent frames as they pass gas and light things and people on fire. The exaggeration of the act from the corpulent body treats it as an abnormality and a function that only an “abnormal” body would perform. Traditionally, this ‘funkiness’ has been tied to Black bodies in general, as is reflected in the contemporary hyper-visibility of Black bodies on television commercials that deal with such subjects as gas and indigestion. Thus, things and behavior tied to nature are written on Black bodies.
Raputia’s tendency to yell at the smaller Norbit is accompanied by her practice of hitting him as if he were a mere child, furthering his emasculation. This abuse permeates throughout the film as she constantly bashes Norbit and sends him cringing in pain. Like an overbearing and abusive parent, Rasputia physically and verbally abuses her husband as she chastises him as if he were ten years old. She yells, “Dammit Norbit! How many times have I told you to not mess with the seat!” and when she gets hungry and thirsty, it is Norbit who is responsible for settling her cravings, “Go over there and get me some wine!” This aspect of the film’s narrative meshes well with the construction of Norbit. Visually, his looks do not change even after the passage of time. He wears the same afro as he did as a child and he works with children as a puppet master. Thus, intellectually, Norbit has not developed into an adult male. The film blames Rasputia’s presence in his life as the reason for his infantilization.

Murphy simply recycles the constructions of Black male and female interaction that white racism erected in order to create a difference based on inequality and inferiority. He has regurgitated a construction that has existed in American culture for centuries. This construction was initially meant to render Black people in general inferior; however, a detachment from the Black female body has led Black men to participate in, and perpetuate, this form of ethnic sexism. Thus, it now performs itself as a gendered racism. Many feminist theorists have commented on a form of sexism that targets specific ethnic groups, however, the complexity of corpulence performativity has yet to be taken into account in definitions of ethnic sexism. The construction of Mammy has been deemed a specific racialized and gendered stereotype, however, how does Rasputia fit into these definitions? Unlike Mammy, she is hypersexual and far more
cantankerous. The line between familiar stereotype and contemporary caricature is blurred. Rasputia’s evilness and sassiness fit into multiple constructions of contemporary Black womanhood. Even though Mammy serves as Rasputia’s foundation, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) makes reference to contemporary constructions of Black womanhood that make her image all the more derogatory. She states, “The controlling image of the ‘bitch’ constitutes one representation that depicts women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” (Collins, p.123). Collins argues that terms such as ‘bitch’ and ‘freak’ do not stand alone but function in the demeaning portrayal of Black women as overtly sexual. This theory is evident in *Norbit* as Rasputia is consistently referred to as ‘bitch,’ a common term used by Murphy to describe Black women in his films and stand-up comedy. One scene that illustrates the use of the term to denigrate Black women is one in which Norbit is thrown outside by Rasputia and asks the neighbor’s dog, “What am I going to do?” to which the dog responds, “Ice the bitch!” Rasputia’s construction as a hypersexual “bitch” denies her the humanity that other characters in the film possess.

The visual effects in *Norbit* increase a disdain for the corpulent body. The visual effects spotlight a grotesque ‘fatness’ that is racialized and gendered. Rasputia has very short and curly hair, which she tries to hide by wearing wigs and weaves. Thus, she is Africanized because she is constructed as possessing the physical characteristics that are furthest from European femininity ideals. She constantly rolls her eyes and neck, which explodes and distorts the strength of real Black women. In addition to the famous poster that promotes the film, the DVD menu screen replays the widely advertised water park scene from the film. As Rasputia plummets down the water slide, the largeness of her body is emphasized as her weight is obviously too much for the slide. Her plummet
toward the very frightened Norbit and Kate symbolizes how complex the racialized
gender constructions in the film are. As her large body rushes in between and past Kate
and Norbit, Rasputia fails to take heed that her presence is not only intrusive to Norbit’s
well-being, but to the functioning of Eurocentric gender standards in general.

Rasputia’s corpulence is a direct attack on the standard inscribed on Thandie
Newton’s character’s, Kate, body. Newton’s character is a visual perpetuation of the
female actresses that are often cast in Murphy’s films. As writer and producer of *Norbit*,
Murphy’s decision to produce a film of this caliber when he has received crossover
success with his contemporary films that deal with children and family themes is
questionable. As a popular leading man, Murphy has a reputation for having women who
resemble each other cast as his filmic leading ladies and love interests. From Jasmine
Guy to Halle Berry, most of the women who are deemed beautiful and worthy to be loved
by Murphy’s characters are light-skinned, extremely thin, and postured by traditional
European standards. Thus, the presence of Thandie Newton’s extremely thin body is
keeping with this tradition. However, Newton’s character’s bodily performance goes
further and serves as an interesting play on post 9/11 constructions of identity. Newton’s
bi-racial and English identities intersect with her thinness to sharply contrast the Black,
poor, and corpulent pathology that is inscribed on and reflected in Rasputia’s bodily
performance. The taboo subject of intraracial colorism and performance must be
examined in this case. Newton’s obvious European identity performs a standard that
further constructs the corpulent Black female body as inferior and anti-American. By
placing Newton as the mild-mannered, ultra-feminine counter to Rasputia, the film is
adhering to a very Eurocentric construction of normality and whiteness. Reverting back
to traditional constructions of Black groups as abnormal and pathological, the film perpetuates a definition of difference that, yet again, locates a hypersexual corpulent Black female body as the location of pathology and mother of American chaos. Unfortunately, but obviously, Newton’s body performs itself. In certain shots, her thinness easily reveals the bones underneath her skin. Her bodily performance of whiteness is literal, as was the case in another role she played. Her character was mistaken for a white woman in the award winning political film Crash (2005). Moreover, her performance of whiteness is both literal and symbolic in Norbit and alongside Rasputia. In all, they both function to solidify the corpulence performativity in the film.

The sharp contrast of the two characters is evident throughout the film. In addition to the corpulent frame of Rasputia, her kinky and short hair and dark skin contrast with Kate’s very light skin and straight and long hair. Another scene at the water park demonstrates the different statures of both women. As Rasputia and Kate sit alongside each other in lawn chairs, the body of each is in plain view of the camera. Ironically, Rasputia is belittling Kate about how “skinny” her body is and affirming her own corpulent being by insisting that Norbit and any other man would prefer a woman who is thick. As the viewer witnesses Kate apparent vulnerability to Rasptutia’s wrath, it is easy to sympathize more with her than Norbit’s wife.

Rasputia’s wearing of a bikini functions to draw laughs from the viewers of the film. As she enters the park, she is asked by an attendant if she is wearing anything at all, to which she replies by lifting her excess weight in order to show her bikini bottom. Kate, on the other hand, is the idealized version of what is expected to adorn such attire. Her plummet on the water slide happens neatly and without incidence as compared to
Rasputia’s infamous slide. Also, the soft and light colored clothing that Kate wears during the film can be contrasted to the sharp and erratic patterns of Rasputia’s clothing. Kate wears soft yellows, greens, and pinks as opposed to the darker colors of Rasputia’s clothing. For example, when Norbit and Kate have dinner, she wears a soft light green dress; however, the scene quickly shifts to an outraged Rasputia, who wears a dark pink and black striped dress. The softness in Kate’s pattern is no match for the erratic and sharp pattern in Rasputia’s clothing. Thus, the visual effects of the film firmly establish and maintain a dichotomy between the two characters. The clothing that Rasputia wears aligns with her constructed ‘monstrosity’ as a character. On the other hand, the simplicity and softness in Kate’s appearance supports her construction as ultra-feminine and gender conforming.

Unlike Murphy’s character in his early film, *The Nutty Professor*, Rasputia lacks humanization and thus is a figure that fails to evoke sympathy from the audience. Rather, her petty and evil ways and actions targeted to the main protagonist, Norbit, encourage the viewer to literally despise her. This disdain further allows for the inferior rendering of her corpulence. Kate’s law and social abiding ways are more in line with the American ideals of gender roles and femininity. Once again, the corpulent Black female body serves as indicator of inferiority in accordance to white nationalism. On the other hand, Sherman, Murphy’s character in *The Nutty Professor* elicits a wide arrangement of emotions from viewers. Viewers cry, get angry, and laugh with him rather than at him. His privileged male body is one that overshadows any humanity that Rasputia’s body may possess even in the minds of the most sympathetic viewers. Between the two films, we can clearly see that gender is performed at the intersections of class, race and
sexuality to create specific imagery and constructions of corpulence, which are marginalized in visual culture. Like Rasputia’s extremely tight fit in her small car, the message reflected is that her body does not belong or ‘fit’ in American society. There is no room for the corpulent Black female body in American society except for its ability to define gender and racial standards. Therefore, Sherman Klump’s humanity is reserved for males only and can never be Rasputia’s reality.

“Why Did I Get (Sacrificed)?”: Tyler Perry’s Black Female Subjectivity

Unlike Martin Lawrence and Eddie Murphy, Tyler Perry is not a comedian but a playwright who gained success with his plays centered on his character Mabel “Madea” Simmons, a stern Southern matriarch. Perry adorns a fat suit like the other two men; however, his face is not padded with make-up to add fat. With lipstick covering Perry’s natural lips, Madea is actually an attractive image that has a few extra pounds, which successfully cover Perry’s tall and masculine body. Her appearance is less offensive than the other two performativities and the visual image does not come across as grotesque like Big Momma and Rasputia. I propose that Madea functions in more intricate ways and the construction and function of her character is more complex than any of the other corpulence performativities I have discussed thus far. Tyler Perry’s Madea serves a particular function, one that is unprecedented in the history of motion picture. Perry’s films have been instrumental in redressing the traumatized Black female body. I propose that despite the criticism Perry’s gender performance may receive, overall his films have added to the articulation and representation of Black female subjectivity, a fact that
sharply contrasts with the previously mentioned gender performativities of Lawrence and Murphy and one that certainly cannot be ignored.

After experiencing personal hardship such as abuse and homelessness, Tyler Perry started his career and introduced Madea in the play circuit in the 1990’s. Quickly working his way up with the help of a faithful audience base, Perry turned his plays and character into a multi-million dollar company and Madea soon became a household name. By the time he began writing, directing, and producing films under his Tyler Perry Company, he had a loyal following. The films transformed Madea Simmons from play favorite into a filmic icon and subsequently allowed Perry the visibility and opportunity in an important arena to address issues important to the Black community and particularly Black women. Those who were not used to seeing his plays were interested in his films due to the mass marketing in several cultural specific texts like *Essence* and *Ebony* magazines and Black Entertainment Television. More than likely, the oral tradition of passing information via word of mouth played a part in disseminating information about Perry’s plays and films to the American public. Oprah Winfrey had the cast of his first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), on her show and extensively promoted it. Whether Winfrey’s cultural influence had a hand in the box office turnout of Perry’s films is unclear, however, even though Winfrey’s audience is primarily middle-class white women, Perry’s primary audience and fan base remain black women, as is evident by the interactivity of Perry and his productions via his website and other outlets. Even though Perry has a large body of work, I will focus on his films.

*Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, Perry’s groundbreaking film, was adapted in 2005 from his play with the same title. The story follows a woman who suffers physical,
verbal, and emotional abuse from her husband until she is literally put out of their home. She eventually finds love with a blue collar working man and attempts to let go of the anger in order to find peace and happiness. The film was groundbreaking because rarely is the Black female body successfully treated as a subject in motion picture. Therefore, Perry’s decision to place a Black woman’s personal story on the big screen was risky, but it proved successful, thanks to his audience and fan base. The strong portrayals by film talents, Kimberly Elise and Cicely Tyson added to the allure of the film.

Tyson and her mother wit have been visible in Perry’s films, which focus on the Black matriarchal image as mother to the family and Black community as a whole. Like Big Momma and Rasputia, Madea adorns many of the posters that advertise the films she headlines. However, Madea’s presence on the covers is drastically different and more in line with a Mama subjectivity. For example, the cover of *Tyler Perry’s Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006) displays images of the characters surrounding a larger image of Madea whose dress is filled with more images of family. This strong image symbolizes the matriarchal figure that Madea stands for and it articulates the films theme of strong kinship values among African-American families. Madea then, symbolically stands in for the Black female presence and Mama subjectivity within the film’s narrative. The presence of elder Black women of strength including characters played by Maya Angelou and Cicely Tyson also constructs this subjectivity. These bodies serve as the location from which wisdom, knowledge, and history are disseminated.

The two sisters who serve as the primary protagonists in the film both go through struggles with relationships; one is consistently being physically and psychologically abused. The mother of the two adult women has been abused herself and repeats the
pattern with the emotional baggage she inflicts onto her daughters, preferring one over the other. In a climactic scene, the older daughter finally decides to express to the mother how she feels as well as reveal to the younger sister the abuse that she suffered as a young girl with the approval of the mother. Revealing that she was raped by her stepfather, she decides that the mother has also been controlling her and she then refuses to be the mother’s ‘tragedy’ any longer. This emotionally packed scene is vital in identifying Black female subjectivity because Perry does not present a monolithic and superwoman vision of Black women in his films. Moreover, the pain that has been inflicted on the daughter’s body and mind is being acknowledged and addressed, which is rare in contemporary Hollywood film. The older daughter’s refusal to repeat a cycle of abuse and violence with male companions strengthens her role as supporter to the younger daughter. It is the older daughter who calls on Madea for assistance with the younger daughter’s abusive relationship. Madea then tells the two women a lesson about love without directly telling them what to do. Therefore, Madea, the grandmother, serves as the mother who teaches the daughters to believe in and love themselves first.

Even though Madea shows the other characters their self worth and strength, she does not embody a superwoman persona as is the case with the traditional Mammy construction. Perry has the other matriarchal figures, played by Tyson and Angelou, in the film to further Madea’s intent. Thus, Perry steps back and places these figures up front, while Madea learns from them as well. The most powerful scene that illustrates the women’s wisdom and Mama subjectivity is toward the end of the film at the annual family reunion. As the family gather to celebrate their sustenance, the elder women notice the lack of caring and self-worth the younger generations express. Perry filmed
this scene on a simulated slave quarter setting, which contains an older cabin located on plenty of land. The great aunt and head matriarch of the family calls a family meeting to address these issues. Tyson’s character has the duty of transmitting wisdom and history in an effort to instill pride in the family. As the family listens to her request for men and women to “take (their) place,” the family begins to see its deep and rich history. Tyson also advises the women that, “You are worth more than your thighs!” I propose that Perry gives Tyson’s Black body politic back to her and to Black women in general. Tyson’s strong figure is typical of the roles she insists on playing in her lengthy career. The dignity in the character provides her a vehicle to express the importance of self-love to Black women. Therefore, as she stands in for the symbolic Mama image who is teaching and mothering her symbolic Black community, Perry recoups her battered narrative from Lawrence’s film and relinquishes it to her and Black women in general. Even though the Black body politic is fading from visual culture, Perry insists on it throughout his productions.

More importantly, Perry and his work stand out because of his overall autonomy. Unlike Lawrence and Murphy, Perry owns and runs his company, which allows him full control to construct and tailor Madea, the other characters, and the narratives in each production. Perry’s control is rather extensive because he writes, directs, and produces each film, including the soundtrack that accompanies them. This control allows Perry to write in culturally specific references to his narrative as he creates subjectivity in many of his characters and narratives. Thus, Perry has a commitment to religion and family, which is reflected in his films. More than likely, the resolution in the film takes place as the result of a commitment with self, spirituality, and family. However, Madea’s personal
and hesitant stand on religion further resists a superwoman identity as a corpulent matriarchal image. Perry places spirituality and other qualities in his films but does not write them on Madea’s body, which provides complexity and avoids stigma and stereotype. It can be argued that in the beginning of his career, Tyler Perry possibly relied on the popularity of Madea to bring in his audience; however, it is evident that she is not needed now to keep them coming. The character has not been involved in some of his most recent and equally successful films such as, *Why Did I Get Married* (2007), and *Daddy’s Little Girls* (2007), *Meet the Browns* (2008).

Finally, Perry’s texts are interactive and open to critique from his audience. Perry’s website is devoted to his audience and its relationships to the texts. For example, he posts blogs and requests feedback on his work urging his audience, “Sometimes I will stop and write letters to all of you just to let you know what is going on with me or even just to say thank you…just a short note today, I wanted you to see the trailer for the new movie…now don’t forget to let me know what you think. I’ll be checking the message board later on” (http://www.tylerperry.com/).

The message board Perry speaks of in his note to fans is critical in identifying his influence on creating and promoting Black female subjectivity. His audience floods his website with critique as well as praise for Madea and family. Many make reference to how his films have helped them in their own life situations, particularly dealing with abuse. For example one viewer praises him by saying, “Whenever I watch this movie it is like watching myself with my ex. He was abusive…thank you all for your inspiring movies!” Another says, “Watching *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* lets me know that I am
not alone in my situation.” Perry’s personal story of triumph has also encouraged many in his audience. One viewer wrote, "I've been a single mother of two for five years and solely (sic) doing everything by myself and now laid off. It's not easy., but after hearing about your story how you were homeless makes my situation not so bad. .. Be Blessed Tyler and thank you for giving me hope to keep going as a single mother...”

Most of Perry’s fans have expressed a connection with his characters and narratives and have used them in their own lives. This is an interesting spin on how Madea and the other women in the films ‘mother’ the audience. Thus, the Mama subjectivity within his texts is extensive and transcends the actual text to reach the actual lives of his audience. Thus, Perry’s films could be read as activism on the part of touching his audience in a more meaningful and moving way.

In conclusion, as of yet, Tyler Perry’s texts present Black female subjects in a way that has yet to be successfully accomplished in motion pictures. This subjectivity allows for a more complex reading of the character Madea and situates her within a narrative of progressive Black female being, family relations, and human bonding. Therefore, Perry’s text and corpulence performativity possess more of a ‘Mama’ subjectivity than the other images of ‘fat-suited’ Black figures in contemporary visual culture. Unlike Lawrence and Murphy, Perry seriously takes into account the Black female body and redresses it in his texts. Moreover, the minstrelsy and “Yo’ Mama” tropes in Lawrence and Murphy’s performativity are problematized and undermined in Perry’s work.

I have attempted to illustrate how Black humor has continued the denigrating practice of performing marginality in the way that early blackface minstrelsy did.
Moreover, a close analysis of how race, gender, class and sexuality function in such humor is crucial when identifying how corpulence intersects with these identities to shape specific performativities in visual culture. Therefore, the corpulence performativity of many recent cultural productions such as Martin Lawrence’s *Big Momma’s House* and Eddie Murphy’s *Norbit* reflect the traditional practice, the Dozens, and can be traced to the racialized gender performativity found in early blackface minstrelsy.
CHAPTER 3

The Bluest Eye Sees the Fattest Body: Reading Corpulence Identity in the Literature of Toni Morrison

China was not too terrible, at least not in our imaginations. She was thin, aging, absentminded, and unaggressive. But the Maginot Line. That was the one my mother said she “wouldn’t let eat out of one of her plates.” That was the one who had killed people, set them on fire, poisoned them, cooked them in lye. Although I thought the Maginot Line’s face, hidden under all that fat, was really sweet, I had heard too many black and red words about her, seen too many mouths go triangle at the mention of her name, to dwell on any redeeming features she might have. ~ Claudia in The Bluest Eye

Literature has been one of the most reliable and primary sources for African-American women to theorize Black feminisms. Scholars have argued that African-American women’s “narratives theorize” (Lee, 1996, p. 97). Writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison incorporate Black feminist theories and criticisms in their work. Moreover, African-American women writers are critically and innovatively engaged in intricate discussions of intersectionality and body politics as they seek to rewrite the Black female body as a complex subject in what Valerie Lee (1996) has called “rescue operations” in narrative culture (Lee, p. 97). This recuperative writing is so sophisticated that social, historical, and political Black feminist theories and criticisms, such as those put forth by Patricia Hill Collins (1990), have relied on the work of African-American women novelists and poets to analyze racial and gender politics. In this chapter, I argue that corpulence performativity is an aspect of African-
American women writing culture that Toni Morrison has specifically articulated in her fiction. Hence, I situate Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in this extensive engagement of body politics as I argue that the complex corpulence performativity in the text is unprecedented in an examination of difference.

An examination of early African-American women writing culture identifies the slave narrative as one of the first literary mediums used in recovering the Black female body. The writings of ex-enslaved women such as Harriet Jacobs sought to humanize the objectified Black female body. Moreover, Jacobs and her sister writers were forced to argue against their status as chattel in their writings. These writings eloquently engaged in racial and gender politics as they were the first means that African-American women had in articulating their experience as not only racial subjects but gendered subjects as well. In her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs maintains, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs, p. 77). Jacobs’ literary project was defined by a need to reclaim her body as human and it was accented by her intersectional approach to identifying the ways that race, gender, and class drastically shape the lived experiences of enslaved women. Included in Jacobs’ demands for her humanity was a critique of conventional gender definitions, which bond ideals regarding her body to those of the white woman. Jacobs “used the material circumstances of her life to critique conventional standards of female behavior and to question their relevance and applicability to the experiences of Black women” (Carby, 1997, p. 87).
During Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction, women writers remained focused on reclaiming the African-American female body as they challenged the racial ideological bodily constructions of it as hypersexual. Sexuality was a topic that many women were careful to engage in during this time out of fear of reprisal from these constructions. Nonetheless, writers such as Francis Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Hopkins borrowed some of the themes of the slave narrative, while touching on several new issues that defined the 19th-Century, such as racial uplift and miscegenation. For example, Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), the first published novel by an African-American woman, “clearly delineates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist’s struggle to refute these images…the salient element of the story is the heroine’s willingness to be known as a black woman, although she has all the physical and cultural attributes of a white woman”(Christian, 1980, p.5). Therefore, the earliest writings by African-American women reflect what Valerie Lee (2006) describes as a “passion for freedom” as they attempted to recover the female image from annihilation.

According to Akasha Gloria Hull (2004), “color” defined the Harlem Renaissance; the first major literary movement that involved the participation of African-Americans in the history of the United States (Hull, 2004, p. 80). The issues that the protagonists in the writings of Jacobs, Harper, and Hopkins faced were still pertinent during this time; however, African-American women challenged many of these themes as they found more innovative ways to engage in the Black female body. The ‘passing’ or ‘tragic mulatta’ narrative prominent during this era and illustrated in the writings of literary figures such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmond Fauset served as commentary
on how the Black female body was perceived in the early 20th-Century. Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) force her readers to re-examine the rigidity found in the ideals of race and color. Gender, race, and sexuality became tropes in these texts that were interrogated by Larsen as she granted her Black female characters subjectivity. Carla Kaplan (2007) explains how Larsen’s commentary in her fiction was complex and taboo for the times. Kaplan states:

Refusing to act out one’s racial identity was particularly risky in the 1920’s…never before or since has the color line been treated with such hysteria. So-called ‘Americanization’ organizations were hell-bent on holding people to strict racial categories and extending segregation’s legal and economic reach by making all movements across racial lines seem both undesirable and unnatural. (p. xv)

Thus, Larsen was one of the writers who transcended racial heteronormativity in her work. Larsen’s critique of racial identity was intertwined with a general critique of middle-class domestic ideals. Other writers of this era such as Dorothy West and Zora Neale Hurston challenged middle-class gender conventions in their fiction as well.

Zora Neale Hurston’s protagonist in her early novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is revered in her community for her beauty, which includes her hair and physique. Janie, the protagonist, reflects a challenge to middle-class gender conventions as she rejects her status as an abused wealthy housewife. Hurston posits a complex protagonist in Janie, who goes through tribulations with three husbands in order to experience a growth from childhood to handsome woman. Hurston’s engagement with the Black female body through her construction of Janie’s womanhood and sexuality
foreshadows how African-American writers use narrative culture to challenge normative bodily ideals that render Black female bodies obsolete. Janie’s Caucasian physical features become a hindrance to her and, more importantly, the community’s worship of the features fails to provide Janie with true subjectivity. It is only when she encounters a man who allows her to love unconditionally, that she is set free from the bonds of domesticity. Hence, Hurston’s portrayal of free love and intimacy renders the Black female body a sexual identity that women such as Harriet Jacobs were forced to deny in their work. Hurston’s work remains one of the most popular and complex texts from the Harlem Renaissance era. Even though its publication date was 1937, Hurston’s influence on the era and its reciprocated influence on her work contextualize Their Eyes Were Watching God as an important text. Moreover, Hurston’s treatment of the Black female body during this era was groundbreaking because she chose to embrace Blackness in its most unprocessed forms.

Treatment of the Black female body in post-Harlem Renaissance literature has been more consistently political. The literature of what many critics term “the second renaissance,” from the period of 1970 through the 1980’s engages its reader with many different issues involving the Black female body. As Black Feminist theory and criticism emerge in this era, Black female writers are acknowledged for incorporating issues that particularly deal with race, gender, class, and sexuality in a more political approach. More specifically, African physical traits such as dark skin color and curly hair became common tropes in constructing and assessing notions of Blackness. A reclamation of the Black female body as beautifully ‘Black’ defined this era. The voices of Black women writers were at the core of this politically aesthetic writing.
The writing of Gloria Naylor poignantly reflects the complexity of the second renaissance. Her characterization of seven women in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980) exemplifies the rich diversity of Black women’s bodies as it reconfigures race, gender, class, ability, and weight. Her attempt to deconstruct a monolithic and one-dimensional construction of the Black female body is strengthened by her attention to these intersecting factors of women’s identity. Naylor’s text also transcends the constructs of race, gender, and class in an effort to examine more aspects of identity that seriously shape women’s lives. For example, her primary character, Mattie, is described as a thick woman who was admired by a neighborhood boy when she was young. The boy’s admiration of Mattie centers on her fuller figure, as is evident in the scene where the two make love. Butch “intently watched the circular movements of her high round behind under her thin summer dress, and he followed her rising hemline over her large dark calves when she bent to dip the water” (Naylor, 1983, p. 9). Later in the novel, an antagonist male character to Mattie attempts to berate her by repeatedly calling attention to her corpulence in a negative way. In his effort to undermine Mattie’s strength and dignity, the character relies on the fat-loathing atmosphere of American society to denigrate her. He constantly refers to her as “fat black bitch” in an unsuccessful attempt to render her invisible (Naylor, 1983, p. 90). Naylor’s use of corpulence to dramatize the multitude of Mattie’s oppression in a racist, sexist and fat-loathing society is evident through her construction of the character and her articulation of American societal bodily norms. Mattie is not only discriminated against in American society because her body is poor, Black, and female, but also because it is corpulent. Naylor’s positive affirmation of
Mattie’s corpulence is a way to reclaim this particular body and challenge the discrimination it faces on a day-to-day basis.

Another example of Naylor’s eloquent use of language to interrogate monolithic notions of the Black female body is her description of Lorraine. Lorraine, who becomes the victim of a vicious rape and murder, is described as “light-skinned” with a “limp” (Naylor, 1983, pgs. 139, 155). This configuration of color and ability adds to Lorraine’s established identity as a financially secure Black lesbian. Naylor’s portrayal of Lorraine’s ‘differences’ attempts to engage the reader in a thorough examination of Black female bodies and critique the subsequent treatment of those bodies. What is most important in Naylor’s construction of difference is her refusal to privilege any one Black female body over the other, which further demonstrates that the bodies of her characters together serve as a nexus for examining the multiple experiences of women. Thus, Lorraine’s slim and light-skinned body does not subordinate Mattie’s thick ebony body in Naylor’s narration. The experiences of both are central in examining the lives of Black women. Thus, as Valerie Lee (1996) explains, “Rejecting an essentialized body, Black women writers have been making an effort to theorize the multiplicity of Black female subjectivities and to write the bodies of all ‘colored girls’ in their canon, remembering that whatever the hue-milky white, brown, tan, coca, mahogany, cinnamon, ‘we was all girls together’” (Lee, 1996, p. 56). Naylor poignantly uses her writing to investigate the multiplicity of experiences located in the lives of Black women and its progression demonstrates how important an engagement with body politics is in examining the lives and experiences of Black women.
Naylor reclaims the corpulent body with her literature; however, writer and cultural critic, Toni Morrison’s literature reflects a corpulence performativity that is unprecedented in African-American women writing culture. As a giant in the contemporary literary renaissance, Morrison reflects the political atmosphere of the latter part of the 20th-Century. Gurleen Grewal (1998) argues:

Unlike their literary foremothers, writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker had the sturdy black bridges already made for them. Their works paralleled the energy generated by the black cultural and political mobilization of the 1960’s and 1970’s and the black feminist resurgence of the 1980’s…Toni Morrison is part of a growing body of contemporary writers who are responding to imperatives of cultural critique, reclamation, and redefinition…(p. 3)

I argue that Morrison’s impact on this literary renaissance is unique in that her work reflects an intertextual approach to interrogating identity formation. Moreover, her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), represents a critique of how American society constructs and socializes notions of identity. The text reflects the theorizing of African-American women writers and is a reliable source for identifying how difference is constructed and articulated on the body, particularly the Black female body.

For Morrison, difference is a construct that simultaneously is inscribed on the body and exceeds this personal space. Morrison “rejects Western humanist assumptions of identity as fixed, unique and coherent” (Peach, 2000, p. 99). Moreover, the class identity and perceived dysfunction of the family at the center of the novel’s critique, the Breedloves, construct their ‘Blackness’ just as much as their racial identity does. When Morrison initially describes the Breedloves’ ‘ugliness’ by stating that “their ugliness was
unique...the eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen crooked noses, with insolent nostrils” she in fact implicates the reader by interrogating how one views the physical in preconceived notions and ideals regarding beauty (Morrison, 1970, p.38) Moreover, she draws the reader into a physical description of the Breedloves only to rigorously critique the gaze that condemns this particular body. Soon after this physical description, she continues by arguing, “You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction”(Morrison, p.39). Presumptuously, the primary source of the Breedloves’ ‘ ugliness’ is not the actual physical bodies of the family, rather the source is the prejudices of the outside gaze. Morrison undermines any comfort afforded the reader to gaze and pity the Breedloves’ ‘ ugliness’ as she redirects the aim of her interrogation to this condescending gaze.

The complexity in Morrison’s engagement in body politics is articulated through her interrogation of the extent to which American society places value on people, things, and situations. To simplify and relegate Morrison’s engagement with difference to Pecola’s race is a misinterpretation of her embodied experience as an African-American child in America. Hence, it is no coincidence that Morrison constructed her primary character through an intricate web of race, gender, class, and neglect. Pecola’s intersecting identity drastically shapes her experiences within her immediate community and the greater American society.
Morrison pushes our understanding of difference through her examination of body politics, which also identifies color as a major factor that shapes women’s experiences. Similar to the writings of other African-American women writers, Morrison’s examination of the Black female body includes an analysis of how skin color and colorism impact the lives of women. Pecola’s “very black” body is contrasted to her childhood peer Maureen Peal’s “high-yellow” body, which is valued in American society and revered in the Black community (Morrison, 1970, pgs 62, 88). Maureen serves as a signifier of internalized racism in the novel and her light skin debunks that myth of a dichotomy that only exists between Pecola’s Black body and Shirley Temple’s white body. Therefore, Blackness is inscribed on Pecola’s body in the same way that “whiteness…privilege and hegemonic power” is inscribed on the body of Temple (duCille, 1998). The accusation made by many Black feminist practitioners such as Elsa Barkley Brown (1995) that difference is not adequately addressed in theory does not apply to Morrison’s text. Brown argues, “We are likely to acknowledge that white middle-class women have had a different experience from American-American, Latina, Asian American, and Native American women; but the relation, the fact that these histories exist simultaneously, in dialogue with each other, is seldom apparent in the studies we do”(Brown, p. 43). Morrison marks the difference of whiteness as she simultaneously marks the difference of Blackness by positioning them in dialogue with one another. Each relies on the other for its construction and meaning. Moreover, Morrison’s text illuminates how whiteness is an unmarked category of difference that only exists in relation to ideals of Blackness, which together render Black female bodies obsolete.
Morrison’s examination of difference and the Black female body extends much further than critics have already assessed. A thoroughly progressive Black feminist criticism would identify the ways that the corpulent Black female body figures into our assumptions regarding difference. For example, Morrison’s discussion of weight and body size intersects with other facets of women’s identity to reflect narratives, which are inscribed on Black bodies by the dominant culture. The corpulence performativity in the text articulates another very important component of difference and an effective analysis of corpulence figures smoothly into existing examinations of Morrison’s multiple narratives of the body. Corpulence politics adds another analytical tool through which body politics can be instrumentally assessed in determining national, personal, cultural, and historical narratives.

Morrison’s narrator and progressive voice, Claudia MacTeer, is constructed as being resilient enough to resist the condemning outside gaze, which dictates that her race, age, gender and class are ‘ugly’ and marginal. However, there is a critical component of this gaze that Claudia and others in her community internalize. The members of this community share the fat-loathing American view that renders corpulent bodies ugly, deviant, and funky. Similarly, Black feminist practitioner Margaret Bass (2001) argues that she was prepared to face and challenge the world’s condemning gaze as an African-American woman, however, her parents failed to teach her how to effectively respond to discrimination based on ideals such as those which condemn corpulence. As a fuller-figured academic, Bass argues, “I never shed one tear or suffered one moment of shame because I was born black. I refused to let racism degrade or humiliate me. Armed against this oppression, why was I so ill-equipped to handle the discrimination I experienced as a
fat child?”(Bass, 2001, p.223). Bass reminds us that corpulence is treated as an anomaly in America. This anomaly status has yet to be recognized in the same way that racism, sexism, or classism has been interrogated. Bass’ revelation that she was not reared to view weight discrimination as an affront to her humanity reflects the negation of this discrimination. Like Bass, the fictional character, Claudia, demonstrates resistance to racial, class, and gender denigration; however, she internalizes ideals about corpulence. This internalization drastically comes full circle in her meeting with a notorious prostitute, Miss Marie.

Miss Marie is one of three prostitutes who represent marginality in the text; however, she is the only one who possesses a corpulent body. In fact, Miss Marie is the only prominent corpulent body in the entire text. Morrison’s examination of the prostitutes’ marginal status in the community is evident in the way that the other characters in the text view and treat them. The reader is first introduced to two of the working women as Claudia and her sister Frieda encounter them in the MacTeer home entertaining its boarder, Mr. Henry. Claudia articulates the disdain for the working women when she mentions, “We knew immediately who they were, and our flesh crawled. One was China, and the other was called the Maginot Line (Miss Marie). The back of my neck itched. These were the fancy women of the maroon nail polish that Mama and Big mama hated. And in our house”(Morrison, 1970, p. 77). The two women, along with a third, Poland, are posited in the text to speak to societal norms and values. Similar to her interrogation of physical ‘ugliness,’ Morrison attempts to deconstruct the contempt and condemning gaze that both the textual and reading communities target toward the working women. It is evident through an analysis of the corpulence
performativity in the text that the working women, especially Miss Marie, play a more crucial role in the examination of difference. Because of her corpulent body, Miss Marie is lowest in rank amongst her crony prostitutes and in the textual community. Moreover, by analyzing the corpulence performativity in the text, one can identify how the complex and intricate corporeal politics play in the construction of identity in America.

Corpulence is an identity that is not isolated from race, gender, and class in the Lorain community and world of Pecola Breedlove, for it allows us to fully incorporate the emerging factor of body size into its construction and politics performativity. Because Morrison’s text examines North American constructions of whiteness and Blackness, it allows one to identify how important corpulence is to the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Later in the text after Mr. Henry molest[s] Claudia’s sister, Frieda, the girls become scared that the sexual abuse may have made her “ruined...like the Maginot Line. She’s ruined. Mama said so”(p. 101). Moreover, unlike the two other prostitutes, Miss Marie’s ‘ruined’ status is directly tied to her corpulence in the minds of the girls. Frieda cries as a result of her molestation but also as a result of her possible ’ruined’ status, which brings to both girls’ minds the corpulent body of Miss Marie. Claudia frets, “An image of Frieda, big and fat, came to mind. Her thin legs swollen, her face surrounded by layers of rouged skin, I too begin to feel tears”(p. 101). Claudia continues her fear of Miss Marie’s corpulent body as she suggests to her sister, “But, Frieda, you could exercise and not eat...besides, what about China and Poland?...they ain’t fat.”(p. 101). When the girls decide to search for Pecola so that they can drink whiskey to prevent becoming ‘fat,’ they encounter a somber Miss Marie whose “rain-soaked eyes lit up” when they approached...
the apartment (p. 103). Moreover, Miss Marie’s kindness to the girls is atypical of adults in this community as Claudia remembers, “Her smile was full, not like the pinched and holding—back smile of other grown-ups…the Maginot Line seemed interested in our problem” (p. 103). However, the girls react with fear and anxiety instead of appreciation of Miss Marie’s hospitality, “We stared up and automatically reached for the other’s hand. A mountain of flesh, she lay rather than sat in a rocking chair…puffy feet…swollen ankles…massive legs like tree stumps…both of us imagined we were seeing what was to become of Frieda” (p. 102). The girls do not stop there as they inadvertently insult Miss Marie with their accusation of her body as “ruined”:

“Why don’t you wait for her?
“I moved to go up the stairs, but Frieda said, ‘No Ma’am, we ain’t allowed.’
“Ain’t ‘llowed?”
“No’m.”
“Ain’t ‘llowed to what?”
“Go in your house.”
“Is that right? The waterfalls were still. ‘How come?’
“My Mama said so. My mama said you ruined.”

When Miss Marie became aware of the girls feelings toward her, she initially started to cry again and then reverted back to a false barrier, one that reflects her ‘Maginot Line’ construction. The “Maginot Line,” or line of fortifications erected by Andre Maginot in France during World War II, failed to keep invaders from attacking the country. Morrison plays with the notion of defense in the case of her character. Miss Marie is caught off guard by the girls’ perception of her, “The waterfalls began to run again. She put the root-
beer bottle to her lips and drank it empty. With a graceful movement of the wrist, a gesture so quick and small we never saw it, only remembered it afterward, she tossed the bottle over the rail at us” (p. 104). Miss Marie’s corpulence is monstrous and frightening to the girls who, as children, are unaware of what her working woman status really entails. In the minds of Claudia and Frieda, it is the corpulence that allows her to be the metaphorically larger-than-life figure that the adults condescendingly gossip about and loath.

**CORPULENCE PERFORMATIVITY AS NUTRIMENT TO PECOLA**

Pecola has a different experience with Miss Marie than Claudia and Frieda because she seemingly overlooks her corpulence and is appreciative of the woman’s attention. Ironically, the food fetish that Morrison’s gives her corpulent character linguistically functions as Pecola’s only positive recognition and acknowledgment in the Lorain community and in the entire text. Thus, Marie offers Pecola a simplistic brand of mothering that occupies the space of her biological mother. In this sense, Morrison re-writes the “Mammy” component which is traditionally inscribed on corpulent Black female bodies in visual and narrative cultures as she provides Marie with a Mama subjectivity that also undermines her position as sexual worker. Moreover, Marie’s mothering of Pecola is an isolated case in the text, and it serves as the nutriment that the child desperately needs. Morrison describes, “…her epithets were fond ones chosen from menus and dishes that were forever uppermost in her mind” (p. 51). These “epithets” become terms of endearment that the neglected and abused Pecola yearns for. She affectionately refers to Pecola, as “chiltlin’…puddin’…sweetnin” in her interactions with
the child (pgs. 51-53). In *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (1990), Doris Witt argues that her own fascination with Black women, food and visual and narrative cultures began with her assessment of its hypervisibility in the literary works of African-American authors. She recognized that “several characters in Toni Morrison’s fiction labor as domestics or cooks,” and that, ‘key scenes in Morrison’s fiction, moreover, revolve around food. When Pecola accidently splatters the fresh-baked blueberry cobbler, her mother Pauline comforts not Pecola but the child of her employer” (Witt, 1990, p. 77). Witt’s observation is crucial in identifying how corpulence plays out in the text. Witt and others identify how Pecola’s mother neglects her as she internalizes the role of Mammy to the child of her white employer (Harris, 2001). Pauline’s role as Mammy must be examined alongside Marie’s brief role as nurturer to Pecola. Critics of the text have failed to identify how Morrison’s corpulence performativity functions to interrogate Pauline’s Mammy embodiment as it also humanizes Marie’s otherwise hypersexual status as marginalized prostitute.

Trudier Harris (2001) criticizes the perpetuation of the physically and mentally strong Black female character in African-American literature by stating “These suprahuman female characters have been denied the ‘luxuries’ of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences, or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, multidimensional characters” (Harris, 2001, p. 12). I would argue that, while Pauline is viewed as a suprahuman Mammy figure in the text, corpulence is re-worked so much so that it is constructed as a facet of difference, which serves as the bodily stature of a character who Morrison attempts to humanize and render complex. The fact that the ‘Maginot Line’ was broken and consequently showed emotion reflect this complexity in
her character. The invasion of Miss Marie’s false exterior by the girls’ perception of her
reflects the reality that she is a complex individual with emotions and feelings and not an
object. Also, her ability to express concern and tenderness when it came to Pecola and the
other children in the text affords her a Mama subjectivity that undermines both the
traditional Mammy construction and the hypersexual construction of her corpulent body.
Thus, Marie fills in the gap that Pauline creates as mother to Pecola. This is most evident
when Pecola visits the working women in their upstairs apartment immediately after she
is rendered invisible by the actions of a racist storekeeper. As she enters the room, Marie
is the first to speak to her out of concern when she asks, “Hi dumplin’. Where your
socks?...You heard me. Where are your socks?”(Morrison, 1970, p. 57). Marie’s concern
for Pecola is further affirmed through Morrison’s narration, which states, “Marie
concocted stories for her because she was a child”(Morrison, 1970, p. 57). Marie’s
attention to Pecola preserves her childhood the best way that she knows how and while
critics may be skeptical of a child’s interaction with a prostitute, Morrison’s text
demonstrates how abuse can come from anyone in a community rather than those that are
deemed marginal. Thus, the reader is forced to take a critical look at the intricate ways
that adults interact with children. What appear to be comical moments in the novel that
center on food ‘epithets’ are actually imperative moments for Pecola’s well-being. Miss
Marie is the only adult to reach out to Pecola and treat her like the human being that she
is. Pecola, in turn, reciprocates the attention and regards Marie as the human being that
she is. She insists on Marie’s humanization by rejecting the degrading nickname the
community has given her and confirms her kindness to Claudia and Frieda. She
adamantly explains to the girls, “Oh, you mean Miss Marie. Her name is Miss
Marie...Miss Marie is nice. They all nice” (Morrison, 1970, p. 106). Pecola’s humanization of Miss Marie involves the important practice of naming in the oral tradition and African-American community. Naming in the African-American community is a practice that involves empowerment because historically the oppressive system of slavery has undermined the ability and power of enslaved individuals of African descent to “name” oneself. Conversely, practices and rituals such as the “Dozens” flirt with this disempowerment by misnaming an individual or their loved ones. Therefore, Pecola’s refusal to participate in the derogatory misnaming of Miss Marie is equivalent to Miss Marie’s rendering her humanity by acknowledging her existence. The reciprocality in this relationship is imperative for both marginalized characters. Moreover, it demonstrates Morrison’s critique of personal relationships and their effects on humans.

**CORPULENCE AS INDICATOR OF FUNK**

A negation of Miss Marie’s corpulence is a dismissal of the intricate ways that weight is treated as a trope for racial identity in Morrison’s text. Her corpulence has a direct relation to her Blackness, gender, class, and sexuality. In her immediate community and in the American psyche, Miss Marie represents the deviance that has been portrayed as being embodied only by Black female bodies. Her ‘ruined’ status is only compounded and reflected by her size. Miss Marie’s ‘ruined’ body is defined not only by her sexual practices as a prostitute, but also by her tendency to over-indulge in food. Moreover, Morrison relegates Marie’s size to indulgence, while she also leaves room for a more progressive reading of this seemingly flat character. On the surface,
Marie’s status in the community represents deviance and excess; however, it also intensifies her power as a woman because she transcends the relegated gendered roles that Geraldine, Pauline, and even Mrs. MacTeer occupy. She generously belches, dominates males and controls her sexuality, unlike Pauline and Geraldine. Crossing the lines of traditional notions of femininity, Miss Marie’s behavior is viewed as threatening to the core of American racial and gender politics.

Miss Marie’s corpulence and infamous sexuality must be analyzed alongside the repression of another character, Geraldine, in order to thoroughly identify the ways that corpulence is racialized and gendered in the respective community and text. Whiteness is centered on assimilation in the text, or rather, on the notion of a “mythical norm,” which dictates that only white skin and racial identity, maleness, wealth, and heterosexuality, among other attributes, are valued and revered in American society (Lorde, 1984). Therefore, an analysis of the Black characters that migrated to Northern American cities indicates how this mobility symbolized assimilation to white ideals and standards for many. Moreover, social, economic and political mobility indicate a move to transcend Blackness in the minds of characters like Geraldine and Soaphead Church whose “lack of funkiness” was deemed “amazing” by Northerners (Christian, 1980, p. 150).

The ‘funk’ that Barbara Christian makes reference to in her analysis of the text is critical in identifying the ways that corpulence is viewed as a trope of Blackness. Morrison’s discussion of funk in the text represents the southern-most identity of the characters. Hence, unprocessed hair, dark skin, African traditions, and behaviors that are deemed exclusive to Black communities actually construct funk and Blackness. A
function of the *Dick and Jane* reading primers threaded throughout the novel involves a reflection that whiteness is perceived and performed as ‘perfect’ and ideal in the minds of those attempting to assimilate. Even though perfection only exists on the pages of the primers and not in reality, both children and adults fail to understand the illusion of this fictional mythology. Certainly anything that is associated with Blackness is rendered inferior and opposite to the normativity of whiteness. Therefore, many in the text, especially Geraldine, consider a departure from whiteness as funky and repulsive. Her repression and rigidity as a middle-class Northern Black ‘lady’ rely on Miss Marie’s flaunted sexuality, lifestyle, and corpulent body. Morrison’s characterization of Geraldine places her in a community of African-American women who migrated to Lorain in attempts to leave the “funkiness of passion, funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” as they “hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free…cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair” (Morrison, 1970, p. 83). Geraldine’s excessive repression also defines her sex life, as her husband “must rest his weight on his elbows when they make love, ostensibly to avoid hurting her breast but actually to keep her from having to touch or feel too much of him” (Morrison, p. 84). This portrayal of sexuality is in direct opposition to that of the prostitutes because it reflects a very conservative and frigid view of sex, but one that is nonetheless in line with societal gender norms. Geraldine is limited because she views the natural behaviors of humans as repulsive. Her sexual rigidity is just as much deemed aberrant as many would like to view Miss Marie’s sexual practices. For women in the textual community like Geraldine, sexual practices and views repress them.
Morrison conflates Geraldine’s repression with American ideals of thinness. Moreover, she saturates her descriptions of women like Geraldine with terms such as ‘thin,’ ‘narrow,’ and ‘long’. Thus, it is clear that assimilation to middle-class also means a clear departure from corpulence. Moreover, upward mobility and the appropriation of Eurocentric white ideals depend on the view that corpulence reflects lower class, deviance, pathology, and Blackness. This reasoning dictates the gendered-racialization of corpulence while it mandates that thinness and sexual repression are characteristics that are deemed a part of whiteness. Therefore, Geraldine’s status as a middle-class African-American woman is depended on Miss Marie’s lower class status as an aging prostitute. The validity of her thinness is depended on Marie’s ‘fatness.’ Ironically, Geraldine’s thinness and repression is couched between the textual references and narratives of Marie in the text, further insinuating her repression. In this sense, Morrison is privileging Marie as she interrogates Geraldine’s rigid gendered behavior and rationale.

Geraldine is bound by American gender norms in a way that Miss Marie is not and even though Miss Marie uses her body for profit, it could be argued that Geraldine uses hers for profit as well, to enter into middle-class society and assimilate to the white ideals and constructs of the dominant culture. In general, “Geraldine exploits her husband for his labor and her child for his place in the world she has created” (Harris, 1991, p. 39). Geraldine’s mythical world of anti-Black assimilation fosters a culture of exploitation. Her desire to transcend the ‘funk’ that she perceives her racial identity to be is exploitive in nature because she will use any and everyone to achieve her goals, including her own body. Therefore, her personal bodily performance is similar to Miss Marie’s because the body serves as a commodity in the acquisition of specific objectives. Here, I do not
intend to suggest that Miss Marie’s status as a sex worker is a progressive or liberating one. However, my aim is to identify how the complexity of the character speaks to Morrison’s engagement in body narratives via corpulence performativity. Surely, Miss Marie could have chosen to work in the kitchens of wealthy whites like Pauline Breedlove did, however her refusal to inhabit spaces that other characters in the text inhabit speaks to notions of empowerment that cannot be ignored. Thus, Marie disturbingly disrupts gender norms and expectations on multiple levels. Her corpulence invades and occupies more space in America; her use of her sexuality is threatening to the rigid gender norms inside and outside her respective community; and her weight metaphorically intrudes on hostile territory in society, for her corpulence is deemed repulsive and intrusive by the Lorain community and American society as a whole. On the surface, Miss Marie’s status in the community represents a certain pathology that is rooted in sexuality, race, gender, and class; however, she transcends the relegated gendered roles that Geraldine, Pauline and even Mrs. MacTeer occupy. In reality, a counter reading of Miss Marie’s characterization would allow one to identify how she occupies spaces only reserved for males. She freely belches, “softly, purringly, lovingly” (Morrison, 1970, p. 58), has the ability to control men because she has a commodity that is in demand, and moves to the beat of her own drummer in an oppressively racist society. Perhaps in the eyes of some, Marie’s corpulent body may actually resemble a “mule” and a “hippo” as her crony, China argues, but her “mule” status is contested by her refusal to occupy standard gender norms and expectations in the textual community as a corpulent body. Miss Marie’s status as a sex worker is no less
than Geraldine’s status as Lady because both are dictated patriarchal constructions of female bodies.

Miss Marie, with the help of Geraldine, illustrates that corpulence, ‘fatness,’ is a part of the Blackness that the outside gaze condemns. ‘Fatness’ is racialized to the point of ghettoization and the symbols and narratives embedded in the concept make it all the more apparent why rigorous analyses of corpulence are warranted. An analysis of Morrison’s text demonstrates that corpulence reflects and intersects with notions of race, gender, sexuality and class.

The writing culture of African-American women is one of the richest and diverse mediums for exploring body politics and identifying corpulence performativity. More importantly, this writing reflects the lived experiences of African-American women and stands as testimony to the trials and triumphs of black bodies. Claudia Tate (1983) argues:

Their work addresses what it means to be human...as a result, their fiction
characters engage in perplexing struggles to maintain their human dignity and emotional sensitivity in an impersonal, alien, and frequently threatening world...by and large black women writers do not write for money or recognition. They write for themselves as a means of maintaining emotional and intellectual clarity, or sustaining self-development and instruction. (p. xviii)

As with other mediums, the literature of African-American women reflects and influences. Therefore, corpulence performativity is treated in a way that disallows the ‘fat’ body in society to stand alone. This literature offers a glimpse of how corpulence
operates in the construction of identity. More specifically, Toni Morrison’s complex engagement with ‘fatness’ establishes it as an actual identity that has been overlooked in American culture.
CHAPTER 4

Give Me Body! Black Nationalism, Gender, and Corpulence Performativity in the Work of Queen Latifah

Figure 8. Queen Latifah on cover of Ebony Magazine (January, 2005)

“For people who may be thicker, for people who may be darker and for people who may be female it is good to see someone like me in one of those magazines under ‘beautiful’ so that a girl out there can say, ‘you know what? I’m beautiful! She’s beautiful!’” ~ Queen Latifah
In a 2009 television interview, Cathy Hughes, Black female television owner and operator of TVOne, referred to legendary singer Mary J. Blige as the “Queen of Hip Hop.” Mary J. Blige immediately and vehemently corrected Hughes and said that she was the “Queen of Hip Hop Soul” and the “Queen of Hip Hop” title belonged to Queen Latifah. Blige’s homage to Queen Latifah is typical of the accolades targeted to Latifah’s public persona and celebrity legacy.

Rap artist, singer, actress, and business woman Dana Elaine Owens, better known as “Queen Latifah,” is one of the most visible entertainers in visual and narrative cultures today. Queen Latifah’s body has become an emblem for many different communities. Thus, Queen Latifah’s rise to superstardom has been characterized by her ability to appeal to multiple audiences and groups. In doing so hers is one of the most visible Black female bodies in contemporary American culture. I propose that Queen Latifah has possessed an Africentric Queendom, which is, in essence, Mama subjectivity. “Mama” is racialized and based in specific Black traditions that are contrary to the demeaning Black folklore and humor discussed in chapter one. For Queen Latifah, this Africentric Queendom challenges the external constructions of the Black female body. Moreover, an examination of corpulence is important in any assessment of Queen Latifah because she has claimed it as an intricate facet of her identity and public persona.

Originally from Newark, New Jersey, Queen Latifah grew up as the only daughter of Lance and Rita Owens, a police officer and school teacher respectively. Her parents divorced when she was young and she would later go on to say, “Before my parents
separated, they complemented each other when it came to raising us kids…Together my parents laid a solid foundation for both my brother and me” (Latifah, 2000, p. 40).

Throughout her career, Queen Latifah has persistently paid homage to her parents and tributes her success and strength as a person to them. For Queen Latifah, her parents, especially her mother, serve as the foundation of her strength as a woman. Rita Owens argues, “The road to solid self-esteem and self-confidence starts with dialogue in the home, and it starts in the womb…Every child has the right to feel confident, and as adults we must take on the responsibility to see that that happens…As I look back, I realize that subconsciously I was building Dana’s self-esteem from the day she was born” (Latifah, 2000, p. xii-xxi).

Similar to Toni Morrison’s critique and theme of parenting in *The Bluest Eye*, Queen Latifah’s mother felt that it was essential to parent her daughter with the intention of building character and raising her to have confidence as a Black woman in a world that would continually produce adversity. Her gender-specific outlook on raising her daughter is evident in Queen Latifah’s view that the woman plays a crucial role in strengthening the family. Queen Latifah states, “That was my mother, Rita Owens. She laid the foundation for me to become a self-proclaimed queen. She made the ground fertile for me to persevere, no matter what obstacles, and to keep my head up. My mother believed in me before I even believed in myself” (Latifah, 2000, p. 11). Moreover, Queen Latifah learned early in her life that the Black woman is a staple in the collective identity of African-American people.
Dana Owens’ choice in a name for her public persona reflects her interest in, and commitment to, a specific racialized gendered identity. The name “Queen Latifah” became the backbone for her public persona, which was first articulated in an award-winning rap career.

Dana Owens’ decision to refer to herself as “Queen Latifah” reflects the way that she challenges Eurocentric standards and ideals. An analysis of the name “Queen Latifah” reveals how Dana Owens strategically embarked on a career journey that not only redefined traditional standards of beauty, but also redefined articulations of the corpulent Black female body and its mythical connections to nurturing and mothering whiteness.

Queen Latifah’s contribution to hip-hop politics cannot be overstated. She is considered a pioneer of the rap art form and hip-hop culture. Since hip-hop culture is one that undermines dominant culture and standards, the process of naming is especially important for artists. Most hip-hop artists, especially rap, appropriate a name that defines their desired public persona and artistry in general. Historically, hip-hop and rap artists empower themselves with a title that speaks to their uniqueness and particular style. Dana Owens’ convergence on the rap scene occurred at a time when there were not many women practicing the art form and even fewer making a successful career out of it. Most of the women who were trying to break into hip-hop as rap artists during the 1980s
appropriated the styles and traditions of their male counterparts. For example, the legendary MC Lyte, who quickly rose to prominence in early hip-hop circles, not only referred to herself as “MC” but also often adorned clothing in similar fashion as successful male rap artists at the time; sporty sweat suits with sneakers.

Dana Owens decided on a very different path in regards to her hip-hop artistry, one that broke the male-dominated grounds of the culture and stands as the most challenging path to date. In addition to choosing a physical appearance that utilized African costumes and iconography, Owens settled on a name that affirmed the teachings of her mother and reflected a racialized gendered identity:

Then I got to Latifah… I thought the name was beautiful. I loved the way it sounded, how it rolled off my tongue. So I was already feeling that name, but when I read what it meant, I knew that it was me, Latifah: ‘Delicate, sensitive, kind.’ Yeah, that was me… For me, Latifah was freedom. I loved the name my parents gave me, Dana Elaine Owens. But I knew then that something as simple as picking a new name for myself would be my first act of defining who I was— for myself and for the world. (pgs. 16, 17)

In becoming “Latifah,” Dana Owens, established her individuality through her public persona; however, it was the precursor “Queen” to this name that further articulated a racialized gendered identity.

For Owens, “Queen” pays homage to an African past and present where women are centered and viewed as dominant in the Black community:

When I rhymed, I called myself the Princess of the Posse, because I was the only woman in my clique… Around this time, the late 1980s, the conflict in South
Africa was coming to a head…My mother and I would get into deep discussions about the plight of South African women and talk about how segregation and racism were alive and kicking right here…my mom and I revered those African women we didn’t know, because they seemed to be so close to the most royal ancestors of all time. Before there was a queen of England, there were Nefertiti and Numidia. The African queens have a unique place in world history. They are revered not only for their extraordinary beauty and power but also for their strength and for their ability to nurture and rule the continent that gave rise to the greatest civilizations of all time. These women are my foremothers. I wanted to pay homage to them. And I wanted, in my own way, to adopt their attributes. So “Queen” seemed appropriate. Queen Latifah. When I said it out loud, I felt dominant. I was proud. When I said “Queen,” it was like saying “woman.” Queen became synonymous with woman for me—the way every woman should feel or should want to feel. Queen is the ultimate woman. (pgs. 17,18)

Dana Owens conceptualizes her stage name, “Queen Latifah,” as one that reflects and is simultaneously bounded by ties to an African history and heritage. Her attraction to the ancient queens of the continent, as well as her concern for contemporary political and societal realities in African countries, allow her to perform an identity that prioritizes a Black female body. Moreover, her conceptualization of this racialized “Queen” as being the nurturer and ruler of civilization effectively articulates a “Mama” that is empowered and autonomous in nature. Thus, an African defined Black matriarch counters one that has its root in Eurocentrism and colonialism. “Queen Latifah,” as a persona, is rooted in a brand of Black Nationalism that affirms Africentric cultural styles and traditions;
however it counters traditional Black Nationalist impulses by affirming the Black female body as an empowered matriarchal figure and one that willingly takes charge of the community and consequently is the only one who can effectively rule due to her gendered identity. Via Queen Latifah, this body is articulated and performed as one that is intelligent, empowered, and revered.

By politicizing her body in hip hop culture, Queen Latifah performs corpulence in a way that is precedent to her specific 21st-century public identity and the overall cultural movement to redefine how thickness is perceived in American society. Further, Latifah’s performance of an Africentric Queendom in hip hop culture demands attention to this body and challenges popular depictions of Eurocentric beauty ideals. Many scholars, such as Robin Roberts (1996), have analyzed Latifah’s early work such as the single “Ladies First” from her debut album, All Hail the Queen, as an example of her feminist expression that emphasizes “female solidarity and sisterhood” (p. 58). However, I recognize her work as an intervention in the whiteness that characterizes American culture and society. It is also a corpulence interjection in traditional feminist expression, which rarely invests in progressive examinations of corpulence identity. My argument is that the Africentric Queendom articulated in her body of work and public persona is not only progressive in reading and assessing women’s concerns, but it is also communal in a sense that it satisfies womanist requirements that call for an interest and investment in the community as a whole. Therefore, the Africentric Queendom challenges traditional European-inspired patriarchal standards while it maintains “watch” over a community based on race and class. This performance of identity is counter to the historical “Mammy” construction of Black female bodies.
In addition to the power of naming herself, Queen Latifah’s adorning of African-inspired and influenced clothing also affirms her racialized identity. One of the most striking African customs that Queen Latifah appropriated was the headdress that is a tradition in many African societies and cultures. During the 1980s and 1990s Queen Latifah consistently wore headdress as an emblem of her Africentric Queendom. Further, Queen Latifah’s performance of this custom challenges the demeaning nature of Mammy’s customary style. Images of the Mammy have always contained a rag or bandana on her head. K. Sue Jewell (1993) argues, “The fashioning of handkerchiefs into headscarfs can be traced to Africa. The wearing of headgear arises from an African custom that necessitated the covering of the head, particularly in religious ceremonies but also on other occasions” (p. 39). The headdress has been misappropriated in Mammy’s construction and becomes one of the motifs that indicate her inability to be feminine and kempt. Thus, a tradition based on lived experiences is distorted to fit the mythology of the Black female body as inferior and emblem of difference based on deviancy.

Queen Latifah’s appropriation of fancy headdress to complete her Africentric Queendom persona literally and figuratively redresses the Black female body. It adds to the imagery of her racialized gendered identity as it recoups this identity in a powerful and autonomous way. For example, the album covers for *All Hail the Queen* and *Nature of Sista*’ (Figure 9), her second album released in 1991, show Queen Latifah in the headdress. On the cover of *All Hail the Queen*, she has a black headdress, which matches her black militaristic uniform. Standing with her head high and clutching the front of the blazer, Queen Latifah performs a challenge to the traditional Mammy construction and Black Power nationalism imagery of revolutionary organizations such as the Black
Panther Party for Self Defense. Moreover, her presence in the image is complimented by a black diagram of the African continent encircled with the name “Queen Latifah” in red and “All Hail the Queen” in green. These colors are the selected colors of many Black Nationalist organizations and groups dating back to the teachings of Black Nationalist “grandfather” Marcus Garvey. This imagery suggests her investment to her racialized gendered identity as it simultaneously challenges traditional imagery of the corpulent Black female body. As “mother” to an Africana community, the corpulent Black female body neither succumbs to prioritizing whiteness, nor does it play into a sexist agenda of Black Nationalism that forces women to the background and affirms men as the primary source of strength and leadership.

The imagery recurred in her early work and was an identifiable motif for her. Conversely, Queen Latifah worked the imagery to accompany her lyrical rap artistry. In her first album, *All Hail the Queen*, Queen Latifah’s agenda brings forth a message of empowerment to women. Gwendolyn Pough (2004) argues that:

> Black women participants in Hip-Hop culture have developed key survival skills and formulated various ways to bring wreck to the stereotypes and marginalization that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere. Through Hip-Hop culture, a generation of Black women is coming to voice and bringing wreck. These women are attacking the stereotypes and misconceptions that influenced their lives and the lives of their foremothers. (p. 87)

I would add that not only is Queen Latifah attacking misconceptions about Black women, but her corpulence performativity allows her to bring “wreck” to the traditional performance of weight, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Hence, traditional constructions
of Mammy are challenged in the autonomous and empowerment of Queen Latifah’s plays on race and gender relations.

In the first hit single released from the *All Hail the Queen* (1989) album, Latifah quickly rose from “Princess of the Posse” to “Queen” of hip hop artistry. In *Ladies First: Women in Music Videos*, Robin Roberts analyzes the hit single, “Ladies First,” as a reflection of Queen Latifah’s feminist concerns. Roberts argues that, “Being feminist does not mean abandoning her African heritage; instead it becomes a source of strength and power” (Roberts, 1996, 166). This single adequately articulates Queen Latifah’s womanist stance because in it she argues that not only have Black women been pivotal instruments in the formation of community and nation, but also that Black women have got to be a central focus of liberation struggles and concerns.

Roberts’ analysis of the video sheds light on the woman-centered imagery that Queen Latifah appropriated during this time in her career. The re-articulation of Black female bodily constructions is evident in the video. She states, “The photographs and pictures provide a history of Latifah’s African-American lineage. Through the images of African-American women who fought for freedom for women and blacks, she suggests that, in a number of different ways, women have been in the forefront of struggles against both forms of oppression” (Roberts, 1996, p. 173). The visibility of historical figures such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Madam C.J. Walker, and Angela Davis in her video allows for a naming and redressing of the Black female body. Having been left out of traditional historical narratives, Queen Latifah not only recognizes and names them as important instruments in the fight for racial and gender equality, but she also redresses their bodies and identifies the Black female body as an agent for change rather than a
passive participant. In doing so, Queen Latifah emphasizes that her own body and shared identity should be taken seriously and is needed in the continued fight against racial and gender discrimination.

Her alignment with historical gendered and racialized figures affirms the notion that women have come and continue to ‘come first.’ This alignment allows for a reconfiguration of the symbolic matriarchal Black body. Moreover, the thickness that Latifah possesses adds to a dramatic change in how this body is performed and demands new and broader perceptions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and notions of motherhood. By metaphorically tracing her roots to African queens, Latifah is re-articulating the strength, power, and leadership of the Black female and corpulent Black female bodies.

In addition to *All Hail the Queen*, Queen Latifah continues this reconfiguration throughout her rap career on the other rap albums she released. In the four albums, including, *Nature of a Sista* (1991), *Black Reign* (1993), and *Order in the Court* (1998), Queen Latifah articulates a Mama subjectivity that was founded on her racialized gendered identity. She begins her articulation of a specific gendered African royalty in “Princess of the Posse” by maintaining, “I’m the princess of the posse…Latifah run the family!” Eventually, Queen Latifah evolved from identifying as a ‘Princess’ to ‘Queen’ as her album soared up the charts. In the single “Latifah’s Law” she affirms the importance of her African heritage in the shaping of her identity. She stresses, “Peace to Africa…Can’t forget my other land. I won’t fulfill my heart unless I speak about the motherland…call me your Highness.” A demand for respectability is redefined in the hip hop arena. As a counter to historical requests for respectability by Black women, Queen Latifah’s demands are not apologetic nor are they reflective of existing demands. In
“Queen of Royal Badness” Latifah demands, “These are the words of a queen of a queendom…I’m the queen of royal badness! This is a queen speaking wise words…when you address me address me as ‘your Highness, one of hip hop’s finest!’” The song is an example of Queen Latifah’s eloquent construction of her identity. She reveals an intricate conception of Black female motherhood, one that is occupying a male dominated and defined space: hip hop.

The 1988 hit “Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children” is an interesting spin on kinship and it lyrically establishes Queen Latifah’s place in hip hop history and invention. Moreover, the song blatantly lays out her self-constructed Mama identity in music and redefines the corpulent Black female body’s societal “mothering” purpose. The twelve inch album single cover contains an illustration by Michael Uman. An illustration of a curvaceous woman, assumed to be Queen Latifah, carrying out motherly duties to three men-children in a fast sports car version of a stroller is the cover image of the album. Accompanying her large Africentric inspired headdress is form fitting clothing to match. This illustrates the symbolism in this Africentric hip hop mothering. As progressive hip hop artists and part of the racially and socially conscious genre of rap music during this time, members of the hip-hop group, De La Soul act as pupils and children of Queen Latifah, who posits herself as mother of this form of activism. In manipulating the assumptions regarding Black motherhood and implementing a hip-hop symbolic definition with the song, Queen Latifah undermines the big-breasted nurturing Mammy trope of Black motherhood found in visual and narrative cultures. Queen Latifah is viewed and portrayed as a figure of power whose mothering is not necessarily physical but more so psychological and cultural.
In the song Queen Latifah insinuates that “Mama gave birth to the soul children!” as a way to transfer knowledge and wisdom. The group members of De La Soul have always been known for their socially conscious lyrics, especially during this time of racially conscious hip hop. Therefore, Queen Latifah establishes her ‘mothering’ and nurturing of this consciousness by working with and mentoring them through her own socially conscious infused hip-hop lyrics and overall persona. More importantly, Queen Latifah does not simply maintain a role of actor in this school of hip hop consciousness; but rather, she makes herself mother and creator. In the song as the trio sing “go mommy” and “go ‘head mama get down,” she professes, “I’m back…a Black Queen upon the scene…Prince Paul produces this and it’s a fly one. It had to be that way, he’s one of my sons…Check the sounds of Mama Zulu…as I relay the story untold and if you’re wondering why I got kids so big…they weren’t born from the body, they were born from the soul!...It’s a family affair!”

“Mama Gave Birth to the Soul Children” was the beginning of Queen Latifah’s cultural mothering, which she continued throughout her rap career. She encourages her suitor in “Come into My House” to “come into” her “house” and she similarly invited audiences into her home where she was the queen and mother to a new form of parenting; one that involved racial, gender, and sexual communities. Dealing with racial and gender pride, domestic issues, and gender roles, Queen Latifah’s music became not only her platform but also a critical soundtrack for the Black community as a whole.

As she states in a popular song, “It’s a house party I’m hosting…for those who dare to…come into my house…from the queen of royal badness…I move multitudes. The Afro-Asiatic Black women, hard core, beat drummin’...it’s hard to keep a good
woman so I keep coming…I symbolize wisdom!” Queen Latifah’s mothering was initially intended for her immediate Black community. In the song, “Evil That Men Do,” she tried to instill pride in both females and males through a critique of the American welfare system, drug use, homelessness, and Black-on-Black crime. She claims, “Black-on-black crime only shackles and binds…stop! Bring about some type of peace not only in your heart but also in your mind. It will benefit all mankind.” This Black-on-Black crime theme has been a constant narrative in her work. In her fourth CD release, *Order in the Court*, she composed a tune about the subject. “Black on Black Love” is a poignant tale about the possibilities of unity within the Black community. The song is an extension of the female empowerment theme found in “U.N.I.T.Y” and “Ladies First” and reflects a concern about the community. Spanning beyond the realm of domestic violence, “Black on Black Love” is a cry for the Black community to come together and spread love instead of “hate” in order to survive and thrive. In addition to intra-racial crime, drug abuse, domestic abuse, and homelessness, Latifah discusses the beauty in the community in an effort to articulate an Africentric perspective. She states, “No need to fight. We stayed tight. We all loved our neighbor; had each other’s back…the whole village chipped in and raised that one child.”

In addition to the many issues that Queen Latifah addresses in the song, she also goes back to her Black Nationalist stance by saying “We stood Black and strong...supported our Black-owned stores...We all stuck tight...as a people we lived right...We took control of our own fate.” “Black on Black Love” reflects Queen Latifah’s conscious mothering of community in her music. Her dedication to disseminating knowledge, wisdom, and pride in culture and heritage extends the realm of her music.
career. Therefore, she does not simply promote women’s empowerment, but rather she is devoted to the survival and well-being of all humankind through her message of loving oneself first. Thus, her music is an extensive catalogue that addresses intersecting issues pertinent to multiple communities; such as racial pride, gender roles, domestic abuse, poverty, and child abuse.

There has been much work done on U.N.I.T.Y that identifies it as a text that supports Latifah’s claims of pro-woman concerns, including Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary Culture* (1994); however, I analyze the text as one that also reflects a Mama subjectivity, which consequently locates Latifah as the bearer of knowledge and disseminator of wisdom to the Black community. In doing so, I recognize the text as yet another example of the early Black *activism* of Queen Latifah. A closer examination of “U.N.I.T.Y” detects the work as also being an intervention in the whiteness that characterizes American culture and society. “U.N.I.T.Y” can be viewed as an example of Queen Latifah’s mothering to the community. Therefore, it challenges traditional European-influenced and inspired patriarchal standards and undermines traditional gender roles and expectations that are damaging to the Black community. In U.N.I.T.Y, she argues against domestic abuse and women’s objectification; however, she also questions the gender assumptions that forces Black males to try to reenact a kind of power that hinders the progress of both women and men. Hip hop scholar Bakari Kitwana (2002) summarizes the masculinity and misogynist tropes in certain forms of hip hop music. In *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* Kitwana argues:
Rap music has given young Black males a primary avenue through which to access public space—something that they have long lacked. That Black males’ sexist attitudes and gender conflicts have persisted as one of rap’s dominant themes for more than a decade suggests the extent to which these issues resonate with young black men. The very misogynist, antagonistic depictions of young Black women in a music form dominated by young Black males reflect the extent of the tension brewing between young Black men and women. (p. 87)

Queen Latifah’s gender critique and her progressive communal depictions serve as intervention in this crisis that Kitwana speaks of. Her dedication to Black female and male personal relations is an articulation of her hip hop form of mothering in an increasingly global hip hop culture. Not only does she espouse a pro-woman narrative in her work, but she also demonstrates a strong commitment to community that can thus be viewed as a womanist agenda. Alice Walker (1983) identifies that a womanist is “committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (1983, p. xi). Queen Latifah’s partnership with male hip hop artists like Heavy D, Naughty by Nature, and KRS-One reflects a hip hop community that influences the work of all involved. For example, she invites male artists on her work and she is invited to participate on their work. By participating in this community, Queen Latifah’s womanist agenda intervenes in traditional male spaces. Her form of mothering establishes her as mentor and equivalent to the most popular and dominant male hip hop artists. Therefore, Queen Latifah’s corpulent Black female body rearticulates hip hop expertise and legend as it centralizes itself in unfamiliar locales.

**HIP HOP'S FIRST LADY OF TELEVISION AND CINEMA**

A number of prominent African American female celebrities appear on a 2000 ‘collector’s’ edition of *Essence* magazine. The superstardom of most is exemplary and speaks for itself in that women like Queen Latifah, Jada Pinkett-Smith, Vivica Fox, Loretta Devine, Regina King, and Angela Bassett have been in cinematic box office hits. However, the layout of the image is particular and reflective of racial and gender
ideologies perpetuated in contemporary American society. Actress Halle Berry is in the center of the photo with her arms around Pinkett-Smith and Fox. Her body is the only one in the photo facing straight and the other women are surrounding her at different angles. The photo is symbolic of Berry’s ultra-superstardom in American culture. Berry has been centralized as the epitome of beauty and success for Black Hollywood. Important to note is how Berry’s biracial identity intersects with her thinness to perform and perpetuate a beauty ideal that marginalizes many Black women. Thinness is an aspect of identity that is unmarked in American society. It is assumed to be normal and a basic desire and reality of one who performs it. Consequently, corpulence becomes the marked difference and something that is undesirable and marginalized.

However, Queen Latifah’s corpulence performativity has managed to intervene in American cultural production so much so that in a 2009 edition of People Magazine, she is centered with images of Taylor Swift and Jennifer Lopez to her sides with the heading, “Play up your shape!” Her explosive music career led to an impressive television and film career that allows her to be a cinematic box-office draw and icon to many communities including women and African Americans. The empowering mother narrative that she eloquently sketched out in music followed her to her successful screen career. Moreover, Queen Latifah’s “radical womanist persona” (Zook, 1999, p.66) was the foundation for many of her characters in the beginning of her career.

Queen Latifah started her career in Black cultural productions where she appropriated her hip hop Africentric Queendom articulation of mothering. The hit sitcom, Living Single (1993-1998), exemplifies the fusion of Queen Latifah’s Africentric mothering with the character she plays. The sitcom, based on the lives of four friends and
housemates in Brooklyn, New York in the 1990s, was created by an African American woman, Yvette Bowser. Kristal Brent Zook (1999) argues that, “Because Bowser is a successful, independent woman, relatively sympathetic to feminist aims, her characters reflected this sensibility” (p. 68). Zook contends that Queen Latifah’s character, Magazine CEO and entrepreneur, Khadijah James posits a womanist presence in the show that refuses to align itself with traditional sexual and gender discourses.

I would like to extend Zook’s argument and suggest that the character Khadijah James mothers her sitcom friends and family as well as her audience in the same fashion that Queen Latifah does. Contrary to traditional Mammy characteristics such as asexuality and dependency, Khadijah is a complex character who possesses agency due to her beauty, style, and business sense. Like Queen Latifah’s own entrepreneurship, Khadijah is the owner and operator of her own image via her magazine, Flavor. Similar to Queen Latifah’s production company and record label, Flavor Unit, Flavor Magazine is under the mercy of its owner and her womanist and Africentric Queendom sensibilities. Through the magazine, Khadijah promotes a more complex representation of hip hop culture and other issues pertinent to the Black community. Therefore, her ownership and editorship of a Black cultural production encourage female empowerment and intervention. It is through the corpulent Black female body that culture is disseminated. This measure of authority in culture and community is in line with Queen Latifah’s off-screen persona and legacy. For example, Khadijah is the voice of reason in the series and as Queen Latifah argues that she “symbolizes wisdom,” so does Khadijah.

Krystal Brent Zook’s argument that “the radical womanist persona of Queen Latifah provided an implicit challenge to… the regressive politics of female desperation
evident in so many episodes of *Living Single*” (p. 68), is the beginning of an analysis of the character Khadijah James. One can reach beyond the angle of womanist politics to suggest that Khadijah’s presence in the series challenges corporeal politics due to the complex presentation and performativity of Black women’s bodies on the show during this time in U.S. history. The visibility of Black womanhood is multidimensional in the same gesture that writers such as Gloria Naylor have proposed. The four characters played by Queen Latifah, Kim Fields, Kim Coles, and Erika Alexander, all deviated from traditional European standards of beauty. Queen Latifah and Kim Coles’ weight fluctuated throughout the tenure of the series and Erika Alexander brought her dark skinned and braided haired Black woman’s presence to the show.

Also, the show was dedicated to uplifting the community though its portrayal of Black males. The four women’s closest friends were two African American males, Kyle and Overton, played by T.C Carson and John Henton respectively. The male friends were bonded to each other in the same fashion that they were bonded to the women. This community was based in Africentric narratives, which were in line with Queen Laitfah’s celebrity narratives at the time. For example, it was common to see Queen Laitfah in clothing that reflected an aspect of Black culture such as sweaters with historically Black colleges and universities on them. Kyle also wore his hair in locks and on one episode when his employer encouraged him to change his hair style for a job promotion he refused arguing, “It is just not me. My hair is not just for fashion it is a part of my heritage. It is a statement of pride. If you decide to promote me or not, I will not change my hair.” These Africentric performances along with tropes such as African art and home decorations, all reflected a dedication to racialized communities and therefore, Queen
Latifah’s womanist performance in the show was definitely communal. Because her body was centralized, the viewer could interpret mothering in unconventional ways being expressed on the show.

Furthermore, the construction of mothering is rearticulated even more due to the sexual ambiguity of Queen Latifah’s persona. Zook argues:

Latifah has been associated with nontraditional representations of femininity, sexuality, and power. Because of her own brand of ‘sexual liminality,’ she too has entered (whether willingly or not) into a discourse around both feminism and lesbianism…Latifah’s public and private personas reveal an ‘ability to slide up and down the registers of masculine and feminine’…I certainly do not mean to suggest here that Latifah is a lesbian. I neither know or seek the answer to that question…Rather, I’m interested here in Latifah’s refusal of monolithic definitions of ‘female’ experience and desire. This refusal, I would say, plays an important role in shaping gender representation (and reception) in Living Single.” (Zook, 1999, p. 69)

I concur with Zook’s assessment as I maintain that this liminality aspect of Queen Latifah’s celebrity persona extends to her Africentric Queendom and redefines the role of the corpulent Black female body and its mothering role in visual and narrative cultures. Thus, a reading of Queen Latifah’s body as lesbian rearticulates Black female mothering and corpulence in non-traditional ways and provides even more agency to this particular body.
Filmic Africentric Mothering

In the films Juice (1992) and House Party 2 (1991), the ‘Queen’ of Queen Latifah’s persona shines through her fictional characters in that they are both strong characters who continue to mother African American sensibilities in African American communities. For example, she transcends traditional gender expectations in her role as an influential and powerful music promoter that possesses the decision to accept or reject hopeful music artists in Ernest Dickerson’s Juice. Also, her character, Zora, in House Party 2, ‘mothers’ and nurtures her friend’s self-esteem and womanist consciousness. Zook summarizes:

Thanks to Zora’s influence, Sidney undergoes dramatic changes during her first year at college. She begins to wear headscarfs and kente cloth and, much to Kid’s dismay, even replaces a course entitled Afro-American Consciousness of the Sixties (which examines James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the theme of growing up as a black male in America) with one recommended by Zora-Male Mythology: A Feminist Perspective. (Zook, 1999, 71)

The character Zora embodies a feminist sensibility that is an important part of Queen Latifah’s public persona at this time. Moreover, Zora also resembles the redressing of corpulent Black bodies that are assumed to nurture whiteness. This intervention in whiteness is important when analyzing how corpulent Black female bodies are treated and perceived.

This hip hop mothering is continued in more contemporary Black cultural productions such as Brown Sugar (2002). Queen Latifah’s roles in Juice, House Party 2 and Brown Sugar are indicative of her elevated and authoritative position in hip hop.
culture and history. The positioning and reading of her characters in these films are critical in analyzing the perception and consumption of her in Black cultural productions and communities. Her characters possess a “mother” persona that serves as an expert in the history of the music and culture. In Juice she assumes the traditionally masculine-dominated role of producer and judge of hip hop artistry and in Brown Sugar, which uses hip hop as a dominant motif; she serves as the best friend and confidant to the main character, Sidney, played by Sanaa Lathan. Queen Latifah is the only female hip hop artist in these productions that showcase male hip hop legends such as Tupac Shakur, EPMD, Pete Rock, Big Daddy Kane, and Slick Rick. A critique of contemporary mainstream hip hop culture is one of the main narratives in Brown Sugar, which positions racially and socially conscious Queen Latifah’s character, Francine, and Mos Def’s character, Chris, as lovers. The role of Mos Def and Queen Latifah in the film can be viewed as a symbolical homage to a specific genre of hip hop that stresses racial and social commitments and priorities. Both artists are revered in hip hop communities as architects and experts of socially responsible hip hop. When Chris is finally swayed to join a newly found record label that produces positive and socially responsible hip hop music, it is a breath of fresh air for the lovers of traditional and authentic hip hop.

Moreover, Mos Def’s partnering with Queen Latifah in the film suggests their legendary status as traditional, and many would argue, ‘authentic,’ hip hop symbols.

Throughout the film, Francine encourages Sidney to go after her dreams and be strong in her choices and desires. While attending the wedding between the man that Sidney loves, Andre, and another woman, Francine urges a distraught, fearful, and heartbroken Sidney to be upfront with her desires for him. She served as an intervention
and impartation of knowledge, wisdom, and strength for Sidney saying, “She is going to marry your man! You’re just going to let it go down like that? SAY SOMETHING!”

Francine serves as a foundation for Sidney to strengthen her identity and womanhood because she herself is a strong and independent figure that acts as a role model for her.

On another note, Chris takes great care in romantically approaching Francine and when he finally expresses his attraction for her, she accepts him and even takes initiative in the courtship. The elevated status of Francine is reflective of Queen Latifah’s status in hip hop culture and history. The film not only posits Queen Latifah as a mentor and mother to other Black women, but it also constructs her as a sexual love interest, unlike traditional Mammy notions.

As in her role in the television sitcom, *Living Single*, Queen Latifah is a woman with agency, who spreads wisdom and knowledge to women and the community. If one were to read her work in this manner, it is evident that she has actually performed and enacted this motto throughout her career.

**MURKY MAINSTREAM WATERS AND “MAMMY” NOTIONS**

An important transitional period in Queen Latifah’s career was when she crossed over to mainstream cinema. There are performativities during this time that are open to interpretation due to the presence of white bodies and their specific connection to the “mothering” of Queen Latifah. Moreover, the presence of white communities disrupts the Queendom and threatens the power of Africentricity in her performativity in visual culture. Namely, the motion pictures *Chicago* (2002) and *Bringing Down the House* (2003), created a period of limbo for Queen Latifah’s Africentric Queendom persona.
which led to misappropriated acts of “mothering.” However, in the long run and overall, Queen Latifah’s celebrity persona interjects in traditional Mammy notions and constructions.

During the same year that Brown Sugar was released and became a hit with Black audiences, Queen Latifah also starred in Chicago, a multiracial cast musical about women on trial for murder in 1920s Chicago. Unlike many other roles in her career, Queen Latifah auditioned for the part of Matron “Mama” Morton. Queen Latifah said in an interview with CBS’ 60 Minutes, that she wanted the role and felt that she truly earned it. She also conceptualizes Mama Thornton in a way that aligns the development and dissemination of the character to her own grandmother:

I had to earn the role of Mama Morton. They did not see me, Queen Latifah, as Mama Morton but after three auditions I got that sucker!...I did not want to lose weight for Chicago because I felt Mama should be big and buxom...I was raised by a mother who told me that every black woman was a queen... I lost my grandmother while I was shooting Chicago...more sentimental value. My grandmother was that Mama Morton character...she was a big-breasted sexy woman that was a pistol.

If one were to read against the grain of the film and interpret Queen Latifah’s words and portrayal of Mama Morton as attempts to sexualize a “big-breasted” Black woman, an intervention in Mammy politics can be detected. Although Mama “mothers” the white characters in the film by offering advice and support, the stand-out part is her own dream sequence when she sings, “When You’re Good To Mama” in a lavish dress and accessories. In the scene Mama Morton sings, “I’m the biggest mother hen! When you’re
good to Mama, Mama’s good to you! There’s a lot of favors I’m prepared to do. You do one for Mama; she’ll do one for you!” An oppositional reading of the scene and character can provide “Mama” agency, especially when read against the early Hollywood characterizations of Mammy and corpulent Black female bodies. It is the dream sequence that possibly grants Mama subjectivity and redresses the corpulent Black body. Although Mama is “mothering” white characters, she does it on her own terms and only in expectation of returned favors. Mama also represents a sexual corpulent Black female body that is reminiscent of the complex body politics of early blues artists such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis (1999) argues that these artists and their work presented counter-discourses to the expected gender and racialized roles of Black women during the early part of the Twentieth century. She contends that gender and sexual expectations were disrupted by the performances and lyrics of the artists so much so that they possessed agency due to the progressive intervention in societal norms of their expressions. If Davis’ argument is used to read Mama Morton’s performance in the dream sequence, it can be determined that her performance and personality resemble those of Blues greats such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith rather than a Mammy construction. Therefore, corpulence revamps itself on Mama’s body in the midst of what appears to be a traditional and constricting role.

Another important role that some critics argue is a reflection of stereotypical cultural imagery is Queen Latifah’s character, Charlene Morton, who was wrongly convicted of a crime and seeks the assistance of a white lawyer, Peter Sanderson, played by Steve Martin in *Bringing Down the House*. The film is viewed as a reflection of racial
stereotyping. Charlene’s posturing in the film and her interactions with the white community reaffirm a dominant portrayal of whiteness. In “Queen Latifah, Unruly Women, and the Bodies of Romantic Comedy” Linda Mizejewski (2007) argues that “Charlene’s, tough, trash-talking posture and outrageous clothing are clearly meant to spark and satirize racist reactions from Peter and his horrified white neighbors and colleagues…The problem is that these stereotypes are the film’s sole markers of ‘authentic’ blackness.” Mizejewski goes on to argue that race prevents Charlene’s “unruly woman” characterization from being a subjective participant in a Hollywood romantic comedy (Mizejewski, 2007).

Charlene Morton is perhaps Queen Latifah’s most controversial role and presents in limbo Latifah’s celebrity persona and threatens her Africentric Queendom form of mothering. Mizejewski summarizes film theorist Judith Mayne’s (1993) argument that there exists a “…cultural narrative,” where, “‘a black character functions centrally and crucially to enable the fantasy of the white participants.” I agree that the appropriation of Queen Latifah’s body in certain productions can be viewed as stereotypical and in line with this cultural narrative; however, I would also like to emphasize Judith Mayne’s idea of ‘negotiation’ when reading Queen Latifah’s star persona against these portrayals. The assumption that “…a purely dominant reading would presume no active intervention at all on the part of the decoder, while a purely oppositional reading would assume no identification at all with the structures of interpellation in the text”(Mayne, 1993, p. 83). Further, bell hooks (1992) argues that “we (Black women) do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and
invent on multiple levels’ (hooks, 1992, p. 128). Thus, when taken into consideration her already established Africentric Queendom and womanist persona, her corpulent performativity can be read as a challenge to the same Mammy notions that she has been criticized as confirming in productions such as Bringing Down the House and Chicago. In essence, Black women can construct and read themselves as subjects in visual and narrative cultures.

I am not problematizing interracial interaction in visual culture, but rather I am complicating the assumptions about identity and consumption and each spectator’s relationship to a star’s celebrity persona and/or text. Conversely, each spectator brings something to the text that influences what she/he gets out of it. Queen Latifah represents different symbols for different groups and communities. For Black women, she remains a strong voice of intervention in traditional beauty ideals and gender constructions. She is a staple in Black cultural narrative and visual productions and revered in particular communities. Jeannine Amber describes her in an October 2006 edition of Essence magazine as, “a rapper, singer, spokeswoman, Oscar nominee, cover girl, fashion designer, real estate mogul, full-size woman and now movie producer-with the most exquisite cheekbones-she’s repping for every sister who ever thought she should have been a star…”

AFRICENTRIC QUEEN OF THE SCENE

There are important filmic and cultural productions where Queen Latifah’s involvement continues her Africentric Queendom. I argue that her presence and role in
Life Support (2007) interjects Queen Latifah’s original form of mothering to racial and
gendered communities. The HBO film Life Support, stars Queen Latifah as a grassroots
activist who is HIV positive. The film, written by Nelson George and based on a true
story, is set in New York and portrays Ana as a woman who overcomes the hardships of
drug addiction and low self-esteem to empower other women through her community
activism. The drama presents a realistic story that is crucial when analyzing racialized
and gendered communities because Black women are specifically vulnerable to
contracting HIV and other diseases (Collins, 2004). Therefore, the film can be viewed as
a form of activism. Similar to Queen Latifah’s recurrent call for social responsibility in
regards to safe sex, the character fights for the protection of, and love for, Black women’s
bodies as she educates women and men on safe sex. Because Ana’s story is based on a
true story, Queen Latifah’s portrayal of her is critical when assessing her corpulence
performativity. In this narrative, the corpulent Black female body is an activist and
mothers wisdom to the community in regards to serious issues plaguing it. Her
performance earned Queen Latifah the Golden Globe, Image, and Screen Actors Guild
awards in 2008. Queen Latifah’s dedication to fighting HIV is also reflected in her
participation in events and performances that fund AIDS research (Bloom, 2002).

Queen Latifah has been involved in other productions and activities that
perpetuate and reflect her dedication to Black communities. She has authored two literary
texts that aim to uplift the esteems of Black girls and women. Her mothering in her
memoir text, Ladies First: Revelation of a Strong Woman (2000), and her storybook,
Queen of the Scene (2006), resembles the Africentric Queendom in her early work. In
both texts, Queen Latifah espouses a narrative that seeks to uplift Black females as it
undermines the gender and racial roles that have marginalized them in American society. As she tells Black women that they are inherently queens in both texts, she manages to convey a message of empowerment for Black females that is still lacking in contemporary visual and narrative cultures. For example, the protagonist of her storybook is a small Black female who attests, “I’m queen of the scene. Baby, I’m a star! I make games look easier than they are…I’m the best when it comes to hand- and stickball- I hit that ball so hard, it can break a brick wall” (Latifah, 2006, pgs. 2, 8). The storybook is a reflection of Queen Latifah’s mothering to younger generations in the spirit of her own mother’s teachings.

*Ladies First* is categorized as “Inspiration/Biography,” thus it is not solely an autobiography, but more of a testimony of Queen Latifah’s lived experiences in an effort to uplift other females. She states in the text:

A queen is a queen when riding high, and when clouded in disgrace, shame, or sorrow, she has dignity. Being a queen has very little to do with exterior things. It is a state of mind… I’m writing this book to let every woman know that she, too- no matter what her status or her place in life- is royalty. This is particularly important for African-American women to know inside and out, upside down, and right side up. For so long in this society, we have been given-and have allowed ourselves to take- the role of slave, concubine, mammy, second-class citizen, bitch, ho. Many of us have been so hurt and dogged out by society-and by men and by life-that we can’t even wrap our brains around the notion that we deserve better, that we are queens. (Latifah, 2000, p. 2)
The othermothering nature of these texts takes on new meanings when they are placed in the hands of Black girls and women. Moreover, Queen Latifah’s Africentric Queendom and othermothering presence in contemporary visual and narrative cultures is one that counters and challenges the dominant readings of her presence in productions such as *Bringing Down the House*. She not only empowers women and girls to love themselves, she also challenges traditional gendered notions and restrictions. She says in her summary of the protagonist of *Queen of the Scene*, “This ruler of the playground has got game. B-ball, stickball, jump rope, soccer—there’s nothing she won’t try. And watch out, boys, because she’s representing all the girls, and the Queen has girl power to the max!” (Latifah, 2006, p. 1). In addition to the visual and literary aspects of the storybook, *Queen of the Scene* also comes with a CD that showcases Queen Latifah rhythmically reading the story in her characteristic confident voice.

Queen Latifah’s royal status is also appropriated for other literary projects that involve the uplifting of women and racialized communities. Activist Terrie Williams enlists Queen Latifah to do the introduction to her uplifting text, *Stay Strong: Simple Life Lessons for Teens* (2002), aimed at raising awareness and the self esteem of teens. Queen Latifah begins the text by saying, “…it’s ok to be special in your own way— in your style, your choice of music, the things you want to do and the way you want to be. We’re all different. I mean, how many other Queen Latifah’s do you know?” Queen Latifah’s ability to positively inspire others has rearticulated the mothering role of corpulent Black bodies.

Queen Latifah’s corpulence performativity also interjects in traditional spaces where gender has been pronounced and constructions of femininity and masculinity are
rendered white. Queen Latifah is the spokesperson and face in multiple Procter and Gamble products. A reading of her CoverGirl cosmetics promotions posits Queen Latifah as a redress of the corpulent Black female body due to the nature of the promotions and her place in them. She is not simply promoting cosmetics, but rather, bringing her Africentric Queendom to a space traditionally reserved for white female bodies. The narrative of being ‘comfortable in one’s own skin’ is prevalent in the promotion. Her “Queen Collection” advertises cosmetics that bring out the “natural hues” and colors of one’s skin. One of the earliest photos for the endorsement featured Queen Latifah wearing a plaid beret with her hand on her chin in what can be read as a traditionally masculine cool pose. The small diamond earring in her ear and the soft pink nail polish conflict with the masculine clothes: a blazer worn over a stripped dress shirt. Moreover, this photo reflects the redefinition of gender roles and expectations aspect of Queen Latifah’s celebrity persona. The beret-style Kangol hat was a popular visual motif in early male hip hop performance. Many popular male hip hop artists, such as LL Cool J, have adorned the style of headdress and created fashion trends in hip hop culture. Queen Latifah’s presentation challenges gender expectations and blurs a blatant traditional performance of femininity. Moreover, her appropriation of the clothing and her stance conflict and possibly intervene in the presentation of make-up. It certainly complicates a dominant reading and definition of femininity.

On a recent CoverGirl commercial she attests, “One size fits all? No Way!” The commercial espouses that women’s identities and bodies are multi-dimensional and it borrows from Queen Latifah’s personal and public motto of celebrating difference. This reading of the commercial can transcend even the basic and simplistic perception of
cosmetics. On another commercial, Queen Latifah is shown in a black ‘After-Five’ gown with the paparazzi and thinner, model-like admirers watching her walk down a ‘red carpet.’ She smiles and is the primary focus of the gaze as she strolls down the carpet to the waiting limousine. The centering of Queen Latifah in such a traditional Eurocentric and ultra-feminine space allows the viewer to witness corpulence intervening and performing in a locale where it is not usually revered. This interruption, via Queen Latifah’s corpulent Black female body, poses a threat to traditional gender and racial narratives, thus, upsetting familiar body politics and presenting new ways of seeing and perceiving racialized and gendered bodies. One can read the CoverGirl promotion as not merely assimilation to European standards of beauty or white patriarchy, but rather as pushing specific boundaries and forcing corpulent Black female bodies into spaces and locations that has historically refused them. In the productions, the corpulent Black body is centralized.

Another Procter and Gamble campaign that centers on the body of Queen Latifah is the “My Black is Beautiful” promotion. The promotion attests on the company website that, “Our extraordinary new initiative, My Black is Beautiful, celebrates the diverse collective beauty of African-American women and encourages black women to define and promote our own beauty standard — one that is an authentic reflection of our indomitable spirit.” This promotion is articulated through media outlets that are targeted to Black communities; namely Black Entertainment Television (BET) and Essence Magazine. It professes to instill pride in Black women and young girls and “recognizing that beauty and self-confidence are intrinsically linked, My Black is Beautiful is designed to ignite and support a sustained national conversation by, for and about black women —
the way we are reflected in popular culture and how we serve as the catalyst for a movement that effects positive change."

The “My Black is Beautiful” campaign is a spin-off from the “Queen Collection” in that Queen Latifah is used in the promotion to inspire women of color; particularly Black women, to admire and embrace their identities. Ironically, the slogan, “My Black is Beautiful” can be perceived as similar to the “Black is Beautiful” and “I’m Black and I’m Proud” slogans of the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, Queen Latifah is directly linked to a contemporary form of Black pride in yet another way. Her positioning in such a campaign allows the corpulent Black female body to be the location from which such rhetoric is disseminated. Unlike the primarily masculine narratives of the 1970s Black Power movement, which centered Black males as the emblem of pride and activism, Queen Latifah is the focal point of an articulation of Black pride that targets women first.

Her promotions and dedication to Black bodies elevate the corpulent body to a status that it has not traditionally occupied in visual spaces. In an April 2005 edition of *Upscale* magazine she argues “One thing that I resent about the fashion industry is the way it defines plus size…I hate that. I mean, you’ve got 60 million women in this country who are supposedly overweight. That’s a huge majority, so what makes us plus size?”(Odum, 2002, pgs 72-75). The unity of race, gender, and weight allows Queen Latifah the ability to redress a body that is marginalized and she “was recruited by executives at Curvation, a lingerie company for the full-busted woman, to launch her own collection of” undergarments (Odum, 2002, p. 75). Her visibility in visual and narrative cultures has carried the corpulent Black female body to places and narratives that are generally closed to it.
“CALL ME YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Most notably, Queen Latifah’s role as business woman performs corpulence in new and innovative ways. It is this role that merges all of the many facets of her celebrity persona. Conversely, her role as business woman and company CEO redefines traditional Mammy notions because she is in charge and behind the scenes of not only many of her own projects and productions, but those of others as well. This role as producer further affirms her Africentric Queendom mothering and places the corpulent Black female body in traditionally masculine defined spaces. Queen Latifah is one of the first Black females to own and operate a production and record company, Flavor Unit Entertainment, which promotes the advancements of other artists through recording contracts, management, and motion picture involvement.

Queen Latifah’s dedication to ‘lifting’ as she ‘climbs’ is evident in her endeavors. Managed by her partner, Shakim Compere, and herself, Flavor Unit is responsible for the uplift of Black bodies in narrative and visual cultures. An example of the company’s involvement in the recording industry is the 2002 album release of “100% Hater Proof” by The Unit, a group of aspiring rap artists. The cover of the album showcases the eight male artists encircling Queen Latifah who sits in a similar sweat suit with her head tilted and arms crossed. The standing men are gazing in the camera confrontationally; however, Queen Latifah’s gaze is direct and confident and the picture seems to suggest that the males are members of her “team” and she is the authoritative figure and “coach” of the team. Moreover, her roles as producer and manager of the rap artists are reflected in the image and undermine traditional gender expectations and roles.
Flavor Unit was also involved in the production of films such as *Beauty Shop* (2005) and *The Cookout* (2004), which also starred Queen Latifah. Queen Latifah plays a chic but down-to-earth salon owner who experiences love in *Beauty Shop*. The film challenges beauty and gender ideals through Queen Latifah’s corpulence performativity. There is evidence of her curvaceous empowerment narrative early in the film when her character, Gina, asks her daughter, “Vanessa do you think these pants make my butt look big? Perfect!” Queen Latifah’s resistance to conform to traditional standards of beauty is pronounced in the film as she denounces the confining attitudes of other characters in the film that wish to do so. Her voice as owner of a beauty shop is articulated in the film in ways that actually challenge Eurocentric notions of femininity.

Queen Latifah’s ownership of the salon in *Beauty Shop* begs the question as to how race, gender, and class impact a character in a film. Moreover, male actors such as Al Pacino have been known to play roles of authority; however, if we read many of Queen Latifah characters in the same way, we can detect that many roles would could be characterized using the same definition and are in line with her mothering wisdom to certain communities. For example, like Khadijah in *Living Single*, Gina not only manages her own business but she also serves as a voice of reason throughout the film. Her bond with other Black females in the film can represent a sisterhood that Queen Latifah’s personal adventures articulate. Women do not have the luxury of being viewed as playing figures of “authority” due to the historical reality of intersecting race, color, gender, sexuality, class, and age constructions. However, an alternate reading of Queen Latifah’s work in film observes a pattern of authority in her persona that manifest itself in many different ways. Queen Latifah’s own conception of such characterization can be summed
up in a 2007 interview she did with *Ebony* magazine where she states that her roles are “strong female characters” and admitted that she “loves playing” them.

Outside of the realm of film, it is evident that Queen Latifah’s desire is to employ women and people of color and she uses her own career and celebrity status to do so. She told *Ebony* magazine in 2005:

> Every time we do one of these films, we pay back our community with employment... Just doing the talk show, we employed 150 people. I had a mandate that African-Americans be hired, so that went from me down the line. When I get in a position to do that, I can lay down the law like that. It’s not that I’m excluding people, but I’m including people... including my people. The other day I ran into one of the producers I had hired for the talk show. She is now working at BET. She said, ‘I want to thank you for giving me an opportunity. I have been doing my thing ever since.’ (Norment, 2005, pgs. 130-135)

This dedication to community is a large part of her personal commitment to the Black community and renders her an important twentieth century activist. Treach, rap artist in the Grammy nominated and New Jersey based group Naughty by Nature, articulates Queen Latifah’s hip hop mothering. The group was managed and given their break in the music industry by Queen Latifah. He said on CBS’ *60 Minutes*, “La was always like a big sister... She represented the female empowerment. She turned a lot of adults on to hip hop.” Another member of the group, Vinnie, adds, “She is naturally a Queen.”
RACIALIZED CORPULENT QUEENLINESS

Queen Latifah’s persona and presentation make her a hot commodity and favorite among many audiences. White dominance and privilege assume that the English musical group, the Beatles, is revered by everyone. This ideology also assumes that Elvis is universally recognized as the “King” of music when in fact his fan base is probably not as large as assumed. This is articulated in the high visibility of both acts via white dominated and operated media. In her assessment of whiteness and visual culture, duCille (1998) argues that political and national narratives were scripted on the body of white child star Shirley Temple in the 1930s and 1940s. Also, even though Temple’s Black co-star, Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson, was more popular and recognized in Black communities, the inaccurate assumption was that all groups and communities had the same admiration of Temple. I would like to challenge the assumptions that whiteness mandates. Texts are viewed and perceived differently by different spectators and at different historical moments. Identities, shaped by personal and cultural histories, influence the consumption of Queen Latifah in any given text. She can portray a role that performs itself in very stereotypical ways, but yet she still maintains a strong following due to her personal activism, legacy, and historical roots in racialized and gendered communities. Her commitment to these communities allows for negotiated and oppositional readings of her work.

Analyses and perceptions of Queen Latifah must take into account the early and current constructions of her body as an Africentric motherly queen. These constructions are still very important parts of her public celebrity persona and they have been staples in her career. Many communities, such as Black women, have come to negotiate their
readings of Queen Latifah in cinema and television with her overall legacy and Africentric Queendom. Therefore, even though some may argue that traces of ‘Mammy’ have contemporaneously surfaced and are present in some performances by Queen Latifah, in the end she remains one of the most visibly revered Black women in American society. As her name implies, Queen Latifah is royalty and has commanded respect and recognition as a voluptuous Black woman. Her influence on gender roles and expectations by redefining femininity has yet to fully be measured. In April of 2005 she told *Vogue* magazine, “Hey, look, I’m on the cover of many magazines. Number-one billing on a lot of these movies, and other people out there can look and say, ‘There is someone I can identify with. There’s someone I kind of look like’” (VanMeter, 2005, pgs. 340-343, 397).

Her presence in visual and narrative cultures transcends traditional constructions of the Black female body as she continues to inspire racial and gender communities. Her articulation of the corpulent female body challenges popular social narratives that marginalize it. Queen Latifah posits the corpulent Black woman as mother of knowledge, wisdom, history, and culture. She told *Upscale* magazine, “Beauty radiates from the inside out…when you love yourself enough on the inside, all that love kind of radiates out and turns into confidence and joy and a certain attitude that inspires people” (Odum, 2002, p. 74). Queen Latifah’s celebrity persona accurately and innovatively grants subjectivity to the mothering possibilities of the corpulent Black body.
CHAPTER 5

Baby, I’m F.A.T!’ Mo’Nique’s ’Mama’ Subjectivity and the Re-articulation of Corpulence Identity

Figure 10. Mo’Nique receiving Academy Award for “Best Supporting Actress” (2010). (Michael Caulfield).

“I’ve had people say to me, ‘I don’t appreciate you in that mini skirt.’ Well look the other way! I have a lot of people who like to look at me! I like being on the stage when there is one thousand to forty thousand people watching my fat walk across the stage. Watching me, the fat girl they would not let be a cheerleader!” ~ Mo’Nique
The 82\textsuperscript{nd} Academy Award winner for Best Supporting Actress in a film was presented to actress and comedienne, Mo’Nique. She graciously and stylishly walked to the stage in a blue fitted ankle length dress with flowers planted in the right side of her hair, which was pulled to the back. Her corpulent frame swayed like a high class top model. Upon receiving the award she dedicated it to legendary actress Hattie McDaniel. I read Mo’Nique’s homage to Hattie McDaniel as extending beyond the fact that McDaniel was the first African American woman to win an Academy Award. Mo’Nique’s celebrity presence and narratives regarding the body in American culture mark corpulence as a facet of difference. Thus, McDaniel’s status as a corpulent Black woman in visual culture is important because of the character roles “fatness” forced her to play during the Classic Hollywood era. I would like to shed light on the notion that McDaniel’s place in history is more relevant to the moment than Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, or Whoopi Goldberg in Mo’Nique’s acceptance speech. Moreover, Mo’Nique is reclaiming McDaniel’s specific Black female body; one that performed corpulence in ideals about nationhood and American identity. Mo’Nique’s attempt to redress McDaniel’s body has been occurring long before she was nominated for an Academy Award. I argue that Mo’Nique has attempted to redefine corpulence identity in American society. An intersectional analysis of Mo’Nique celebrity persona will identify how the corpulent Black female body has been scripted with ideals regarding beauty and American identity.
GOOD FENCES ARE MEANT TO KEEP OUT “FAT” BODIES

I would first like to analyze how Mo’Nique’s body has been scripted with political and social narratives in an effort to identify how corpulence has been racialized and gendered in American society. A textual analysis of the 2003 HBO motion picture film, Good Fences, acknowledges how race and gender intersect with corpulence to perform political and social narratives regarding social mobility and standing. Mo’Nique’s corpulence performativity in this film addresses the racial and gender ideologies associated with corpulence in a similar way that The Bluest Eye is read in the second chapter of this project. Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona attempts to redress corpulence identity in American culture in the face of constant tension, contradictions, and ambiguities.

Good Fences explores racial identity and one that depends heavily on visual cues to carry the spectator through its storyline. Set primarily in the 1970s, the film also uses flashbacks to tell a story of racial relations and identity formation in America pre- and post- Civil Rights movement era. The film traces the life of a Black family in Connecticut, where success is tied to assimilation to a Eurocentric world-view. The family is challenged daily as they struggle with societal racial standards and pressures. Adapted from Erika Ellis’ novel of the same title Good Fences brings to life a narrative that lacks an in depth physical description of Mo’Nique’s character, Ruth Crisp. Thus, similar to its introduction in American society, moving picture creates a visual to accompany ambiguously written narratives, especially those dealing with the body. Moreover, the film reflects a corpulence performativity that examines and sustains racial
and national ideologies. Even though the novel lacks an in depth physical description of Ruth Crisp, the film’s positioning of the character, played by Mo’Nique, presents an intersection of race, gender, class, and corpulence that advances hegemony in its performance. The mere casting of Mo’Nique in the role forces an examination of corpulence performativity because of her self-imposed bodily narratives, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Like the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, socioeconomic mobility has repercussions in regard to race and gender. For the Black body to move economically and socially in American society, it needs to reflect very specific narratives. Moreover, *Good Fences* insinuates that corpulence has a very specific role in this reflection and construction of racial identity. I am reading this film in an effort to extend my analysis of how corpulence performs itself and has meaning in racial ideologies as indicated in visual and narrative cultures.

The film stars Danny Glover and Whoopi Goldberg as a married couple, Tom and Mabel Spader, who raise two children as Tom Spader strategically moves through the judicial ranks from basement attorney to prestigious judge. His role in the spatial basement of his employer is symbolic of his journey. As Tom literally ascends from the basement to a judge upstairs in the building, he does so symbolically in American society. Tom’s ambition allows the family to move from a humble home to the prestigious and affluent Greenwich, Connecticut community. However as he continuously receives affirmation in the workplace he compromises his racial consciousness and identity.
The film begins at the family’s humble residence in Hamden, Connecticut in 1972. The opening shot is of the two children playing in the backyard while Mabel cooks hamburgers on the grill. Thus, food and dwellings are emphasized upfront and remain important tropes throughout the film to demonstrate economic mobility and racial identity. The high shot of Mabel breaking the egg in the ground meat moves to close-up shots of the meat on the grill as Mabel orders her daughter to clean off the small patio table. These shots are important in analyses of scenes later in the film. The economic mobility narrative is interwoven with food and dwellings from the beginning of the film as Tom arrives in a new Italian sports car that he insists will get him “the promotion” that he desires.

Tom’s strong ambition fosters the social mobility storyline, which ends with the couple becoming neighbors with the corpulent Ruth Crisp. Tom and Mabel both experienced racially traumatic events in the South during the years before the Civil Rights movement. One such incident involved Tom being dragged and almost hanged by a group of white supremacists. Even though he manages to escape the attack, the blood stains cast a red veil over his eyes and influences how he views himself and the world. Moreover, it is from this forced position of inferiority and red veil that he views life and thus attempts to escape ‘Blackness’ and assimilate to dominant Eurocentric ideals. Throughout the film, the color red is treated as a symbol for what Tom feels is ‘Blackness’ and the cause and remembrance of the traumatic racist event in his past.

Since the visibility of Black people is high due to technology, the overall celebrity persona of many Black artists is scripted with ideological narratives. For example, Whoopi Goldberg’s character, Mabel, wears a straight wig. For Whoopi to perform the
role in her natural and locked hair would go against the narrative of the film and the performance of the character. Since Mabel is socially ascending and assimilating to a white dominant environment, a natural hair style would go against her character’s situation and bring more political narratives that Whoopi Goldberg herself possibly carry; especially in regards to hair politics. Conversely, Mo’Nique’s “pro-curvy” narrative challenges the dominant narratives that society places on her body in general and in the film. Nonetheless, it is evident how these dominant narratives function in Good Fences.

Tom’s aspiration to forget and transcend the racially charged and traumatic past is demonstrated in his ability to disconnect himself from ‘Blackness’ by prosecuting Black clients and defending the white clients who are charged with hate crimes. This assimilation and compromising of his racial consciousness is evident in his insistence on changing the behaviors and attitudes of his family. As the film shows the family moving to Greenwich, Connecticut they arrive on “Serendipity Street” to an immaculate home with white walls, cabinets, and carpeting. As Mabel enters the large kitchen, her mind flashes back to her upbringing in Lovejoy, Illinois as she remembers her parents’ insinuation that it will be hard for someone to marry her “dark and ashy as she is.” This darkens Mabel’s self-concept until she finds Tom, who marries and promises to take care of her. The connection of her present day reality to the past presents the dilemma that Mabel faces. Even though she realizes that Tom’s aspirations are compromising his racial consciousness and sensibilities, she struggles with her own self-esteem against the ‘luck’ she feels marrying Tom has brought her as a poor dark-skinned female in American society.
When the family returns to Mabel’s hometown for a family gathering she takes note of Tom’s behavior; however, she fails to challenge it. Moreover, food is the trope that identifies Tom’s assimilation. As Tom shuns her family, Mabel says to him, but only in her head, “You are turning up your nose to Aunt Sissy’s neck bones!” Tom’s disgust of the traditional ‘soul’ food that is served at the gathering is reflective of his growing disdain for anything he considers to be ‘Black.’ This scene is contrasted with scenes of the family in their new home. Their first night in the home takes place as they have dinner on the white floors using chop sticks. Also, the festival of Thanksgiving is important as the film follows the family through years of their celebration of it. The grilled hamburgers in the first scene of the film quickly become replaced with the family sitting around a large table with food prepared by a maid. As the years pass, the table becomes larger and the food less visible. Therefore, the family drifts apart literally and figuratively as they assimilate further to the dominant ideals of whiteness and American culture.

In the beginning of the film, Mabel is seen making homemade Strawberry Daiquiris with her Latina and Black friends as they laugh while watching soap operas on the television. When the Black friend, who wears a large afro and African-inspired clothing, visits Mabel at her new house, she hardly recognizes her and her children in their new environment. The friend’s Afro is scripted with political and social narratives of Blackness, therefore, when it appears in the Greenwich environment it is out-of-place and presented as an annihilated narrative in the dominant and Eurocentric culture. In *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (2002), Maxine Craig identifies the significance of the Afro hairstyle during this time. The natural
hairstyle celebrated “...the beauty of Black women’...and, ‘...became a trope for the Black Power Movement”(Craig, p. 72). Moreover, the children’s growth in this environment reflects the assimilation and racial conscious compromise of the family as the daughter desires blue eye contacts, long straight hair, and Caucasian romantic partners in an effort to deny any trace of Blackness in her identity.

As the story progresses, it is evident that Mabel’s own consciousness is compromised as she assimilates more to this environment as well. Moreover, it is not culture and traditions that determine consciousness here; but rather, self-concept and world view. Mabel compromises her friendly and down-to-earth personality as the film progresses and adopts a world view that seeks to isolate her from any signs of Blackness. Ultimate Blackness, of course, is reflected in the body; the poor, racialized, gendered, and corpulent body. Mabel’s interaction with her new white and wealthy neighbors fosters her to change her own habits and behaviors as she entertains them. Her maid recommends feeding them snacks of “thin white bread, mayonnaise, and cucumbers” to satisfy their selective tastes. Although foreign to Mabel, she gives in to the suggestion when she hosts the ladies. This scene is scripted in racial narratives and symbols as Mabel wears the dominant color black and the white ladies wear the dominant color white with traces of black in their clothing and accessories. Thus, color is central to the racial narrative of the film. The literal and symbolic ‘whiteness’ of her home becomes more dominant as Mabel and Tom attempt to blend into the Greenwich community.

Mo’Nique’s character enters the story at a time when Mabel is farthest from her ‘Blackness’ and is appropriating the behaviors, actions, and attitudes of those around her. For example, she starts taking sedation medication like her neighbors and she becomes
estranged from her house help and disgusted by people with less money than she.

Previously, Mabel would engage in conversation and watch soap operas with the help; however, she becomes more detached from such interactions and even begins to take part in a hierarchal relationship as evident in her orders of “put your apron on!” to the maid. Thus, as the family engages in behavior that indicates their true appropriation of dominant ideals, a poor corpulent Black woman who recently won the Florida lottery moves into the Greenwich neighborhood and next door to the Spaders. This specific body indicates the ultimate challenge to their assimilation.

Ruth Crisp’s entry into the neighborhood makes her only the second Black occupant of a home on Serendipity Street. The transformation of the family from a Baptist to Episcopal religious denomination and their social mobility is threatened when Ruth moves into the house next door to them. Mabel’s medication induced state and the bright glare of her large diamond ring cause her to almost wreck into the moving van carrying the belongings of Ruth Crisp. The camera captures a side shot of Ruth Crisp dressed in a red sweat suit and confidently going about her own way. Mabel’s excitement that her new neighbor is Black is challenged by a call from her husband,

Tom: Please just tell me she’s (another neighbor) just punch drunk!

Mabel: Who?

Tom: Did some woman just move next door to us? Of all the streets in the U.S. she chooses to live on ours! They’ll assume that we invited her. We are so close now. The last thing we need is for people to think that we were the beachhead for this ghetto invasion! Don’t go over there!
Tom’s words are enough to compromise Mabel’s good sense and prevent her would-be hospitality to her new neighbor. Therefore, Mabel decides to ignore Ruth and treats her as an anomaly in the community.

The remainder of the film is spent on Ruth’s presence in the community and the perceived threat she presents to the Spader’s assimilation into the community. Moreover, this “invasion” of Blackness counters the presence of whiteness and the Spaders’ hope of becoming invisible in the community. Shots of Ruth, primarily wearing red colors, occupy the remainder of the film. Mabel views Ruth from afar doing things such as taking her garbage out and yelling at the mailperson for misplacing her mail. Mabel finally decides to speak to her one day and insincerely apologizes for not interacting more. Ruth responds, “Well you ain’t the only one. Girl, I ain’t got nothing from no one.” She then walks away and says under her breath, “Don’t come say hi to me after I’ve been living here a whole damn month. I don’t know what kind of shit you trying to play!” It is in this scene that the women first interact. It is evident that Mabel is conflicted about her behavior and compromised racial consciousness; however, she chooses to obey and follow her husband and stay away from Ruth.

One of the most important scenes in the film involves the first Thanksgiving holiday that Ruth Crisp spends in the neighborhood. The food and festivities are highlighted in both households to identify the collision of worlds. As the Spader's sit at their large table and pick at the small plates of food in front of them, the music of funk superstar Bootsy Collins blares from the Crisp’s backyard through their windows. Ruth has invited family and friends to share her holiday and their presence is a total embarrassment to Tom. The camera goes back and forth from Ruth dancing in her bright
red dress to the Spader’s quiet dining room. Tom is disgusted as he reacts by exclaiming an imaginary conversation in the Crisp household. He mimics (in partial exaggerated dialect), “Us don’t worry about the vote, us just got to have the pig feet!” He then angrily asks his wife “Is this Martin Luther King Street? I work too hard. I dedicate my life to distinguish myself from these niggers. If you look in the nigger handbook I swear to God you’ll see her picture!” The juxtaposition of the two families seeks to identify how the Spader’s have conceptualized Blackness. The performativity of corpulence and food serve as cues for racial identification and social mobilization in the film. Therefore, the behaviors and attitudes of Ruth Crisp and her family members are defined as “Black” and a far cry from what the Spader’s hope to be in a white dominated society.

As Tom Spader continues to have bad dreams about the traumatic events he suffered in the past, Ruth makes the boldest move yet, one that drives him over the edge and into insanity from trying to deal with it. After Ruth decides to purchase an empty house on Serendipity Street for a relative, not only do the white neighbors approach Mabel in an effort to influence her to deter Ruth’s actions but Tom also demands that she tries to convince her from the purchase.

Tom: …Three is the apocalypse. Every step we have taken has led us to this moment. Though I spent my whole life getting us to the goal line, you are the one who is going to win the game for us

Mabel: I can’t…

Tom: Tell her that nobody pays cash for a house, no matter how much they have. After all of these years, I need you to do this for us, for the children!
Tom’s words about family present conflict for Mabel and she thinks about approaching Ruth for the sake of her own personal dreams of family. Later, she takes pills and the film ventures to a dream sequence where Mabel’s deceased parents serve as her conscience. They insist that she has forgotten who she is and that it is “time for you to come home girl!” Mabel responds, “It’s too late for that. As long as I trust in Tom…” Her words would come to haunt her as she drifts to sleep because of the medication.

Tom’s decision to set fire to the empty house is the climax of the film. This scene presents Tom’s irrational fear of ‘slipping back’ into Blackness by residing with Black neighbors who behave in a way that he feels is anti-Eurocentric and, therefore, unacceptable and contrary to his assimilation attempt in American society. As he pours gas in the home in preparation for the blaze, the scenes of his traumatic past are with him. The red blood, which has been signified by Ruth’s red clothing, symbolically veil his eyes as the film uses flashback to illustrate Tom’s rationale for not wanting the Black neighbors that represent Blackness and shame. Scenes of Tom being brutally attacked by the white supremacists surface again as he sets the house on fire, “This is for my sweet Mabel, my Stormy (daughter) trying to convince herself that she is Farah Fawcett.” Tom’s burning of the house symbolizes his riddance of Ruth’s family and Blackness; however, it also symbolizes the deterioration of his mind.

When Tom’s mind deteriorates, Mabel’s conscience is salvaged. The critique of how Blackness is conceptualized in America takes place in the final scenes of the film. As Tom and his daughter, Stormy, try hard to assimilate to Eurocentric ideals, Mabel and their son evolve to being more practical and open-minded. Tom takes to the bed and Mabel must force him to do simple things like eat and, most notably, sign the papers in
order for the son to attend Morehouse College. Tom’s world crumbles as his son chooses the historically Black university instead of Princeton and his world disintegrates when Mabel finally befriends Ruth.

After the final Thanksgiving celebration where only Tom and Mabel eat without the leaf in the table, Ruth visits the Spader’s home. The two women find out that they have more in common than not as they converse and interact about Black hair dressing and food recipes. Mabel insists, “It has really been nice having you here Ruth!” Ruth’s visit symbolizes the reconciliation of Mabel with her conscious. Ruth’s body carries narratives that are central to the film’s overall examination of race and identity. The corpulent Black female body is rendered “Black” and inferior. As with the construction of Mammy in American culture, it is this body that most symbolizes the antithesis of white bodies. Therefore, “Blackness” is scripted on, and performed through, the corpulent Black female body. Unfortunately, Tom has appropriated this world view and internalized racial and class prejudice.

Tom’s traumatic experience tortured his soul in a way that is in line with Toni Morrison’s analysis of racial oppression in the second chapter of this dissertation. Instead of rising above the experience and condemning the wrongful actions of his attackers, Tom believes that assimilating to Eurocentric ideals would erase his Blackness and allow him to be racially invisible. His attempts at assimilation come from a place of racial shame and self-loathing. Gender, class, food, and “fatness” are cues of racial identity and stagnation. When the size of the dinner table becomes larger, the bond between the individuals in the Spader family became smaller and eventually breaks. In essence, Tom sells himself to assimilate and be accepted in American society. On the contrary, Ruth
Crisp denounces the world-view that devalues a positive and healthy racial identity. Her comfort and satisfaction are not based on how the world views her but, rather, how she views herself. *Good Fences* was the first full-length film that identified Mo’Nique in connection with racial narratives of the body.

**I AIN’T ‘YO’ MAMA!: REDRESSING GENDER IN HUMOR AND CULTURE**

Mo’Nique’s stand-up comedy and celebrity persona have been intricate mediums for the representation of race, gender, class, sexuality, and corpulence in American society and culture. Mo’Nique’s presence in popular culture and her attempts at redressing specific bodies have made an impact on the way such bodies are presented and viewed, especially in certain communities. Mo’Nique’s personal narratives of the body and her corpulence performativity have been reflected in her work. Despite how the corpulent Black female body is scripted, Mo’Nique has made a career out of redressing this body in American visual culture.

Mo’Nique’s role as a comedienne has allowed her the opportunity to redress the corpulent body in her stand-up routine as well as being the host of many Black cultural productions such as *The Queens of Comedy* (2001), *Showtime at the Apollo* (2002) and *The BET awards* (2003-2004). *The Queens of Comedy* was a feature film which starred Black comedienues as an answer to *The Original Kings of Comedy* (2000); a film directed by Spike Lee that showcased the comedy of popular Black comedians, Bernie Mac, Steve Harvey, DL Hughley, and Cedric The Entertainer. Mo’Nique, along with Sommore, Laura Hayes, and Adele Givens, demonstrated that stand-up comedy is not
just for males. Moreover, Mo’Nique’s jokes and narratives constructed the corpulent Black female body in a way that had yet to be done in comedy and Black humor in general. Without blatantly mentioning the traditional folklore and humor that repress and mock ‘fatness’ and interweaves it with gender and race, Mo’Nique reconceptualizes these narratives regarding specific bodies.

The brazen comedy of Mo’Nique can be characterized as a traditionally “masculine” style. Conversely, she uses profanity and tells jokes that are sexual in nature as she challenges societal gender norms and roles. As outlined in the first chapter of this project, Black humor has confined the corpulent Black female body to an inferior space in American society. “Fatness” has been a symbol of weakness reserved for feminine ideals. In her entrance in The Queens of Comedy, Mo’Nique walks on stage after emerging from a make-shift pyramid stage prop and greets her audience, “Memphis, god damn it this is some wonderful shit! You better make some noise! All of you fat girls should have got out of your seats when my fat ass rolled around in that pyramid! Stand your asses up and take a bow! You better represent it. I love you baby girl, you handle your shit!” Mo’Nique’s confrontational style of comedy demands attention and respect from her audience. Further, her style reconceptualizes “fatness” on the Black female body as an asset and simple aspect of one’s identity rather than an anomaly. Rather than lacking control, fatness “handles its shit.” In an effort to bring about humanity and dignity to all bodies, Mo’Nique’s comedy intervenes in traditional discussions and comedy about corpulence. I argue that this intervention works to establish corpulence as an identity and serious subject of inquiry. Mo’Nique’s approach to comedy performs corpulence in a way that affirms its existence and redresses it in Black humor and
American culture. She boldly begins her routine with a narrative of corpulence as positive. Mo’Nique is re-writing the scripts attached to corpulent female bodies.

In *The Queens of Comedy* and *Showtime at the Apollo* she speaks freely about sex and desire. By doing so, she redefines female corpulent bodies as agents rather than objects in sexual narratives and performativities. Obviously, Mo’Nique realizes the negative scripts written on corpulent bodies and seeks to challenge them in her stand-up comedy performances. Her famous proclamation, “Skinny women are evil” is a staple in her comedy and undermines body politics that adhere to hegemonic narratives and ideals.

Traditionally, the construction of Mammy has been one that is plagued with contradiction. Hence, as Mammy was constructed as being happily devoted to whiteness via the white family, she was constructed as being emblematic of Blackness, via her role in the Black family. She was obedient to the white power structure; however, disobedient and neglectful of the Black community (hooks, 1981, pgs. 84, 85). Mo’Nique’s insistence that the thin female body is evil contradicts this narrative. Also, her attention to Black identity redefines the corpulent Black female body’s relationship to both white and Black communities.

Mo’Nique’s proximity to the Black community in Black cultural productions allows her personal narratives of corpulence to be affirmed and extended. Mo’Nique became the first Black female host of the popular late night variety show, *Showtime at the Apollo* in 2002. Performing as a host to one of the toughest crowds in entertainment history, Mo’Nique became even more popular as she redressed corpulence identity in humor and presentation. She confidently dressed in tailored clothing and she brought her own comedy routines to the show every week. As an important vehicle of Black cultural
production and entertainment, *Showtime at the Apollo* widened Mo’Nique’s audience and reflected her ability at improvisation. Moreover, Mo’Nique used a call and response technique that would be instrumental in her later work such as her talk show, *The Mo’Nique Show* (2009). These techniques keep Mo’Nique close to her audience and have proved instrumental in the reception of her by multiple communities. Most notably, Mo’Nique’s introduction and performance of behaviors such as the “electric slide” dance (popular in African American communities at special functions such as family reunions and weddings) at the end of the show reflected her down-to-earth persona and willingness to reach out to the Black community while maintaining her star persona.

Mo’Nique has been in demand since her inception in visual culture. She has served as the host to many awards and ceremonial shows in both mainstream comedy and Black culture. One particular event proves instrumental in analyzing her corpulence performativity and presentation of the corpulent Black female body. In 2003 and 2004, Mo’Nique was selected to host the BET, Black Entertainment Television, annual awards television ceremony. In her opening scene at the 2004 show, Mo’Nique stepped out with corpulent sisters in an animated simulation performance of singer Beyonce’s hit single “Crazy in Love.” Her costume and movements appropriated Beyonce’s original video performance of the song. This performance speaks volumes in terms of body politics and presentation (Figure 11). The camera first catches the surprised but happy look on Beyonce’s face when the music starts and Mo’Nique and the women start moving and vibrating their frames to her single. She immediately stands up and begins to bob her head and cheer Mo’Nique and the women on. As Mo’Nique and the women work their way around stage rivaling Beyonce’s signature rhythmic movements, their short dresses
sway from their bodies that are in perfect synchronicity. Mo’Nique ends the show by saying, “We can show you all better than we can tell you! Ladies, do you! Beyonce, ok girl! I know the little skinny video girls are real nervous right now!” Mo’Nique’s comments activate her corpulence performativity. By demanding that the corpulent Black female body be the target of the gaze of her audience, Mo’Nique challenges existing corporeal politics that insist Eurocentric ideals should be dominant. Further, by performing a routine traditionally done by sex symbol superstar Beyonce, Mo’Nique allows the corpulent Black female body to imagine and occupy spaces that are reserved for specific bodies. Reception to Mo’Nique’s performance was positive and complimentary for the most part. During the after-show special artists and attendees were asked about the highlights of the ceremony and many responded that Mo’Nique’s opening performance was spectacular. Mo’Nique’s “showing” of progressive body politics via her corpulence performativity was done best in the first televised pageant for corpulent women a year later.
Is There a ‘F.A.T’ Chance for a Corpulent Body to Walk the Runway?

Mo’Nique made television history when she introduced the idea of a beauty pageant show for corpulent female bodies to the Oxygen network. She explained in the opening televised scene that, “I came up with the idea for a full-figured beauty pageant because for years all we had was those other pageants; the skinny ones. They got all the glory and I was happy for them until they tried to cut the big girls out of the spotlight. They had us hiding our chins and stomachs and they used fat as a weapon.” Mo’Nique’s explanation hints to her vision for reclaiming the female corpulent body and redressing it in visual and narrative cultures. Her beauty pageant was a gesture to show that all bodies...
are beautiful and women should feel good about themselves despite what American society dictates.

*Mo’Nique’s FAT Chance*, executive produced by Mo’Nique, debut in 2004 and was unprecedented in its approach and presentation of body politics. The beauty pageant forced the gaze on the female corpulent body and challenged ideals of beauty and normalcy. Similar to her opening performance in the 2004 BET awards show, the pageant began with a vivacious dance routine performed by corpulent bodies. Mo’Nique emerged from the back stage to a standing ovation from her audience. She wore a gold dress with bold prints of multi-colored butterflies. The dress seemed to speak loudly regarding the corpulent female body. The corpulent narratives of the past are imploding in Mo’Nique’s presentation and the ‘unconventional’ corpulent Black female frame is blossoming and spreading like the butterflies that dress it at this particular time. As Mo’Nique strolled to the front of the stage, the announcer proclaimed, “The competition where they will be judged for their beauty, spirit, and confidence. The beauty pageant for the rest of America: the real America!” One of the judges for the evening was full figured model, Mia Tyler, who was praised by Mo’Nique for her work in the fashion industry. Mo’Nique praised her for being a model in an industry that marginalizes thick bodies. Moreover, she commented on the fact that “supermodel” was an appropriate term for Tyler. Her dialogue deconstructed what the term meant and what bodies are deemed worthy of such title.

Mo’Nique’s pageant was a redressing and affirmation of corpulent female bodies of all races, ethnicities, colors, ages, and backgrounds. Interestingly, she affirms the corpulent Black female body so much so that her narrative transcends it to reach all
women. Thus, her performativity works to deconstruct dominant beauty ideals that hinder the mobility of all women. The uplifting of women is central to Mo’Nique’s performativity. I analyze her performativity in the manner that will reveal how powerful it is in relation to gender expectations and roles in American society. Moreover, Mo’Nique’s performativity works to empower women, which is evident in how it transcends her specific body and presents a more encompassing narrative of gender. She says, “When you walk into a room with women screaming your name, I’m excited because it is a new day. We are going to change the world. Everyone is a queen!” One of Mo’Nique’s greatest assets as a celebrity figure is her ability to inspire women to be comfortable in the skin they are in. By focusing on loving oneself, women can be empowered to challenge societal gender norms.

Mo’Nique’s encouragement redefines traditional Mammy constructions because her body is at the center of the narrative. Therefore, she centralizes the corpulent Black female body while she affirms the bodies of all women. By marking the corpulent Black female body as beautiful and rendering it visible, Mo’Nique undermines stereotypical notions of this body. It is through its own affirmation and visibility that other female bodies can be reclaimed. This narrative undermines Mammy’s tendency to uplift and affirm whiteness, via white bodies, and it provides a new spin on Mama and her subjectivity. Conversely, Mo’Nique’s confidence is contagious and women are drawn to her bold persona, which works to ‘Mama’ the empowerment of others. Her persona has been characterized by the usage of the terms ‘baby’ and ‘sister’. She uses the two interchangeably in reaching out to her audience. By referring to the pageant contestants as ‘sister’ she marks a bond between their bodies and her own as she empowers them to
be agents in their own happiness and confidence. Her narration of the pageant notes, “We laughed together and cried together in a mission to show the world that we are big, beautiful, and fabulous!..For so long we felt invisible, like no one saw us. But right now they can’t help but to see us because we are so damn visible they’re going to get sick of us!” The insistence that the corpulent female body is visible is an ongoing narrative in Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona. The notion of bonding is also central in Mo’Nique’s performativity as the women in the pageant experienced a period of sharing. Sharon, a 44 year old African American contestant, said, “I used to avoid mirrors on the regular.” Sharon revealed to viewers that when she started to lose her hair she decided to cut it all off and found peace in her natural beauty. Sharon eventually won the pageant; however, she was surrounded by women who bonded on the basis of their marginality in American society. The format for the show suggested to the viewers that all of the women were winners. It is important to note that Mo’Nique’s narrative does not seek to assimilate individuals to one culture, but rather, it affirms each unique person as it celebrates diversity.

Naturally, race interjects in this narrative and remains an intersectional approach to body politics. In an interview on T­vOne, Mo’Nique discussed her radio show, which ran from 2008 to 2009, with Cathy Hughes. She said, “I want us to go back to a community…we felt good about who we were…I’m excited to get our community back…that’s what I am hoping that this radio show becomes. That everyone feels a hug when they turn it on.” As with Queen Latifah’s public persona, Mo’Nique has attempted to promote a racialized community; however, her promotion has been as a member rather than ‘mother’. Thus, the Mama subjectivity is not as dictating as Dana Owens’ “Queen”
but it does present the corpulent Black female body as a positive authority and agent for change. I argue that because she attempts to *empower* women and community in her celebrity persona, this narrative is more of a Mama subjectivity than Mammy construction. The ‘baby’ and ‘sister’ language she often uses works to empower rather than infantilize humans. In *Mo’Nique’s Fat Chance* she says, “The confidence they developed here would help them with any challenge they face…imagine what we would do to our society when you go back and grab another FAT girl by the hand and she grabs another by the hand? Ladies put your drinks up! Here is to making history!”

Mo’Nique describes her work with the corpulent beauty pageants as a ‘movement’ and she successfully produced two more events. Her use of the term ‘movement’ is pivotal in my analysis of her performativity because it suggests an intention on the part of Mo’Nique to transform the way society views corpulence on female bodies. Moreover, the movement seeks to uplift women and reclaim their bodies from the marginal status dictated by societal norms. In this movement, Mo’Nique attends to women in the most marginalized spaces in society. Women who have struggled to overcome adversity are central in the movement. The *Mo’Nique’s Fat Chance* series and the stand up project, *Mo’Nique: I Coulda Been Your Cellmate* (2007) are mediums for her movement. In the second event of the pageant series, *Mo’Nique’s Fat Chance* (2005), a final contestant, Shawnti, struggled through abuse and neglect as a child before becoming vulnerable to a life in petty crime. She revealed her history and the impact that Mo’Nique has had on her transformation saying, “For any woman out there with any sort of past who is letting that stop her from accomplishing her goals and dreams, you better step out there and do it.” Shawnti’s triumphant life story became one of strength and
courage in the midst of Mo’Nique’s movement to empower women. Moreover, it reflects how Mo’Nique’s approach is intersectional in that she is cognizant of race, gender, age, color, and class differences and their impact on women’s lives.

*Mo’Nique: I Coulda Been Your Cellmate* was the first time that a contemporary comedienne ventured to a prison complex to reach out to inmates via her comedy. Mo’Nique went to the Ohio Reformatory for Women in 2007 to bond with the female inmates and nurture empowerment via comedy. This meeting reflects her ability to reach a diverse audience of women but it also demonstrates her attempt to recoup marginalized women’s bodies. She begins the filming by saying, “Today is the day and, to be honest, I don’t know how I feel because it is not *Showtime at the Apollo* or *The Queens of Comedy*. It is the Ohio Reformatory for Women, baby.” I argue that Mo’Nique’s ‘nurturing’ provides subjectivity to any Mama notions as it undermines Mammy’s affirmation of dominance. Thus, Mo’Nique redefines the ‘duties’ and roles of the corpulent Black female body as she also uplifts the bodies of all women via her movement.
Mo’Nique performs in an orange prison jumpsuit replica that she designed in her typical stylish way, “I had my outfit designed just for ya’ll!” (Figure 12). However, her attempt to reach her incarcerated and female audience extends beyond her outfit. The film interjects Mo’Nique’s personal conversations with many of the inmates throughout its duration. Moreover, by showing these conversations, the performance moves beyond a regular stand-up comedy routine. When Mo’Nique converses with, and affirms, the women she humanizes them to her television audience. During her conversation with one inmate she reveals her investment in the women:

Inmate: What made you decide to come here and see us Mo’Nique?

Mo’Nique: We live in a society that threw you away. They said that you were not worthy and valuable; that you were trash. I don’t believe that.

I analyze *Mo’Nique: I Coulda Been Your Cellmate* as part of her movement and as an extension of her own personal trauma. Mo’Nique has revealed numerous times that she
was physically and sexually abused by multiple individuals. She has admitted to being in an abusive marriage and also that her brother sexually assaulted her when she was a child (McGee, 2003). Mo’Nique’s admission is important in the naming process of violence towards women, especially women of color and poor women. Collins (1990) argues that violence against Black women “tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned while the same acts visited on other groups remain non-legitimated and non-exusable” (p. 146). The notion of the corpulent Black female body being a victim of abuse has escaped American societal narratives and Mo’Nique’s movement actively recoups this body after she marks its abuse.

The racialized, gendered, and classed narratives of Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona have been intricate parts of her corpulence performativity. These narratives have been instrumental in allowing Mo’Nique to possess and present Mama subjectivity rather than a traditional Mammy persona. Mammy certainly would not affirm herself or call attention to her beauty the way that Mo’Nique does. In Mo’Nique: I Coulda Been Your Cellmate she maintains, with tears in her eyes, “If I were here, my picture would be my wallpaper…they told me I was too fat, too black; that I would never be a sex symbol…right now I’m a big fat mutha fuckin’ sex symbol so fuck what you heard!” Through profanity laden language, Mo’Nique ends her tenure on stage by graciously taking her ‘comic bow,’ one that male comics are traditionally known to do after an excellent performance. A vision of a corpulent Black female comic taking the ‘bow’ in front of an all-female audience is certainly history in the making.

In her projects, Mo’Nique interacts and nurtures women of all races, ethnicities, sexualities, and backgrounds; however, her primary focus is still on the Black female
body as an extension of the Black community. This focus is evident in her recent talk show, *The Mo’Nique Show* (2009) on the BET network. Launched in 2009 as a nightly form of entertainment, *The Mo’Nique Show* is the first talk show hosted by a Black woman in a late-night setting on the BET network. Mo’Nique claims that she provides a voice to the voiceless. Her show has been a medium for underground musical artists and Black celebrity and political figures. I further extend Mo’Nique’s explanation of the talk show and argue that the show is a vehicle for her corpulence performativity that seeks to uplift multiple communities. Moreover, Mo’Nique’s signature “Hug you! Now, everyone has been hugged!” is an example of her empowerment and self love narrative that she possesses and carries.

Mo’Nique interviews the legendary singer Chaka Khan on one episode and provides her with accolades and praises as an iconic figure. Mo’Nique further undermines traditional notions of Mammy and Mama by repeatedly referring to Ms. Khan as ‘Mama.’ Thus, as she refers to Ms. Khan as ‘Mama,’ she remarks that her presence in the Black community has been iconic and legendary. Chaka Khan’s status is affirmed by Mo’Nique through the endearing term, ‘Mama.’ ‘Mama,’ therefore, is a term that is not used in a traditional sense but, rather, it is used as a title of empowerment and status as in many African cultures. Chaka Khan’s legendary status in the Black community prompts Mo’Nique to address her in a respectful and admiring way. Her usage of the term is perceived as flattering. Further, Mo’Nique’s movement can be identified as positively reclaiming the Black female body in American culture and deconstructing traditional constructions that render it abject. Mo’Nique uses the term ‘Mama’ to redress the Black female body and reclaim its elegance. Therefore, the
description, ‘Mama,’ is complimentary when used to describe women in general and iconic figures like Chaka Khan.

A PLAY ON CORPULENCE

Mo’Nique believes that the mere visibility of corpulence is progression and the visibility of corpulent women in American culture is an accomplishment. For example, Mo’Nique has commented on how proud she was that her television show, The Parkers (1999-2004), featured thick actresses. In a May 2004 issue of Jet magazine she states, “We had three big women on the show at the same time. These were real people. All those men were watching and saying ‘thank you.’ It was refreshing to watch” (Who Will Nikki Tie…., 2004, pgs. 54-58). While I do agree that the visibility of corpulence is extremely important, I would also argue that its performativity is what impacts perception and reception. Moreover, the narratives that are reflected on corpulent bodies create ideologies that either sustain domination or challenge it. Tension between visibility and performativity does exist in three of Mo’Nique’s most visible projects, The Parkers (1999-2004), Phat Girlz (2006), and the award-winning film Precious (2009). However, her overall celebrity persona and legacy have assisted in strengthening narratives about the body in American culture. It is her celebrity persona that has recouped the corpulent body.

In a publicity photograph of the television situation comedy, The Parkers, Nicole ‘Nikki’ Parker (Mo’Nique) and her on-screen love interest, Professor Stanley Olgeeve (Dorien Wilson), are embraced in a ‘hug’; however it is not the traditional friendly or romantic hug. The photograph shows Mo’Nique actually picking up Professor Olgeeve as
his body is within her arms and his face displays a desperate and painful reaction. The photograph is reflective of the undermining narrative that was dominant in the television series.

The Parkers was a spin-off of the situation comedy, *Moesha* (1996-2001) and debuted in 1999 as an attempt to portray the life of Moesha’s best friend, Kim Parker (Countess Vaughn). Kim Parker, Moesha’s only sassy and corpulent friend, was provided an equally sassy and corpulent mother towards the end of the regular series and in the spin-off. In her work on Black women in television, Beretta Smith-Shomade (2002) states:

Another interesting character, Kim Parker of *Moesha*, evolved as the legacy of *Martin*’s Sheneneh. Loud, round, and clueless, she steals scenes with her audacious, self-centered, and inane ruminations without signs of development. Yet she and her mother’s antics proved show stopping enough to warrant a spin-off series of their own...Kim and her mother Nikki (Mo’Nique), are Kathleen Rowe’s unruly women. Their sexuality oozes through anti-Ally McBeal bodies. They recognize popular-culture limitations but move beyond them. They make themselves spectacles because the narrative allows for it, which proves exceptionally gratifying to Black audiences. (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 52)

Mo’Nique was a new comedienne at the time whose rise to fame can be attributed to the series, which was a televised approach to Mo’Nique’s comedy and redefinitions of the corpulent Black female body. Mo’Nique’s stylish wardrobe and her direct comedy characterized her character on the show. Countess Vaughn and Mo’Nique graced the cover of *Jet* magazine in October, 2000 under the caption, “Why TV’s ‘The Parkers’
remains a hit with Black viewers for a second season.” Reportedly, the popularity of the show was limited to Black audiences and received “...a tepid response by Whites. Some would even venture to say that the show takes silly into maximum overdrive.” Most of the cast defended the sitcom in the interview and Mo’Nique added, “Our show is so real to many people...the show deals with real reactions and real situations. It’s also very funny...I can’t stress enough to people to continue supporting Black shows. There are so few on television and the ones that are, we need to support” (Why TV’s ‘The Parkers’ Remain...2000, pgs. 60-64)

The idea of being a “spectacle,” as Smith-Shomade suggests, creates the tension that is present in The Parkers. Mo’Nique’s argument that the visibility of Black bodies, and corpulent Black female bodies, is an important feat in American visual culture; however, the performance of these bodies can undermine the power of their existence. For example, Nikki Parker’s persistent and overzealous pursuit of Stanley Olgevee reflected an age old narrative that assumes the corpulent Black female body is abject, hideous, and monstrous. Therefore, as viewers tuned in to see Mo’Nique’s stylish reclamation of the corpulent Black female body, they were inundated with images of her persistently chasing a man who berated her in regards to her weight and assumed hypersexuality. This narrative of corpulence as abject threatens the overall narrative and visibility of the corpulent Black female body.

P)RETTY (H)OT (A)ND (T)HICK GIRLZ HIT THE SCREEN

Alleged hypersexuality and food addiction threaten to claim the reputation and dignity of other characters played by Mo’Nique. The theater poster for the film Phat
*Girlz* (2006) displays Mo’Nique in a strapless multi-print dress that comes above her knees. She is positioned in between the large pink letters G and R in the word, “girlz,” thus her body serves as the “I” in the word (Figure 13). This indicates an emphasis on her identity as a “Phat Girl”; however, because the spelling of the terms is manipulated, as is common in Black and hip hop vernacular, the term is a spin on the original meaning of the word. The term, “Phat,” is a manipulation of the term “fat” and is embodied in Mo’Nique’s character as she attempts to undermine traditional connotations of the word in regards to the female body. Under the phrase “Phat Girlz” is the caption “Her dreams are about to get A WHOLE LOT BIGGER.” The manipulation of the concept of “fatness,” along with an emphasis on “BIGGER,” reflects a tension that is recurrent throughout the narrative of the film. This tension is characterized by a hyper-visibility of food consumption and sexual activity. Moreover, food consumption and hypersexuality compromise a totally progressive and liberating narrative focusing on the corpulent Black female body. However, the film can be assessed alongside Mo’Nique’s persona in order to identify its place in her movement.
Figure 13. Theater Poster for *Phat Girlz* (2006).

*Phat Girlz* was Mo’Nique’s biggest motion picture release because it was highly anticipated and its storyline correlated to the personal narratives of Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona. Moreover, at the time the film was released, “Phatness” and “F.A.T.” were simultaneously associated with Mo’Nique’s persona and she had already gained a large following due to her ‘Fabulous and Thick’ platform. *Phat Girlz* served as Mo’Nique’s star vehicle and was heavily anticipated by her targeted audience. The film, about a thick Black woman who lives with her thin cousin and has close bonds with a corpulent friend, is an unconventional story in the traditional Hollywood sense. The story simply involves
the thick woman, Jazmin Biltmore (Mo’Nique), facing the day-to-day challenges of weightism before finding her soul-mate and living happily ever after.

Directed and written by Nnegest Likké, who wanted “to show a positive side of Africa” (Mo’Nique Shows the Beauty…, 2006, p. 57), *Phat Girlz* was mainly advertized in spaces that occupied and targeted Black audiences such as Black owned and operated publications. *Sister 2 Sister* magazine editor Jamie Foster asks Mo’Nique to comment on the anticipated film. She responds:

*Phat Girlz* is a movie that will appeal to everybody. *Phat Girlz* is an underdog movie… it’s a fat girl who goes through life always trying to satisfy society’s thing that they call beauty. So she beats herself up and she’s on every diet she can think of and every diet pill and she beats herself up with her own self-image. Then she goes on this trip and meets this African doctor. Now you know African men like big women. (Foster, 2006, p. 40)

Mo’Nique may have been too optimistic about the appeal of the film; however, she summed up the story well. *Phat Girlz* focuses on the ups and downs of a Black woman who feels pressured to fit into American ideals regarding beauty and femininity. For the most part, her corpulence is the ultimate offense to these ideals but she finally manages to accept herself and inspires others along the way. The film does succeed at showcasing Mo’Nique’s star image and redressing corpulence in a way that promotes ‘Blackness’ as positive and beautiful.

Jazmin Biltmore, an aspiring fashion designer who works in a department store in Los Angeles is a sympathetic character. The film challenges traditional Hollywood filmic rules by highlighting a corpulent Black female as its star. Likké wanted Mo’Nique to play
the starring role after she saw her stand-up routine in *The Queens of Comedy*. In an April 2006 edition of *Jet* magazine Likké says, “When I saw Mo’Nique in *Queens of Comedy*, I knew I had found my vehicle. I knew she would bring that lovable, comedic, sexy sassiness to the table that I needed my main character to have” (Mo’Nique Shows the Beauty…, 2006, p. 57). Set in Los Angeles, *Phat Girlz* is guided by a Hollywood, California point of view, one that centralizes the thin white body as ideal beauty. However, Jazmin intervenes in this point of view, which she adopts at first until accepting her own beauty. The film begins in a dream sequence that celebrates Jazmin’s body as it is carried on screen by men body builders. Jazmin awakens from her dream and instantly smells food before she struggles with putting her clothing on. The tension and contradiction are present early on in the film as Jazmin both masturbates and craves food. The assumption that corpulent female bodies over-indulge in food and lack strong and healthy sexual and personal relationships casts a shadow over the film’s progressive narrative. Even though Jazmin maintains that she “ain’t fat,” but is “sexy succulent” to critics in her environment, she struggles with her self-esteem in the beginning of the film and almost gives into societal pressures regarding the body. She rides on a diet rollercoaster and has a symbolic statue of a thin white female body with an image of her own face pasted on it to entice her to lose weight. Moreover, Jazmin’s corpulence identity is compromised by her desires to be an ideal.

Mo’Nique’s own persona is articulated in the self-confidence side of her character. When she and her friends take a vacation and meet admiring men from Africa who wish to date them, they become involved in whirlwind romances that take them by surprise. Jazmin is admired by the men throughout the film and this romance narrative is
pivotal in recouping the corpulent body and interweaving it with a strong and celebratory narrative of Blackness, via African society, cultures, and traditions. Tunde, her love interest, sees her and responds, “I did not know that they made bodies that beautiful in America!” His proclamation undermines American assumptions regarding beauty and the body. As Tunde is represented as the voice of reason throughout the film, his representation of Africa and Blackness is centralized and presented as normal. When the ladies accompany the men to an outing celebrating Nigerian cultures and customs, Jazmin becomes the center of attention and easily fits into the environment. Tunde tells her, “You are a very rich woman. In Africa a woman’s body stature is a reflection of her social status.” Jazmin enjoys the attention as she dances and celebrates her corpulent body; even transferring her confidence to her corpulent best friend. She responds to Tunde, “Well, hell. I’m living in the wrong country. I want to live were they like the fat girls!” As the lyrics of the soundtrack repeats, “African Queen,” viewers see Jazmin’s body move from the margins of her filmic society to the center.

The positioning of the corpulent Black female body is even more pronounced in a scene that takes place when Jazmin is low in spirits. After Jazmin wrongly assumes that Tunde could not possibly love her, she says to him as she touches her body, “Look at this! It ain’t going anywhere and neither are we. Let’s just say goodbye now and you can go and get a skinny woman!” After she abruptly leaves Tunde, she retreats to her bedroom and the familiar: food and loneliness. In the most poignant scene in the film, Jazmin cries, “I know it was too good to be true!” a montage of diet pills, food, exercise television commercials, and her made-up white body mannequin reflects her dilemma. However, after a few days she destroys the mannequin, which symbolizes a turning point
in her vision. By destroying the thin white mannequin, Jazmin takes part in undermining the Eurocentric beauty ideals that marginalize her body and render it abject. Thus, Jazmin decides to break the cycle of despair and self-pity by changing her self-perception after she envisions her grandmother saying, “You are beautiful inside and out.” She repeats the empowering words, “I AM! I am beautiful...all of me! I love me!” The next scene is a panoramic view of the room with an emphasis on her smiling in her bed and then looking in the mirror at her nude body. She tells herself, “You are a diamond girl and don’t you ever forget it!” Jazmin’s acceptance of her body and her own beauty challenges the Hollywood filmic tradition of thinness and whiteness as normal and ideal.

Although tension exists, Mo’Nique’s presence in the film can be viewed as affirming her movement because some of her actions are directly mirrored in the character, Jazmin. Jazmin makes a dream come true when she starts her own clothing line for thick women. Mo’Nique is invested in the fashioning of corpulent bodies via clothing as well. Also, Jazmin’s sense of humor rivals that of Mo’Nique as she plays the Black culture tradition the Dozens with a restaurant worker who repeatedly refers to her as “fat.” It is the thick Black female body’s turn to take part in the ritual that has denigrated it for so long. Jazmin upsets gender roles in Black folklore and humor by winning the game and feminizing male bodies. Thus, she possesses agency as the corpulent Black female body and ceases to be ‘Yo' Mama,’ but rather, her own being. At the end of the ritual, Jazmin taunts her less than competent competitor, “You bitching up on me?!” and then punches him out. Her actions, via her character, rearticulate the ‘Yo’ Mama’ tradition and rescue the corpulent Black female body from its confinement in the ritual. Mo’Nique’s comedy offers a different way of viewing the body in regards to race,
gender, and sexuality. The final scene in the film takes place in a bedroom where the corpulent Black Jazmin and Tunde make love; something that has not occurred in a Hollywood production before. Thus, even though *Phat Girlz* possesses tension it does succeed at pushing boundaries regarding the body in visual culture.

*The Precious One*

![Figure 14. Theater poster for Precious (2009).](image)
"Precious" (2009), the film adaptation of Sapphire’s novel, *Push* (1997), is a disturbing story about child abuse and neglect. Mo’Nique was chosen to play the role of Mary, mother of the protagonist of the story Claireece Precious Jones. The comedienne and actress had to be stripped of her usual and celebrated glamour to portray a character that abuses her daughter and lacks self-worth and possibly sanity. Mary serves as an antagonist to Precious who struggles with illiteracy, a lack of nutrition, and internalization of societal prejudices. Having been raped and impregnated by her father, Precious lacks the resources for a better life outside of the harsh Harlem neighborhood she calls home. Sapphire revealed on *The Mo’Nique Show*, in November of 2009, that she saw many children in similar situations as Precious when she was a teacher in New York, hence her inspiration to write the novel.

Again, as in the case of *Good Fences*, a film creates a visual image of a literary text. The focus on the corpulent Black female body is unavoidable in the film since the book describes two main characters as being corpulent in nature. Nonetheless, *Precious* presents hypocrisy in treating this particular body in moving picture. I propose that the hypocritical aspect of the film be reconciled through Mo’Nique’s movement in order to recoup the corpulent Black female body. Thus, it is extremely important that a reading of *Precious* in this project takes place *after* an analysis of Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona and her movement platform. As such, my analysis of *Precious* is in connection with the theme of this project and places the film in context with my aforementioned argument regarding Mo’Nique. By taking Mo’Nique’s star persona and celebrity narratives into account and using them as lens through which the film is read, Mo’Nique’s own body
critiques the character that she plays and that of Precious Jones. This performativity has a history of itself in critiquing and recouping these marginalized bodies.

The film presents a denigrated look at corpulence as it also tries to critique the prejudices targeted to corpulent bodies. The corpulent Black female body is an abuser as well as victim. Therefore, Mo’Nique is in a peculiar predicament because she calls for the redressing of this body, but she is also performing this body in an unbecoming way. It is hard to sympathize with Mary Jones because the protagonist is at her mercy and is being taken advantage of on a daily basis. Precious suffers sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse while living with her mother. I am particularly interested in how corpulence intersects with race, gender, sexuality, and class to create a specific performativity of pathology in the film.

Precious is the character that most grabs the viewer’s favorable attention because her story begins and ends the film. The viewer hears her voice and witnesses her dreams in the beginning of the film. Her wish to “break through” is displayed within the first minutes of the film as she reveals that her mother says, “Who wants to see” her “big ass dance anyway.” This revelation foreshadows the abusive interaction between mother and daughter. Precious dreams of having a “light-skinned boyfriend” and being married to her Caucasian teacher and Blackness becomes the unwanted identity that she possesses. Blackness is presented as negative and whiteness is desired in the film. For example, when Precious looks into the mirror she envisions a white female looking back at her. Her dreams of being white more than likely demonstrate her aspirations of possessing the perceived ‘normalcy’ that American culture inaccurately dictates. The dichotomy of white and black permeates through the film’s visual and narrative cues. Shots of the
apartment capture a dark dwelling and Mary is constantly shot in partial shadow. When the counselor from her school visits the apartment, Mary threatens her daughter, “If your fat ass don’t get that bitch away from her!” and blames her for her own misery. The fact that Precious was raped by her father is missed in her mother’s insecure mind as she claims that Precious “stole” her “man.” At this moment, Mary is not only an abuser to her daughter but also an enabler to others whom abuse her. Precious’ darkness is not only created by American societal norms but also by her own mother.

On the other side, light enters Precious’ world through certain figures in the film such as, Ms. Rain (Paula Patton), Ms. Weiss (Mariah Carey), and Nurse John (Lenny Kravitz). These specific characters are kind to Precious and brighten her world by assisting her and instilling a more positive self-regard in her. As Ms. Rain teaches Precious to read, the camera shifts to images and thoughts of Precious’ father raping her, her mother cursing and degrading her, and pork cooking on the stove. This interweaving of food with abuse creates food as a barrier and factor in Precious’ marginality. The intersection of ‘fatness’ with abuse creates a dilemma for the corpulent body. Further, Blackness, ‘fatness,’ and abuse position the corpulent Black body as a product of pathology. Precious tells Ms. Weiss that her mother is a “whale” that forces her to eat. Precious’ corpulence can be read as an extension of her marginality that is created by her abuser rather than a simple aspect of her identity.

Instead of the connection of race, gender, class, skin color, and weight being presented as the cause of her marginality according to society’s rigid standards, these characterizations perform as the products of Precious’ marginality. A thorough critique of societal standards and prejudices does not take place in the film. Instead, the film focuses
on Mary Jones as an antagonist to Precious’ self-worth. She rarely leaves the house and indulges in destructive behaviors that haunt her daughter and hinder her mobility in American society. Society’s prejudiced view of corpulence is not reflected in the film to the extent that Mary’s destructive behavior is. For example, Mary forces Precious to cook and eat unhealthy foods despite Precious’ objections. ‘Fatness’ becomes monstrous in the film and attributes to the actions and attitude of Mary. Mary’s parenting is presented as what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the “welfare queen” construction of the Black female body. Daniels’ direction fails to undermine the construction as an intentional social construct by presenting Mary as an antagonist and abuser to the main character. Mary’s abuse of Precious and her children is perpetuated as abhorrent due to the fact that the viewer does not capture a view of Mary as sympathetic. At the end of the film when Mary breaks down and cries, she is rebuked by Ms. Weiss for her treatment of Precious, which may prompt the viewer to rebuke her as well. Precious’ HIV status as a result of the sexual abuse inflicted by her father pushes her further to the margins of society. Moreover, Mary’s ignorance and nonchalant attitude to the situation perpetuates her as a ‘monstrous’ instigator of her daughters tragedy.

The film’s underdeveloped treatment of corpulence is further reflected in the treatment of another character in the film. A young Black female child who wanders the street unkempt and neglected is shown approximately three times in the story. The child desperately yearns for attention as is evident in her attempts to interact with Precious when she sees her in the street. The most pivotal and revealing scene involving the child is the final scene that shows her mother and she at the social service agency requesting financial aid. As Precious’ narration states that Ms. Rain has been insistent regarding her
beauty and worth, a close-up camera shot of the child’s mother is shown. The woman, a corpulent figure with an angry facial expression, berates her child as she is called into the office by the social worker. Here, the viewer is introduced to another abusive and antagonistic corpulent Black female body. This body, more than any other, is a predator in the filmic community. The child’s blackened eye insinuates that her torment is more than child neglect; it is also physical among other things. The scene is followed by the poignant scene where Mary reveals the extent of Precious’ abuse to Ms. Weiss. However, Ms. Weiss’ reproach of her at this moment complicates any inference of victimization in regard to Mary. When Precious concludes that her mother was simply an enabler in her abuse, she, and possibly the viewer, dismisses Mary as any possible victim. She tells Ms. Weiss, “I like you too but you can’t handle none of this” as she grabs her children and leaves. Even though Precious breaks the cycle of abuse, the film leaves the viewer with a denigrated presentation of corpulence, specifically the poor corpulent Black mother figure.

If any identification of how the Black female body, especially the corpulent Black female body, has been marginalized in American society can be retrieved from the film, then it should be noted. In an interview in the February edition of *Upscale* magazine in 2010, Mo’Nique said, “I don’t know of any other director that would have given two fat black women the opportunity to do what we did…The world needs to see it because Mary Jones exists. So does Precious” (Harris, 2010, p. 23). Mo’Nique and Sapphire's desire to tell the story of marginalized and abused Black women deems it necessary that the film is viewed through this lens. As with *The Bluest Eye*, the representation of the Black body is not perfect nor is it pretty; however, Precious Jones’ story exists all over
the world and identifying it within Mo’Nique’s movement is the aim of this analysis. I identify the film as a vehicle to theorize Black women’s bodies and as an extension of Mo’Nique’s personal and public crusade to encourage people to rethink the body in regard to race, gender, class, sexuality, and size.

Lee Daniels’ direction of the film adaptation of the novel has been a concern for some critics that feel the film perpetuates traditional negative cultural imagery. Cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal explains the reservations of some viewers of the film. He says, “In some ways, it’s The Color Purple all over again, with people writing and talking about what the film represents…people are suspicious of narratives that don’t put us in the best light.” In the same article the comments of Armond White, film critic of The New York Press and chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle, are expressed, “Not since The Birth of the Nation has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as Precious….full of brazenly racist clichés, it is a sociological horror show…Black pathology sells…It’s an over-the-top political fantasy that works only because it demeans blacks, women and poor people” (Lee, 2009). As with any text there are multiple interpretations of Precious; however, this project seeks to analyze the Black female body by critiquing the gaze that condemns it. This reading of Precious as a theorizing text in the history of Mo’Nique’s movement allows a complex but critical lens in viewing the film and its participants. Consequently, Mo’Nique’s own personal narratives and persona critique Mary Jones’ abusive and tragic role in Precious. Mo’Nique has attempted to recoup the bodies of both Mary and Precious; and by revealing her own traumatic story of sexual abuse, the film was therapeutic for her and naming “violence” for Black women and corpulent Black female bodies.
I argue that a complex reading can be done if Mo’Nique’s movement and characteristic empowering performativity is used to assess the filmic bodies. The down-to-earth and outreach aspects of Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona demand a critique of the characters in Precious. Obviously, Precious Jones’ body has been recouped by Mo’Nique’s movement; however, when viewed closely, Mo’Nique’s narratives about the body and her movement critique her own character as well. Thus, Mo’Nique has created such a legacy at the time she performed Mary Jones that her own narratives must be taken into account when analyzing her character. Thus, Mo’Nique’s movement can be a foundation on which the abusive corpulent Black female body and the abused corpulent Black female body in the film are read and analyzed. Precious is one of many films that present a complex representation of Blackness and garner review; however, critics must assess the Academy’s attention to certain narratives and representations of Blackness. The hypervisibility of pathology surrounding narratives of Blackness in film continue to gain the attention of the Academy and are deemed noteworthy. Thus, pathology and deviance are presented as embodied in Black bodies as far as Hollywood is still concerned.

GOING HOME….AGAIN

I end this chapter with a brief textual analysis of a more contemporary film, Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins (2008), that stars Mo’Nique and Martin Lawrence; two very different cultural reflections of corpulence performativity. The contradiction in the treatment of Mo’Nique is evident in the film as it merges class, race, and gender with
“fatness” to represent social mobility in America. The film traces the life of a successful television talk show host, Roscoe Jenkins (Martin Lawrence), who is engaged to a thin fashion model and ex-reality show star, Bianca (Joy Bryant). Roscoe Jenkins has left his “Blackness” behind by moving to California and shunning his Southern small town roots. His economic mobility is merged with his identity and when he reluctantly ventures back to his hometown for his parents 50th anniversary celebration, he shamefully interacts with the family that he is embarrassed by. Mo’Nique plays his stereotypical desperate, hypersexual, loud, and corpulent sister, Betty, who gossips and bullies him along with other family members.

There are many shots in the film of Roscoe and Bianca exercising and eating “healthy” throughout the film. Roscoe’s diet is restricted by Bianca and she prohibits him from eating meat and sweets in the face of temptation at the larger family’s many food oriented festivities. Ultimately, the bodies of Bianca and Betty are juxtaposed in the film and maintain hegemony and a rigid Eurocentric ideal of beauty. When Roscoe and Bianca arrive in town, they are greeted by his cousin, Reggie (Mike Epps), who insists, “Hollywood done came to town!...First it was survivor, now it’s America’s Next Top Model...you must got some Indian in you...that long pretty hair...I’ll drink your bath water!” Bianca’s tall thin frame is captured in close up shots throughout the film. The gazes of the male characters are included in shot-reverse-shots of her body.

In contrast, Betty’s body is made spectacle in the film. Therefore, “fatness” is scripted with gender, sexual, and class narratives. In addition to Roscoe’s amazement at how “fat” and “big” his niece and nephew are, Betty’s weight becomes a symbol for the Blackness he has attempted to avoid all of his life. The dehumanization of Betty takes
place in her being a spectacle vis-a-vis her hypersexuality and ‘monstrous’ frame. Her character blatantly lusts after her cousin and also visits inmates at the local jail for sexual escapades. Her sexuality is constructed as extreme and deviant. The family members mock her actions as inappropriate and embarrassing. The shots of Betty’s body are for comic relief and therefore her body is sacrificed as one of the primary jokes in the film.

When Bianca enters the kitchen she is told by Betty, “Don’t get all uppity! This kitchen is my domain!” Betty’s posturing in the kitchen reflects a bond between her body and food. There are close-up shots of the food as Bianca is shown with a look of disgust on her face. After she tastes Betty’s famous sugary ice tea and spits it out, Bianca is ostracized and viewed as “uppity” by Betty. Bianca’s rejection of the ‘soul’ food and her compulsive exercising are presented as cues of economic and social mobility. Betty, on the other hand, is stagnant because of her eating habits, which are assumed to be reflected in her physical body.

The treatment of the bodies of Betty and Bianca signal how “fatness” is perceived on poor Black female bodies. Roscoe and the other men berate Betty throughout the film while they validate the body of Bianca. Roscoe tells her, “You better get your Butterfinger eating ass back in the car! I may not hit a woman but I will beat a bitch’s ass!” Afterward, as the two fight, the camera captures close-up images of Betty’s buttocks in animal-print pants. Her clothing suggests her body is primitive and bestial in relation to how “…women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, ‘wild’ sexuality” (Collins, 2005, p. 27). Moreover, her nude body becomes even more of a spectacle as the naked “fat” Black female body is ridiculed in the film. When Betty is accidently accosted by Reggie while she showers, he covers his eyes and jokes about how
frightening her “fatness” is to him. On the contrary, Cousin Clyde’s (Cedric the Entertainer) thick dark male body is revered and humanized in the film. When Clyde arrives on screen, there is a shot of his luxury Cadillac Escalade vehicle and his body, from his shoes to the top of his head, as viewers are expected to share the admiration of his filmic community members. There are no jokes made about his body and the fact that it is thick is never highlighted in the film. Therefore, maleness becomes the invisible privilege in the film as it is in American society and culture.

The contrast of Betty’s corpulent body with that of Bianca and another character, Lucinda (Nicole Ari Parker), reflects how complex corpulence performativity is. As Mo’Nique continues to make a presence on the lives of women regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, and size, her body is still used as a spectacle that reflects dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and class. Moreover, even though the bodies of Betty and Lucinda are juxtaposed in the film and in society, Mo’Nique’s influence on Nicole Ari Parker is made evident in a 2010 episode of The Mo’Nique Show when Parker praised her for being a personal inspiration to her life and other women through her ‘love of self’ narrative.

American Beauty

In an article titled “American Beauty” printed in Upscale magazine’s April 2006 edition, Mo’Nique is heralded for her beauty that challenges and ultimately transcends Eurocentric standards. In a photo accompanying the article, Mo’Nique is pictured with a gold sleeveless dress with matching earrings and her arms crossed and softly touching her shoulders. The photo is relevant to Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona and beliefs because the
natural hair on her arms is visible in the image. Body hair is one of the vices Mo’Nique has been forced to speak about in relation to how she is not adhering to American beauty standards. In 2010 Mo’Nique’s status as Oscar nominee for her role in Precious gained her an interview with Barbara Walters in March of 2010. During the interview Walters asked Mo’Nique about the hair on her legs and many other things in her annual Oscar special.

Walters: What would winning an Oscar mean to you?
Mo’Nique: It’s a great accomplishment.
Walters: …some critics say this movie makes Black people bad. What do you say about that?
Mo’Nique: …Precious is universal…I knew Mary Jones. Mary Jones is my brother…sexual abuse…I was afraid of my brother…my situation is not unique…in doing the movie and playing Mary Jones it made me stop resenting my brother because I understood my brother. I understood mental illness.
Walters: You do not believe in shaving your legs. Why not?
Mo’Nique: I tried shaving one time and it was so uncomfortable and painful…I said never again!
Walters: Does Sid (husband) like the hairy legs?
Mo’Nique: He loves the hairy legs!
Mo’Nique’ unwillingness to rid her legs of hair challenges and counters Eurocentric beauty ideals and expectations. Moreover, body hair is one contradiction in Mo’Nique’s performativity that works to undermine gender roles and expectations. When she appears at ceremonies and events with diamonds and hairy legs, Mo’Nique certainly upsets
societal norms. Further, her husbands’ acceptance of such beauty traditions begs the question of how bodily politics are complex and certain traditions and standards may be culturally specific.

Mo’Nique is still concerned with the Black female body and its presence in American culture. Similar to Queen Latifah’s ability to captivate specific audiences through her celebrity persona, Mo’Nique continues to make waves and push boundaries with her ‘movement’ to uplift women. Overall, her stardom encompasses her corpulence performativity and she continues to name corpulence as an identity, regardless of how her own body may change.

I have identified the ways that Mo’Nique’s celebrity persona contests Mammy representations and undermine beauty ideals based on race, gender, age, class, and corpulence. Mo’Nique’s corpulence performativity has been successful due to her ability to reach women and inspire them to embrace themselves. Her ability to empower women through her movement is an example of how the corpulent Black female body is rearticulated and redressed in contemporary American visual and narrative cultures. I chose an image of Mo’Nique accepting her Oscar award in front of the television and live audiences because the legendary Hattie McDaniel was denied this joy. She was forced to accept her award out of view of the audience due to her race. Mo’Nique is attempting to bring the corpulent Black female body out of confinement and rearticulate its meaning and worth in society. This one is for you Ms. McDaniel!
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Figure 15. Gabourey Sidibe on cover of Ebony magazine (March, 2010).
This project began with an example of corpulence performativity in visual cultural via mega superstar celebrity Oprah Winfrey; however, it ends with a lesser known name, Gabourey Sidibe, star of the film, Precious. As Winfrey appeared in lavender on the cover of her very apologetic magazine cover, Sidibe graced the cover of the March, 2010 edition of Ebony magazine (Figure 15). Sidibe was all smiles as she appeared in a deep lavender outfit in the opening shots of the article on the inside of the magazine. Sidibe’s body is crucial to the study of corpulence in visual and narrative cultures because it has become an emblem for pro-weight advocates as well as weightists in private and public debates. Ironically, Gabourey Sidibe is very different from her award-nominated, self conscious and abused character, Claireece ‘Precious’ Jones. In the article, “Gabby the Glorious,” Sidibe is described as being:

…effervescent and full-on articulate. Daniels (accurately) describes her as ‘a Valley girl.’ Close your eyes as she speaks, and the image of a ponytail-tossing girl in kneesocks and a prep school blazer comes to mind. She is wry, observant and insightful, particularly when it comes to the whirlwind existence that is now her life. Oh, and her confidence level? Off the charts. (Glover, 2010, p. 112)

The words of the article’s author, Terry Glover, reflect a tension surrounding the corpulent Black female body. There still remain assumptions about it that denigrate it even in the most celebratory circumstances. Both Glover and (Lee) Daniels seem to suggest that the average thin young female body looks, sounds, and behaves a certain way and the average corpulent Black young female body appears a specific way. Why is it easy to believe that Precious Jones is an accurate representation of this body? Moreover, Sidibe’s supposed ‘departure’ from an assumed identity has taken many by
surprised. What is even more surprising to many is the fact that Sidibe is happy in the body that she is in. She has revealed that unlike the character that she brought to the screen, Precious Jones, she is filled with esteem. She states, “People think I kind of came out of my shell and became awesome after I got this role...the truth is, I was awesome first, then I got the role” (Glover, p. 112) The fact that Sidibe is unapologetic as a corpulent Black female contradicts the traditional narratives that dictate thin white female bodies as ideal. Unlike Oprah Winfrey, Gabourey Sidibe does not seem to seek approval from anyone regarding her identity. Sidibe’s confidence is certainly a healthy way for a woman to view oneself. Also, when asked about the representation of Black females in the film, Sidibe connected the abuse of women to her portrayal of Precious Jones. She continues:

I heard one filmmaker say that the situation [in Precious] couldn’t possibly exist. But I get it. I’m now the face of that story, or that type of abuse and neglect, and that hope, I guess. So when people tell me, when they thank me, or they just want to know, that makes me feel good because it feels like that’s the reason we did the movie. Not for the fame and stuff. When it changed someone’s life and makes [him or her] feel less alone in the world, I’m proud...I think that I’m much more compassionate to those stories now, and people might be more willing to talk about it. Knowing that, I’m proud that we did this. (Glover, p. 119)

A photo of Sidibe and the cast of Precious embraced in a hug on The Mo ’Nique Show is directly above the page that boasts these powerful words of Sidibe. If one were to identify the ‘marking’ of abuse inflicted on the Black female body as a possible gain of Sidibe work, it can definitely be interpreted as a part of the Mo ’Nique’s movement.
This project has identified the ways that an intersectional approach to ‘difference’ is crucial when assessing women’s lives. Corpulence is a facet of identity that should be viewed as a ‘difference’ in American society. When it is identified as such, activists and scholars are more equipped to deal with the multi-dimensionality in women’s lived experiences.

This project further investigated the ways that the Black female body has been constructed using corpulence as a central narrative that reflects anxieties about race, gender, class, sexuality, and national identity. It identified how the performance of corpulence through the Black female body has particular ideological meanings that have been articulated through visual and narrative cultures. Corpulence is operative in defining rigid boundaries in regards to identity, which are built on constructed notions of whiteness and Blackness. Moreover, this study illuminated how corpulence intersects with race, gender, class, and ethnicity to render Black women non-existent and relegate them to the bottom of American society. Through an intertextual analysis of several popular texts, this study illuminated the varied ways that the discourse involving corpulence reflects narratives that employ race, gender, and class as signifiers of “authentic” American identity and which restrict the social, economic, and political mobility of the Black female body.

This analysis began with a historical examination of how pertinent size has been to the construction of the Black female body in visual and narrative cultures and how this particular construction has worked to establish ideals regarding difference. In assessing the historical ‘Mammy’ construction of the Black female body, it can be identified how the physical attributes of this particular construction serve to nurture whiteness in
general. The primary interest was to identify the function of corpulence in the construction of this caricature and analyze how it was composed as a signifier of ‘Blackness’ that was used to establish, promote and sustain white supremacy through visual culture.

An assessment of this imagery led to an identification of how corpulence has been appropriated and used in Black folklore as a means to comical effect. The internalization of inferiority in Black cultural productions has led to the further assault on the Black female body using corpulence as a primary weapon of choice. Moreover, this study illuminated the ways in which corpulence is performed in Black folklore as a means to denigrate and the Black female body. This denigration takes place in such traditional practices and rituals as ‘Yo’ Mama’ jokes (playing the Dozens/snapping) and the use of the gendered ‘fat suit,’ which has historically been worn by many Black male comedians. By performing a gendered and racialized ‘grotesque fatness,’ these comedians perpetuate notions of difference that mark Black female bodies inferior and pathological. Such practices and internalizations perpetuate the myth of an overindulgent, cantankerous, and ‘lazy’ Black female body that prevents it from acquiring the ‘American Dream’. Thus, these practices continue to relegate Black women to the bottom of the racial hierarchy and marginalize them from constructions of nationality and ‘American’ identity. The practices also play into denigrating ideals about gender roles and expectations in the Black community, whereas, Black men are feminized and Black women are masculinized. This gender inversion is an extension of the early blackface minstrelsy that attempted to perform Blackness as inferior.
Conversely, this study also analyzed the ways that Black women artists have engaged in corpulence politics. Black women have attempted to recoup the Black female body and treat it as a subject in American society. Various forms of visual and narrative cultures were analyzed in order to identify how Black women perform corpulence in new and innovative ways. Black women have used literature, film, television and music as ways of articulating ideals about their own bodies and identities. Consequently, cultural and identity theorists such as Toni Morrison and contemporary celebrity figures such as Queen Latifah and Mo’Nique have been invested, whether indirectly or proactively, in corpulence politics. Even though the corpulence politics of these artists are complex, they nonetheless have initiated empowerment in women of all races, ethnicities, classes, sexualities, and sizes. For example, Queen Latifah’s ‘Africentric Queendom’ has been instrumental in not only redefining gender roles, but it also has been instrumental in empowering women. Comedienne and actress Mo’Nique has also been a key figure in the reclamation of the corpulent Black female body. Her entire movement has served as an effort to redefine corpulence and encourage women to love themselves and celebrate diversity rather than assimilate to Eurocentric ideals of beauty. This movement challenges whiteness as a norm and recoups Blackness from being an anomaly in American culture and society.

Through this analysis of corporeality, it was demonstrated that the body is still used as a central location for the inscription and dissemination of ideology; however, its fluidity allows for the performativity of identities such as corpulence. This performativity can be progressive or regressive in nature. In the end, this project attempted to encourage feminist scholars and cultural critics to take add corpulence to inquiries of knowledge.
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**TELEVISION**


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