A Counterhistory of the Ratchet: Black Aesthetics in the New Millennium

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: A Counterhistory of the Ratchet: Black Aesthetics in the New Millennium

Beginning at the end of the twentieth century, my dissertation, *A Counterhistory of the Ratchet: Black Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, explores Black femininity as a resource for creative community and world making in film and television. I investigate what I term "the ratchet aesthetic" as a cultural practice and political maneuver that Black femme performers employ in culturally specific ways. In the Black southern vernacular, "ratchet" is a term used to describe people and behaviors that are deemed socially deviant. This includes being loud, disruptive, sexually explicit, angry and a host of other non-respectable actions. The term is often used as a way to police the boundaries of respectable Black femininity. Following the work of scholars in hip hop feminism and Black feminist cultural criticism, I argue that Black femme cultural producers adopt excessive performances of Blackness that elicit an expansive viewing experience of emotions, feelings, and beauty and that challenge the viewers' perception of Black femme expression.

Chapter 1 "Preliminary Thoughts on the Ratchet Aesthetic" situates the ratchet aesthetic as an intervention in Black aesthetics. Chapter 2 titled "The Televisual Ratchet Aesthetic" analyzes Martin Lawrence's embodiment of the character Sheneneh Jenkins from the television series *Martin* (1992-1997). By looking at the performance of Sheneneh's ratchet aesthetic, I argue Lawrence's performance as Sheneneh undermines the heterosexist and gender specific logic of the series. Chapter 3 titled "The Cinematic Ratchet Aesthetic" uses the 1997 film *Black American Princesses* starring Halle Berry (as Nisi) and the late comedian Natalie Desselle (as Mickey) to investigate the visual iconography of the Black American Princess in American culture. With a creative team including two-time Academy Award winning costume designer Ruth E. Carter and celebrity hair stylist Kim Kimble, I argue that through wardrobe, makeup, hairstyling, and nail art the film immortalizes distinct stylistic conventions of working-class excess in the latter half of the 1990s and progresses a narrative of refinement over the course of the film. Chapter 4 titled "The 'Real' Ratchet Aesthetic" looks at the career of the reality television star Nene Leakes from the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present). Leakes is memorable on the series for her boisterous attitude and confrontational behavior which has landed her multiple acting gigs and she still maintains her relevancy as a television celebrity today. In the chapter, I explore Leakes' blonde embodiment as a form of ghetto fabulous identity formation. Finally, my coda "The Ratchet Aesthetic in the Twenty-First Century" ends with a discussion of the rapper and reality television personality, Sukihana, to explore the kinds of futurity the ratchet aesthetic offers.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, the living and the dead, who have made many sacrifices throughout the years so that I could be where I am today. Though I have been distanced from them during this journey, I honor their legacy through my success.

Much love to the women of color scholars I have been in community with during my graduate studies: Mushira Habib, Teresa Hernandez, Madhura Nadarajah, Vivian Schmolke, and Jiesha Stephens. May we continue to laugh, cry, shout, dance, grieve, and rejoice together.

I want to give a shoutout to the drag and queer music scene in Eugene, Oregon, specifically Slutashia, Lyta Blunt, Amiia Nectar (aka Bebe Boudoir), Evan Hopper-Moore, Wanda Aqua Flora, Ladel La Faye, Chloe San Carlos, Chakra Stone, Wonderful!, Nini Munchette, DJ Android, Kinaya Haug, Morena, Kimberley Brown, Seven, Burnt Toast, Lavender Haze, Destiny Smokez, Dahlia Kash, Imani, Petra Etc., Candy Whoreholla, Edd Zackly, Heavy Cream, Shirley Mental, Kiki Boniki, and R. E. D. 4 Filth. I was not expecting to find y'all when I did, but I am grateful that it happened while I was in the thick of my exams and dissertation writing. It was always a relief from work to perform and create alongside such talented people. May we all continue to be bad bitches.

Lastly, to Janine Thornton. And to Mabel Byrd.

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Chapter 1:

Preliminary Thoughts on the Ratchet Aesthetic

The politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance are two concepts in Black feminist theory that explain why discourses about Black women's proper behavior, attitudes, and manners of dress persist today. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first coined the term "the politics of respectability" to mark how nineteenth century Black club women "emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations."[1] In a similar fashion, working in the nineteenth century, historian Darlene Clark Hine terms the "culture of dissemblance" to explain "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."[2] Continuing, Hine notes, "in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self."[3] Both Higginbotham and Hine develop theories for understanding how Black women sought to reverse negative stereotypes about representations of Black female sexuality through strategic ways of presenting their bodies to the public. Due to prevailing stereotypes about Black women's lasciviousness, they have historically been placed in positions where their bodies must conform to the norms of a "respectable aesthetic"—namely, through manners of dress that cover the body, hair that is

1. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187.

2. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912.

3. Hine, "Inner Lives of Black Women," 916.

"tamed," hands that are closely manicured, and conservative jewelry. Central to both of these concepts is the idea that Black women possess the agency to create their own self-images, even though dominant visual discourses, such as film, television, and other popular media, continue to circulate what Patricia Hill Collins has termed "controlling images."[4]

In the twenty-first century, the emergence of a Black feminist creative community is characterized by the proliferation of Black women rappers, reality television stars, and cultural icons. These figures, many of whom are discussed in this study, embrace hypersexuality through performance, styling, and manners of dress. Instead of conforming to traditional standards of Black respectability that are meant to shield expressions of Black female sexuality, they have actively established a new aesthetic language, what I am terming a "ratchet aesthetic," signaling a departure from conventional norms of Black sexual expression in popular culture.

I open with scholars discussing representations of Black women in the nineteenth century due to the prevalent anti-Black stereotypes of that time and the social changes during the Reconstruction Era, marking America's shift out of formal slavery. This period forced newly liberated Black women to devise survival strategies amidst ongoing racialized sexual violence, building upon the abuse they endured in slavery. Hine's concept of the culture of dissemblance notes how Black women strategically crafted their self-images to protect themselves from the pervasive threat of rape. Dissemblance allowed Black women to assert some level of control over how they were perceived, particularly in the context of a society where they were vulnerable to sexual violence. Dissemblance also gestured toward the creative agency that Black women employed under multiple levels of surveillance. However, despite the historical

4. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

significance of dissemblance, contemporary discourses about the representation of Black womanhood in the media are still largely shaped by the politics of respectability. The politics of respectability dictate societal expectations and norms regarding how Black women should behave, present themselves, and be represented in visual media. This concept often imposes restrictive portrayals of Black women—namely how they represent Black female sexuality—that contribute to the continued marginalization and objectification of Black women. Here, I am suggesting that rather than empowering or liberating Black women, the politics of respectability actually limits their agency and perpetuates harmful narratives about their identity, including how they depict Black female sexuality in popular culture. That contemporary Black women in popular culture possess the power to represent Black female sexuality on their own terms signals an important shift from the self-preservation tactics of the nineteenth century to an expansive form of Black feminine expression that rejects contrived narratives about how Black women should exist in the visual sphere.

Taking this rejection of the politics of respectability as my cue, this dissertation explores "the ratchet aesthetic" as a form of stylistic, artistic, and cultural practices that Black femme cultural producers adopt in direct contrast to the politics of respectability. This study investigates the function of excessive stylistic practices in film and television production. Oscillating between performance and production, I read 1) how characters perform the ratchet aesthetic in ways that motivate the narrative and setting of particular scenes and 2) how the ratchet aesthetic offers insights into the behind-the-scenes labor of hair stylists, nail technicians, wardrobe stylists, make-up stylists, and costume designers, what Erin Hill has called "women's work."[5] I place early appearances of the ratchet aesthetic in the representations of video vixens or "video hoes" in hip

5. Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 3.

hop music videos of the late 1980s and 1990s. As a mainstreamed art form, hip hop offers the space where narratives about Black sexuality are performed for the predominantly white public. More importantly, because Black women's performances of hypersexuality are often the subject of these music videos, these images have been considered to "set the race back" and contribute to damaging representations of Black womanhood by Black and non-Black critics alike. By using ratchetness as a reading method and exploring the performance and production of ratchetness as a form of beauty, viewers are able to revisit these images of Black female hypersexuality to consider the kind of work they are doing. In the late 20th century, I explore how early formations of the ratchet aesthetic were creations that happened under the guise of male pleasure and entertainment. Yet, as the aesthetic transitions into the new millennium, I demonstrate how Black women's performances of excess and hypersexuality disrupt dominant ways of reading Black femininity in general and the Black femme body in particular in the visual sphere. Thus, as I will argue, the ratchet aesthetic is both an aesthetic language and a reading method for redressing performances of Black female hypersexuality and excess that combat an aesthetics of respectability.

In this introduction, I begin by providing my own personal definition of the ratchet aesthetic and then delve into a review of scholarship on ratchet performance. Next, I explore the function of Black style in the performance of the ratchet aesthetic. Following my discussion of Black style, I show how the ratchet aesthetic—an aesthetic of working-class Black femininity—has been left out of scholarly conversations about Black aesthetics. Following this section, I close read a few examples from the music video catalog of the hip hop group 2 Live Crew to explore early representations of the video girl, the figure which I frame as an anchor point to the ratchet aesthetic. Finally, I end the introduction with an overview of my chapters.

Ratchet Terminology

"Ratchet" is a term that comes from southern Black vernacular and is used flippantly in Black cultural spaces.[6] In southern Black vernacular culture, "ratchet" is a term meant to describe someone's behavior as socially immoral, out of line, or simply being "extra" and the term is usually directed at a queer or heterosexual Black woman or Black femme presenting person. As a gendered term, it is used as a way to regulate excessive expressions of Black femininity in general. Therefore, throughout my dissertation I use the term "Black women and Black femmes" to account for the various gender expressions that may not fall neatly under the category of "Black woman," but do express Black femininity in a different form.

Growing up as a queer Black child who identified with femininity, I always knew that when someone was "being ratchet" they were acting outside of invisible norms set by a dominant social group, namely those who subscribe to heterosexual Christian Black middle-class values. The aesthetic of the "heterosexual Christian Black middle class" encompasses a blend of traditional norms, cultural practices, and aspirational ideals deeply rooted in the experiences of Black middle-class individuals who adhere to Christian faith and uphold heterosexual norms and gender roles. This aesthetic is characterized by a sense of stability, respectability, and conformity to societal expectations, reflecting values such as family unity, moral uprightness, and economic success. In terms of appearance and style, it may manifest through conservative attire that exudes professionalism and modesty, reflecting a desire to project a polished and respectable image. For instance, the image of church ladies comes to mind because of the way that their form of dress

6. It has a few derivatives that are used throughout scholarship and in everyday uses: "ratchetness," "ratchet performance," "the ratchet," "the Black Woman ratchet," "the ratchet Black woman," and "ratchet Black girls."

maintains a level of respectable femininity—clean pant suits, low heels, white gloves, and of course church hats. This image of the "Sunday Best" represents the epitome of a respectable aesthetic. The aesthetics of respectability perform a rigid set of social cues that seek to tone down stereotypical representations of Blackness for the fear of what the white public might think of all Black people. On the more political side of the spectrum, the aesthetics of respectability might also mimic the forms of dress during the Civil Rights movement, where protesters sought to present polished versions of Blackness.

By "being ratchet," one is choosing to reject the aesthetics of respectability and express themselves in a less restrictive and ultimately creative way that is not concerned with the way it might be read by those in and outside of the Black community. These behaviors may be talking loudly, being too expressive with one's body, showing "too much skin," dancing provocatively, being overly dramatic, or acting "ghetto." As I continue to parse out how I remember ratchet being used in my upbringing, the more I think of words that are used to regulate Black expressive culture. On the one hand, related terms like "hood," "ghetto," or "street" signal a cultural and historical representation of working class Black communities. These terms often connote aspects of urban living, poverty, and struggle, reflecting the experiences of marginalized Black populations in inner-city areas. On the other hand, terms like "boogie"[7] and "ghetto fabulous" are linked to representations of the Black middle class and upper class. These terms suggest a different socio-economic status, implying affluence, style, and sophistication within Black communities, or at least aspirations to this status. These distinctions that are used to describe the behaviors of Black people are also filled with much meaning about the aesthetic worlds that are created and performed in Black expressive culture. In this study, I explore more

7. I prefer the spelling "b-o-o-g-i-e" because it best displays the phonics of the word. There are multiple ways to spell "boogie" such as boojie, boujie, bougie, and boujie. See Lane, *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet*, 37.

fully the terms "ghetto," "hood," and "ghetto fabulous" and their relationship to what I am theorizing as "the ratchet aesthetic." As I argue, the ratchet aesthetic encapsulates multiple registers of Black expression, each with their own unique performances that speak back to respectability politics and stereotypes about Blackness.

This dissertation seeks to expand theories of the ratchet through close readings of film, television and popular culture. In it, I seek to understand the way that ratchet performance produces an aesthetic that connotes various lived experiences of Blackness and Black cultural expression. In particular, I am invested in narrating how representations of Black female hypersexuality create an abundance of references and connotations that continue to build on one another. In some cases, Black female hypersexuality is positioned as the butt of a sexist joke (see Chapter 2), while in other cases it is celebrated and explored for its ampleness (see Chapters 3 and 4). By exploring the performance and production of ratchetness, I am concerned with a few overarching questions: How is the ratchet aesthetic imagined and employed for popular audiences? How does the ratchet aesthetic operate as a constant contrast of the aesthetics of respectability? How does the ratchet aesthetic "play up" or reverse racial stereotypes? How does the ratchet aesthetic depart from the aesthetics of respectability? How does the ratchet aesthetic hyperextend racial tropes? Why are stylistic choices important to understanding the fullness of the ratchet aesthetic? What story does styling tell in different narratives on film, television, and digital media? How much behind-the-scenes labor goes into producing a ratchet aesthetic? Why does the ratchet aesthetic seem to always relate to expressions of Black female hypersexuality? What are ways that hypersexuality is doing work to highlight the agency of Black women?

Though the origins of the term "ratchet" are not clear, Black feminist scholars have framed a "ratchet etymology" and how it leads to their interpretations of it as a racial signifier of

excessive Black femininity. Kristen Warner notes that the term is said to have emerged in the 1990s in Shreveport, Louisiana as a dance and a rap song.[8] Racquel Gates states that the term "connotes behavior that is crude, socially unacceptable, and, more, often than not, associated with lower-class black vernacular culture."[9] In this way, the word connotes images of lower class southern Black expression that is resistant to proper forms of behavior. In her etymology of ratchet, Therí A. Pickens provides the various parts of speech in which the word functions:

> As a verb, ratchet tends to mean that something is moved by degrees, usually followed by up or down. For instance, one can ratchet up the volume or ratchet down prices. Incremental movement is centrally important to understanding ratchet performance. To maneuver within the ratchet imaginary is to deploy strategies that work bit by bit. In noun form, the ratchet refers to the ratchet wheel, a tool devised to control movement either by stopping it or changing its motion. The ratchet is also a tool by itself that when used with a socket wrench allows one to unscrew a fastener in cramped spaces. The tool metaphorizes ratchet performance in its reference to the confined cultural spaces in which the ratchet subject must maneuver. The ratchet performance borrows from this linguistic lineage, seeking to maneuver around expectations of black respectable behavior without being ignored or dismissed. In other words, the ratchet seeks to make itself audible and visible while it unmakes acceptable black behavior.[10]

Pickens notes the "incremental movement" that ratchet performance entails. This movement shows up in the way that ratchet actors are always striving for financial success through entrepreneurial strides. Pickens points to the ways that this upward movement, but not quite upward mobility, is something inherent in the ratchet imaginary. Even though the ratchet performs under the conditions of public scrutiny by the Black middle class, the ratchet always seems to be upping the ante in Black cultural spaces. When the ratchet reaches one level of a

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8. Kristen Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood," *Camera Obscura* 88 30, no. 1 (2015): 130.

9. Racquel Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 144.

10. Therí A. Pickens, "Shoving aside the politics of respectability: black women, reality TV, and the ratchet performance," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 44.

successful display of (anti)respectability, she continues to ask: "How can I fuck these hoes up even more?"[11]

Lastly, Nikki Lane's definition of ratchet, informed by her ethnographic fieldwork among Black Queer Women (BQW) in Washington, DC, is most expansive of the various meanings the word signals:

> "Ratchet" Etymology
> (with apologies to E. Patrick Johnson [2001] and Alice Walker [1983])
>
> Ratchet (ra-CHit), adj. 1. meaning wretched, raunchy, and/or raggedy; also opp. of highbrow; having low taste, or tacky; from the African American Southern vernacular for wretched; sometimes negative in connotation; denotes a purposeful or careless excess of funk, attitude, filth, and/or grime. Antonyms, classy, professional, and boojie.
>
> —adj. 2. socially unacceptable, and/or outside of norms within Black sexual and cultural politics and community; often used to describe a person who acts out and "acts up" intentionally, or not, with excess.
>
> —adv. 3. lack of pretense, or care for socially acceptable standards; often used to describe an action performed with total disregard for propriety.
>
> 4. *ratchet* is to wretched as *quare* is to queer.[12]

Drawing on a lineage from E. Patrick Johnson and Alice Walker, Lane develops a precise definition of ratchet that captures the ways the word is always tied up in the notion of class and taste. According to Lane, "ratchet" is a Black southern mispronunciation of the word "wretched" which embodies the kind of queerness, or more appropriately, the kind of "quareness" invested in ratchetness. Johnson defines "quare" as "something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off-kilter" or to "connote something excessive" as a way of centering a relationship

11. You will have to excuse this slip up where I embody an authorial ratchet persona. In addition to disrupting traditional academic language, it helps me further illustrate the performative qualities of ratchetness.

12. Nikki Lane, *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)Politics of Respectability*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 35.

between Blackness and queerness.[13] Lane draws the connection between ratchet and quare by noting their excess, their performance of non-normativity. Ratchet departs from quare in the disregard of the opinions of the Black respectable masses. By "acting up," ratchet secures cultural capital in the power to disrupt preconceived social norms. The ratchet also "acts up" by being a word that is in a state of multiple contradictions as Lane notes that it "denotes a purposeful or careless excess" and is intentional or not with its excess. These tensions mark a distinctive gesture that ratchet makes. On the one hand, it masquerades as a willful disruption of social space and behavior. On the other hand, it claims to have no knowledge of this disruption. In this way, ratchet functions as a slippery gesture that is malleable to various social spaces at any given time. It also functions on the level of double gesture whereby its meaning is constantly building from another meaning. It operates as a reference of a reference.

This ratchet etymology helps parse out the ways that ratchet is used in common parlance but also reveals how in its use as a term to describe a behavior or group of people, it is rife with so much meaning about performance. As a theory of performance, ratchetness revels in displays of bodily excess, emotionality, and the performance of failure—all components that ignore the politics of respectability. Both Kristen Warner and Raquel Gates provide a useful discussion of the potential that ratchetness has for the viewer and the performer. These performances bring to the forefront Black women's emotionality and its effects on viewers. Kristen Warner underscores ratchet performance as "excessive and hypervisible,"[14] stressing its desire for visibility through

13. Throughout this study, I find myself resisting the urge to replace "quare" with "queer." Though I am speaking to the ways that Black queerness is being articulated through ratchetness, "queer" still seems the more appropriate (read: respectable) to use. E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 126.

14. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 130.

mediated channels. She sees ratchetness as a personalized performance marked by reflexivity and awareness of engaging in hyperexcessive behavior. Warner suggests that blackness portrayed as ratchet displays self-awareness of its boundaries, traits, and impact, theorizing ratchetness as a mode of existence.[15] Warner's theorization of ratchet highlights it as a performance in which one is hyperaware of their behavior and how it might be received by various publics. This appears to be the enjoyment in engaging with ratchet performance as a performer and as a viewer. Most useful to her theorizations of ratchetness are the ways that Warner shows how performance functions as affect for Black female audiences. Throughout the article, Warner mentions how though she may not demonstrate the behaviors of the characters on reality television in which she reads, she can understand and appreciate why they might act in a certain way that is outside the boundaries of respectability. Warner marks the liberatory act that Black female audiences experience when engaging with ratchet performances on the screen. These performances open up room to discuss tough conversations that are specific to Black female communities and offer some of the only forms of representation that Black women receive in popular media.

It is worth pausing here and considering Warner's heed of conflating "ratchet" with "camp." Susan Sontag's notion of camp as style "that responds to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated" serves as a primary definition of this cultural phenomena.[16] Because of their excessive characteristics, Warner anticipates ratchet's association with camp, however, she states, "I would caution…against the instinct to use 'camp' and 'ratchet' interchangeably, as they

15. Ibid, 132-133.

16. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966; New York: Picador, 2001): 279.

originate from different cultural spaces that may complement but cannot substitute for one another."[17] Framing the term in Black identity politics, Warner marks the distinction between ratchet and camp on the basis of culturally specific performances of Blackness. I want to further add to this distinction situating Zora Neale Hurston's 1933 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in this debate. Hurston's essay documents the vernacular culture of the rural South in a brief set of observations. Most instructive for my purposes, here, are her observations section of the essay titled "Imitation" where she notes that "The Negro…is famous as a mimic…Moreover, the contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it."[18] For Hurston, mimicry is a local form of Black expression that is attendant to the way Blackness is performed. It is a performance that enjoys, finds pleasure even, in taking things out of context and making them their own, reanimating them with their own bodies. Hurston's note on mimicry does great work for my formulation of ratchetness by pointing me to the ways that working class Black identity is rooted in playful expression. But this playfulness is not that of camp, but that of ratchetness.

Additionally, anger does productive work to my framing of ratchetness. Anger is an emotion that Black women are not afforded to have, even in moments where it is warranted. The Angry Black Woman trope is a specter that haunts much of the contemporary representation of Black women. In my theorizations of the ratchet aesthetic, I think through the "uses of anger" and the kind of work that anger might produce in particular contexts.[19] Terrion Williamson positions

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17. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 131.

18. Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Degel Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press): 301.

19. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in Sister Outsider, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984): 124-133.

anger as "not simply the assertion of presence, *but presence itself*…a critical posture toward suffering and constraint that is irreducible to suffering and disruptive of constraint…"[20] In Williamson's formulation, anger is a vicious force that exists on its own and that cannot be maintained. Angry Black Women on screen exceed the boundaries of emotion and have the power to stir up similar or combative feelings in the viewer. The function of ratchetness as "a performance of excess that makes and unmakes both performer and audience"[21] allows the performer to display anger without judgment and the viewer to confront their preconceived notions about Black women's anger in popular culture.

Returning to Warner's distinction, she marks a particular instance in the season seven reunion of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* where ratchet is confused for camp in a way that ends up creating a harmful environment for the crew and cast members, alike. After much taunting in the form of props—a specter and a bullhorn—by castmate Kenya Moore, Porsha Williams reacts by grabbing Kenya by the hair and pulling her to the ground. The altercation is quickly broken up by producer Andy Cohen and the production crew. Warner faults Cohen for mistaking Kenya's actions as camp because of his associations with certain outlandish behaviors in a white queer context.[22] Warner illustrates where ratchet departs from camp and it is in the potential for verbal taunting to escalate into physical altercation. The kind of emotion that might elicit a physical altercation, anger—but also a host of other emotions such as shame, embarrassment, humiliation—is a topic I explore in my case studies.

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20. Terrion Williamson, "On Anger," in *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 31.

21. Pickens, "Shoving aside the politics of respectability," 44.

22. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 132-133.

Similar to Warner, Racquel Gates highlights the affective qualities of ratchetness in her discussion on Black women and reality television. Gates is attentive to the class based performance of ratchetness and the potential it has to open up space to celebrate these performances. She writes "I contend that these shows function as a type of virtual reality, allowing viewers to inhabit these 'bad' actors and work through everyday tensions, contradictions, and frustrations that characterize life for black women across class, educational background, and professional achievement…[these shows] provide an emotional release from the social pressures placed on black women to 'correctly' perform their gender along white, patriarchal norms."[23] For Gates, the viewer's investment in ratchetness serves as a way for them to escape the normative boundaries of their daily lives in which they must conform to "proper" forms of performing race, gender, sexuality, and class. The emotional release the viewers receive from viewing these performances creates a lasting bond with ratchet imagery and the lessons one might learn in seeing other Black women "get ratchet."

Throughout this study, I explore concepts of quareness, labeling certain performances and aesthetics as "quare" and, therefore, ratchet. Much of scholarship on ratchet performance explores the performances of cisgender heterosexual Black women. Though their identities as cisgender and heterosexual would seem to position them under the umbrella of normative gender presentation, the fluidity of Black female sexuality creates a situation where even Black women that purport to belong to a normative identity are rife with inherent quareness.[24] This is related to the historical ways that Black female sexuality has been misused and misconstrued by various

23. Gates, *Double Negative*, 180.

24. See Labennett, Oneka. "'Beyoncé and Her Husband': Representing Infidelity and Kinship in a Black Marriage." *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)* 29, no. 2 (2018): 154–188.

white dominated publics. By framing ratchetness as a quare gesture, it centers the agency of Black female sexuality. In "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination," L. H. Stallings writes that ratchet "has been defined as foolish, ignorant, ho'ishness, ghetto, and a dance. It is the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race…"[25] Stallings notes what she terms "The Black Ratchet Imagination" as a social space that "unleash[es] postwork imagination and antiwork activities."[26] In the Black Ratchet Imagination, we can imagine a world where Black queer failure is celebrated by having the leisure time to move intra-transitionally through space and place where bodies, identities, and cultures are in flux. Nikki Lane's book *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)politics of Respectability* serves as the only monograph to date that explores the use of ratchet in Black social spaces. Lane's ethnographic work explores the Black Queer Women Scene in Washington, D.C., marking moments throughout the text when ratchet is used linguistically as a way to distance oneself from other women who cannot "progress" into the Black middle class, to critique the inherent misogynoir in Trap music, a subgenre in hip hop and also referred to as "ratchet music," to represent Black queer femininity in expansive ways, and to perform coming out narratives on reality television. Central to this work are the ways that ratchet functions on the level of queerness. Lane shows how Black Queer Women adopt the term for various uses that are not without their faults and contradictions.

These theorizations of ratchetness are useful in determining definitions of ratchetness and the function of it as a performance. They also allow us to see that ratchetness is about being seen and being heard, regardless of if one agrees or disagrees with the performance; that the

25. L.H. Stallings. "Hip Hop and The Black Ratchet Imagination," *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013): 136.

26. Ibid, 137.

performance visually takes up space suggests a successful display of ratchetness. Ratchetness functions as a sometimes self-aware, sometimes thoughtless critique of dominant social structures such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. As a double, or sometimes triple gesture, ratchet performance animates a kind of aesthetic that is not meant to suggest that the performers are unkept or not socially mobile, but an aesthetic that centers the beauty of excess.[27] A ratchet aesthetic embodies multiple layers of meaning or intention, emphasizing a celebration of abundance and extravagance through the use of style, fashion, and appearance.

One of the defining characteristics of the ratchet aesthetic is the meticulous attention paid to adornment. This includes excessively stylized hair, makeup, nails, and jewelry, all of which play integral roles in shaping the aesthetic's visual language. These adornments are not merely superficial embellishments but rather powerful tools for self-expression and empowerment. Wearers of the ratchet aesthetic adeptly incorporate and innovate these elements, tailoring them to suit their individual tastes and purposes. Through the deliberate selection and application of these adornments, individuals embracing the ratchet aesthetic use fashion and style as mediums for reclaiming and redefining notions of beauty and opulence, challenging conventional standards and norms of Black respectability. In doing so, they craft identities that reflect their resilience, creativity, and unapologetic embrace of excess.

Black Style & Appropriation

The ratchet aesthetic subverts conventional notions about gender, class, and sexuality as they are attached to performances of Blackness. In framing a conversation about ratchet aesthetics, race and style are important to engage, considering how the ratchet aesthetic, on the

27. See also Jillian Hernandez. *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

one hand, explodes and refashions stereotypes of Blackness, and, on the other hand, disrupts conventional notions about what style is and what style can do. Blackness-as-excessive functions on the level of double gesture: it is a stereotype to be Black and excessive and also a political maneuver. Black performance theory offers a way to set with the nuances of excessive performances of Blackness that tend to layer multiple meanings in a single performance.[28] My formulation of the ratchet aesthetic argues that the aesthetic is so hyperracial, so visibly Black that stereotypes of Blackness become elements that are troubled and, at times, dismantled. Stereotypes about Blackness are rooted in a conversation about the materiality of excess. Ratchetness makes excess a tangible element to identify and examine. The question of materiality brings attention to how stereotypes about Black excess are framed by perceptions of abundance or exaggeration in certain styles and aesthetics commonly associated with Blackness. In many ways, the ratchet aesthetic positions overconsumption as a high fashion achievement. The aesthetic is performed not only by the way one wears it, but also by the way one embodies its excessive qualities. As the ratchet aesthetic prides itself on the performance of individuality, my framing of "stylization" helps to parse out how racial performance and style operate in the aesthetic.

I employ the term "stylization" to examine the process of creating a style that is culturally specific. Scholars of Black style discuss the ways that Black people have historically developed their own style in the face of white scrutiny. As Graham White and Shane White note in their study on Black style beginning in Africa and ending in the 1940s how "ordinary black men and women developed a style that did indeed affirm their lives" and tell "a story of the public presentation of the black body, a search for the cultural imperative that have influenced the ways

28. See DeFrantz, Thomas, and Anita Gonzalez, eds. *Black Performance Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

in which African Americans have clothed themselves, styled their hair, and communicated meaning through gesture, dance, and other forms of bodily display."[29] White and White mark styling as an important aspect of Black expressive culture and reveal the ways that styling is a form of communication that Black bodies perform. These styling practices come into being by way of a history of subjugation in the transatlantic slave trade and in plantation culture thereafter. They note, "blacks have created their style in a white world, a world in which black bodies have been regarded with a mixture of envy and contempt, as something to emulate but also as a target for violence."[30] An inquiry into questions about Black style must be attentive to the ways that Black bodies are always seen as a site of danger. It is because of Blackness's historical relationship to white culture that the subject of danger is even brought up. But also, it is interesting that Black style is always seen as reacting to or being inspired by white style. The two seem to react to each other in certain historical moments. Historically, Blackness is said to be the copy of whiteness, but that does not hold up entirely considering the ways that white culture has sought Black expression for inspiration. Therefore, in the topic of style, we are always coming up on the question of the original context and Blackness is not invested in that conversation because it is more concerned about the innovation on a set of visual connotations.

In her study on the Black dandy, Monica Miller notes "…black performance styles have become grouped under the general rubric of signifyin'- an intra- and intercultural aesthetic that has come to define the culture of the African diaspora. To "'signify' is to repeat, revise, reverse, or transform what has come before, continually raising the stakes in a kind of expressive poker';

29. Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African-American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998): 2.

30. Ibid, 3.

signifying is thus a signature of all black expressive forms, whether music, dance, oral and written narrative, and even…dress."[31] Thinking of Black style as a signifying practice allows me to see how Black style is constantly referencing a reference, and in some cases, intentionally misconstruing the reference. The Black Dandy is a useful example for exploring these forms of double reference because it is a style that is thought to be imitative of white style. The Black Dandy does pull from influences of white culture, working with the images that Black people had access to during the nineteenth century. However, to suggest that the Black Dandy style is solely imitative flattens the negotiations of power and identity that are key to Black identity formations during and after slavery. Black identity has historically been formed under distinct periods of racial violence and racial surveillance. Thus, while Black style might, at times, be forced to pull from white culture, Blackness refashions the style for its own uses in distinctly Black contexts. Black style, then, is contextual and operates out of a collection of connotations from a variety of histories that document shifts in the perception of racial identity.

The styling that emerged in 1990s and 2000s popular culture, the period in which my study takes place, is tied to this lineage of nineteenth century and early twentieth century Black style. Relevant historical and cultural shifts influenced clothing preferences, hairstyles, and accessories that give Black people a more developed language on how to represent their appearance to the public. In these earlier periods, heavy racial tensions and political fights created an environment where Black expression had to be more cautious. By the latter half of the 1980s and early 1990s, hip hop, as a subcultural phenomenon, provided a significant shift in terms of Black representation. Unlike previous generations where representations of Blackness were more toned down, this newfound assertiveness and embrace of Black identity, presented a

31. Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), Caponi qtd. in Miller, 14.

bold and unapologetic representation of Blackness. As the children of the children of the Civil Rights era, hip hop performers recognized the inherent risks of being outspoken or reserved in a society that often penalized Black expression. Following the cinematic history of the Blaxploitation era, the hip hop music video produced unabashed representations of Black sexuality with a sense of defiance. These representations were characterized by their fearless exploration of sensuality, intimacy, and explicit eroticism, challenging societal norms and taboos surrounding Black bodies and desires. This portrayal of Black sexuality within hip hop not only served as a form of empowerment but also as a means of reclaiming cultural identity and challenging oppressive stereotypes that had long plagued Black communities.

My attention to ratchet aesthetics seeks to explore how performances of Black female hypersexuality through manners of dress, style, and adornment call attention to the complex intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality within contemporary culture. Therefore, ratchetness highlights the multiple binds of visuality that the Black female body is viewed in popular culture. As a lens for reading popular culture, ratchetness offers insight into the dynamics of power, identity construction, and resistance, illuminating the complexities of social hierarchies and the negotiation of cultural authenticity. While hip hop reclaimed narratives about Black sexuality in the mainstream, representations of the Black female body were used as a selling point for the male dominated industry. The Black female body and Black female sexuality were positioned as visual props in the periphery of the music video. They were only meant to accent the Black masculine performers' credibility—only to be seen and never to be heard. The kind of dress that develops out of this reality is worth considering more closely, especially in regard to the way that contemporary style and fashion that emerged in the 90s and early 2000s advances a theme of body contouring, sensuality, and artificiality. The Black female

performers in hip hop music videos—video girls or, more explicitly, "video hoes"—had to create space for their own self-representations within the constraints of the male dominated industry. By performing hypersexuality, they were able to secure brief moments of agency in the time they had allotted. However, common perceptions of these performers are that they are solely objectified and contribute to the further objectification of the Black female body in popular culture.

So far in this section, I have been discussing how Black style has been historically constructed in relationship to whiteness. Though the rise of hip hop signals a departure from this relationship, I would argue that the evolution of Black style is marked by its various appropriations of cultural styles. These appropriations are more notable in the innovations and experimentations of contemporary Black hairstyles in the post-civil rights era, which embraced the Black hair as artifice and not necessarily "natural." If race, gender, class, and sexuality are socially constructed, then these social cues are signaled through certain stylistic choices. The waters get murky when Black women adopt or what I argue, "appropriate," what some might consider to be "white hairstyles" through the use of hair extensions, hair coloring, chemical processors, or wigs. My framing of "appropriation" is best illustrated in an inspiring conversation I had with my mother, a post-civil rights baby who came of age in the 1990s. Upon discussing my research in ratchet aesthetics, my mother immediately claimed that it was ratchet when Black women wore blonde hair because of the cultural perceptions of blondeness being tied to histories of white beauty standards. She remarked that the ratchet gesture came from the fact that Black women have observed white women be celebrated as beautiful when they were blonde. And so, by adopting this beauty standard in a Black context they were "ratcheting up" the kind of stylistic innovations that Black hair could undergo. This conversation opened up

space for me to think about other kinds of Black appropriations of "culturally white" hairstyles, for instance, ponytails and straightened hair.

The ratchet aesthetic is in a constant interplay with racial tropes; therefore, Black style becomes animated by artificiality. E. Patrick Johnson and Nikki Lane help draw out my discussion of appropriation as an element of the ratchet aesthetic more clearly. In *Appropriating Blackness*, Johnson suggests that "'blackness' does not belong to any one individual group. Rather, individuals or groups appropriate this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups."[32] In Johnson's formulation, Blackness is a racial signifier that is not attached to particular bodies or a particular group. Yet, because of the way that Blackness functions in popular culture and in the everyday, it is often tied up in the notion of authenticity. Johnson notes that a

> person's authenticity is called into question by his or her 'own' based not solely on phenotype but also on the symbolic relationship between skin color and the performance of culturally inscribed language or dialect that refer back to an 'essential' blackness or whiteness. Within racially and politically charged environments in which one's allegiance to 'race' is critical to one's in-group status one's performance of appropriate 'essential' signifiers of one's race is crucial.[33]

In his discussion of authenticity, Johnson makes clear the ways that race operates as a collection of arbitrary signifiers—language or dialect, or for my purposes, fashion and styling—which do not capture the reality of race. However, race is a reality that is lived and embodied and these cultural signifiers make racial performance more visible to audiences in and outside of any given racial group.

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32. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 2-3.

33. Ibid, 3.

Nikki Lane's ethnographic study on Black Queer Women's engagement with ratchet highlights the way that appropriation is something that is inherent in the way ratchet functions linguistically. In one scene that takes place in Stadium, a DC strip club, she discusses how the Black Queer Women who attended the Ladies Day Party appropriated Chief Keef's 2012 song "I Don't Like" featuring Kanye West, a song that boasts about the trend in rap music of "girls kissing girls" for male pleasure. Lane remarks at the way the women in the audience interacted with Kanye's verse: "Kanye does several interesting things in the verse that makes it well suited for appropriation by BQW at a ratchet party."[34] She goes on to interpret the way Kanye's tone switches to embody a white "Valley girl" and notes how this parody is what allows for a reading of the song "against the normative framework within the sexual economies of desire within hip-hop."[35] In this way, there are two levels of appropriation happening, that of Kanye in the song and of the Black Queer Women rapping along with him. Through appropriation, Lane reveals how the women were able to speak against the misogynistic context of the song and employ queer meaning. In this instance, Lane conveys how the Black Ratchet Imagination has the ability for Black Queer Women to appropriate the song to make a statement about "the presence, authenticity, and power of BQW to *make* space for themselves."[36] In Lane's example of appropriation, the concept places power into the hands of Black queer women to create space for themselves in the face of their own sexualization. That Lane uses this term only once without much theoretical backing suggests that "appropriation," what I am theorizing using Johnson and

34. Lane, *Black Queer Work of Ratchet*, 81.

35. Ibid.

36. Lane, 87.

Lane to mean *the power to reverse, reuse, or restore meaning in any given text,* is a distinct way that ratchetness operates in social space.[37]

Thinking about how race and style are appropriated and do not belong to a particular group disrupts whiteness's power to exist in the visual sphere as the normative form of beauty. Thus, my foray in exploring a ratchet aesthetic has moved me to rethink my ideas about what "black" is and how social actors signal "black" even when they may appear to be commenting on whiteness. What is really "black" about black aesthetics if blackness is something that is appropriated for cultural capital, as E. Patrick Johnson argues?[38] If blackness is appropriated, what are the ways that specific bodies embody that appropriation? What is "white" about white aesthetics when it is appropriated by black women? Why do ratchet Black girls wear ponytails and straight hair? Why do ratchet Black girls wear blonde hair? What are ratchet Black girls signifying on when they adopt "white" stylistic choices?

The concept of appropriation suggests the power to take on or "play up" cultural signifiers. Under the ratchet aesthetic, to appropriate requires a dedicated knowledge of a particular cultural group that one may or may not be expected to belong to based on certain racial signifiers. The idea of racial belonging is an important challenge here because not all racialized individuals accept the norms of their prescribed racial groups. Whatever the political and social outcomes may be, the fact of appropriating, *taking particular cultural signifiers to create a unique or conventional aesthetic*, means that the individual has the *power* to choose how they represent their allegiance to a racial group or imagine themselves differently within that racial

37. The way I am framing appropriation is similar to Jose Esteban Munoz's "disidentification" in that it is something that minoritarian subjects do to assert power over certain cultural signifiers. Jose Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

38. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 5.

group. This is why throughout this dissertation study, my case studies, return to discussions of straightened hair, blonde hair, long hair, ponytails, braids, and afros. These hairstyles—some of them more racially and culturally specific than others—perform distinct forms of both racialization and stylization. More specifically, Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the appearance of straightened hair and blonde hair as Black hair processes that suggest that artificiality requires a level of maintenance in front of the camera and behind the scenes. Because of the harmful nature of chemical processors to Black hair, wigs, weaves, and hair extensions are safe alternatives to protect natural Black hair.[39] However, these items may connote an image of artificiality and therefore fail to represent "authentic" Blackness. This is the very function of the ratchet aesthetic at work—always failing to adhere to the politics of respectability and, at times, always failing to adhere to the perceived scripts of Blackness that are more regulated on Black women's bodies. My case studies suggest otherwise, as they position racial signifiers like straight hair and blonde hair as distinct forms of the ratchet aesthetic. This is not to say that my case studies are removed from any interactions with whiteness. In fact, in both, the characters assert their beauty within white dominated spaces. In addition to hairstyles, my readings are concerned with other aesthetic elements such as nail art, make-up, shoes, and manners of dress. Ratchet aesthetics "signify" on cultural norms to expose those norms as false or "fake." Even though there are elements of ratchetness that are "fake," ratchet aesthetics constantly blur the lines between the real and the fake in which realness is only a trend and not the epitome of Black identity.

Historical Formations of The Ratchet Aesthetic

39. Faith Karimi, "When it comes to their hair, Black women face a difficult choice," *CNN Health*, October 22, 2022, accessed Jan. 31, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/22/health/hair-straighteners-cancer-black-women-cec/index.html.

I situate my approach to the ratchet aesthetic in a conversation about Black aesthetics that began forming during the post-Civil rights era. Following the death of several Black activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X, scholars of Black literature and cultural theory sought to understand the accomplishments and the failures of the Civil Rights movement and how it shaped a collective aesthetic. In Addison Gayle Jr's 1971 edited volume of essays titled *The Black Aesthetic*, several of the authors offer multiple definitions of what a Black aesthetic might look like and how it might function in the post-Civil right era. Yet, much of their imaginings of this aesthetic rests on a more respectable form of Black masculinity.[40] Later in the twentieth century, scholars of the Black aesthetic begin to define it in relation to integration. Trey Ellis calls a new generation of Black artists in the 1980s and early 1990s "cultural mulattos" due to their "educa[tion] by a multi-racial mix of cultures."[41] For Ellis, integration poses new challenges to the representation of Black aesthetics whereby Black artists and performers pull from a variety of sources, not all of them Black. Lastly, Gena Dagel Caponi redefines the aesthetic for the new millennium, terming the Black aesthetic an "African American aesthetic" that is "a set of techniques and practices—a technology of stylization—that recur over time and across different forms of cultural expression."[42] Both Ellis and Caponi's version of the Black aesthetic account for the shifts in Black politics and culture through different time periods. However, the topic is always the same—scholars continue to argue that Black culture has a

40. For example, see Julian Mayfield, "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," in *The Black Aesthetic*. ed. Addison Gayle Jr., (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971): 27.

41. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," in *Platitudes: & The New Black Aesthetic*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003, 189.

42. Caponi, *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin' & Slam Dunking*, 8.

distinct aesthetic and that it is worthy of historical study. Yet, little to no attention is paid to the importance of Black femininity in Black aesthetics.

As a clear rejection of any symbols of respectability of the post-Civil right era, the cultural image of the "'round the way girl" or "the hoochie mama"—two figures who perform ratchet aesthetics and that emerge in the late 80s and early 90s hip-hop music videos—represent a culturally specific form of working-class Black femininity. The ratchet image develops out of a cultural embrace of hypersexual Black masculine representation in the hip hop industry. As "video hoes" or the background eye candy in the music video, these visual tropes are part creations of male performer's hypersexuality and part very real assertions of beauty that Black femme subjects created on their own in the face of Black male misogyny. It is in the Black masculine performer's aspirations to perform the aesthetics of a pimp in the music video that produces its much needed equivalent, the ho, in which the image of the video ho references. In discussing the generational imaginings of gender in hip hop fashion, Robin M. Chandler and Nuri Chandler-Smith note:

> The female counterpart to the pimp—the 'ho'—achieves a role as co-signifer, one accentuated by the reductive attire of voluptuous young girls whose sexuality is defined by the fashion politics of pimping. The 'ho' is a style proxy for the pimp, both in her role as actual sex worker and in the adopting of revealing, figure-defining clothing in the attire of everyday life…Both female 'mannequins' are real figurations of 'streetwalking,' of fashion's utility in the 'prostitution' of black female culture.[43]

The image of and the stylization of the ho produces a new aesthetic language for Black femininity that builds from historical formations of Black aesthetics. That the aesthetic is tied to a form of labor like sex work adds power to the ways sexuality through forms of dress can be

43. Robin M. Chandler and Nuri Chandler-Smith, "Flava in Ya Gear: Transgressive Politics and the Influence of Hip-hop on Contemporary Fashion," in *Twentieth-Century American Fashion*, eds. Linda Welters and Patricia A. Cunningham, (Oxford, UK ; Berg, 2005): 243-244.

leveraged as a form of capital in a hypermasculine environment. The ho figures in this tension perfectly, as a symbol representing the "failure to uplift."[44] Similarly to Chandler and Chandler-Smith, Mireille Miller-Young argues:

> The ho and her dysfunctional siblings—freak, skeezer, chickenhead, hoochie, hoodrat, and golddigger—are figures that trouble the notion of black collectivity that rests on ideologies of racial uplift and moral citizenship. As public women who use sex for their own interests (be they profit or pleasure) rather than for the reproduction of the racial community, hoes are not only outside of black respectability politics, they are utterly loathed. The slur is used to describe a class of women who are perceived to represent multiple legitimacy crises—the "disappearing" black family, epidemics of teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and even the materialism and consumerism of black youth culture. Hoes exist as outcasts—part victim, part threatening force. Because, as a subaltern figure, the ho troubles black heterosexist attempts to put her in her proper place in the home, in the church, or alongside a breadwinning husband, the violent disciplining and erasure of her role in black communities is legitimated. As a figure, the ho symbolizes the construction of an African American "underclass" that is shaped by cultural deficit, moral debt, and economic disenfranchisement.[45]

Miller-Young positions the ho as the site where multiple kinds of anxieties about Blackness proliferate. She also highlights how the boundaries of normative heterosexual restrict the kinds of performances that hoes can do. As a foresister of the ratchet, the ho does work to present the artistry of the explicit Black femme body, a body that is always already under the strict gazes of dominant culture.

Work animates the ratchet aesthetic. In the music video, the image of the ho is a projection of the real figure and not an actual sex worker. The performance of the ho is one that a performer creates and has a language of its own. One that is married with a full look head to toe and movement of the body. The way I formulate the ratchet aesthetic is in direct contrast to the casual styles of dress that male rappers tend to have during the scenes that video girls are present.

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44. Stallings, "The Black Ratchet Imagination," 136.

45. Mireille Miller-Young, "Ho Theory," in *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2014): 163-64.

It is intentional that male rap artists perform in clothes that cover their body while the content of the song is about the female body and the anxieties and desires it produces. This is meant to put the focus on the woman's body and preserve their own power. Yet, viewing these dynamics from the position of the video girl creates a situation where this form of bodily display has to be thought of as an art form. The reason why the ratchet has been thought outside of conversations about Black aesthetics is due to the explicit performances of Black female sexuality. Because of the historical implications of Black women's sexual deviance, conversations about Black female sexuality take a backseat. The ratchet aesthetic celebrates Black female sexuality in a way that showcases the labor of it as an art form. Theri A. Pickens notes:

> Black female sexuality subtends any discussion of the ratchet—beholden as it is to eschewing the politics of respectability. Within the ratchet imagination, sexuality becomes utilitarian and the ratchet performance capitalizes on the problematic notion of black female sexuality availability. The result lays bare the relationship between sexuality and power an economy of desire where the body is currency…Sexuality then becomes the cachet she needs to advance her own interests…The ratchet performance trades on one's knowledge, experience, and talents to secure one's own status and create a public persona.[46]

The video girls of the 80s and 90s hip hop and rap music videos highlight the artistry of self-representation and self-styling that might be missed considering the hypermasculine environments in which their representations come into being.

2 Live Crew's "Hoochie Mamas"

The Miami based rap group 2 Live Crew was known for producing videos that showcased Black women's bodies, and especially their butts, in explicit ways. I want to turn my focus to two video girls from two different music videos from the group to demonstrate the kind of work that the ratchet aesthetic is doing. In their 1989 music video to "Me So Horny," the

46. Pickens, "Shoving aside the politics of respectability," 47.

women are clad in form-fitting spandex clothing and slowly perform choreographed thrusts for the camera in close ups.[47] A scene that features the main video girl gives a moment of pause for the viewer as it brings attention to the multiple levels of production inherent in the image (see Fig. 1). Besides her curvy body and light skin, what stands out are the large doorknocker earrings that are done in triangular shape and are textured with multiple grooves. She wears a reddish-pink night gown that exposes the bottom of her butt. She wears gold bracelets on both of her wrists. The hairstyle is teased out with the front of the hair laying in a full curl that covers her forehead. There is a maximalist approach to style that the male performer takes, to assert himself and his wealth, while for her the wealth is in those small items of jewelry and in the awareness of her body, the pride in her form, and the vanity of her own beauty. She does not pay attention to the male performer who lies on the bed, seeming to be awaiting her once she is done primping herself. This form of the ratchet aesthetic rests in a kind of sensuality that appears to be disregarded in the visual world of the music video. That the video girl only looks at herself in the mirror reveals something about the power of vanity and the agency she maintains in putting her body on display for the viewer and the performer alike. Mind you, we do not hear her speak so the only language she is able to give us is body language and the language of self-styling.

47. 2 Live Crew, "Me So Horny (1989)," uploaded on Apr 30, 2018 to *YouTube* by "J S" as "2 Live Crew - Me So Horny (Full Official Video Version) (1989) (HD) 4:3," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkdY4tuvLA0&ab_channel=JS.



Figure 1. The video girl in 2 Live Crew's "Me So Horny" (1989).

The opening to 2 Live Crew's "Hoochie Mama" is very indicative of the exaggeration of the ratchet aesthetic.[48] The principal video girl, played by Paula Jai Parker, is obnoxiously loud in terms of her presentation and actually has lines of dialogue (see Fig. 2a). Her loudness highlights the multiple levels of production that represent her vanity. She wears blonde microbraids that are in a couple of messy buns on the back of her head. Microbraids are braids that are braided in a style that could appear to be strands of hair locks. These kinds of braids take much longer than braids of a thicker diameter. In this way, the hairstyle highlights the hours of labor of the hairstylist. The labor of the hairstylist is important to note because it allows us to understand more about the character's production of the self. Imagining the hands that made the strains of micro sized braided hair, positions Parker as the product of black feminist creative

48. 2 Live Crew, "Hoochie Mama (1995)," upload to YouTube on Feb. 15, 2021 by Throwback Jams as "2 Live Crew - Hoochie Mama," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=80zdN7blln8&ab_channel=ThrowbackJams.

labor. The hairstyle is further styled in a way that suggests messiness, but it actually protects the hair. She wears a pink nightgown and a white digital watch. What brings the whole look together are her extremely long pink nails (See Fig. 2b). With nails that are so long, it makes the simple task of dialing a number and holding the phone quite a humorous sight. The nails are so long that she has to use her index knuckle to dial the numbers on the telephone. She holds the phone in a way that it rests in the palms of her hands. Nail length details the amount of leisure this character has, especially if she is calling the phone of one of the members of the crew. With her alone in the room, it appears that nagging is the only thing she has to do for the day. Parker adds extra elements to the performance that exceed the boundaries of normative movement. She repeatedly moves her shoulders back and forth when asserting a line. She always holds her hands up with the highest amount of care, always displaying the length of the nails. In one moment, she whips her head and her nails end up hitting the lamp shade next to her bed. In terms of her function, she is a figure that exceeds boundaries of the visual space in the way that she takes up space by asserting her beauty and personality. Her idea of beauty is not one that is tamed, but understood as excessive for the sake of excess. The stylistic choices of the ratchet aesthetic is rooted in forms of experimentation. The appearance of long nails seems to restrict the performer but they add to the kinds of inflections she can make. Attitude is central to how the aesthetic lives in the moment. The nails alone tell a story of critical worth and wealth.

Parker's contribution to “nailography,” as I term it, is historically situated in the film and music video cannon. Parker’s cultural prominence in the mid-90s laid the foundation for more kinds of representations of characters that were ratchet in nature and artistic in performance. As Craig’s (played by Ice Cube) girlfriend in *Friday* (1995), it is memorable in the way Parker articulates certain words and phrases with a hair flip, in which the nails strategically don’t get

caught in the long faux locs, or in the way she stands when she interrogates her "sorry ass" boyfriend, in which the hands are tense, alert. Similarly, in the black sex comedy *Sprung* (1997), Parker's first lead role, her nails are produced in a series of variations. In each scene there is a different acrylic set that is matched with the costume and hairstyle which suggests an additional form of behind-the-scenes labor was consulted during this film's production. Nail technicians are often not credited for their work in film; therefore, a ratchet interpretation into film production analysis might do some work to redress their hidden labor.

Parker's performance in 90s film and music video demonstrates how ratchet aesthetics bring attention to production elements of the film industry that are overlooked in current scholarship. Because of the way that nails, braids, and other hairstyles are creations of culturally Black environments, scholarship on the white dominated film industry has not yet explored the fullness of these representations. A part of the work of this dissertation is to distinguish these moments as reversals in how the production of whiteness is centered in the film and television industries. By framing the discussion on the production of Blackness, ratchet aesthetics make viewers reconsider the technical labor of creating images that tell the story of lived Black experiences and stylistic practices.



Figure 2a. Paula Jai Parker in 2 Live Crew's "Hoochie Mama" (1995).



Figure 2b. The close up of Parker's press on nails.

I end this section with a quare close reading of one of the images that resulted in 2 Live Crew's obscenity charges: the cover to their 1989 album cover *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*. The butts of the women on the cover of the album appear to be a candid moment on set, captured by a photographer. As Miller-Young notes "the butt, or 'booty,' is the key marker of a particular

image of working-class black womanhood. Hence, the booty is a key site where these women work upon their bodies, to discipline them to conform to the most desirable kind of fleshy black feminine embodiment."[49] The four black women, three dark and one light, stand on a sandy pedestal above the four person group with their backs facing the camera. One of the dark skinned women has her top off. What is noticeable about these dancers is their bushy, full Black hair that blows in the wind, caught only in a moment by the camera. Their bodies are fit and athletic and their butts are evenly toned. Each member of the 2 Live Crew wears a simple black oversized tee shirt with large gold rope chains and black sunglasses. Not all of them appear to be looking at the dancers above them. In this way, the women are supposed to be on display for the viewer, while in the moment they are possibly trying to impress the members of the group.

This obscuring of vision is something that the work of the ratchet aesthetic does—it complicates the way viewers have been historically taught to view the Black femme body in hypersexualization. A quare reading of the cover presents a moment for us as viewers to speculate about the women's agency and choice to present themselves in a hypersexual manner. Clearly, the rap group is not concerned with them and their bodies; they are most likely looking for the next woman to exploit for their own sexual needs. Thus, these four women exist on the cover for themselves and themselves alone. How the viewer choses to view them is not up to their control. The women do more work to show off natural athleticism and the work of the body in a way that might subvert the manipulation of Black female sexuality. The image is a snapshot of the kinds of natural, "authentic" Black female bodies that were desired in this period. As I demonstrate in the Chapter 4 and the Coda of this dissertation, the current state of the ratchet aesthetic prides itself on striving for the perfectly refined body through excessive amounts of

49. Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, 172.

body modification. The women on the cover illicit a kind of desirability that was certainly of the time.

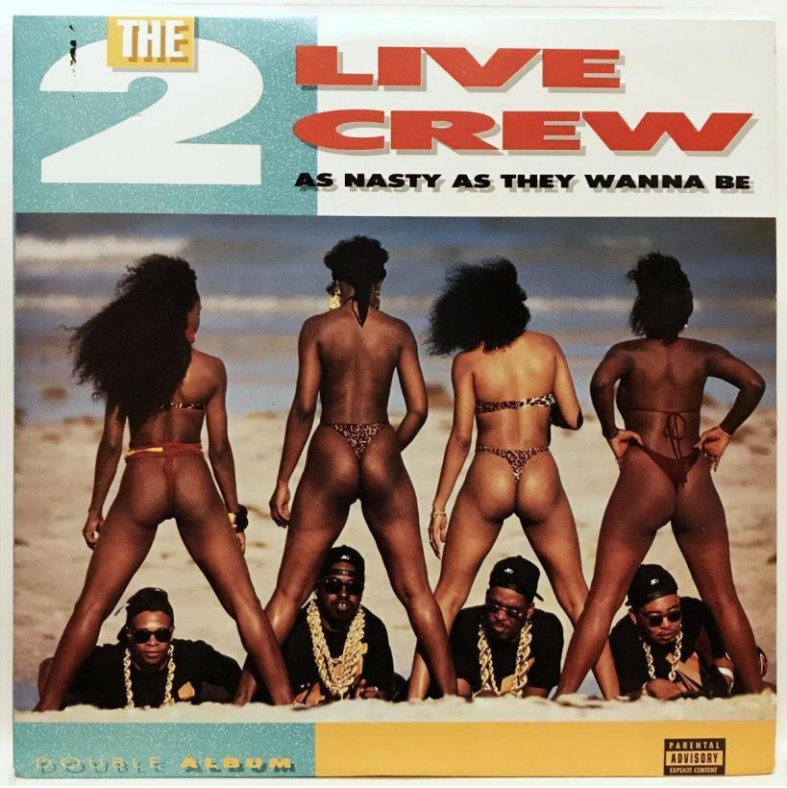

Figure 3. 2 Live Crew's album cover to *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* (1989).

The ratchet comes to an aesthetic language by offsetting the status of her working-class identity. By performing an image of excess, the performer is bringing attention to the depth of Black femininity, one that lives in a world in which norms are extended beyond the means of the appearance of functionality. Through manners of dress and behavior, they visually reject the politics of respectability. The two examples I have read from 2 Live Crew's music videos are related and also differ. In "Me So Horny," the item that is extended are the earrings, while in the "Hoochie Mama" it is the nails. In both, the characters are performing a kind of sensuality for the camera, for the man they are meant to be eye candy for, and for themselves. That the ratchet figure has a level of vanity about her performance is something that is unique to her

representation. As she is relegated to the fringes of visuality, she makes it clear that the moment she has to impress the viewer is one that celebrates her beauty.

The ratchet aesthetic represents the convergence of multiple beauty industries: hair, make up, nail, and fashion. One question in this study is whether or not the ratchet contributes to these industries or pushes the styling and innovation to a new level. There is a level of experimentation that the ratchet engages in. Experimentation with silhouette, not just of the body, but of other features on the body like the hands, ears, and feet. The way she adorns herself is something that makes her appealing to the viewer and to the rapper who uses her as a prop. It is in her existence as a prop—only to be seen for a moment—that the levels of stylization, experimentation, and improvisation become staples of the aesthetic language. In this way, the ratchet aesthetic exists in a constant state of variation, always in a state of being remastered and reworked. These early representations of the aesthetic are moments when the male gaze is highly present, but in reading ratchetness more fully, the viewer is able to identify the ratchet as representations of a creative community that is filled with a never ending resource of tools for asserting one's body and one's creative self.[50] There is a never ending resource of variation, extension, experimentation, stylization, and improvisation. In this way, the performance of the aesthetic varies from performer to performer and medium to medium.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 titled "The Televisual Ratchet Aesthetic" looks at the performance of the ratchet aesthetic in the drag character Sheneneh Jenkins played by Martin Lawrence in the television sitcom *Martin*. This chapter wrestles with Sheneneh's existence in Black culture as a

50. Someone like Theri A. Pickens would disagree with me thinking about a ratchet community as she argues that ratchet performance is not about appealing to a collective. However, I am invested in thinking about how the aesthetic creates a community, solely on the basis of looks, however shallow that may be.

"poor" or "demeaning" representation of black womanhood on television. Often thought of as the laughingstock of the series, Sheneneh Jenkins (Martin Lawrence in drag performance) is a hairstylist and fashionista who stands her ground. She is a curvier, larger woman, especially compared to petite Gina and Pam, and has a perfectly padded butt, that connotes her "ghettoness." Sheneneh is usually seen wearing gaudy clothing and jewelry, larger than life hairstyles, and long acrylic nails. She exists in the series as a foil to the more respectable black women and its sexist black men. If in "acting out" the black fag, as E. Patrick Johnson has stated, "the black heterosexual male performer conjures the specter of the black fag that suggests not only his disavowal but also, at the very least, his psychic mourning of the same,"[51] I argue that Lawrence's performance as Sheneneh Jenkins undermines the heterosexist and gender specific logic of the series. In constant opposition to her surroundings, this round the way girl employs what Jose Esteban Muñoz calls "terrorist drag." Terrorist drag positions drag as a political performance and notes how it stirs up unknown or hidden desires to "confound and subvert the social fabric."[52] I extend the work of Johnson and Muñoz to explore how ratchet performance makes impossible an "authentic" black masculinity. By close reading performative movements such as hand waves, neck rolls, eye rolls, tongue snaps, and more, I develop a theory for *quare movement*, a kind of movement that rests on the particularities of gesture. Similar to Vaginal "Crème" Davis's "freakiness," Sheneneh's freakiness "exploits its energies and its potential to enact cultural critique."[53] By looking at the performance of Sheneneh's ratchetness, the viewer is able to understand the character as one who forms community among Black women, challenging

51. Johnson. "The Specter of the Black Fag: Parody, Blackness, and Hetero/Homosexual B(r)others." *Journal of Homosexuality*. 45, no. 2 (2003): 232.

52. Muñoz. *Disidentifications*, 100.

53. ibid, 111.

previous readings of the character as harmful to representations of Black womanhood on television.

Chapter 2 titled "The Cinematic Ratchet Aesthetic" uses the 1997 film *Black American Princesses* starring actress Halle Berry (Nisi) and the late comedian Natalie Desselle (Mickey) as a case study for what I term the *cinematic ratchet aesthetic*.[54] Working with theories of the close-up, I close read noticeable and significant close-ups in *Black American Princesses* that capture black beauty and styling as well as the constant rehearsal of black gender and sexuality in aesthetic life. Along with thinking about the cinematic performances of Berry and Desselle, I speculate about the "hidden labors" of the two-time Oscar winning costume designer, Ruth E. Carter, and the hairstylist, Kim Kimble. Berry, Desselle, Carter, and Kimble all represent a Black feminist creative community that drove the success of the film's cult following.

This chapter further develops cultural imagery of the feminine silhouette. Based on the casting of the film, the duo is visually in contrast to each other on the light/dark, thin/fat binaries. The film seems to have its own idea of ratchet beauty considering how much visual space Berry takes up in close-ups. Additionally, Berry's costuming patterns, hairstyling, and make up always accentuate her shapeliness and her lightness. The same cannot be said for Desselle. Her presence in the film positions her as the token fat friend, meant to be a sidekick to Berry's light skin beauty. When the pair does make it to Beverly Hills, Berry's lightness is knowingly exploited to gain the trust of a wealthy white man while Desselle's Mickey becomes the house Mammy in some scenes. In exploring *cinematic ratchetness,* we must confront the dominant visual logics of the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" that is embedded in Black female representation in

54. The film is often referred to by its acronym BAPs, but I use full name to gesture toward a cultural history of the Black American Princess aesthetic similar to the Black Barbie aesthetic.

cinema.[55] The scenario Nisi and Mickey find themselves in toward the end of the film builds from myths in cinema of the tragic mulatta and the Mammy.

An attention to ratchet performance draws the viewers focus on the Black femme body as spectacle. The spectacle of the Black female body first came into cultural relevance when Sarah Bartman's silhouette was used as scientific justification of black women's sexual deviance and lasciviousness.[56] By reading the black femme body as high art, I seek to remove the racist scientific associations of the black femme body as well as remove the desire to view this body as only worthy of attention when they are performing sexuality. The spectacle of the Black female body animates a reading of cinematic ratchetness. Berry and Desselle's visually contrasted bodies represent the film's reminder of historical representations of Black women in cinema. In acknowledging the light/dark and thin/fat binaries, my intention is not to simply say that the film prioritizes Berry's light beauty over Desselle's, but to make evident the way the cinematic constructs of Black identity are always already caught up in a range of conflicting binaries.

Chapter 3 titled "The 'Real' Ratchet Aesthetic" examines the career of the reality television star Nene Leakes from *the Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present). As a personality that is frequently used in internet memes, Leakes' ratchet persona serves as a modern representation of the aesthetic trends of the turn of the twenty-first century. Much of Leakes' success is attributed to her signature cropped blonde bob, which is a staple hairstyle in many of her appearances on reality television from 2008 - 2016. By exploring the production, maintenance and performance of Black hair, this chapter argues that Leakes' performance of blondeness disrupts and reworks dominant ideas about blondeness in popular culture. Leakes'

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55. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

56. Janell Hobson. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, 2n ed., (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

repeated performances donning a blonde bob divests blondeness from its associations with white femininity and reasserts Blackness as blondeness. As Leakes performs blondeness on television, she inserts excessive Black femininity into cultural narratives of blondeness. Further investigation into the production, performance, and maintenance of Leakes' blonde bob reveals how much labor is required to self-fashion oneself under a presumed racial signifier of whiteness. It also offers insights into how Black women in reality television have the cultural and visual power to appropriate blondeness, which is an inherently quare gesture. In this way, I read how the performance of blondeness—or "blonde embodiment"—on the Black femme body makes clear Black femininity's fluidity and queerness.

The coda titled "The Ratchet Aesthetic in the Twenty-First Century" focuses on the rap artist and reality television personality, Sukihana to address what the aesthetic looks like in the current popular culture moment. The aesthetic in the 2020s is marked by representations of the "baddie." In a post-Trump era, the baddie represents a kind of defiant joy that refuses to be contained and a lawlessness based in Black femme working class expressive culture. The baddie is a different symbol than the ho, though she is not afraid to be a ho when she wants to. She is confident and young; she is tough and bold and will certainly knock a bitch out.[57] She most likely has been to jail or is not afraid to go to jail if it means defending her loved ones or her reputation. She enjoys showcasing her body, twerking at a moment's notice, and "stylin' out"[58] for the masses in person and on social media. She is aware of the way her body is represented

57. Representations of the baddie in the reality television cannon showcase the youth of this emergent figure. Baddies are usually those between the ages of 19 and 25. Yet, there are many women and femmes who are outside of this age range who consider themselves baddies, but as a variation of the auntie. Though youth in age is a particular marker of the baddie so too is how one continues to reference youth as they mature and elevate. See *Baddies*, Seasons 1-5, executively produced by Natalie Nunn and *South Central Baddies*, Seasons 1 – 4 and *Mean Girlz: LA*, executively produced by Isaiah Carr.

58. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion*, 3.

and consumed by multiple mediated channels in our digital world. With the mainstream success of rap artists like Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, Ice Spice, the baddie offers vibrant and fuller representations of Black femininity and Black female sexuality that continue to reject the politics of respectability. Sukihana has remained popular on social media due to her performances of hypersexuality and her reputation for fighting on camera. She also maintains that she will not turn her back on the hood as she continues to elevate in her career. Sukihana provides an example of the kinds of moves performers of the ratchet aesthetic negotiate in the new millennium.

Chapter 2:

The Televisual Ratchet Aesthetic

Sheneneh Jenkins, Black Drag, & Ratchet Characterization

Martin is a 1992 live taped television sitcom that stars Martin Lawrence as a local radio host trying to raise the ranks of the radio business. Martin, the titular character, is very sexist, yet very dependent on the women who he is often at odds with. Though the focus is usually on Martin's masculinity in crisis, the series highlights representations of Black womanhood that engage in the ratchet/respectable binary. Martin's girlfriend Gina's (played by Tisha Campbell) success as she climbs the corporate ladder is a direct threat to how Martin perceives his success at the radio station, WZUP. There are moments in the series where Gina must compromise her work opportunities to support Martin's. In some episodes, the couple is feuding when Gina has an opportunity to advance her career while Martin needs her to tend to his needs. Usually, the feud is not resolved until Gina decides to choose Martin's career over her own. Gina's best friend Pam (played by Tichina Arnold) is a supportive friend who aids her in her pursuits up the corporate ladder. Both respectable women, Gina and Pam represent the corporatization of Black womanhood in the televisual landscape.

On the flip side, Martin and Gina's neighbor Sheneneh Jenkins, played by Lawrence in drag, represents the performance of an excessive form of Black femininity, one in which ratchet aesthetics informs characterization. Sheneneh exists on the show as the butt of the joke, but as the viewer watches the progression of the series, Sheneneh's style and presentation tell a narrative about the critical uses of drag in a series that prioritizes heteronormativity. While Lawrence's Martin is misogynist and insecure, Lawrence's Sheneneh is intelligent, glamorous, and confident. However, she is deemed unattractive by many of the characters in the series.

Sheneneh's unattractiveness is most likely due to her face, robust and busty silhouette, namely her round and well-padded "ghetto" butt, her loud clothing, her overly dramatic expressions and gestures, gaudy hairstyles and accessories, and her dark skin.[59] In terms of the kinds of Black women who receive the majority of the screen time—professional Black women— Sheneneh as the ratchet alternative offers the audience a different kind of Black woman, one who's intelligence and creativity revels in ratchet aesthetics. Sheneneh's ratchet performance is layered with multiple meanings. On one hand, we can think of her as a foil to Martin's sexist attitudes; on the other, we can also think of her as a foil to the respectability that Gina and Pam represent. More specifically, Sheneneh, as the ratchet 'round the way girl, poses a serious threat to the heteronormativity of the series.

In *Martin*, Black gender performance is central to how the viewers understand each character's characterization. The "ungendered" nature of Black masculinity in particular and Black gender more broadly place these identities in flux.[60] Moreover, the instability of Black masculinity is unique because of its dialectical relationship to Black femininity. Drag, then, is a performance the heterosexual Black male performer uses to embody identities that offer them moments of solace from the boundaries of masculine gender expression. In his article "The Specter of the Black Fag," E. Patrick Johnson theorizes about heterosexual Black male comedians who perform Black gay characters as a form of ridiculing effeminate performances of Black masculinity. Johnson argues that "[t]hrough the 'acting out,' or performance of the Other

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59. One notable descriptor about Sheneneh on the public information platform, Wikipedia, is her "ghetto booty." That her ghettoness is marked by the butt seems to suggest how classed based performances are related to the body. That this descriptor makes its way on a site like Wikipedia highlights the accessibility of "low class" Black vernacular. Wikipedia. "Martin (TV series)." 29 June 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_(TV_series)#Other_roles_played_by_Lawrence.

60. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 207.

as a register of that repudiation, the black heterosexual male performer conjures the specter of the black fag that suggests not only his disavowal but also, at the very least, his psychic mourning of the same."[61] Johnson reveals how heterosexual Black male performers embodied signifiers of Black gay men to suggest their distance from markers of femininity, but ultimately, they reveal their desire to be free from the pitfalls of Black masculinity. In the context of *Martin*, drag is meant to function as comedic humor, but it does much more to reveal the fluidity of Black gender and to highlight Black cultural references. Sheneneh as a drag being exposes the unstable nature of Black masculine identity. This instability of gender exposes the performative cultural signifiers that reference lived performances of working class Black femininity.

The form of ratchet drag that gives Sheneneh life is performed through exaggerated facial expressions, bodily movements, and distinct vocal timbres and inflections. Though Lawrence's Sheneneh character is meant to ridicule Black womanhood, the character reveals that the process in the characterization of a ratchet Black woman requires cultural knowledge of performances of working class Black femininity. In his book on ballroom culture, Marlon Bailey notes, "Black drag performance, [male to female], is associated with Black popular music…perhaps the most important point about Black drag is that the performance and all of the qualities thereof have to be recognizable to the spectators in the community in order for them to be appreciated."[62] Building from Bailey, Sheneneh is a ratchet drag performance that is associated with lived Black female experience from an urban or working-class background. These performative signifiers require the performer to appropriate gestures and language of what is deemed "low class"

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61. E. Patrick Johnson, "The Specter of the Black Fag: Parody, Blackness, and Hetero/Homosexual B(r)Others" *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 232.

62. Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013): location 213 of 433.

Blackness. However, the fact that these signifiers make their way onto television reveals the artistry involved in ratchet embodiment. In this regard, ratchet drag has the potential to disrupt dominant norms established in the televisual narrative, similar to what Jose Esteban Muñoz terms as "terrorist drag" or drag as a political performance and stirs up unknown or hidden desires to "confound and subvert the social fabric."[63] Ratchet drag, then, seeks to highlight the performance of aesthetics that are deemed too excessive to be seen by the cultural mainstream.

In this chapter, I argue that Lawrence's ratchet characterization connotes culturally specific references of Black femme expression and suggests that the performance of ratchet aesthetic requires an investment in multiple beauty industries and behind the scenes labor. As a character whose production value requires a large amount of preproduction planning in terms of costume, makeup, hairstyling, and nail art, Sheneneh's ratchet characterization suggests a convergence of the overconsumption of multiple beauty industries and the cultural specificity of Black styling practices. Sheneneh constantly steals the scene. When she is not in the frame, you anticipate her arrival. Through what I term "quare movement," I focus on ratchet performative gestures like the neck roll, the tongue pop, and a host of others, to highlight how ratchetness is being performed and referenced in televisual space.[64] I also consider Sheneneh's relationship to other Black women in the series and how she becomes a vessel for Black feminist creative community or a "ratchet community." By exploring the function of ratchet drag, it becomes clear that the Black masculine performer finds the ratchet Black female other as generative of new forms of existence outside the rigid boundaries of Black masculinity. In spite of Martin's misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, Sheneneh subverts the optics of heteronormativity and

63. Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 100.

64. For a refresher on how I am using the term "quare," please refer to Chapter 1.

asserts excessive Black femininity as a resource for creativity and community building. Therefore, the kind of narrative that costume, makeup, hairstyling, and nail art tell about Sheneneh is one that, on the one hand, seeks to achieve elevation and the outward expression of Black interiority, and on other the hand, form creative community with other Black women on the basis of aesthetics and taste.

Before providing my close readings of key moments from the series, I begin with a brief history of the representation of Black womanhood in television in the section titled "Television History & Black Womanhood." This history places Sheneneh in the context of the Mammy image, what is deemed by scholars as the most demeaning representation of Black womanhood. I discuss at length the career of Lousie Beavers who was most known for her Mammy roles in film and television to reveal how the production of the Mammy image actually highlights investments in Black beauty culture. I contrast the Mammy image with the image of the respectable Black woman as seen with the character Julia, played by Diahann Carroll. Then, I end this section with a discussion of how Sheneneh figures into representations of Black womanhood on television. Finally, my close reading section titled "A Drama of Quare Movements" explores the ways ratchet performance both highlights the aesthetics of working class Black womanhood and offers moments of community building for Black women, what I call "ratchet community." As my readings show, even Pam and Gina, the series' respectable Black women, benefit from engaging in ratchet community. Like Martin, they too steal moments of solace through their interactions with Sheneneh and her ratchet community.

Television History & Black Womanhood

The televisual narrative constructs race, gender, and class into a bind of normativity, leading the viewer to believe in post-war American dream ideology.[65] Representations of Black womanhood, then, come to stand in for all racial, social, political, and historical anxieties—which the medium appropriates for its own uses. The ratchet image complicates these representations of Black womanhood because it asks us to reexamine the "good"/"bad" binary, a binary in which Black performance is often examined.[66] By way of American history, Black femininity exists in a space that is most vulnerable to criticism. Specifically, performances of Black femininity display a lot of information about the afterlives of slavery, which Saidiya Hartman has argued as the reality of the unfolding outcomes of racial enslavement in the US.[67] Historically, Black femme bodies have endured excessive amounts of sexual and bodily exploitation and this history is embedded in the way we view these bodies in media and cultural objects.[68] Television captures the intricacies of Black performance because of the way the medium is suggestive of normative gender. However, because Black female/femme flesh exists outside of normative gender structures, performances of Black femininity fluctuate with masc, femme, and quare forms of characterization.[69] The characterization of Black femininity in television is most notable in costume, make up, hairstyling, and nail art. Through these production elements, on the one hand, representation becomes signaled by way of certain trends

65. See Spigel, Lynn, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

66. Similar to the "good" hair/'bad" hair binary.

67. See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small axe: a journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

68. See Davis, Adrienne D. "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle": The Sexual Economy of American Slavery, in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, Sharon Harley et al. eds. (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 15-38.

69. See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Patrice D. Douglas, "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," *Theory & event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 106–123.

and patterns, and on the other hand, gender becomes the lens the viewer may view such trends and patterns.

The ratchet image develops out of this notion of "bad" representation. Excessive and hyper-black in nature, the ratchet aesthetic highlights the beauty in excess and the beauty of performances of Blackness that perform against the aesthetics of respectability. As a focus on the ratchet aesthetic deconstructs racial norms and myths about Blackness and whiteness, I view bodily movement as a regulatory and historically specific form of racialization. Certain people, some of them Black and femme, are interpolated as ratchet based on their physical movements and appearance. My framing of "quare movement" explores distinct forms of Black femme performance in movement. Quare movement is movement that is distinctly Black and femme, offering insight into looking at movement that exceeds the boundaries of respectability. For example, this is why hands that move with long, thick, and curved nails are so common in the ratchet image. Nails signify leisure and affluence. We associate this movement—I refer to it as "nailography"—as a culturally specific movement that provides insights into the artistry of wearing long nails. There is such an attention to detail in the way one flexes one's hands wearing long nails. You can have your fingers spaced evenly to display the work of your nail technician. (Imagine the work out the smallest of nerves and joints in your fingers will get.) Paying close attention to the palm of your hands and your fingers are not considerations that people who wear short nails have to think of.

This movement is thus seen as ratchet because of its deviation from "normal" movement. Movement that subscribes to normalcy has an attachment to capitalism, heterosexuality, and white supremacy. Poised hand movements that show off nails calls attention to Black hands in a way they are not supposed to be seen in the visual logics of white supremacy. Black femme

hands have labored in America for centuries. As "controlling images,"[70] these forms of labor dictate Black women and femme's opportunities to represent oneself in their own light, and specifically, what they can "do" with their hands. To exist in a Black femme body and to perform Black femininity is already disruptive to dominant logics of white supremacy; it is inherently ratchet. Because of the historically specific way that Black femininity has been regulated in American culture, moments when this body rejects imposed forms of physical labor are key to understanding how ratchetness operates in the visual frame and in performance. Additionally, other quare movements stick out to me, namely the neck roll, the tongue pop, the hand flick, and the eye roll. These gestures visually register as Black, femme, and working-class.

Sheneneh is an interesting case when we consider the history of Black female representation in American television. My distinct focus on the production of her beauty, which allows the viewer to see more fully the performance of her ratchetness, disrupts ideas about "bad" representations of Black womanhood. Beauty is something that is often disregarded in discussions of representations of Black womanhood that are deemed "bad." For instance, the production of the beauty of the Mammy image complicates this idea of "bad" representation. In television history, the Mammy trope has been a dominant representation of Black women since television began representing Blackness. Patricia Hill Collins explains "[t]he Mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for White men. She is asexual and therefore is free to become a surrogate mother…[she] represents the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought."[71] Robin Means Coleman notes that the

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70. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Revised tenth anniversary edition. (New York: Routledge, 2000):* 79.

71. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 92.

Mammy was "thought to be the ideal Black person largely because she was so deathly loyal to the White who owned her or to whom she was employed."[72] In Donald Bogle's history of Black representation in American film, he explores the career of one of the most famous actresses who popularized the Mammy role in film and television, Louise Beavers. He remarks how though Beavers performed one of America's most beloved "slaves":

> she detested kitchen work and abhorred pancakes. During filming, professional white cooks had to prepare the food. Then Beavers was situated at the stove, smile intact and pancakes flipper in her hand; thus the image of the jolly black cook was completely manufactured and presented for mass consumption.[73]

Beavers was excellent at delivering a convincing portrayal of a Black woman who was content in captivity. Her convincing performance can be attributed to certain facial gestures, like a smile, but also the aesthetic produced through costume, make-up, hairstyling, and nail art. Insight into the production and the performance of the Mammy figure reveals the labor that went into representing one of the "bad" representations of Black womanhood. The production team works to create this racial fantasy of the white American imagination by ensuring that the image of the Mammy fits the mold.

By examining the production of the Mammy image through the lens of costume, makeup, hairstyling, and nail art, the viewer reconsiders the notion of the Mammy as a "bad" representation of Black womanhood. The lens of beauty offers the viewer a peek into the Mammy's inner world even though it seems to not be a priority in her characterization. In one moment in his biography on Beavers, Bogle inserts a photo that shows her, dressed in her maid attire, looking up with a slight smirk and with her hands crossed. In the caption, he writes "The

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72. Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000): 43.

73. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film*, Updated and Expanded 5th edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016): 63.

screen's favorite domestic or its biggest phony? Check Louise Beavers' sly smile and take one look at those beautifully polished nails. Those hands never touched a dish in their life."[74] In response to Bogle, I would add that you should take more than one look at the nails in order to appreciate how well groomed they are. Notably, too, is the attention to detail paid to Beavers' hair, which is tightly coiled, shimmering, and covered by a bonnet. If this is a "bad" representation of Black womanhood, then why was there such an effort in aestheticizing the Mammy's beauty? What might examining the production of this image reveal about the labor that went into producing Black womanhood on screen? As Adrienne L. McLean has noted in Hollywood's studio era, Black performers were not given much thought in terms of makeup and hairstyling. In the production of (white) normalcy, the priority was often how the studio could accentuate the beauty of the white protagonists.[75] Beavers' well-groomed and polished nails serve as a reference point for highlighting the productive elements that went into producing the image of the Mammy. That the studio put resources into the production of this image during a time when Black performers were an afterthought suggests a great investment in the production of "poor" imagery.

The aesthetic of the Mammy demonstrates the layers of Black performance. Not only is Beavers performing the Mammy through facial expressions, vocal inflection, and bodily movement, she also performs through the language of Black styling. Beavers' performance in still images as the Mammy performs a kind of excess—a ratchetness—that subverts the Mammy's perceived meekness. The viewer must shift their frame of vision in order to understand the production of the Mammy image outside of the "good"/"bad" binary and to

74. ibid, 65.

75. Adrienne L. McLean, *All for Beauty: Makeup and Hairdressing in Hollywood's Studio Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022): 178.

consider the possibilities of Black cultural styling present in the image. From the image, the narrative tells the viewer that Beavers is invested in her image and possibly went to a Black stylist and a Black nail technician, considering how nicely tight and shiny her curls are and how well-groomed her nails are. As she was cemented in television and film history as America's Mammy, it cannot be ignored the kind of extratextual labor she employed as a performer to represent this imagery. Beavers' hair, her nails, and her convincing smile trick the viewer into believing that she is actually working. The maid costume she wears is simply a uniform. Because we are never permitted to see the Mammy's personal life, we are not aware of her full life outside of employment. The production of the Mammy's beauty reveal how Black aesthetics and Black styling complicate assumptions about the Mammy's inner life. Beavers' performance and the investment in her image allow the viewer to think more openly about the intricacies of her "bad" representation.

If "bad" representation allows the viewer an entry point into the production of Black beauty culture, then it would seem that the same could be said for representations that were considered to be the counter to the Mammy's image. The 1968 series *Julia* was created in order to combat the images of not only the Mammy, but of the militant Blackness rejected and challenged white supremacy.[76] According to Beretta Smith-Shomade, *Julia* "operated fully within the American, safe, [w]hite, and middle-class mainstream."[77] The series never addressed the civil and social unrest happening in the 1960s, nor did it address the "white flight" happening during the period of integration.[78] *Julia* represented a fantasy version of integration that never

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76. See Heitner, Devorah. *Black Power TV*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

77. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives: African-American Women and Television* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 13.

78. Ibid; See also Spigel, Lynn. *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

challenged the dominant notions of white supremacy. The title character played by Diahann Carroll portrayed the ideal image of the respectable Black woman that was devoid of any culturally Black specificity. This foil to the Mammy presented a challenge to the "good"/"bad" binary, namely through the production of beauty. Julia's beauty was portrayed as clean, tamed, and polished. Elements of her stylistic characterization are not done with excess in mind. It is because of this fact that Julia's respectable imagery does not do the same work that the Mammy's imagery does. Even though it is considered a "bad" representation, the Mammy's beauty highlights culturally Black stylistic practices that defy white beauty norms and adds layers to the characterization of the Mammy.

As my discussion of the Mammy demonstrates, "bad" representation is rife with culturally specific Black cultural signifiers. Sheneneh does similar work and more for the way that the character reverses Martin's sexism. Scholars have commented about how Martin's misogynistic attitudes characterized the Black women and their cultural practices in the series. Means Coleman explains, "Martin was so antagonistic to women, the series was largely misogynistic…in full view of young White viewers (the series' primary audience), Martin belittled not only Black women, but cultural signifiers at times attributed to Black females."[79] Black femininity appears to be the main source of the comedy and especially "poor" representations of Black women. Means Coleman describes Sheneneh as the "most troubling" character that Lawrence performs:

> Sheneneh wore outrageous outfits that were always skimpy and often in bright colors and satiny material. She was busty and too possessed an enormous behind thanks to considerable padding. Her earrings were huge, her acrylic nails inches long, and her hair

79. Means Coleman, *The Black Situation Comedy*, 116.

> weave was plentiful. She was quite promiscuous…She was also reminiscent of the White actor Marlin Hurt's Beulah, with its "erasure" of the Black woman.[80]

Here, Means Coleman seems to place the "most troubling" aspects about the character in her excessive aesthetics. That she sees the character as similar to a performance that erased Black women suggests she views Lawrence's drag character as doing the same work. However, this line of reasoning does not consider how Sheneneh's ratchet drag references Black female beauty culture. Like Means Coleman, Smith-Shomade notes that "one of the most disturbing aspects of womanhood's construction" emerged with Lawrence's Sheneneh. "...[M]ale impersonation has often produced laughter," Smith-Shomade states, "This time, however, it came at the expense of a specified segment, the Black, urban young woman." Further Smith-Shomade remarks, "Lawrence made an unattractive and barely believable woman…the body of Sheneneh represented Black class disparities and anxieties displaced across a gendered body. She disrupted the narrative with her loud dress; her broad voice, body, and articulations; and her insistent demands for attention."[81] Again, Smith-Shomade's assessments of the character do not consider the ways that Black drag pays reference to Black female beauty culture. The class disparities and anxieties that Sheneneh evokes are already issues that plague the lives of Black women. Ratchet drag only highlights this aspect and brings the viewer's attention to the aspects of beauty that are abound in Sheneneh's ratchet aesthetic.

Though Sheneneh has been viewed by some scholars to be a character that ridicules representations of Black womanhood, her placement in the frame with Black women of her similar aesthetic and quare movements suggests a dependency on a Black feminist creative community, the very root of a ratchet community. The production of Lawrence in drag as

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80. ibid, 117.

81. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives*, 65.

Sheneneh destabilizes the assumption that quare movement does not require artistry. As a unique form of Black expression, quare movements are filled with double meaning. Lawrence's performance style relies on a racist assumption that ghetto behavior is not respectable behavior and that it especially looks funny in drag by a heterosexual Black man in front of a live audience on television. By the racist visual logic of television, Lawrence-as-Sheneneh is always already funny and funny alone. If it were not for the high production value of Sheneneh and her gradual narrativization, this might be the case.

Even though Lawrence is heterosexual and in drag, the character he performs is distinctly quare and is immortalized in a quare television history in which Black femininity is central. Martin Lawrence as a heterosexual Black man performing quare movement unmakes historical images of Black masculinity as stable and monolithic. Lawrence's Sheneneh character has been compared to Flip Wilson's Geraldine but as a way of deeming Sheneneh as regressive to the representation of Black womanhood in television. For instance, Smith-Shomade remarks how Geraldine was "an early feminist" while with Sheneneh "womanhood's power reversed itself."[82] However, I would argue that Sheneneh extends Geraldine's feminist sensibilities through the formation of ratchet community. The moments in which Sheneneh is with other Black women is where the character's feminism exists. In my close reading of three key episodes, I explore ratchet community and the potential for quare movement to reveal broader forms of representing ratchet Black femininity in television history. Lawrence's Black masculinity is tied up in trying to distinguish itself from Black femininity, but in turn provides broader representations of Black womanhood in television history.

A Drama of Quare Movements

82. ibid, 65.

In the series, quare movement is a resource the characters adopt to express their beauty and to assert themselves in social spaces. A scene from season 1, episode 26 “Baby, You Can Drive My Car” stands out as an entry point into exploring the way quare movement operates. After agreeing to share a car won in a giveaway with his friends, Tommy (played by Thomas Mikal Ford) ends up driving Sheneneh and her two friends, Keylolo (played by Yolanda 'Yo-Yo' Whittaker) and Bonquisha (played by Kim Coles) to the club. These names might sound ridiculous to those outside of Black culture, while others possibly do know a “Sheneneh,” a “Keylolo,” or a “Bonquisha.” Yet, the laugh track wants the audience to believe these girls are a joke, based on their ratchet aesthetic and quare movements. The laugh track exposes the behind the scenes labor of the production team to create humor around quare movement, however style and aesthetics point to the broader work these characters are doing. The distinct details of these characters' ratchet characterization reveal the labor of the costume, hairstyling, make-up, and nail art departments that meticulously crafted these ratchet characters that are meant to be the jokes of the narrative. By way of the laugh track, the viewer is aurally cued to interpret Sheneneh, Keylolo, and Bonquisha as comedy for comedy sake. Their quare movements elicit laughter because they are unordinary under the optics of whiteness even on a Black-cast sitcom. However, the laughter actually brings the viewer’s attention to the kinds of ratchet aesthetics the characters perform. The function of style, though it appears to be ridiculed by behind the scenes production, adds layers to how the characters are received in televisual space.

The stylistic choices of the characters demonstrate the way that ratchet characterization speaks back to dominant television narratives of whiteness. At first glance of the four shot (see Fig. 4), Sheneneh, Keylolo, and Bonquisha visually stand out next to Tommy, who is wearing a simple dress shirt with a vest. Each character’s hair and headdress are unique. Sheneneh wears

braids with a yellow scrunchy that holds a section of her hair in a ponytail, Keylolo wears a color blocked baseball hat with the brim facing backward, and Bonquisha wears a poofy hat with golden embroidery. They all wear doorknocker earrings, large gold earrings that make noise when they move. They all wear curved nails that are about two or three inches past the tip of the finger.

Throughout the scene, the women primp themselves and give each other style advice, preparing for a night out at the club. Here, the club signifies a social space where otherwise undesirable subjects can be desired among those who might understand and appreciate their aesthetics. The club is a place where the ratchet imagery can proliferate without ridicule. It is a place where they can engage in creative sociality. Therefore, there is such an effort placed into making sure they are just right for their night out. Throughout the car ride, Sheneneh and Keylolo file or buff their nails. In one moment, Sheneneh, Keylolo, and Bonquisha high five each other with the palm of their hands and quickly return to filing and buffing their nails. The focus on their nails reveal how much value they put into them. The action of nail grooming also adds to the language of quare movement that runs throughout the scene. The key lighting brings attention to how their nails catch light. Once the performer positions them right, you can see the varying color tones in their nails. The nail color also corresponds with their chosen lipstick color.



Figure 4. Sheneneh, Keylolo, and Bonquisha in the car with Tommy.

The scene sets the tone for the kind of women we are viewing. They are women who find creativity wherever they see it and who view their bodies as creative vessels of expression. When the scene begins with an instrumental hip hop beat playing on the radio, the women rap over the beat. This is why the explosion of sound they create on top of the hip hop beat demonstrates their beauty and equally their humor. They point outlandishly at each other. They chew on gum with their mouths flapping without a care. They are very focused on getting their nails right for this night out. During the girls rap session, Tommy has had enough and turns off the radio. This is when we get the first close-up of Sheneneh in this scene and she is the only character that receives a close-up (Fig. 5a). That this close-up comes after the introduction of the ratchet girls reveals how Sheneneh is a reflection of a larger aesthetic community, a ratchet community. Sheneneh is made beautiful by the production of lighting, hairstyling, and costuming. In the close-up, Sheneneh looks like a neo-noir film star in technicolor. The light hits

the left side of her face, highlighting the Blackness of the foundation and the smoothness of her skin. The eyebrows are shaped and darkened with a black pencil. The red lipstick is shiny. The colors yellow and red feature as balanced colors, especially when paired with Black skin. Similarly, the lighting makes clear the details of the chunky braided shoulder length wig. There are no braids that are loose. The braided hair contrasts against the color blocked jacket. There is so much effort put into creating this "ugly ghetto Black woman." Sheneneh is the only character in this scene to get a close-up, which means production prepared her beauty with perfection in mind. There is not a smudged lip or eyebrow. The foundation does not appear caked on. The face is visually flawless.

Though the series tries to paint Sheneneh as "ugly," the labor of the ratchet aesthetic makes this task impossible. Another close-up on Sheneneh captures the labor placed in her production value (Fig. 5b). After remarking how she downs two forty ounce malt liquors before the club to avoid paying for overpriced drinks, Sheneneh says "Because I'm a lady." The laugh track is cued. This face is an attempt to make Sheneneh appear buffoonish, but it brings into attention that the makeup department took into consideration that Lawrence's face would move like this and thus painted the face smooth so that the foundation would not wrinkle. Sheneneh's face stays flawless, even when it is twisted up to make her appear "ugly." Lawrence performs this face while asserting Sheneneh's womanhood as a way to call attention to his ratchet drag performance. The joke is that she is certainly not a lady by heteronormative standards. However, this mockery of ratchet drag reveals the production value and attention to detail in Sheneneh's characterization.



Figure 5a. Sheneneh's first close-up.



Figure 5b. Sheneneh's second close-up.

The first close-up allows us into Sheneneh's interiority. Sheneneh turns, looks at him: "*Daaang, Tom*my. We just tryna say we got us a man. I mean *dang*. Excuse us. MC No Hair! [audience laugh track]. Okay we just warming up fo' da *club, Tom*my." It is hard to describe the cadence of Sheneneh's lines, but the repetitions, long inflections, and cultural reference to MC Hammer and Tommy's bald head create a response that is pointed, yet poignant. She and her home girls are just trying to get hype for the club. The attitude she communicates in the close-up is necessary if we are to understand the desires of these ratchet Black girls. The girls are pressed for time, traffic is slow and they want to get to the club before the ladies' night special ends. They keep trying to get Tommy to pass the old man in front of them, he cites a broken side mirror as the reason he cannot. Sheneneh says to him, grabbing his rearview mirror: "Well, since you ain't gon pass him, then you won't be needin' this, Tommy, huh?" Her and Keylolo quickly check out their faces in the mirror (Sheneneh continues to file her nails) before Tommy scolds her and adjusts the mirror. She says, looking at him, flicking her hand and shaking her body in the seat, "Well, *Tom*my I gotta get my face done [pats the back of her wig with the palm of her hand]—I gotta get ready fadda *club, Tom*my."

Forms of insult and playful banter is commonplace in ratchet community. It is another form of creation that is expressed in community. When Bonquisha asks Sheneneh if she wants to try her red lipstick, Sheneneh declines the offer, stating that "I don't know where your mouth been, Bonquisha [cue laugh track]." To that response, Bonquisha says "You just jealous." Keylolo is upset because she has just dropped an earring. Sheneneh says "Keylolo. Okay, please. Alright [Lawrence rolls their eyes to the side]. It is not like anyone is gon' notice. I mean, *damn*, you got on ten pair!" "Ah-Huh? [eyes wide, head pulls back]. Shut up, Sheneneh." She responds. To Tommy, Keylolo turns and says "Tommy, look, if you find my earring, you betta give it back

to me. I don't wanna see none of yo skeezers wit my earring on." Tommy responds, "What are you talkin' bout, Kaluha!" The women who had been very lively pause and look at Tommy. Sheneneh and Bonquisha let out a childish "oooo" signaling his mistake. Keylolo addresses him with great attitude: "Kaluha? My name is Key. Lo. Lo." As Keylolo delivers this line, her neck moves with each syllable, punctuating her language. This moment is insightful because of the way that ratchet girls' names are often misread and misspelled even among Black men. The televisual reality has to make room for Keylolo's existence. She spells her name for him, "K-E-Y" and assisted by Sheneneh, "Lo. Lo." Though the women take slights at each other, they are banded to together to assert the correct spelling of Keylolo's name. This moment of togetherness is quickly turned humorous when Sheneneh tells her that her mother was trippin' when she gave her that name. Keylolo claps back by saying that Sheneneh's mother was wrong when she gave her her name. This sends Sheneneh in a frenzy asserting the fact that "*Er*body like Sheneneh…Sheneneh is the *bomb*." When Lawrence performs this movement, his mouth is open and eyes are bulging. He flicks his hands and moves his neck. These movements signify power between the group. In their environment, it is important to hold one's space and to assert one's name.

This ratchet chorus takes us on a rollercoaster of gestures, emotions, and verbal insults.[83] This scene demonstrates the lengths they will go to protect each other and their assertion of beauty. They may seem to be in a constant battle with each other on aesthetic choices, but they have each other's back in moments when they are disrespected. For instance, a car honks at

83. I am thinking of the chorus in the same way Saidiya Hartman has framed the chorus. As I have been arguing, ratchet Black girls pursue aesthetic conventions to demonstrate Black feminist creative collectivity. These girls are a strong collective of ratchet voices, gestures, movements. Saidiya Hartman, "The Chorus Opens the Way." *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 349.

them, setting Sheneneh off. Another close-up captures her telling the driver, "Hold on, hold on. Who da hell you beepin' at? Oh no you didn't, oh no you didn't. I will hurt you, alright!" "Put ya ugly face back in the car" the white male sounding driver says. Throughout this exchange, the way Lawrence constantly blinks and holds his mouth open to exaggerate certain inflections that the character makes is most striking. After the driver calls her beauty into question, Keylolo and Bonquisha pop up in the back window. "Don't let us get ta slicin'!" Bonquisha screams. "That's right. We will get ta [big eye roll] slicin'!" The driver honks again. Sheneneh says to him, "Is that your wife or is that your dog sitting backwards?" [Laugh track.] The car runs them off the road, crashing into an unseen object.

Angry Black women on screen exceed the boundaries of emotion and have the power to stir up similar or combative feelings in the viewer. Angry black women, especially on television, express a wealth of feelings for the viewer. Terrion Williamson positions anger as "not simply the assertion of presence, *but presence itself*…a critical posture toward suffering and constraint that is irreducible to suffering and disruptive of constraint…"[84] In Williamson's formulation, anger is a vicious force that exists on itself own and that cannot be maintained. Depending on how you read angry Black women in your daily life, you will interpret the televisual or cinematic image of anger similarly. Unless you are captivated or entertained by the actresses' performance of anger. This is why they are ready to cut a random stranger. Their friend Sheneneh will *not* be called ugly in their presence. These girls are aware of the need to assert social dominance. Thus, anger is a useful resource for ratchet Black girls to protect themselves, while delivering a catchy catchphrase, insult, or comeback. And can you blame

84. Terrion Williamson. "On Anger" in *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 31.

them? They just want to get in free at the club and have a good time on their Tuesday night, most likely after work.

The performance of anger, excessive gesture, and insult are central to ratchet community. These performative qualities bind the groups of women to one another through a language in which the riff off of. The bodily movements of the ratchet chorus is something that can be seen more fully in season 2, episode 7 titled "Control." The episode displays Gina and Pam's engagement with ratchet community in a way that offers them a solace from the corporatization and respectability of their aesthetics and personalities. The episode begins with Gina winning basketball tickets for Martin as a surprise gift. But something goes wrong, in typical sitcom fashion, and she ends up losing the tickets. Out of desperation, Gina and Pam seek out help from Sheneneh to get new tickets before Martin finds out. Sheneneh agrees to give them to them under one condition: that they work in her hair salon.

Preceding this agreement, there is an altercation between Pam and Sheneneh in which Gina has to step in between them to keep them apart. This common occurrence happens throughout the series with these two characters and it highlights the light skin/dark skin dynamic that is common in Black social spaces. Gina as the light skinned mediator of the two dark skinned women, Pam and Sheneneh, positions her as the most tamed and well-mannered of the two. Because Pam is always paired with Gina in professional clothing and social spaces, one of the only moments where she is given space to break away from these forms of respectability is in her altercations with Sheneneh. Beretta Smith-Shomade reads Pam's presence in the series as always in state of being degraded because of her casting as the dark shinned best friend. She notes the series "denies her subjectivity…not only signify[ing] her minor importance…but

introduc[ing] problematic color considerations plaguing Black communities."[85] Extending Smith-Shomade's observation, I would argue that even though Pam is a supporting character, the few moments in which she shines is in her ratchetness. She is deemed a respectable woman due to her occupation and association with Gina, her dark skin, excessive hairstyles, body hugging clothing, and accessorization make her a part of ratchet community in a way that Gina is not.

In spite of Pam and Sheneneh's recurring altercations with Sheneneh (Fig. 4), there appears to be forms of commonality based on aesthetics. On the basis of clothing and hairstyle, Pam and Sheneneh reference each other, albeit in different contexts. For instance, on the basis of costume, Pam wears a gray two piece set that reveals her midriff and Sheneneh wears a pink sweater that is tucked into denim shorts. Both looks bring attention to the silhouette in ways that accent the waist and the butt. Through this styling choice, the Black femme body becomes a reference point for presence in social space. Similarly, both Pam and Sheneneh's hairstyles adopt artificiality through the use of extensions and accessories. Pam's hair, which appears to be a blend of relaxed natural hair that is enhanced with extensions, is styled stretched curls that hang past her neck. The hairstyle is similar to the one Sheneneh wears which is a wig that is styled in chunky twists and accented with spiral black ribbons. This kind of ratchet referencing creates an aesthetic allegiance that is visible in distinct social spaces, especially those that are conducive to ratchet community, such as Sheneneh's hair salon.

85. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives*, 47.



Figure 6. Gina breaks up the argument between Pam and Sheneneh.

On the other hand, Gina's "normal" aesthetics frame her as the more respectable and therefore more "sane" Black woman (Fig. 7a). Gina's normalness is really a reference to the Black Lady, the form of Black femme representation that sought to assert racial mobility. Her light skin adds another layer of desirability to her characterization, after all she is the only Black woman we see in a long term relationship from the start of the series (even though it is an unequal one). Similar to the "good"/"bad" binary, the light/dark binary is hyperpresent in representations of Blackness. The televisual narrative seeks to prioritize a light skinned Black woman due to her proximity to whiteness.

In Sheneneh's salon, Gina's hair is the only thing that has changed about the production of her character. This suggests that the episode privileges hair as a main narrative element. At the beginning of the episode, Gina's hair is a slick back with a middle part and it has a tightly curled bun attached to the back of the head. Like Pam and Sheneneh, Gina's hair does have some

artificial hair attachments but it is not as unruly as the other two. Pam and Sheneneh's curls signify excess, while Gina's tight curl signifies containment. When Gina agrees to take a position at Sheneneh's hair and nail salon, the containment that Gina's hairstyles are now for ceases to exist. Gina's ratchet transformation happens rather comically. Sheneneh, in a close-up, turns her head to the camera, capturing the structure of the bouncy hairstyle (Fig. 7b). The close-up fades into a close-up of the back of Gina's head, displaying a freshly installed weave with thinner and more explosive curls (Fig. 7c). Gina turns around to reveal the front of her hairstyle with laid edges (Fig. 8). She pauses in shock and dread. Audience laughter.



Figure 7a. Gina's "normal" hair.



Figure 7b. The film dissolve from the back of Sheneneh's hair…



Figure 7c. …to the back of Gina's new "ratchet" hairstyle.

The dissolve from Sheneneh's head to Gina's suggests that Sheneneh transports her ratchet aesthetic onto Gina's. The curls that Gina's style once contained are now messy and take up most of her head. Her curls even become a point of ridicule with Pam pulling on a strand of hair and it bouncing back in place. The finishing touch of the look, the laid edges, is a feature that is common in working class Black femme aesthetics. The laying of edges requires that the stylist construct excess "baby" hair to stylize on the forehead of the wearer. On the one hand, laying edges does draw attention to excess hair, while, on the other hand, the stylistic practice appears to tame the excess hair, using styling the hairs in straightened or curled waves. Typically, the excess hair is held in place by a thick edge gel that provides a shine to the area. Gina's edges are the only element about the style that is tamed and even then the hair appears to cover up Gina's otherwise cleaner aesthetic.



Figure 8. The reveal of Gina's new hairstyle with edges laid.

Though Gina has the look of someone in ratchet community, she certainly does not play the part. She believes that salon work is easy and that it does not require that much skill. Sheneneh quickly reinforces that certain jobs in the salon require skilled labor in which Gina was not versed. Sheneneh provides her with a simple task: wash Laquita's hair. This leads Gina to question Laquita's choice at requesting burgundy finger waves. The question makes Laquita uncertain about her place in Sheneneh's salon and she decides to leave to go be styled by one of Sheneneh's competitors. Laquita remarks that she will come back to the shop once "that boogie girl leaves," referring to Gina.



Figure 9. Laquita (played by Simbi Kali) taps the tip of her nails on her tongue while listening to Sheneneh insult her.

Laquita's presence in the salon scene displays her as representative of ratchet community (Fig. 9). Her nails and her costume including a shirt with mismatched patterns display a clash in color and in form. Laquita is far from the toned aesthetics in which Gina

subscribes to. Laquita's aesthetic is one of experimentation, incongruency, and hyper-stylization. Particularly, the way she holds her nails adds to the televisual narrative. The nails represent comfort for her. That she places them on the tip of her tongue and looks up at Sheneneh suggests a posture of curiosity. Though she is waiting for an insult, the nails place her in community and therefore in the know of the social dynamics. After Sheneneh compares her to Flavor Flav, a somewhat "unattractive" dark skinned man, Laquita laughs it off waving her nails in the air. In a medium shot (as close to a close-up that Laquita gets), the viewer is able to see the details of the acrylics (Fig. 10). They are about two and a half inches from the cuticle and styled in a two tone french tip.[86] However, the nails go against the classical color palate of the french tip which is pink acrylic with a white tip finish, mimicking the look of natural nail color. On Laquita's nails the base color is a hot pink and it is finished with yellow tips.

The ability to have multiple actors in a scene who wear heavily stylized acrylic nails suggests an investment in the elevation of aesthetics. Background or guest characters[87], in their brief time in televisual space, reveal even more about the versatility of Black hair, the hyperstylization of Black style, and the cultural specificity of excessive Black femininity. As a guest performer, Simbi Kali's time to perform for the camera is limited. Each movement she makes adds layers unto the character but also showcases nail art as an art form and as important to the production of the episode in general. It could be argued that the elevation of production value can be seen in the way ratchet characterization is styled and casted for the camera.

86. As a wearer of medium to long acrylic nail sets, this estimate is my best educated guess. However, it is worth understanding the labor of performing with nails of this length and the artistry of the uncredited nail technicians.

87. For a discussion on the function of background and guest characters in the television sitcom, see Miller, Quinlan. *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.



Figure 10. Laquita sitting up spreading her hands. This medium shot makes it easier for the viewer to see the details of the nail art.

Sheneneh as a guest character opens up ways for the main characters to relieve themselves of their respectable lives. The final scene from the episode reveals the ways that Sheneneh's hairstyling gives Gina a new personality in a moment where she is dismissed by Martin. Gina returns home after having gotten the tickets from Sheneneh to give to Martin in time for the game. Lawrence, now out of drag, is back to his normal heterosexual masculine identity. As he leaves, he notices something different about Gina. He looks at her and says, "Did you get a new outfit?" completely disregarding her excessive new hairstyle. When he leaves, Gina faces the camera and says in a lower, drawn out vocal inflection, "oh ma guuudness." Audience laughter. All while pulling on a strand of hair and sucking her thumb (Fig. 11a & 11b). That Gina reverts back to a ratchet Black girl further displays how interactions with Sheneneh offer moments of freedom for those who ascribe to Black respectability. The combination of

bodily gesture (she lowers her head, holds her left wrist in a curved position, and pulls on her artificial hair) and vocal inflection (she lowers her voice and drags out her words) signify the quare movements that merge the body with sound. For the whole episode, Gina does not perform any quare moments, but it is in the privacy of her own home, following working in Sheneneh's hair salon, and after being left unnoticed by her lover that she allows her persona to change. It almost appears as if Gina relaxes into herself. Quare moments like these and throughout the rest of this study reveal the way Black femme performers pull references from lived Black experiences in "urban" environments. When they make their way on television, they explode its history of representing Black femme bodies in ways for the white imagination. The Black ratchet imaginary[88] rests in the nooks and crannies of the aural and the physical, revealing the ways Black femme performance in televisual narratives "troubles the vision" of the viewer.[89]

88. See Stallings, L. H. "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination." *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013): 135–139.

88. See Fleetwood, Nicole R. *Troubling Vision : Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.



Figure 11a. Gina's "oh ma guuudness."



Figure 11b. Gina sucks on her thumb.

The function of the background and the guest character highlights the ways the ratchet aesthetic represents an image of upward mobility. Season 3, episode 15 titled "Sophisticated Ladies" is indicative of the narrative of upward mobility. The episode portrays Sheneneh and Laquita in an elevated context: an exclusive women's social club (Fig. 12). On the basis of the club women's more respectable attire, one might assume that they do not fit the mold based on their aesthetics that clash in terms of color and pattern. However, it is their status as entrepreneurs that make them the more attractive candidates in comparison to Gina and Pam, who are trying to earn access into the club as well. Sheneneh represents herself as a successful business owner whose clientele has expanded. Additionally, at this point in the series, Laquita is a professional nail technician with her own store front, a detail that is not given in her previous appearance. That the series provides this insight into the life of this background character proves the way Laquita offers the series more expansive representations of Black womanhood. As women who work in corporate America, Gina and Pam are far from the entrepreneurs that Laquita and Sheneneh are. While the series might disregard their elevation, Laquita and Sheneneh are characters that seek access into greater forms of status and wealth.

Though the ratchet aesthetic is in contrast to an aesthetic of respectability, it forms community on the basis of aesthetics in a space that is deemed respectable. "Sophisticated Ladies" shows that it is not Sheneneh and Laquita who need to change their aesthetic to fit into the group, but the reverse: the club women adopt ratchet aesthetics to liven up the stuffy social space. The club women's transformation into the ratchet aesthetic is followed by Sheneneh and Laquita revealing details about several of the women's husband's infidelities. As business owners in the beauty industry, it would seem that they are privy to these kinds of intimate details. This knowledge about their husband's unfaithfulness adds another layer of credibility to the club.

The last scene of the episode portrays the once demure club women as the ratchet, hip hop dancing, loud talking, and acrylic nail wearing women that Sheneneh and Laquita are. The club women's engagement in the ratchet aesthetic allows them to imagine a life away from their husbands—even if only briefly. In this way, the aesthetic allows them space to be free from the binds of respectability.

My readings of Sheneneh and other characters of the ratchet chorus reveals the attention to detail that is placed in producing the ratchet aesthetic. By allowing viewers to see fuller representations of Black womanhood, the series unmakes its investments in heteronormativity, misogyny, and respectability. Through performance, the ratchet aesthetic disrupts normalcy and offers a creative alternative to combating it. My discussion of the performative qualities of the ratchet aesthetic is continued in Chapter 2 where I discuss the 1997 film *Black American Princesses*. In this chapter, I revisit the image of the video girl to mark the entrepreneurial potential of the figure and to show the figure's desire for upwardly mobile success. The video girl is a performer that is supposed to be seen but not heard. That the film gives the video girl image a full narrative shows the ways the image speaks to the idea of the ratchet aesthetic's progression of refinement.



Figure 12. Sheneneh and Laquita arrive at a women's club meeting.

Chapter 3:

The Cinematic Ratchet Aesthetic

Black American Princesses & Black Female Creative Labor

This dissertation explores how the expansive body of work that video girls have contributed to the hip hop music video genre reached mainstream status in the latter half of the 90s. I have also shown how the mainstreaming of the video girl represented a shift in the norms of American beauty culture. Though limited in their screen time, the video girls of the 2 Live Crew era brought into the mainstream authentic narratives about Black female sexuality. Their sartorial manners of dress and their hypersexual performance—the foundational elements of the ratchet aesthetic—highlighted the beauty of the Black female body and the labor that went into producing it. But a renewed interest in Black Nationalism in the 1990s starkly conflicted with the emergence of the explicit images of Black women shaking their butts in hip hop music videos. This tension between the respectable image (pro-Black ideology) and the ratchet image (the video girl) was the grounds on which narratives about Black female sexuality and the Black female body were shared with the (white) mainstream. These anxieties over the Black female body—as projected in the image of the video girl—redefined American fashion, the American feminine silhouette, and the American blonde.

Black American Princesses (1997), then, is a fantastical cinematic interpretation of the video girl.[90] The film is most known for how the production team of Black women creatives styled the Black female body for Hollywood cinema which has historically produced imagery of

89. Though the film is typically referenced by its acronym, BAPs, I use the full name to assert how the film develops a visual iconography of the Black princess and positions her as an emergent cultural figure.

Black women in sexually subservient roles.[91] By placing Black beauty culture as the focus, the film immortalizes a culturally specific working class Black femininity for the new millennium "for and against" the mechanisms of Hollywood cinema.[92]

I begin my discussion of the film by briefly talking about the Black female creatives that produced the ratchet aesthetics: writer, Troy Beyer, costume designer, Ruth E. Cater, and hairstylist, Kim Kimble. I then explore how the film relates to the image of the video girl and groupie culture in the hip hop industry. In this section, I detail the ways that the cinematic positions the Black female body on a series of binaries and tropes, namely the tragic mulatta and the Mammy. Most importantly, I note how the video girl image allows room to subvert this imagery. I then explore how the cinematic close-up allows the viewer to take in the beauty of Black styling and to have access into Black interiority and Black feeling. In my close reading of the film, I remark how the ratchet aesthetics that are seen in the beginning of the film as hyperexcessive transforms over the film's narrative into what I term "ratchet minimalism." The embrace of ratchet minimalism gestures toward the achievement of the "ratchet elsewhere" the characters strive to exist in. The film's sustained presence in popular culture and its references to Black beauty culture represented modern images of Black femininity for mainstream audiences. These images reveal a breadth of knowledge about the creative capacities of ratchet aesthetics which make it memorable for fans decades later.

Directed by Robert Townsend and written by Troy Beyer, the hyperstylized, and at times, hypersurreal, *Black American Princesses* stars actress Halle Berry (Nisi) and comedian Natalie

90. See Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. Updated and expanded 5th edition. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

91. Tavia Nyoung'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018): 3.

Desselle (Mickey) as two best friends from Decatur, Georgia. A rags-to-riches story, the film begins with Nisi and Mickey as waitresses in a local diner. Nisi hopes to audition for the "video girl of the world" competition to obtain money for her and Mickey's dream business: a combination hair salon and restaurant. Following a failed audition, Nisi is hired by the nephew of Mr. Blackmore, a wealthy white businessman played by Martin Landau, to pretend to be the granddaughter of a former domestic worker for the family, Lily, with whom Mr. Blakemore was in love. Nisi and Mickey go along with the plan and end up developing a caring relationship with Mr. Blakemore until his death. During the reading of his will, it is revealed to the women that Mr. Blakemore knew Nisi was not Lily's granddaughter because Lily never had any children. Though they performed a ruse on him, Mr. Blakemore rewards the women with a portion of his wealth, dubbing them his "Black American Princesses," which they use to create their combination hair salon and restaurant business, Lily'z.

While the film is known in Black popular culture as a "hood film,"[93] little is said about the team of Black feminist creatives that worked on the film—the screenwriter, Troy Beyer, the costume designer, Ruth E. Carter, and the lead hair stylist, Kim Kimble.[94] In an interview about her work on the film, Beyer laments that the final cut of the film did not capture the way she had initially written it, "...I really believed that my words had not honestly made it onto the screen. The director [Robert Townsend] was a writer/director himself and it was the first time he had directed someone else's writing. He took the liberty of changing stuff as he shot the film. At the

92. See Massood, Paula J. *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.

93. Though these women may not declare themselves "Black feminists," I would consider them as such to gesture toward their collective creative efforts on the film.

end of the day, when I saw the film, I hated it."[95] What Beyer's disappointment highlights is how a Black male director could misconstrue a Black woman writer's vision. Even though much of the creative control of the film was in the hands of Black female creatives, conflicts over racialized gender and labor politics reveal how negotiations of power are framed in representations of "low class" or "urban" Blackness for mainstream cinema. Beyer's disappointment offers a way to think capaciously about the "behind the scenes" Black feminist creative labor of Ruth E. Carter (costume designer) and Kim Kimble (head of hairstyling). Their current achievements in the film and television industries would not be possible without the cult success of *Black American Princesses*.

Costume designer Ruth E. Carter's work on *Black American Princesses* follows her work on popular Black cast films directed by Spike Lee like *School Daze* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), *Crooklyn* (1994), and *Clockers* (1995)—which captured the mood and the aesthetics of the New Black Cinema movement. *Black American Princesses* marked her third collaboration with director Robert Townsend who she worked with on *The Five Heartbeats* (1991) and *The Meteor Man* (1993). Following *Black American Princesses*, Carter's career exploded, culminating in her winning two Oscars for costume design for her work on *Black Panther* (2018) and *Wakanda Forever* (2022). Carter's designs in *Black American Princesses* capture the excessive aesthetics of urban Black female communities. In the 2022 exhibit at the Museum of Pop Culture titled "Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design," 55 of Carter's designs were put on display; the costumes for *Black American Princesses* were absent.[96] In a

94. Tom Cunha, "Actor-Director Troy Beyer Talks About Sex," Indiewire, Last modified September 14, 1998, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/actor-director-troy-beyer-talks-about-sex-82609/.

95. *MoPOP*, "Work of Oscar-Winning Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter on Display in Museum of Pop Culture's Upcoming Exhibition," published April 26, 2022, accessed March 27, 2024; https://www.mopop.org/about-mopop/press/april-26-2022/.

short documentary video that played on loop, Carter remarks that she was "surprised" that so many people wanted to dress like the characters in *Black American Princesses* in the years since its release.[97] It is worth noting that the exhibit featured designs from Carter's more respectable body of work. In this way, it demonstrates the strategic moves Carter employed to gain mainstream success as a costume designer. While the costumes for *Black American Princesses* might not have fallen into the Afrofuturist theme of the exhibit, its absence and dismissal by the artist suggests its status as "low brow." Instead of celebrating the distinct way she captured 1990s excessive Black female aesthetics, Carter seems to be shocked at the film's cultural relevance.

Whereas Carter does not see the film's significance in her work, hairstylist Kim Kimble views the film as a learning experience for which she is grateful. Priscilla Peña Ovalle has argued that Kim Kimble's success as a celebrity stylist is "historically significant" because she established her career through a "matrilineal line of Black hairstylists."[98] In an interview, Kimble remarks about the experience she gained working on *Black American Princesses*, her first feature length film, stating that she had to create several extravagant wigs to keep up with production demands. This project allowed Kimble to garner union membership, noting "...my career took off from there."[99] Since then, Kimble has gone on to work for many film and television productions, earning an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Contemporary Styling in 2022 for the series *Euphoria* (2019 -). Kimble's career began through her hyperstylized interpretations of Black

96. "Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design," Seattle, Museum of Pop Culture, November 26, 2022, independent research visit.

97. Priscilla Peña Ovalle, "Kim Kimble: Race, Gender, and the Celebrity Hairstylist," *Media Industries* vol.6, no. 1, 2019: (127).

98. Ovalle, "Kim Kimble," 120.

hairstyles that are inspired by Black hair shows of the 90s.[100] Thus, she captures a culturally specific and historically grounded ratchet aesthetic through styling.

The ratchet aesthetics—a combination of costuming, makeup, hairstyling and nail art—seen in *Black American Princesses* are cultural reference points in Black American culture. They are developed out of southern Black urban communities still surviving in the afterlives of slavery, economic disenfranchisement, and sexual surveillance. Following the mainstreaming of the hip hop music video girl, the popularization of body contouring, hair and nail extensions, and excessive makeup circulated in the latter half of the 90s.[101] The Black female creative team of *Black American Princesses* immortalized Black beauty culture leading into the new millennium. The ratchet aesthetics we see in *Black American Princesses* references those southern Black urban communities' contribution to American fashion and demonstrates the aesthetic's process of refinement. The ratchet aesthetic is a hyperstylized, exaggerated aesthetic language that positions the body as subject. As the film pairs the Black female body and design, it cannot be ignored the particular way that Berry's and Desselle's performances are more than just acting. In each frame the camera captures them they are modeling key aspects of the aesthetic that is often at odds with their surroundings. The convergence of costuming, hairstyling, makeup, and nail art come together to highlight key aspects of Berry's and Desselle's performances.

Black American Princesses was produced and released at a time where there was an established culture of explicit music videos depicting Black women's performances of hypersexuality through the video girl image. Though the film is not explicit in these ways, in the

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99. See Gaskins, Bill. *Good and Bad Hair*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

100. Beretta Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 81; Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York: St. Martin's Press): 122-123; 159; 181.

mainstreaming of the video girl image the film accomplishes the dreams of the many nameless video girls of the era. In this chapter, I argue that the transformation of the ratchet aesthetic over the course of the film reveals the multiple layers that the aesthetic operates under and the ways that historical representations of Black womanhood are uncovered through certain ways of signaling styling the Black female body. Because of the history of the sexual exploitation of the Black female body, cinematic representations of this body toggle a line between contributing to this exploitation or exposing it. *Black American Princesses* demonstrates something different; the film shows the viewer that while cinematic history is always present, the work of style and aesthetics can highlight and subvert those representations.

The Video Girl, The Black Female Body, & The Cinematic

By the time hip hop crossed over into the mainstream, the public became invested in the sexual exploits of male artists and the women who they claimed to have slept with. Hip hop groupies, or "intimacy aspirants who vicariously derive power or fame (however small) from knowing public men privately,"[102] represented a new generation of women who achieved greater visibility for themselves through hypersexual performance. As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting notes, "...the idea of the groupie is a powerful trope in hip hop culture. She is a metaphor for male sexual prowess…She also represents the intensely transactional nature of hip hop gender dynamics."[103] If male rappers enjoyed the ability to boast about how many "hoes" they slept with, then the groupies themselves sought to cash in on the deal. The success of self proclaimed "video vixen" Karrine Steffans, whose intimate knowledge about the sexual prowess of several

101. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women*, (New York: NYU Press, 2007): 87.

102. Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*, 112-13.

rap artists, helpedestablished her a career in the hip hop industry.[104] In her memoir, Steffans reveals the dark underbelly of navigating the male dominated sexual landscape of hip hop music video production and presents the hip hop industry as far from glamorous. While Steffans' story is one that cautions young girls from participating in groupie culture, it also demonstrates the entrepreneurial aspirations of "video girls." The video girl, then, might add to the list of "controlling images"[105] that influence representations of Black womanhood in popular culture. Where the video girl departs from those images is in her ability to perform hypersexuality on her own terms. In this way, the video girl represents Black female agency in the midst of misogyny and heterosexuality.[106]

While *Black American Princesses* does not portray the hypersexual nature of the video girl trope, the film does reveal how the sexual agency of the video girl reverses past cinematic tropes—the mammy and the tragic mulatta—which manipulated Black female sexuality for the white Hollywood gaze. From the casting of Berry and Desselle, *Black American Princesses* already presents a contrast in skin tone and in body type. Smith-Shomade notes that the more "value commodity" on the set of hip hop music videos were those women who had "light skin, long hair (real, processed, or weaved), curvaceous bodies, and nice teeth." She adds, "skin color maintained its visually loaded symbol of oppression and acceptance…"[107] Sharpley-Whiting concurs with Smith-Shomade's observation, noting that a "groupie" hierarchy exists in which

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103. Karrine Steffans, *Confessions of a Video Vixen*, (Amistad Imprint, 2006). See also Karrine Steffans and Datwon Thomas, *Vindicated: Confessions of a Video Vixen, Ten Years Later*. (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2015).

104. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 79.

105. See also Miller-Young, Mireille, "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography." *Meridians* (Middletown, Conn.) 8, no. 1 (2007): 261–292; Miller-Young, Mireille. A Taste for Brown Sugar : Black Women in Pornography. Durham ; Duke University Press, 2014.

106. Smith-Shomade, *Shaded Lives*, 81-82.

"'thinner, blonder, lighter' women are preferred."[108] With these assessments in mind, in the context of *Black American Princesses*, Berry's light skin, blonde hair, and thin, but still curvy body appears to figure in the film's narrative as the most desirable and most beautiful in contrast to Desselle's dark skin, dark hair, and fat, excessively curvy body.[109] Berry's star image[110] might fall into the category of the "new millennium mulatta" what Ralina Joseph describes as "a self-reflexive character who is knowledgeable, angry, or sad about and self-conscious of her tragic destiny."[111] Racquel Gates has noted that Berry's appearance in the 1993 historical dramatic miniseries *Queen*, in which she portrayed a "tragic mullata" character, shifted the public's perception of her racial identity. Following the premiere of the miniseries, Berry's mixed race identity became a topic of discussion among media outlets and this period of time signaled her transition into the mainstream, starring as the "exotic token black" in white cast films and a mix of black-white cast films.[112] Berry's star image signaled a kind of tamed Black female sexuality and a reserved Black femininity that was represented in the creation of her beauty for the screen, namely through her signature haircut,

Unlike her previous roles where she wore her signature cut—a short, brown bob—which read as a more respectable form of Black femininity[113], *Black American Princesses* places Berry in a distinctly Black female context that rejects respectability through an engagement with

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107. Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down*, 93.

108. I use the term "fat" in similar fashion as other fat studies scholars who see the representation of fatness as worthy of critical study. See Farrell, Amy Erdman. *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies.* Edited by Amy Erdman Farrell. 1st ed. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.

109. Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. Second edition. London: Routledge, 2004.

110. Ralina Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, (Durham: Duke University Press), 2013): 11.

111. Gates, *Double Negative*, 134-135.

112. Ibid, 116-120.

artificiality. For the only time in her career, Berry is seen in a seemingly unnatural hair color (blonde), in acrylic nails, and with gold teeth. Notably, Berry's blondeness highlights the way the color is a culturally specific stylistic choice rooted in Black female communities. According to hair scholar Noliwe M. Rooks, blonde hair is a common stylistic trend found in middle-class or working class Black neighborhoods.[114] Though blonde hair on Black women tends to have an association with women who deny their Black heritage, Black women's appropriation of the color positions it as a particular to Black female communities.[115] In the context of popular culture, however, blonde hair's association with white femininity cannot be ignored. Marina Warner reveals how blondeness and beauty are seen as interchangeable in Western myth and fairy tale.[116] Joanna Pittman remarks that the blonde signals in the white Western world as "success, sexuality, and beauty."[117] In early film production, Richard Dyer details the ways that backlighting was essential to "ensur[ing] that blonde hair looked blonde."[118] Dyer also notes the kind of "glow" blonde hair gave white women which made them appear angelic on screen.[119] This extra attention paid to lighting blonde hair made it such that white feminine beauty was able to be seen and consumed by viewers. In the case of Berry in *Black American Princesses*, her light skin and blonde hair place her as the ultimate form of Black beauty because of its proximity

113. "Black & blond: latest styling craze in black hair. (Beauty and Style: for the new Black woman)." *Ebony*, December 2001, 116+. Gale Academic OneFile (accessed April 9, 2024). https://link-gale-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A80850561/AONE?u=euge94201&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=87c810b0.

114. Ibid.

115. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde : On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

116. Joanna Pittman, *On Blondes*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003): 259.

117. Richard Dyer, *White*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017): 92.

118. Ibid, 124.

to white femininity. Yet this simplistic conclusion is complicated when the viewer considers her character's foil: Natalie Desselle.

Natalie Desselle, a newcomer to film at this point in her career, is cast as Berry's opposite in terms of body type and skin tone. As a fat Black female comedian, Desselle's body and star image connote the image of the Mammy trope. This is why the film appears to prioritize Berry's beauty over Desselle's. In this regard, the viewer must reorient the way they see Blackness, fatness, and femininity in order to see something more than the inescapable stereotypes that plague the representation of fat Black women. While Berry's thin, blonde, and light skin beauty is seemingly prioritized in the film's visual frame, there are many moments when Desselle's beauty shines throughout the film. Roshaundda Breeden and Terah Stewart argue that while tropes such as the Mammy were antiblack invention of the "old Hollywood" era, these tropes still "animate our understanding of who fat Black women are in film and, by extension, social life."[120] Breeden and Stewart reveal how the Mammy trope was in direct contrast to the white, thin, feminine ideal and assert that "perceptions of Blackness and fatness create unique axes of problematic representation in contemporary film and media."[121] Because of the way that the cinematic constructs certain kinds of bodies as more beautiful—and usually these are people with lighter skin and thinner bodies—many of my readings choose to focus on Desselle as a way of combating that idea. In this way, I explore how *Black American Princesses* repurposes and subverts the tragic mulatta and the mammy tropes.

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119. Roshaunda L. Breeden and Terah J. Stewart. "From Hattie McDaniel to Queen Latifah: Examining a New Mammy and Other Fat Black Women Representations in Contemporary Media." In *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2023) 265.

120. Ibid, 278.

The cinematic already makes a spectacle out of the female body, and this is heightened when the Black female body is placed in the center of the frame due to the historical implications of the Black female body as oversexualized.[122] In *Venus in the Dark*, Janell Hobson reveals how the image of Sara Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus," has shaped representations of Blackness and beauty in popular culture. Baartman's body was exhibited by white Europeans who were fascinated by her large buttocks, terming it "steatopygia," a medical condition for a "protruding buttocks."[123] Hobson explains

> Ever since nineteenth-century popular exhibitions in Europe of South African women with so-called steatopygia, black female bodies have been fetishized by this feature and identified with heightened sexuality and deviance. They have also been widely excluded from dominant culture's celebrations of beauty and femininity.[124]

As Hobson reveals, the Black female body is a body that is hypervisible, yet invisible. It is a body that is framed as excessive to the gaze and therefore seen as "not beautiful" or "not feminine." The video girl trope as the more modern form of representation offers expansive ways of consulting the image of the Black female body in cinema. The video girl, as an image that is already seen as demeaning for Black women, highlights the artistry of Black beauty culture. As Hobson notes, "beauty becomes a significant site for political resistance and aesthetic transformation in which black women, whose beauty has been contested in dominant culture,

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121. See Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

122. Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2018): 2.

123. Ibid, 7.

strive to redefine their bodies by means of reasserting their womanhood and, possibly, their humanity."[125]

New Black Cinema & The close-up

The cinematic plays with the viewer's perception of time and space through the use of cinematography and editing. As Mary Ann Doane's work on cinematic time has illustrated, the cinema represents and structures the spectator's time through editing and narrative devices.[126] Additionally, Doane's work on the close-up for the face demonstrates how cinematic space assembles and rearranges the viewer's relationship to the body on screen.[127] These two aspects of the film viewing process—cinematography and editing—are important tools for exploring the convergence of costuming, makeup, hairstyling, and nail art, namely, in terms of the close-up. It is in the close-up that the viewer is allowed time to fully take in the face and appreciate the labor that goes into getting the face perfect for close-up. We might be reminded of Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond at the end of Billy Wilder's 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*. As Desmond is coming toward the camera it backs away from her as she says, "Mr. Demille, I'm ready for my close-up."[128] What might be overshadowed and what the film does not show is the work Desmond put into getting her face ready for close-up only for it to be denied by the camera. If one were to imagine the preparation, they would then further understand the doom that lingers in her world at the end of the film. There is a relational aspect happening between the camera and the face and the power the camera has to show the beauty of the face or to deny that beauty; on

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124. Ibid.

125. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time : Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 25.

126. Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 86-87.

127. *Sunset Blvd*, directed by Billy Wilder, (1950, Hollywood: Paramount, 2012) DVD.

the other hand, there is the power the face has to arrest the camera's gaze, thereby arresting the gaze of the viewer.

The period of the late 90s was rife with self-reflexivity and self-referentiality. The Black cultural productions that premiered in this period exemplified the qualities and the conventions of the New Black Cinema movement, a cycle of Black films that were independently produced and depicted "authentic" portrayals of urban Black life.[129] The New Black Cinema movement ushered renewed investments in representing the Black experience and sought to restore the visual representation of the Black face through the close-up. What is particular about *Black American Princesses* that adds to the legacy of the cinematic close-up is the fact that the camera is allowing the viewer to digest the ratchetness of the Black female face in terms of styling. Doane argues that the female face is both "transparent and opaque" and holds within it narratives about class suffering, female sexuality, and anxieties about time.[130] In this regard, the Black female face in *Black American Princesses* preserves the ratchet aesthetic creations of the Black feminist creative community of the film's production team. In many of my close readings, I focus on the close-up not only as a form of documentation of aesthetic creation, but also as a form of revealing Black female emotionality and interiority.

Black American Princesses as Ratchet Aesthetic Theory

The first two close-ups in *Black American Princesses* establish the importance of hair, makeup, costume, and nails to the two protagonists, Nisi and Mickey. The opening tracking shot is such a quick moment in the film, but it is the first image we see of the visual world that these

128. See Allyson Nadia Field, Jan-Christopher Horak, and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, eds. *L. A. Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015): 1.

129. Doane, *Bigger Than Life*, 179-187.

characters live in. The film is certainly a rejection of what Adrienne L. McLean would call "straight makeup," or formal cinematic makeup that appears "normal and natural on and off the screen."[131] In similar fashion, the film goes against the hair, makeup, and costume styling trends of films in what Tamar Jeffers McDonald terms the "The New Hollywood" era, or films made between 1981-1999 that reflected the "continuing social and cultural chang[es] in America…moving from the power-dressing of the 1980s to the more casual or anti-fashion ("grunge") of the 1990s."[132] *Black American Princesses* makes its commentary through the excessive exaggeration of the Black female silhouette by employing culturally specific and contemporary Black styling and fashion. In their outward display, the film's focus on the stylizations of hair, makeup, costume, and nails provide the viewer access into the inner worlds of the protagonists.

Following an opening shot of the exterior of the diner the Nisi and Mickey work at, we hear a diegetic radio play the beginning of a song by Public Enemy and then a radio host comes on to give an announcement about a party at his club, The Gold Tooth, as well as provide a teaser about a video girl of the world contest being held in Los Angeles. This announcement, and the radio segment in general, works to sonically tie the ratchet aesthetic to hip hop culture. The viewer is also primed about the culture of the video girl and the aspirational qualities this figure possesses. In this way, the sound of hip hop informs the way that the ratchetness operates in the visual world of the film. The next shot is a close-up of a grill in which various meats—sausage links, bacon, pork chop, and ribs—are being cooked. We only see a hand with long baby blue

130. Adrienne L. McLean, "Introduction," in *Costume, Makeup, and Hair*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016): 6.

131. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "The New Hollywood, 1981-1999," in *Costume, Makeup, and Hair*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016): 124.

nails flipping over a sausage link with a pair of tongs. The next shot we see is of a close-up tracking shot of the hand with the blue nails passing a plate of food to a hand with long red nails (Fig. 13). The tracking shot follows the exchange from left to right and then moves with the hands with long red nails as they stop and set the plate down in front of a customer.

So far, without the audience knowing or seeing who the characters are, the nails tell a certain narrative about them. The mundane nature of working in a diner is in contrast to the shape and styling of the nails. In their shape, ranging about four inches from the cuticle, curving down just past the tip of the finger with a somewhat rectangular finish, the nails tell the viewer that the wearer of these structures have an eye for design. The nails stand out as an irregularity in this world, only communicated to us, so far, in a close-up and accompanying tracking shot. If we think about the opening exterior shot of the restaurant, the store front seems so ordinary in comparison to the hands that cook the food. Additionally, the hands appear to be restricting to workers who are constantly using their hands in the preparation and serving of food. The hands are a contradiction to the space and this is an element in which their beauty functions openly.



Figure 13: Mickey passes Nisi a plate of food she just prepared.

When we think about the performers wearing the nails for particular camera angles, so far close-ups and tracking shots, there are distinct things happening in terms of performance. Not only are they acting, but they are also hand modeling, displaying the fine work of a nail technician. There is a particular way Berry's and Desselle's hands wear the nails, too, in a great effort not to stain or break them, which is another form of labor in itself. To achieve this effect, the performers used more of the palm of the hand to hold and pass the plates, to avoid the nails touching the food, but also to protect them. The movement is quare in nature.[133] It is attempting to both perform the physical act of passing and holding a plate, while simultaneously modeling the nails as sculptures. The quareness is in the movement of the hands, the way the palms rest, the way the nails move, the way the fingers are placed out of the way. The way they move their hands brings attention to the labor that hands do throughout the film; they create new and

132. For a refresher on how I am using "quare," please refer to Chapter 1.

exaggerated worlds through styling. In this scene, though, the hands are confined to the restaurant environment. The interior is dull and darker. There is an element of life that is missing. The only pop of color and style is in nails and the movement of the performers hands.

If their nails could talk, they would speak to the kind of bond the characters have with each other. They would speak to a resistance to the kind of low paying work that they are performing in the restaurant. They would speak to a desire to be seen for the artistic expression that they create through their own movement, their own existence. If we think of quare movement, as I argued in Chapter 2, as a form of movement that creates its own expression outside of the constraints of space and time, these nails seem to arrest time. In this reading of quare movement, I am speaking to how, even in their brief appearance, the nails, that is the production of the nails by the nail technician, and the nailography, that is the performance of the nails, offer an entry point into a particular stylistic world that operates by different rules and suspends the realities of time and space. This concept of quare movement is especially applicable to the way the film uses close-ups.

If the close-up of the nails reveal insights into the Nisi and Mickey's creative tastes, the close-up of the face reveals the emotions the characters communicate and allows the viewer to sit with the aspects of beauty and styling displayed on the Black female face. For example, Nisi's first close-up is the first close-up of a face the viewer sees (Fig. 14a). By this gesture, the film's visual narrative would seem to isolate Nisi's beauty over Mickey's. In this close-up, Nisi gives us a big smile as she is attending to a customer's complaint about his burnt toast. The way that she smiles is with great effort to display the two gold accents on the top row of her teeth and the circular earrings she wears. It is a moment that freezes time. In terms of color palate, the baby blue color of the server uniform is complemented by the gold tooth accents and the earrings. The

yellow blonde hair serves as a contrasting color to the uniform. Because of the tightness of the close-up, we cannot see the full hairstyle, but what is visible are the strands of hair that hang off the left side of Nisi's face as well as the way the hair is curved around the scalp, placed out of the way of the face. Together, the blonde and gold are colors that pop against the plainness of the baby blue uniform. Additionally, the maroon tone in the eye shadow is complemented by the same tone in the lip color, which is outlined by a visible brownish lip liner. The eye lashes appear to be of a realistic length and are brought out with mascara and eyeliner. The eyebrows are nicely arched and darked with a black pencil. The smile that Nisi gives is equally annoyed and equally graceful. Annoyed at having to deal with the customer, graceful in the way she showcases her face and hair. In the second close-up (Fig. 14b), Nisi hears another radio host give an announcement about the video girl of the world competition in Los Angeles, the same contest the viewer hears in the opening shot of the film. She is struck for a moment and the close-up helps facilitate her desire for a "ratchet elsewhere," an imagined space where their creative aesthetics can exist outside of the boundaries of extensive labor. Her face is alert and for a moment she is in another world. The moment is crushed when her boss catches her daydreaming and docks $10 from her pay. The way that Nisi reacts to this news suggests she is suffering a huge loss in what is already a low paying job. The viewer does sit with Nisi's disappointment and wonder, with her, what to do next. These moments make evident the way the close-up of the face allows the viewer to access the character's interiority. This focus creates an investment in the character's journey throughout the film.

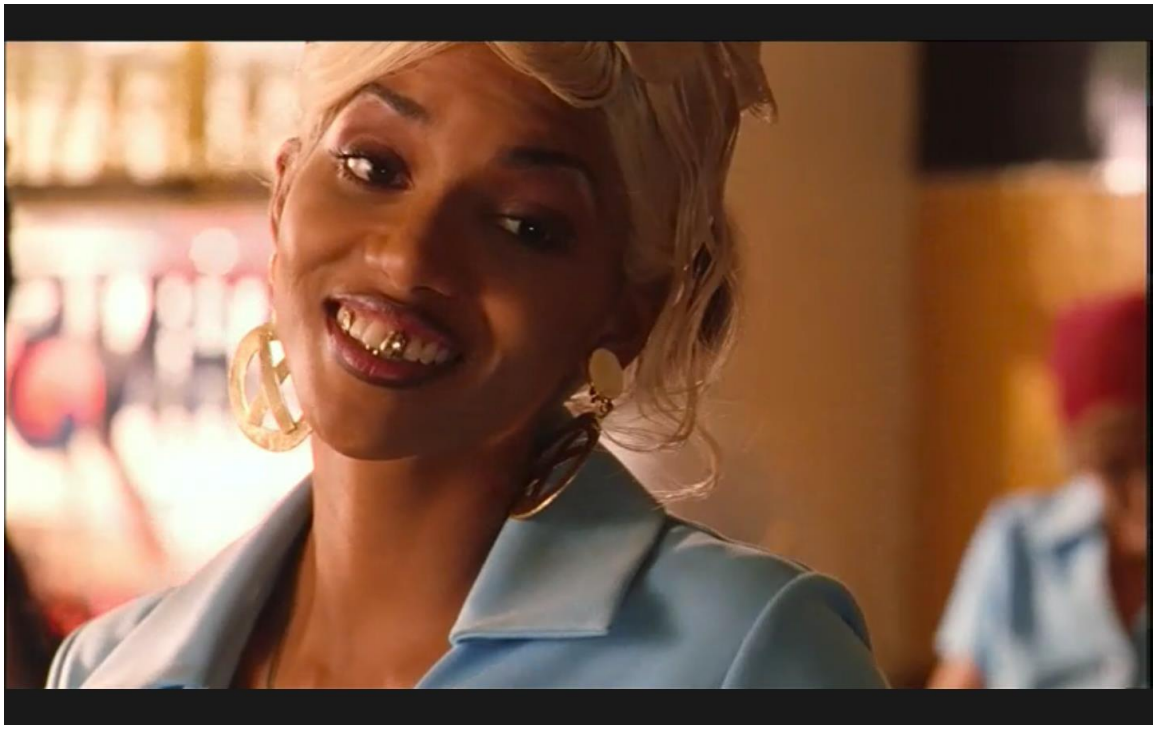

Figure 14a. Nisi's first close-up

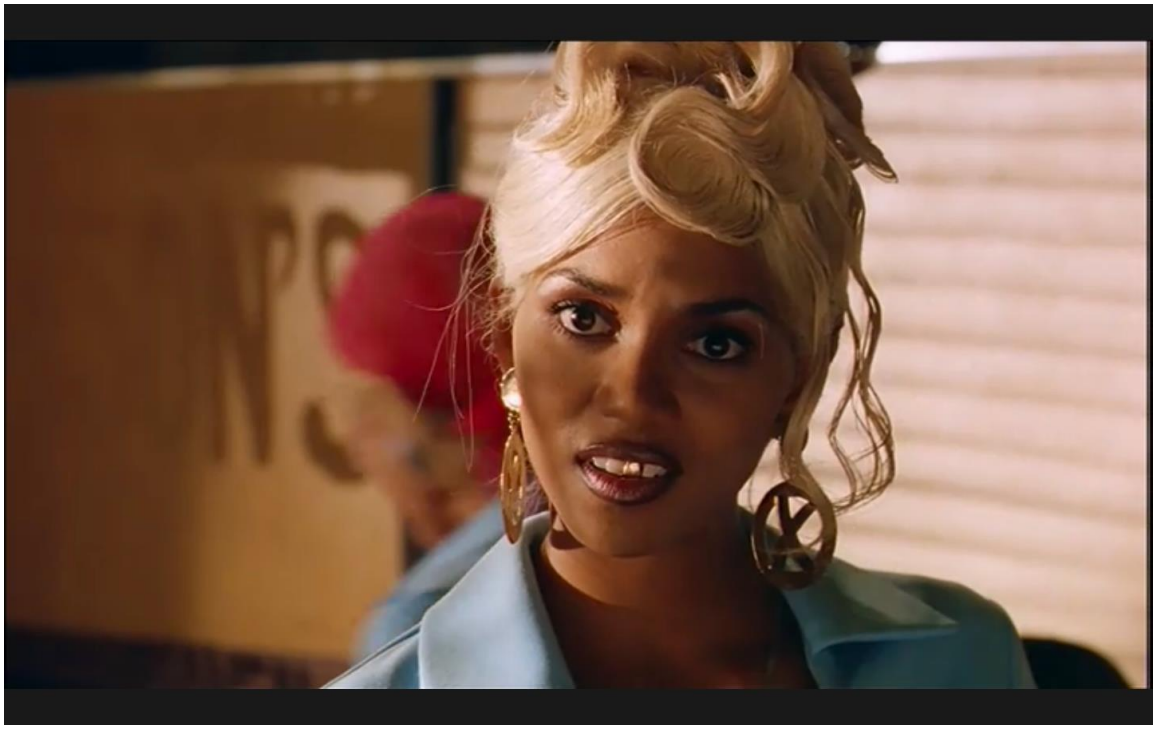

Figure 14b: Nisi's second close-up.

The structure of hair, the performance of hair, and the meaning of hair are also important elements in exploring the production and performance of the ratchet aesthetic. Hair is inherently relational and distinctly personal. In the diner, Nisi and Mickey's hair stands out against the backdrop of the scene, never losing its shape. For instance, Mickey's hair, a variation on the high ponytail, with curls strategically placed around the head, accompanied by a swirl at the tip of the head with curls hanging down loosely, stays intact as she moves about the grill. The curls do not loosen from the heat of the grill or of the unruly work environment. Similarly, Nisi's blonde hair, which is pulled back in a bun and has a series of curls moving up on the center of the head, with one line of curls hanging to the left side of her face, moves in the same way as she delivers plates and handles orders. It also showcases the ways that blonde hair has been historically lit in cinematic history.[134] In this way, their hair represents an imperviousness to their surroundings, able to move about the confining space of the diner with grace. That the hair does not come loose in this scene shows an intentional effort by the hairstyling department to keep the curls and the hair together for the scene. As structures, Nisi and Mickey's hair pieces are captivating because of how it appears in the light. This suggests a unique focus on the cinematographer's use of "backlighting," what Patrick Keating explains as a classic Hollywood lighting technique to "separate foreground from background," to capture hair in this way.[135] The lighting accentuates certain things about the hair, namely the curls and curling patterns. The viewer may be more amazed at the way the performers move their heads such that the curls catch the light. With this shininess of the hair comes the articulation of attitude. When Nisi comes back in the kitchen with

133. See Kulraj Phullar, "'Detour Coiffure': Veronica Lake and Her Peekaboo Hairstyle," *Celebrity Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 83–97.

134. Patrick Keating, *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) 46.

the customer's burnt toast, Mickey tells her to pay him no mind. Desselle's facial movements and neck roll accent her statements, moving her hair in the light.

Hair structure and hair performance is also illustrated in another scene set in their apartment. From the panning shot of their apartment, we see the walls adorned with various magazine spreads which were torn out and pasted. The hairstyles represent a range of African and African American hairstyles from various time periods. These pieces are reminders of the aesthetics they purport and the visions they hope to create for themselves. This idea of an aesthetic world is further emphasized with the "Nisi's world" sign that hangs on the wall in glitter lettering. This setting is such a stark contrast from the dinner and it gives the viewer a sense of the aesthetic world they create in their private space. In their apartment, their style has more life to it and is the grounds for experimentation. The camera pans into the kitchen where Nisi is trying out a new style on Mickey. The cut to a close-up of Mickey reveals the hairstyle in its finished state (Figure 15). The hair is straightened and curled into curly pom poms. There are strains of hair that hang down curling at the bottom. The zig zag part—a styling method done by parting the hair diagonally and then creating another diagonal part in the opposite direction—adds an intricacy and symmetry to it. The style is finished off with the curling of the baby hairs. As for makeup, a shiny nude lip and fresh looking face. It almost doesn't look like much is applied. There is mascara applied to bring out the eyes, but overall, the makeup is natural looking. There is attention placed on simplifying the face in order for the hairstyle to be more of the focus. The hairstyle is a play with curls and they signify a kind of buoyancy and strength that the hair maintains.



Figure 15: Mickey's close-up with baby hair accents.

In this particular style, the movement of the curls evokes excitement. During this scene, Nisi receives a sign that they are meant to take the risk in going to Los Angeles for her to audition for the video girl of the world competition. Mickey is convinced of the promise of having access to wealthy men. At this moment of agreement, the friends embrace each other. It is exciting to see Mickey's curls move and jump when she and Nisi hug, never losing their shape. The curls bounce in the embrace, always coming back together after the motion has ended. Mickey's close-up provides insight into the artistry of Black hairstyling and the forms of touch that are required to style Black hair. For Black hair scholar Jasmine Nichole Cobb, "haptic blackness" transforms exteriority into "a textured surface constituted in habits of feeling and touch as historically informed experiences."[136] The viewer is made aware of the feeling and

135. Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *New Growth : The Art and Texture of Black Hair*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023) 17.

touch of Black hair through the styling of baby hairs. From a production standpoint, baby hairs in this style display the extra level of care that the stylist puts into the hair. From a narrative standpoint, it reveals the kind of care that Nisi has for her friend and the level of her styling technique. Curls and baby hairs highlight the exterior structure of the hair but then in turn reveal the forms of Black female intimacy that is shared in the film's narrative and in the film's production.

While close-ups of hair, nails, and makeup provides the viewer with insights into the Nisi and Mickey's desires, costuming adds another layer to how the characters are seen on screen. In *Undressing Cinema*, Stella Bruzzi argues that some film costumes function as "iconic clothes": "spectacular interventions that interfere with the scenes in which they appear and impose themselves onto the character they adorn."[137] Sarah Street suggests that film costumes provide extratexual information about a character's identity and gender performance but also the way setting influences the way the costumes are viewed in the scene.[138] When Nisi and Mickey walk back home after work, they are outside the confines of the diner and the viewer is able to take in the fullness of their look. Even with the stained blue waitress costumes (with strategically placed stains in the front), one can only notice how they are tailored to the characters' bodies. The tailoring of the bodies suggests an effort at the level of costume production to accentuate the Black female silhouette. The silhouette, in this regard, becomes a character itself, constantly changing with the characters. The medium shot that following Nisi and Mickey reveals, in the background, the other members of the community who all are dressed in pedestrian clothing, all

136. Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*, (London: Routledge, 1997): xv.

137. Sarah Street, Costume and Cinema: Dress Codes in Popular Film, (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 85-99; See also Banks, Miranda J., "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies" in *Production Studies Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. New York: Routledge, 2009.

blending in with each other. As Nisi and Mickey move through their community, they appear to not be a part of it based on solely aesthetic. In this moment, Nisi is talking to Mickey about trying out for the video girl of the world contest in Los Angeles, to which Mickey speaks against this idea, telling her, “Your life is right here.” Gesturing toward a group of fake rings, Nisi says “We don’t deserve this. We deserve the best.” Clearly, they aesthetically create themselves in the "ratchet elsewhere", and at least in Nisi’s case, they have a strong desire to actually exist in the "ratchet elsewhere". But it would seem that this elsewhere is out of reach. Right after Nisi makes her comment, we hear Ali, Nisi’s boyfriend, say “That’s why you got me.” The camera cuts to a two shot of Ali and James. Ali wears a cheetah print shirt with a pointy collar that rests over a gray suit jacket. With a few shirt buttons opened, you can see his chest and the gold medallion he wears rests there. He has a brown hat with permed hair that appears curly and flowy. A toothpick in his mouth for added effect. James, Mickey’s boyfriend, wears an oversized red, black and white Polo shirt, with a gold chain and a complimentary baseball cap facing forward. He has a buzzcut. They both have a few gold teeth. Nisi and Mickey’s confrontation with their boyfriends best demonstrates how the language of aesthetics represents a gender conflict the characters navigate.

This scene displays the language that hair and costuming communicate and the gender dynamics at play. When their boyfriends show up out of nowhere, after not following through with a promise to walk them home after work, Ali is dressed in clothing reminiscent of the 70s pimp character while James is dressed in hip hop clothing that is more contemporary to the time. By the aesthetic choices of the boyfriends, it would appear that the women are up against men who are trying to mimic both older and current forms of Black masculinity. Their financial instability and their emotional immaturity are evoked through this styling of Black masculinity.

As a pair, they represent the conflicting performance of Black masculinity in a working class Black community: dependent on the low wages of their partners. As spectators, we might wonder who even paid for the clothes that they are wearing. However, the two exude a false sense of power that is articulated in their macho stance and cool posture. The women are angered by their tardiness and the men explain that they were out handling "businessman stuff," which entailed looking at a used car to purchase for their page-a-cab luxury cab company, an already unstable idea that keeps them from finding paid work. The attitude that Nisi and Mickey communicate to each other cannot be missed. When listening to their boyfriends, they give side eye, they wave their hands away from them, they give a neck roll dismissing them. Together these quare gestures suggest just how fed up the women are at their partners' antics.

There are two distinct moments where background characters visually mimic the ratchet aesthetic of the main characters, namely through hair and nails. These moments point to the creative team's ability to create both the cinematic ratchetness of the film and ratchetness of the everyday. The film places Nisi and Mickey in moments where foreground and background characters reflect their out-of-placeness. These are similar moments to ones I explored in Chapter 2 where the background characters actually help provide more context into how the ratchet aesthetic operates in the narrative world of the text. The first instance in *Black American Princesses* happens in the opening diner scene (Fig. 16). The extra could be missed in the chaos of the diner's environment. Their nails are long, curved, and green. Their hair is an updo on the top of the head with hair that hangs straight down past the neck. Mickey appears to be taking her order while Nisi is speaking with her boss. This moment stands out because it shows how the film is reflective of the aesthetic environment that Nisi and Mickey create and the everyday looks of this period in the 1990s. It would appear that Nisi, Mickey, and the extra all have an

aesthetic allegiance to each other. Together, they all stick out against the plainness of the diner, but are still swallowed up by the environment. They register for the viewer as characters who exist in the "ratchet elsewhere" that Nisi and Mickey eventually find.

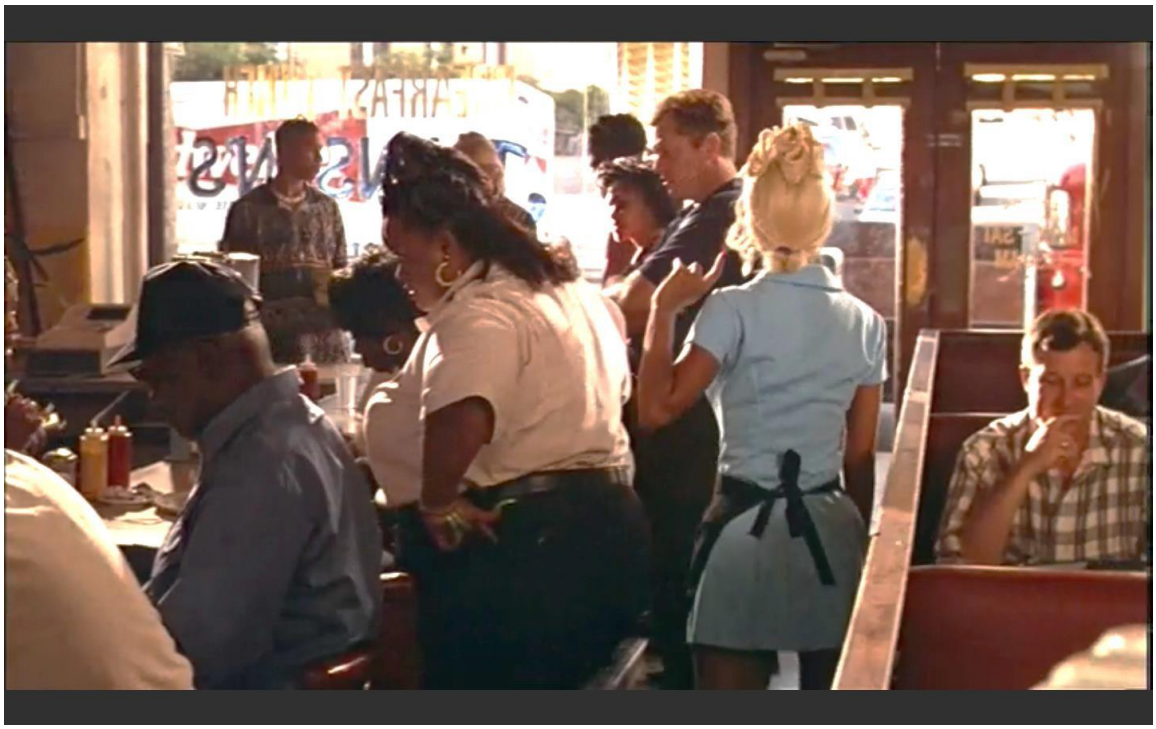

Figure 16. The background character in a white shirt with curved, green nails and similarly styled updo.

Another moment that demonstrates the film's use of background characters to complete the Nisi and Mickey's aesthetic happens in a scene at the local bar, The Gold Tooth. The scene begins with a panning shot of the crowd outside. The extras are dressed in a variety of styles that are a mix of contemporary and older styles. Inside the bar, the women stand out the most. In fact, the setting is filled with various women coming in and out of the frame. Each look catches your attention for a different reason and just as you have seen onelook another one comes into the frame. Like the men in the bar gawking at them, we two are amazed at the abundant styles represented: simple, chic, and form fitting. It would appear that the style of the background

characters mimic the aesthetic of the video girl that the film is commenting on, whereby the Black female body becomes a spectacle for the viewer. The Black female body is not only a spectacle, but a moving art exhibit, displaying the distinct stylizations of Black female culture. The hairstyles of the background characters are a mixed bunch too, but most notably is a helicopter hairstyle, complete with a motorized piece that turns the wings (Fig. 17). Though in the background, this style obviously stands out for its boldness and execution in production. This is the one space in their community where Nisi and Mickey don't stick out, in fact they might even be upstaged by the background characters.



Figure 17: In the background, the helicopter hairstyle, reminiscent of a style one would see at a hair show.

At the root, hair, costume, and nails signify a relationship to wealth in which the characters perform in the context of a working class Black community. These signifiers of

wealth are placed heavily on gold teeth. When they arrive at the door—Mickey wearing a red form fitting dress that hugs her breasts with a small necklace hangs on her chest, Nisi wearing a shiny sleeveless suit top with a peach print and matching pants—the bouncer waves a metal detector over their bodies and then stops at their teeth. The buzzer goes off and they let out a big grin (Fig. 18). They are admitted into the club. In this aesthetic community, gold teeth hold visual weight, placing oneself as attractive and worthy of being bought. However, this attractiveness does not seem to go far in this space. Nisi and Mickey catch the eye of a pair of men who are both dressed in the 70s pimp aesthetic. Mickey flashes her gold teeth and gets the men to order them a drink. When it comes time to pay for the drinks, the men expect Nisi or Mickey to cover it, claiming "it's ladies night, y'all got in free." This same situation happens when Ali and James arrive at the club and they exclaim the same reason. The viewer sees that though Nisi and Mickey are both impeccably dressed and styled out, the wealth they exude does not align them with men who are able to meet their needs. Even at the finale of the film, though Ali and James appear to have cleaned up their act through hairstyle and costume changes, they are ultimately still heavily dependent on the women's success and engage in the same tacky business venture, just in a different zip code. When they are in Decatur, it is certain that they will have to work to provide for themselves and to achieve their dreams. This reality is a driving force that leads them to Beverly Hills to chase the dream of auditioning for the video girl of the world competition.

This shift in scenery signals a shift in the way ratchet aesthetics in the film have been represented previously. The next half of the film begins the process of minimizing the ratchet aesthetic, what I term "ratchet minimalism," as a way of narrating character arcs of transformation.



Figure 18: Nisi and Mickey flash their gold teeth.

Ratchet Minimalism: A Contradiction in Aesthetics

It would be easy to view the minimizing of ratchetness as an appeal to white beauty norms; however, I would argue that cultural signifiers of Blackness do not lose their reference points in the process of minimizing the ratchet aesthetic. Sofia Cheviakoff categorizes minimalism as "counter-revolutionary" and "characterized by a desire for functional and conceptual simplicity."[139] As an art movement that began in the turbulent 60s, minimalist artists created works that challenged the viewer's perception of modern culture and its boundaries.[140] The concept of minimalism proposes the stripping away of excess in order to reveal social commentary about art and design in everyday life. It is followed by the successful exhaustion of a capitalist system. Thus, my pairing of "Ratchet" and "Minimalism" would appear to contradict

138. Sofia Cheviakoff, *Minimalism: Minimalist*, (Königswinter, Germany: H F Ullmann, 2007): 32-33.

139. ibid, 28.

each other. Whereas ratchetness is about the beauty of excess, minimalism seeks to strip away this excess. I develop "ratchet minimalism" to demonstrate how excessive forms of Blackness enter a period of refinement. Ratchet minimalism, then, examines the process of refining excessive Blackness through manners of dress and adornment. The latter two thirds of *Black American Princesses* serves as a distinct case study for identifying ratchet minimalism.

In the first third of *Black American Princesses*, the viewer is aware of the level of artificiality—namely, through hair and nails—that is employed in Nisi and Mickey's looks. Over the course of their time in Beverly Hills, Nisi and Mickey's hairstyles go from being large structural pieces that move up to more relaxed styles that hang down. There are a few moments when curls are played with, but it is mostly more controlled curls and not an explosion of them as we see in the beginning of the film. The nails become shorter and appear at a more natural length. This suggests that the nail technicians on set switched from designing acrylic nail sets to sculpting natural nails. The clothing is still form fitting and bold, but more edited and refined. There is a tendency to think that the ratchet aesthetic must always be in excess, but I think there are excessive ways that more discreet styles still have elements of ratchetness. The straightened styles requires just as much labor as the more elaborate hairstyles. In this context, ratchetness is still seen because the characters have been presented as hyperstylized in the beginning of the film and then that stylization transforms into a more tamed but still distinct form of stylization. There is a reason that their time in Beverly Hills begins their presentation of hairstyles that are straightened. Straightened hair that flows signals a weightless that the characters now have at this point in the film. They no longer have to perform their wealth aspirations. They have achieved it in proximity and can now let their hair down. The hair can finally move and express itself in Beverly Hills. It can be messy and free.

Artificial hair actually appears to register as a relevant visual norm in the film. The film seems to be at odds with representing hair in its "natural" state. This binary between artificial hair and natural hair relates to a broader discussion in Black hair culture about "good hair" and "bad hair." The good hair/bad hair debate is really a debate about the historical implications of hair straightening. Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps have noted that during the period of enslavement in America hair that was kinky denoted African ancestry and was therefore deemed "wholly attractive and inferior" to the European's "pale skin and straight hair."[141] Julia Kirk Blackwelder remarks that in the beginning of the twentieth century hair straightening techniques were developed as a way of assisting Black women in the assimilation of white beauty norms.[142] Scholars have combated the idea of hair straightening as a disregard for Blackness. According to Paul Taylor, hair straightening "has taken on such racialized significance that participation in the practice can be a way of expressing Black pride rather than a way of precluding it."[143] Further, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden argue that "not every woman who decides to straighten her hair or change the color of her eyes . . . believes that beauty is synonymous with Whiteness. Trying on a new look, even one often associated with Europeans, does not automatically imply self-hatred. It is possible to dye your brown tresses platinum and still love your Blackness."[144] Finally, Kobena Mercer suggests, "hair functions as a key ethnic signifier

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140. Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story*, 12-14.

141. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African Americans Beauty Training during Segregation*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 15-16.

142. Taylor, Paul C. "Malcolm's Conk and Danto's Colors; or Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics." *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 668.

143. Jones, Charisse, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden. *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003): 178.

because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening."[145] He concludes, "as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all Black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both symbolic meaning and significance."[146] By this conversation, it would appear that the idea of hair straightening can be considered a distinctly Black cultural practice. While hair straightening does carry with it a painful history in which Black women altered the state of their hair to conform to white beauty norms, in the more contemporary sense, hair straightening, including the use of hair weave and wigs, demonstrates the various kinds of stylizations that Black hair can undergo and maintain.

In *Black American Princesses,* the transition from structural artificial hair to minimized artificial hair happens on their plane ride to Beverly Hills. In one moment Nisi and Mickey are asked to lower their hair because it was blocking the view of other passengers by another Black woman flight attendant with locks. The scene represents a clash between respectable black hairstyles and the ratchet artificial ones in which respectable hairstyles have an authority that ratchet ones do not. When they land in Beverly Hills, it appears that their ratchet aesthetic stands out too much against the more business attired people in the airport and the more simply dressed dancers at the audition.

The audition scene represents their final display of the ratchet aesthetic in its most excessive form. The scene is underscored by upbeat and animated music that sounds unlike the hip hop

144. Mercer, Kobena. "Black Hair/Style Politics," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies.* New York: Routledge, 1994):103.

145. Ibid, 104.

beats we have been hearing before. As the women first arrive at the line that stretches around the building. The low angled pan that moves into a high angled pan shows the many thin women that are in line before them. This camera movement also displays the minimalized, mostly monochromatic dance attire—leotards, tanks, shorts, jumpsuits—that everyone wears, in distinct contrast with Nisi and Mickey. Already in contrast to the space, Nisi and Mickey's bodies are read as too extravagant compared to the other dancers. Their bodies signal a quareness that conflicts with the racialized gendered spaces of the hip hop industry. The similarly dressed, mostly white and thin dancers highlight the commodification of the female body to fit into a desirable image for the male viewer. With their curvier silhouettes. Nisi and Mickey's bodies do not fit into a neat categorization of the female body for the film's imagined hip hop industry—which is in contrast to the kinds of desirable bodies the hip hop industry promotes in reality. This does not stop them from expressing their beauty. In this scene, their beauty is read as a product of the overconsumption of the converging beauty industries that is almost too much to capture in the cinematic form.

When one dancer begins to warm up, Nisi takes this as a challenge, breaking out into a comical interpretive dance routine. During this moment, Mickey notices a man watching them from afar. She catches his glance and smiles in a close-up. The rhythm of the scene is interrupted by her smile, shining with gold teeth. From this point of view, we are able to see, in great detail, the gems outlined in her hairpiece. The close-up reveals the ornamentation of the ratchet aesthetic and the interiority of the character. The camera cuts back to a medium two shot of Nisi and Mickey. Mickey cheers on Nisi after she has finished her dance, followed by a circular turn and her reciting the words "Boo Yow" which are bejeweled onto the back of her hairpiece (Fig. 19). The close-up preceding this movement makes this reveal more enjoyable. To achieve this

move, Desselle demonstrates great control to capture the beauty of the movement and the quareness of dress, style, and attitude.



Figure 19: Nisi and Mickey at the "video girl of the world" audition.

To be more legible to this new environment and to the mainstream viewer the aesthetic must undergo a process of refinement. Following Nisi's failed audition, the two friends' hairpieces are deflated, they look sweaty, and their costumes no longer have the same boldness as before. This moment signifies the exhaustive nature of excess and its inability to sustain them any longer in this wealth location. In other words, their ratchet aesthetic is just too ratchet at this point in the film. The man, Antonio, Mr. Blakemore's driver, who was staring at the friends before the audition approaches them and offers them an opportunity to film a music video at the Blakemore mansion. They agree and are whisked away in a limousine to the mansion. In the car, they begin immediately transforming. The camera opens on a shot of deflated blonde and brunette

hairpieces in the seat in front of them. They then snap off their long nails and restyle their hair. This moment underscores the importance of hair and nails as defining characteristics of their aesthetic because these are the only stylistic elements they change before arriving at the mansion. The new look still has some gold accents of the previous look, but with hair that is straightened (Fig. 20). Mickey's hair is slicked back in the front and has a ponytail attachment, while Nisi's blonde hair is styled in a messy updo. These straightened hairstyles represent the character's adaptability to their new environment and display a desire for upwardly mobile success—an achievement of the ""ratchet elsewhere"."



Figure 20: Nisi and Mickey at the Blakemore mansion.

This change in aesthetic is marked by the shift in labor the friends now encounter. Whereas in Decatur they were low wage service workers, in Beverly Hills they are live-in companions. The friends are welcomed into the mansion where they meet Mr. Blakemore's nephew, Isaac. During a meeting, he asks Nisi if she would agree to posing as the granddaughter

of Mr. Blakemore's late lover, Lily, who was a domestic worker for the family. This detail about Mr. Blakemore's love for Lily is undergirded by histories of sexual violence that domestic workers and enslaved Black women have experienced by white men. We are left to assume that Mr. Blakemore and Lily's relationship was loving and consensual. It does, however, reveal that Mr. Blackmore has broken boundaries as an employer in the past. The ruse that Nisi is too pull off and that Mickey is supposed to go along with unearths white male fantasies of the Black female body. This is why the remnants of the tragic mulatta and the mammy tropes become so prominent to the film's Beverly Hills narrative arc.

One of my critiques about the film is that it is not explicit in defining what kind of work the friends perform at the mansion. Work as a waitress is recognizable as legitimate skilled labor, work as a person pretending to be someone's granddaughter does not register in the same way. There is a tension happening with the past cinematic representations of Black womanhood and the new millennium's revision of those representations. Nisi's light skin and thin body and Mickey's dark skin and curvy body register as stereotypes in cinematic narratives about Blackness. The pairing of these bodies and skin tones is meant to signal a contrast in silhouette. This is why how the women reframe their silhouettes in Beverly Hills is important because it demonstrates a departure from past cinematic representations of Black womanhood even though the characters still engage with them.

The aspirations of the video girl career actually allows room for Nisi and Mickey to advance into the status of a "Black American Princess." The film's title is a reference to someone who gains access to wealth by happenstance.[147] Revising the term, the emotional and

146. The way Nelson George explains the Black American Princess makes the figure appear to toggle the line between gold digging and new money. I believe that the Black American Princess is someone who acquires wealth by their own merits. Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*. (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1992), 2.

creative labor that Nisi and Mickey employ ultimately earns the trust of Mr. Blakemore and he leaves them a portion of his wealth in his death. The cameo by screenwriter Troy Beyer in the scene where the will is read serves as an authoritative voice that reaffirms that characters' beauty. Beyer recites the term "B.A.Ps" and Nisi and Mickey look at each other confused. Beyer's character then says the meaning of the acronym, "Black American Princesses," in which Nisi and Mickey return relieved gazes at each other. Though the term is coming from Mr. Blakemore's will, Beyer's authorial presence makes it appear that she is naming them as Black American Princesses. A coronation of sorts, this moment marks the characters' full transformation into women of wealth.

Long, relaxed hair, like Mickey's long ponytail, signifies the characters' growth into themselves and the new life of wealth that they have acquired. Mickey's ponytail signifies the breath of their journey from Decatur to Beverly Hills. The women are about to fly back home after they hear the reading of Mr. Blakemore's will. Up until this moment, Mickey wears variations of the ponytail which are always curly. This is the only moment we see it straightened out. Now, I am not a fan of how she is dressed in this scene. For much of the film, she wears form fitting looks whereas in this scene she wears a long dress that covers her figure. This could have been an effort of the costume department to highlight the hair at this moment or they could have run out of similar things for Mickey to wear. Either way, the ponytail makes up for it. We best see the work of the ponytail in a close-up of Mickey's face (Fig. 21). There is an elegance to Mickey's ponytail. The hair is slicked back, revealing the freshness of the face. The make-up is softer here, small tints in the eye shadow, mascara, a reddish orange lip. Because of this, her close-up communicates vulnerability. There is something special about the way she whips her head reacting to a line and the ponytail moves with her. Unlike some of the other styles, the

ponytail does not keep its form the whole scene. In this way, the ponytail performs a freedom of movement. In the scene, the curls move in and out of being done. This is the thing about a ponytail. It can be in one moment put together and unbothered and then in the next it is messy or can be messed with. When Nisi hugs Mickey in excitement, after receiving news about the amount of money they were awarded in the will, the ponytail is caught up in the embrace. It is exposed to natural causes of the environment. In this way, the ponytail is a part of her body, even though it is an extension. Without this straightened ponytail, the emotion of the scene and the emotion of the embrace would be lost. In other moments in this scene, the ponytail hangs behind her back, moving freely. As Akkida McDowell states, the ponytail is "political."[148] The ponytail provides the viewer access into Mickey's interiority in a way that it has not before. Because of the way the style pushes the hair out of the way, it allows the face to fully emote. At this point in the film, the full expression of the Black female face is rewarding to the viewer. Before this ponytail variation, the viewer is only rewarded brief insights into the emotionality of the face. In this variation, Mickey's face highlights her crossing over from low wage work to entrepreneur. This is the allure of the ponytail: it makes a statement, it moves on its own, it moves with the wearer, it accents the performer's movement. Here, it is not just about the performer who wears the hair, but also what the hair does on its own, the life it creates for itself from the stimuli it absorbs.

147. Akkida McDowell, "The Art of the Ponytail," in *Body Outlaws: Rewriting the Rules of Beauty and Body Image*, Rebecca Walker, ed., (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2004): 132.



Figure 21: Mickey's ponytail.

For Nisi's characterization, her blondeness is accentuated in this scene (Fig. 22). Nisi's blondeness is seen at its most relaxed state. It appears to be fuller than previous styles. The simplicity of the blonde bob relates to the character's newly acquired wealth. Money, aspiration, and blondeness go hand to hand. Nisi's performance of emotional labor as Lily's non-existant granddaughter affords her the kind of access that she now has to wealth. We must also think about the function of light skin in this context. Cinematic histories of Black representation seek to prioritize light skin and light hair. The same trend does appear to be happening in this film. However, the appearance of Nisi's blonde hair next to Mickey's ponytail does a different kind of work in terms of the Black female representation. The hair color and the hairstyle not only signify the versatility of Black hair, but place the color and the style as symbols of Black wealth. This appropriation of blondeness and the ponytail as markers of success undoes historical cinematic representations of Black womanhood. Blondeness and the ponytail represent the

modernization of the Black female body and the style it wears. The expression of the modern is what the transformation into ratchet minimalism provides for the characters. The hair color and the hairstyle gesture toward the modern stylistic practices of Black feminist creative communities that are devoid of associations with assimilation or the rejection of Blackness. Blackness exists in the expression of emotion and the emotion is a wealth of feeling and expression.



Figure 22: Mickey and Nisi side by side.

In this chapter, I have explored how the ratchet aesthetic in *Black American Princesses* makes the transformation from hypersexcessive to an embrace of minimalism. This transformation follows the journey of the characters as they strive for the "ratchet elsewhere"—the place in which their bodies and their aspirations can exist outside the constraints of extensive forms of labor. In the end, it would seem they have escaped the cycle and are now business owners in their own right. In the final scene of the film, the opening of Lily'z, a hair salon and

restaurant, is met with success. The opening exterior shot of the building shows the name of the business in shiny metallic letters in a capitalized font. It is a stark difference from the exterior of the restaurant we see in the beginning of the film. Additionally, the reserved parking signs out front signal that the space they are now in is regulated by time and space restraints. Another achievement of theirs as it shows they have mapped out space for themselves in Beverly Hills. Their final looks are business attire suits with simple accessories. Their hair is styled in a more professional manner. This closing moment sees them rejoicing at their accomplished dream.

As my previous chapters have been on fictionalized versions of the ratchet aesthetic, my next chapter on the reality television personality, Nene Leakes, addresses the ratchet aesthetic in a more "realistic" setting: reality television. Chapter 4 continues my conversation about blondeness and Blackness and explores how Leakes' narrative of blondeness is wrapped up in her ascent into greater success and stardom in the reality television industry and the entertainment industry more broadly. If Nisi and Mickey are women who accessed the video girl trope to achieve financial stability for themselves, then Leakes designs her television personality in a similar light. Though Leakes does not engage in the hip hop industry, the influences of hip hop can be seen in the subtle accents projected in her aesthetic of wealth and in her performance of wealth. Like Nisi and Mickey in *Black American Princesses*, Leakes reveals the ways that those who don the ratchet aesthetic are striving for upwardly mobile success, which is somewhat at odds with the ways that ratchetness operates in social space.

Chapter 4:

The "Real" Ratchet Aesthetic

Nene Leakes & Blonde Embodiment

Linnethia Monique "NeNe" Leakes is an American reality television personality, actress, author, and entrepreneur whose breakout appearance on Bravo's reality television docu-soap *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008 - present; hereafter *RHOA*) cemented her legacy in reality television history. As a boisterous and confrontational personality, fans and scholars alike have noted how her "memeable" excessive performances in the reality television canon have proffered her a continuous presence on television in particular and in popular culture more generally.[149] Much of Leakes' success and cultural relevance could be attributed to her signature cropped blonde bob, which is a staple hairstyle in many of her appearances on reality television from 2008 - 2016. By exploring the production, maintenance, and performance of Black hair, this chapter argues that Leakes' performance of blondeness disrupts and reworks dominant ideas about blondeness in popular culture. Though I am centering the bob as the main object of study, I do not ignore other aesthetic elements like clothing, accessories, makeup, and setting.

Leakes' performance of blondeness on television is framed in debates in Black culture about 1) "good" hair/"bad" hair and 2) the cultural specificity of Black women's appropriation of blonde hairstyles and blonde personas. The "good" hair/bad hair debate is a touchstone in Black culture. Good hair is that which is straight and can be tamed, while bad hair is hair that is afro-textured. The good hair/bad hair debate is really a battle with the legacy of the afro and the embrace of "black is beautiful" slogans of the 1960s. In the 60s, the afro became a symbol of pride while those that processed their hair were seen as "selling out."[150] But as scholars of Black hair have noted, both styles require a certain level of chemical

148. Racquel Gates, *Double Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 157-158.

149. Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2010): 122-23.

processing.[151] The image of straightened Black hair seems to connote an association with artificiality due to the hair being worn out of its "natural" state. Because Blackness is bound in a conversation about authenticity, stylistic practices that embrace artificial textures in Black hair clash with dominant understandings of Black aesthetics.[152] I would argue that the embrace of artificiality through hair processing, chemical straighteners, or hair extensions and wigs demonstrates the wide variety of styles that Black hair can maintain.

As Leakes performs blondeness on reality television, she inserts excessive Black femininity into cultural narratives of blondeness. Further investigation into the production, performance, and maintenance of Leakes' blonde bob reveals the work and the labor required to brand oneself under a presumed racial signifier of whiteness. In her study on the cultural iconicity of blondeness, Joanna Pittman has noted that Black stars like Lil' Kim, Tina Turner, Naomi Campbell and drag artist RuPaul don blonde wigs to "grab attention with the unnatural contrast of blonde hair against dark skin." Further, she captures RuPaul's comments about wearing blonde hair as not going against his Blackness:

> When I put on a blonde wig, I am not selling out my blackness. Wearing a blonde wig is not going to make me white. I'm not going to pass as white, and I am not trying to. The truth about the blonde wig is so simple. It really pops. I want to create outrageous sensation, and blonde hair against brown skin is a gorgeous outrageous combination.[153]

The "gorgeous outrageous" appeals to the exaggerated persona the artist is portraying. This outrageousness—what I am calling "ratchet"—exists through other performative gestures communicated through style and aesthetic. In the case of Nene Leakes, her appropriation of blondeness offers insights

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150. Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics" in *Welcome to the Jungle*, (London: Routledge, 1994).; Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *New Growth: The Art and Texture of Black Hair*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2023).

151. See E. Patrick Johnson. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Nikki Lane, *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)Politics of Respectability*, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

152. Joanna Pitman, *On Blondes*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003): 259-60.

into how Black women in reality television have the cultural power to reimagine blondeness in a particularly Black context, which is an inherently quare gesture. As I have argued in the introduction, appropriation in the ratchet aesthetic language suggests the power to reverse, reuse, or restore meaning in any given text. In this case, the "text" is blondeness and the personae it is associated with like the "dumb blonde" or the "cheap blonde."[154] Leakes departs from these blonde personas and develops one that is loud, confrontational, and has business savvy. Her performance of blondeness demonstrates how excessive Black femininity transforms social space in a way that positions the Black femme body as mutable. In this way, I read how the performance of blondeness on the Black femme body makes clear Black femininity's fluidity and quareness.[155]

The Performance of "Ghetto Fabulous" in Reality Television

The ratchet aesthetic, as I have been arguing, is an aesthetic formation that exists in contrast to the politics of respectability. It prides itself on excessive expressions of style and performance through the use of various beauty industries. Under the umbrella of how I am theorizing the ratchet aesthetic, there are relational terms like "hood" and "ghetto" that act as location-based terms that are used as a way to describe distinct behaviors and appearances. Racquel Gates notes that "pejorative" terms like "hood" and "ghetto" are distinct from the ratchet due to the nature of its excess.[156] I share this observation with Gates, but see the potential of viewing "hood" or "ghetto" under the umbrella of the ratchet aesthetic and expanding the work that ratchetness can perform. By this assertion, I frame Leakes' embodiment of blondeness as a performance of "ghetto fabulous." In her discussion about the fashion in the Black-cast

153. Ibid, 13 -29.

154. Similar to other Black feminist scholars, I am invested in the idea of Black women's embodied quareness, based on a series of sociopolitical factors, which produces a distinct aesthetic that is copied and rehearsed; Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; Cathy Cohen, Cohen, Cathy J. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–465; Douglas, Patrice D., "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," *Theory & event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 106–123.

155. Gates, *Double Negative*, 144.

television drama *Empire*, Gates explores a definition of "ghetto fabulous" to discuss the character Cookie Lyon. She notes, "'ghetto fabulous' signifies a particular kind of classed blackness along with assumptions about taste. According to Urban Dictionary, to be 'ghetto fabulous' indicates 'the style of nouveau riche people who have grown up in ghetto or urban areas . . . the combination of bad taste, an urban aesthetic and desire to wear one's wealth. Basically, high priced but tacky clothing and accessories.'"[157] The definition Gates provides from Urban Dictionary marks the rise from a person's ghetto or urban beginnings to a newfound wealth that one seeks to assert through fashion and other forms of self-representation. Put another way, ghetto fabulous showcases a person's rags-to-riches ascension into a wealthier society. As a classed-based aesthetic form, ghetto fabulous both documents and asserts the image of a classed society and marks the performance of taste. It makes a commentary about how class and taste function in the appearance of the character and how language operates in representing taste levels. I would like to briefly isolate "fabulous" in this performance, as it marks the inherent quareness of the term. As madison moore states in *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, "Fabulousness is important because it shows how marginalized bodies create art and beauty in states of duress—a creativity from the margins."[158] For moore, fabulousness represents the Black or brown body's defiance against whiteness, heterosexuality, and capitalism. To be fabulous is to exist in a body that asserts their beauty proudly and loudly. With moore's theory of fabulousness in mind, I argue that ghetto fabulous performance is a quare performance that not only represents the transformation of one's wealth status as communicated through fashion and styling, but also how the body functions in this elevated social space.

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156. Toward the end of her discussion of ghetto fabulousness, Gates concludes that the character's fashion is based on a "hood aesthetic" due to her origins in a Black, inner-city environment. This moment highlights the slippage between "hood" and "ghetto," where one suggests or builds on the definition of another. I see a similar slippage happening with "ratchet," whereby terms like "hood" and "ghetto" provide more nuance to ratchetness and especially my framing the ratchet aesthetic; Gates, "*Empire*: Fashioning Blackness," in *How to Watch Television*, eds. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mitchell, 2 ed, (New York: NYU Press, 2020): 28. Urban Dictionary qtd. in Gates.

157. madison moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018): 18.

Though Blackness is always already concerned with representing authenticity, Leakes' characterization of blondeness disrupts authenticity and reconfigures "the real" of reality television to require artificiality to keep its appearance.

Though not a respectable genre, the reality television genre create space for Black women to perform fuller versions of themselves.The ghetto fabulous performance of Nene Leakes on RHOA demonstrates the ways the reality television genre, unlike other television genres, offers Black female performers greater forms of visibility and more control over how they can represent themselves. Yet, due to the prevailing notions about the politics of respectability, Black female performers are often scrutinized for choosing to represent themselves in the genre. Kristen Warner states that "the burden for black women who appear on [reality television] is dual: although they are already performing the most entertaining versions of themselves, they also have to cautiously navigate the murky and often unintentional pitfalls of stereotypes." She adds, "these black female reality TV casts are often tasked with the labor of having to disarm and acknowledge their performances as not representative of their people or racial group."[159] Discussing the similarities of the genre's "melodramatic conventions," Racquel Gates suggests that "reality television shows engage in complicated explorations of black women's experiences and nonnormative identities…yet much of this work is buried under discourses about representations, respectability, and quality."[160] For Gates, the distinction between work and labor is key to how she reads Black women's performances in reality television. She explains, "labor might be understood as the professional activities that the women engage in on and off the camera, whereas work involves their negotiation of broader conceptions of identity and social expectations."[161] These distinctions reveal the multiple levels of production and performance that Black women navigate in the reality television genre.

158. Kristen Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 135.

159. Gates, *Double Negative*, 150.

160. Ibid, 152.

Though they cannot avoid discourses about respectability, Black women proudly assert their identities and cultural relevance on reality television.

In addition to crafting an entertaining television persona, Black women reality stars like Nene Leakes strategically develop personal brands that they are able to leverage in different entertainment spheres. As Gates explains, citing Leakes as a textbook example, "[r]eality television stars without a specific product to promote often attempt to brand their individual selves with the goal of extending their reality television careers beyond their initial 'fifteen minutes of fame' or to transition into a more legitimate sphere of the entertainment industry."[162] Kristen Warner reveals how Leakes has been one of the earliest representations of Black women mapping out space for themselves in the overly white and blonde reality television genre. In a scene from the RHOA season 5 reunion Leakes laments, "'When I came on this show I didn't have anything to watch. We had the [*Real Housewives of*] *Orange County* girls, but they are white with blonde hair, and I am a brown girl…When we first came on we had everybody in Atlanta saying we don't represent black women in Atlanta."[163] Leakes emphasizes the lack of images of Black women in reality television in which she could base her brand. Therefore, the brand that she performs for the camera would appear to have originated from her own black ratchet imagination.[164] It does read as ironic that Leakes comments on the white and blonde girls in the Orange County franchise, being a blonde herself. This moment signals to the ways blondeness does not offer Leakes the same cultural power as white women.

In developing her brand through blondeness and ghetto fabulous performance on reality television Leakes reveals the creative potentials of excessive Black femininity. Leakes and the rest of her castmates on RHOA extend historical representations of the Black bourgeoisie in popular culture.[165] If as Laurie

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161. Ibid, 157.

162. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless," 146-47.

163. See L.H. Stallings. "Hip Hop and The Black Ratchet Imagination," *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013).

164. See Vershawn Ashanti Young and Bridget Harris Tsemo, *From Bourgeois to Boojie : Black Middle-Class Performances*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

Ouellette and Susan Murry argue that reality television is an "unstable text that encourages viewers to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representation before them,"[166] then viewers of Black women on reality television must contend with their own assumptions about Black womanhood in their daily lives. The "reality" element of reality television makes it such that the characters and the production crew capture what is real to the audience. In performing the self on reality television, the performer has to make sure the audience believes that they are showing their "real" personality. The career of a reality television personality is one in which a performer has to live moments of their "real" lives that are produced and edited into short segments and they must always be "camera ready" for the next season should their storylines boost ratings.

Due to the history of Black performances being determined by white producers, Blackness is able to perform more authentically in the reality television genre because of the way that Black feeling and emotion can be displayed. Because the genre employs the themes of melodrama through production elements that mostly engage Black audiences, viewers are more exposed to how Black emotion and feeling operate in "real" settings and situations.[167] One visual element in the reality television genre that establishes viewers' relationship to the reality television personality is the talking head or confessional scenes that are interjected throughout the episodes to deliver puns, contradictory statements, or some good ol' shade. These moments of pause in the ongoing narrative of the episode establish the interview segments as the space in the narrative in which the character is speaking directly to the viewer. The viewer is able to take in the changes of the character and also the embodiment of their character. These moments also reveal the aesthetic transformations the characters may make a combination of hair styles, plastic surgery, or natural body changes.

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165. Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2 ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2009): 8.

166. Gates, "Embracing the Ratchet" in Double Negative; Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless."

Shows like RHOA offer insights into the ever evolving Black beauty industry on television. Over the course of RHOA, Leakes talks about the transformations she's made to her body and face; viewers are able to see the changes through her appearances on the show. Reality television characters' use of plastic surgery preserves and reworks their face and body for the camera. Reality television personalities rework their beauty in order to maintain the narrative of "progression" and "refinement" that the genre seemingly has to portray. This reworking is often done by smoothening harsh lines, making their noses slimmer, and other things to make the face appear youthful. Because of the cinematography of the reality television genre—namely the use of natural light for "on location" scenes and fluorescent lights for studio scenes—the face has to be ready for different lighting environments.[168] This is why ultra white veneers, for example, are popular in reality television: the way the cinematography lights natural teeth makes them look yellow, so stars will get veneers to make sure the teeth appear white and straight for the camera. These performers must look flawless in extreme close ups, what Pier Dominguez would call the "melodramatic money shot," that capture their reactions to certain moments.[169] As a personality that performs realness for the camera, Leakes has to expect these questions about the maintenance of her face and body for the camera. These are things that Leakes is doing to further advance her visual brand in the world of reality television. This insight into looking at her blondeness makes me think about the process of transformation in reality television and how it is someone that is changing themselves to be looked at in a more elevated way.

The Rise of the Ghetto Fabulous

167. See Patrick Keating, *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Though Keating's work discusses cinematography of the early film period, his assessments about the way lighting functions to make a performer glow and appear lighter to the point they might appear blown out addresses my comments about reality television cinematography.

168. Pier Dominguez. "'I'm Very Rich Bitch!': The Melodramatic Money Shot and the Excess of Racialized Gendered Affect in the Real Housewives Docusoaps." *Camera Obscura* 88, vol 30, no. 1, 2015.

Leakes' donning of her signature blonde bob to represent her newfound fame and growing career opportunity is documented in the season four premiere "Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained." The fact that Leakes' voice is used as the series narrator during the opening credits of this season further shows her importance to the series at this point in her career. This episode begins with Leakes' new attitude about her success and ends with a verbal altercation over a failed business decision with castmate Shereé Whitfield. This narrative arc demonstrates the complexities of upward mobility and Black representation. In one of Leakes' first scenes in the season, she takes her teenage son, Bryson, to a car dealership where she is seeking to purchase a car for him.

In this scene, Leakes' bob is cut close to the head. It is combed to the left and is nicely laid to her forehead. She wears simple make up and short, natural nails. She pairs this hairstyle with silver hoop earrings to connote an edgy, sophisticated look that has ghetto fabulous origins due the association with hoops in urban Black and brown neighborhoods (see Fig. 23). Throughout the series, Nene's character development is signaled through the crafting of her brand to be sleek and modern—what I termed in the previous chapter as "ratchet minimalism"—as a way of suggesting her performance of wealth. This performance of wealth is also marked by a performance of taste. Leakes seems to distinguish herself from "low class" Blackness in very telling moments. For instance, Bryson wants to test out an Impala but Leakes dismisses this by stating that the car is "ghetto" and is associated with people who sag their pants. On the one hand, this comment makes it clear that Leakes now thinks of herself as distant from ghetto attributes and communicates this in terms of financial background and taste. It suggests that Leakes' now wants to distance herself and her family from urban forms of Blackness associated with criminality. On the other hand, the comment reveals her anxieties about her Black son being associated with forms of criminality. Thus, her taste levels suggest a form of protection for her and her family. Leakes calling the car "ghetto" is not without its irony because she often makes comments about physically fighting her castmates, which is certainly a criminal activity. Thus, there is this double play happening in terms of how her character shows up in the television sphere.



Figure 23. Leakes at dealership with blonde bob and hoops.

Viewers of reality television shows like RHOA watch to see the Black women perform excessive and aggressive versions of themselves in classy settings. In the next scene, Leakes takes a phone call with castmate and friend Cynthia Bailey to discuss the nature of her meetup with Shereé. She informs her that Shereé has been saying that she has been taking money from her and that she would like to address it. This situation is threatening to Leakes' new status and puts her in a moment where she has to defend herself without "getting out of character." This is a key thing that both women state during the call—that they did not want to get out of character with each other. Getting out of character is something that Black women in reality television and Black women in general are always cautious of. RHOA highlights the way that Black women have to be aware of how their bodies are perceived in public. Yet, the series gets its ratings from the Black women cast members having explosive reactions that can be captured in tightly shot close ups. Terrion Williamson argues that anger is a "*presence itself*" and is an unavoidable element in the representation of Black women in the visual sphere.[170] It is important to note that while the cast members do not want to be portrayed as the Angry Black Woman, the specter of the Angry Black Woman

169. Terrion Williamson, "On Anger" in Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017): 31; See also Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984) & Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless."

is a trope that dominates the visual frame in this series. When getting out of character is the nature of your career and produces fans that will support your career, it becomes impossible to escape this bind. Though maintaining a well-mannered character may be the personal goal of the personalities, the viewers are watching to see the opposite. Thus, the function of the Angry Black Woman must be rethought in a manner that holds space for the performance of aggressive emotion and the viewers who consume that performance. Because television is a medium that viewers consume in a more personal way, these emotional performances have the potential to be heightened.[171]

In the scene where Leakes and Whitfield meet, we see the setting of the meeting place is a winery. The camera flashes shots of various assorted wines that are stocked in wooden shelves as well as the intimate table set ups. Here, Nene wears large diamond studs, a different look than the hoops, which suggest a reserved refinery. It would seem that wealth in this environment, for Leakes is communicated in more subtle ways. Once Shereé arrives, the accusations the women make to each other are quite slanderous, but that is the nature of the genre and the reason for Leakes needing to clear this up on camera, for the camera. This conversation is prefaced with a comment Shereé makes in her confessional asking, "Why can't Black women lift each other up?" In her talking head interview, Nene is annoyed and asks "Why is this a Black issue?" This comment seems to dismiss a grander narrative about the representation of Black women in media. I do not interpret it as Leakes saying that she is not included in this conversation, but that this particular issue between her and Shereé has nothing to do with the Black community as a whole. It is a personal issue. Yet, Shereé views this issue on a more serious scale, or it is possible she could be making this statement as a way to guilt trip Leakes. Whatever the intent is this moment highlights the constant sense of surveillance that Black women are aware of and in moments will proudly dismiss as phony when it is used against them.[172]

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170. Bambi Haggins, "In Another Part of the Cultural Ghetto: A Telephile's Notes," *Framework* 45, no. 2 (2004): 42–47.

171. See Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

The scene quickly turns humorous when Shereé decides to call her associate Tyrone on her Blackberry, which leads Nene to call her assistant Diane to confirm that Tyrone did not speak directly to her.[173] Thus, the two women hold a four way call in the winery filled with verbal jabs. The argument escalates and Leakes informs Shereé that "While you were running your mouth with [Tyrone], I was running to the bank, sweetie, and depositing a Trump check. Donald Trump." The line referring to her appearance on *Celebrity Apprentice* and the invocation of Trump's name seems to place Leakes in a higher tax bracket than Shereé. For Leakes being "very rich" warrants a certain level of respect that Shereé does not give her. Leakes reaches her limit with the conversation and decides to leave. In her final act in this scene, Leakes tells Shereé that she could buy her a house and a car ("I am very rich, bitch!") before getting up to leave. Shereé snaps back saying that Leakes cannot be rich because her teeth need to be fixed and that they are rotten. As she is at the door, Leakes quickly turns around and flashes her $50,000 veneers to Shereé and the camera while saying "They're done. They're done." Not only is it about the appearance of wealth, it is about the performance of wealth (see. Fig. 24). This is where I see the ratchet aesthetic functioning at its best.

Leakes performs blonde that is confrontational and bold, but she also performs a blonde that is filled with a wealth of emotion. At this point in the scene, the women are certainly out of character and make separate comments in their talking head interviews about fighting each other in the parking lot of the winery. Shereé does follow Leakes out to her car, yelling after her, but the moment does not escalate past that. By the end of the scene, the viewer is left amazed at the escalation of the verbal altercation in the midst of the flaunting of wealth. In the scene that ends the episode, Leakes is at Cynthia's house crying to her about the altercation. Cynthia affirms that Leakes is on a rise and that's why she has people after her. In terms of the episode this arc of emotion is at the root of what I am trying to get at. Yes, there

172. I am not sure what the dispute is about entirely. There seems to have been some kind of transaction that did not pan out which led to Shereé accusing Leakes of stealing money from her. The viewer is not privy to the intimate details and thus must figure it out through context clues. This is a part of the enjoyment of watching this kind of reality television.

is the moment where she verbally spars with Shereé, but then in the next scene she is vulnerable. These ups and downs are a part of how the characters perform for the camera. In one moment they are Angry Black Women, but in the next they are broken and in need of comfort. RHOA is a show that allows multiple displays of emotion to exist in one episode.



Figure 24. Leakes flashes her veneers to Shereé and the camera holding iPhone.

The context of Leakes' blonde transformation is key here because it signifies her wealth. In season 4, episode 2 "Surprisingly Rich," we see Leakes with the bob in a lighter tint, but only in the talking head interview and not yet in a "real" scene. In this way, interviews foreshadow the transition from honey blonde that we see in the narrative scenes and the yellow blonde we see later in the series. In the first quarter of the episode Leakes wears a hat, possibly to conceal the reveal of the lighter blonde bob. The bob is two tone: it is a yellow blonde tint in the bang portion of the hair while the rest of the hair is still the honey blonde. In the scene where she reveals the two tone bob, she is looking for a new home in Miami because "those bitches in Atlanta" are driving her crazy. During the scene where she, castmate Kandi Burress, and Cynthia are looking at a new home, in what the realtor describes as "modern," the talking head interview interjects, and she talks about what the success of her *Celebrity Apprentice* appearance has done for her money. She states that her financial situation a few years before was not how it is now and that since her appearance on the show she now surpasses her soon to be ex-husband, Greg

Leakes, who was previously the breadwinner. If you think about the performance she gave on *Celebrity Apprentice* it is quite revealing of what Black women's performances of anger and ratchetness can do for their career.[174] Much of Leakes' success on *Celebrity Apprentice* was due to her arguments with castmate and celebrity lawyer, Starr Jones. These moments in the series further add to the host of arguments between Black women that have been documented on television. Jones was someone who never wanted to engage with Leakes and, in fact, would physically remove herself from the environment when Leakes confronted her. However, Leakes did not confront Jones without reason: at various moments in the series, Jones makes sly comments about Leakes' status as a reality star and lacking of skill. The arguments that Leakes engages in with Jones are thus attempts to defend her brand and importance. That Leakes and her RHOA castmates explore a home with modern architecture shows the appeal of freshness and newness that she is constantly after. To be seen in something that is considered modern is to be seen as a trendsetter. Branding oneself with the modern suggests an ability to keep up with the changing ideas about the modern in a capitalist society.[175]

Performing Ghetto Fabulous in Social Space

RHOA is a series that documents the lives of Black women who negotiate their wealth in front of the public. Because of their financial status, the women often seek to distance themselves from associations with "low class" Blackness. Leakes is someone that did not come from money and has an origin story from "the ghetto," but in her appearance on the series she represents herself as distant from

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173. Leakes may get into verbal altercations, but they never turn physical and that does not have to be a part of her brand. This is different from the performances of Natalie Nunn in the *Bad Girls Club* and *Baddies* franchises on Oxygen and Zeus Network, respectively. These franchises pride themselves on repeated physical altercations and social media beefs. A performer like Nunn must be ready to defend herself physically at any given moment. Despite the dangerous nature of this line of work on television, Nunn is a successful businesswoman who has gained wealth from participating in ratchet television. Where Nunn differs from Leakes is in the context of their class subject positions.

174. I am still forming my ideas on the modern and the ratchet. I see these two concepts as complimenting each other not only in an aesthetic sense, but also in terms of how time is marked at a given decade. What was modern in the 2000s and not modern in the 2020s. And the function of ratchetness takes a different form throughout the decades.

that origin. This is most notable in another scene that portrays how the women navigate homeownership: a famous, frequently memed scene from season 6, episode 4 highlights how words like "hood" and "ghetto" are meant to comment on the state of classed based performance. The beginning shots construct a ghetto for the viewers that is separate from the suburbs where the castmates live. At this point in the series, Kenya had to move out of the house she was renting due to a roommate dispute and Leakes pays her a visit to help her go look for a new place to stay. The scene starts with a record scratch and then a hip-hop beat.[176] This is set against the few shots of the new environment we see. First is a shot of large skyscrapers that appear to be in the downtown Atlanta area. The next shot is of a highway that is sandwiched between large buildings similar to the first ones that exceed the frame. The next shot is what looks like an abandoned house that now has various kinds of graffiti against its lime colored brick exterior. At the front of the home is a sign that reads "Available" from a realty company, most likely ready to gentrify the home and the area (see Fig. 25).



Figure 25. A scene from "the ghetto."

In these three quick shots, we have made our descent into what Leakes will tell us is the "ghetto." This sequence of shots makes it appear to the viewer that we are only safe around the big buildings and the

175. Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. *The Sonic Color Line : Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

freeways. The ghetto looks desolate in comparison to the metropolitan city. The next shot is a pan from left to right of the neighborhood. In the background there are a few homes that look to be in better condition than the previous home we saw, but the view of the neighborhood is blocked by industrial buildings and work trucks. As the camera gets a shot of Leakes pulling into a parking spot in her gray Range Rover, we hear a voice over of her exclaiming "Ooh!" The camera cuts to a close up of Leakes' feet stepping out of the car with open toed leopard print stilettos that have multiple openings leading up to the top of the ankle (see Fig. 26a). The camera only shows us Leakes' shoes as she delivers, still in voice over, the famous line "Chile, the ghetto!" The camera cuts to a medium shot of Leakes in a different styled blonde bob. It is longer in the front and still cropped to the neck. It has a fullness and a roundness to it and ends with a curl. The motion of it adds drama because it is longer than previous styles (see Fig. 26b). It is worth it to pause here to think about the irony of what Leakes' terms "the ghetto." One would not think the ghetto would have nicely manicured trees or nicely paved parking lot, for example. It would seem this ghetto is one that does not appear to match Leakes' new acquired tastes for living environments. This neighborhood is beneath her: she dismisses it as ghetto.



Figure 26a. Leakes' stilettos.



Figure 26b. Leakes walking in “the ghetto.”

Leakes’ performance creates a peek into how the women on the show have to maintain a status of wealth: this means living in the correct neighborhood. The camera cuts to a full shot of Leakes from behind. Here we see how the bob is laid to the back of her neck. Right when this shot happens, she repeats, again in voice over, “The ghetto. The ghetto.” After this, there are three shots that show more of the area: a shot of a city bus passing by, a shot of a used appliance store that has the exterior of an older brick building, then finally a busy street. Then we cut back to a medium shot of Leakes as she enters the hotel that Kenya has been staying in. Leakes flicks the door knocker as if she is touching something unsanitary and Kenya answers the door. Leakes enters the room observing the place. It stands out the way she interacts with the space, as if she is a realtor. The camera shows us what Leakes sees. The room is not glamorous and is mostly filled with wooden furniture with a carpet that has a printed shell design. The space is messy with Kenya’s clothes and shoes spread throughout. Clearly, the space is too small for her. The fact that Kenya is living in a space with a white refrigerator is a huge disgrace for Leakes. “Not a white refrigerator,” Leakes comments in a talking head interview. “Put your shoes on and let’s go find you a home, honey.” She concludes. The white refrigerator seems to represent a low class object that one has in their home. And if we are in what Leakes is declaring the ghetto, a white refrigerator is something that is a part of the environment. But the hotel is not what we would realistically consider the ghetto, it’s

just that it is not in the metropolitan area of Atlanta that the housewives reside. It is funny to think of how the word ghetto is functioning as an exaggeration and the fact that Leakes' wardrobe is very much inspired by the ghetto, mainly the stilettos. The topic of the scene is home space and this is important to note as home space also relates to the way the women maintain the appearance of wealth. The taste level is something to be mindful of too, which is why the white refrigerator stands out. Leakes' commentary in blonde is happening both in the actual scene and in the interview scenes that are interjected. During the present scene she is more reactionary with her body whereas in the interview scenes she is only able to emote from the waist up.

When the women arrive at the luxury penthouse building where Leakes is meeting her realtor, there is a full shot of the women both in stilettos walking toward the entrance. Kenya remarks "We're not in the ghetto anymore." The presence of stilettos in the scene is what makes the attitudes toward ghetto seem contradictory. The shoe has a more sexualized and urban connotation, but because they are on differently classed bodies who are socially mobile they do not have this same resonance. However, the original context in which the shoe is worn cannot be ignored. For instance, the Georgia based rap group Crime Mob's club anthem "Stiletto (Pumps)," performed by the group's two female members Princess and Diamond, is a good example of how people from a working class background view the appearance and the culture of the shoe. As the song boasts, stilettos are the perfect shoe for a club look and really complete a look meant to attract potential suitors. They also express the enjoyment of their versatility and variation in style.[177] In this way, this is a class appropriation of something that Black women and femmes of a lower class background have originated. Yet, this is how style and fashion function, they start from the lower classes who are innovative and deemed inappropriate and then it eventually makes its way to the upper classes who take what they will and distance themselves from the original reference.

176. Crime Mob, "Stiletto (Pumps)," track 6 on *Crime Mob*, Reprise Records, 2004, Spotify.

The fact that the women are negotiating space in stilettos is something that is striking about the scene and reveals the function of blackness in homeownership.[178] This is an important form of representation considering the racist history of homeownership in America. Though they are out of the hood, they are still inspired by hood and ghetto aesthetics, but not necessarily hood and ghetto tastes and environments. This showcases the ways that ghetto fabulous identity performs a kind of hybrid identity that pulls certain markers from "low class" Blackness and seeks to elevate them. The scene ends with the hood being the stand in for Kenya's ghetto apartment. There is a lot about the reversal of word usage and the attention to location and how that inspires taste and what is deemed appropriate. Ghetto and hood are used interchangeably in this scene and in the series as a whole. But in some instances they both take on different meanings that reveal how unsimilar they are. In this scene ghetto and hood are used as terms to describe an area that is not in the metropolitan area in which the housewives reside. That it is so far removed from the refinery of the city adds to its appeal as a ghetto. But it is quite humorous because the ghetto that Kenya is in is not what would be considered a ghetto for people claim to reside in the ghetto, which is typically neighborhoods that are inner-city and densely populated. A hotel next to a large apartment building is not the ghetto. It is interesting how Bravo TV references this scene and calls the apartment "hood" instead of ghetto, which is what makes the scene so memorable for fans.[179] This again shows how the slippage of these two markers are so common in their usage. As multiple episodes of the series deal with the women navigating home ownership, the ghetto and hood are classed terms that are used as a way to regulate upper class performance.

The slippages between "ghetto" and "hood" are ironic to the way the women move about social spaces while being inspired by ghetto and hood aesthetics. While the women on RHOA seek to represent themselves as refined women, there are moments when their emotions, namely anger, get the best of them

177. See Nora E. Taplin-Kaguru, *Grasping for the American Dream: Racial Segregation, Social Mobility, and Homeownership*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

178. "Kenya's 'Hood' Hotel." BravoTV.com, https://www.bravotv.com/the-real-housewives-of-atlanta/season-6/episode-4/videos/kenyas-hood-hotel. Accessed Jan. 7, 2024.

and they are forced to defend themselves and their image. For Leakes, the communication of anger and the appearance of blondeness creates a conflicting visual representation of blondes in Black social space. Another moment that presents the slippages between "ghetto" and hood" would be during a physical altercation scene from in Season 6, episode 13 "Pillow Talk or Pillow Fight." Leakes' platinum blonde bob functions in a very different way in the midst of physical altercation. This is a moment where hair is able to reflect mood and setting in unique ways. The bob noticeably looks like a wig that is attached with hair adhesive whereas in season 4 it appears that she was bleaching her natural hair. The change to the wig does more for hair protection, and since it is a wig, it can withstand heat for longer durations of time and is less prone to damage the natural hair. This is a revealing moment when the wig, something that is artificial, is used to protect natural Black hair. I can only speculate the reason for the switch. It is possible that Leakes' natural hair became damaged over time due to the intense bleaching process her hair went through in previous seasons. This new platinum blonde wig represents yet another status symbol due to the level of care that wigs must undergo.

The pillow talk event is somewhat of a main plot point in the series as certain castmates have been creating rumors about each other. Leakes plans this event as a way to get everyone to air out their beef with their partners by their side in sexy lingerie. Set in a luxury hotel, the party begins with Leakes setting the rules for the games they are playing. During this moment, Leakes walks briskly back and forth in the room making her dress move with her. The flowiness of the dress seems to assert a kind of sex appeal that the event calls for. She even makes a comment to Apollo, castmate Phaedra Parks' husband, about him looking at her legs. Leakes calls attention to her body as a way to set the tone of the room but also to create a playful environment. At the start of the games, the topic of men going to the strip club without their wives comes up and Leakes opens up about her past as a stripper. She notes that the experience was not traumatizing to her and that she was using that job as a way to help raise her first son. This moment gives insight in the forms of labor that Black women must perform to provide for their families. Even Leakes who now has a certain level of wealth is attendant to her past.

Throughout the event, Leakes has been expressing her frustration with castmate Kenya Moore's tardiness. When Kenya finally arrives, Leakes opens the door, says "hello" and then shuts it on her, causing Kenya to reopen the door for herself. Kenya attends the event with her gay best friend, Brandon, who has been like a protector to her in the series. As soon as Kenya takes her seat, Leakes scolds her about being late which then seems to open the floor for other attendees to address their concerns with Kenya. The husband of one attendee gets up to address her and walks over to her in an intimidating manner. This causes Kenya to rightfully get up and stand her ground. It appears that the man grabs her and that's when Brandon steps in, telling him not to put his hands on her. This causes the other men in the room to gang up on him, resulting into a physical fight. As the rest of the guests are trying to calm the situation down, castmate Porsha Williams and her sister Lauren decide to leave the event saying that it turned "hood" and that this was not a part of their character. Again, the idea of character comes up in a scene where anger which produced a physical altercation, which is rare for RHOA. It would seem that anger is an emotion that cannot be contained. It is somewhat humorous that Leakes, as the host, is part instigator and part mediator. The whole reason for this event was for everyone to hash out beef, it was bound to get escalated to a physical fight. Leakes is aware of this by the way that she creates the environment of the space and the kinds of games they play that would bring up the issues that might elicit anger. But when the fight breaks out, she is upset at how Kenya handles herself. She thinks that Kenya should have never got up to defend herself. Again, a double play is happening where Leakes is somewhat of an aggressor, while scolding Kenya and others for their aggression. She does not take responsibility for creating an environment where a physical altercation could happen. That the altercation includes both men and women, and a queer man who is assaulted for defending his friend, suggests that gender and sexuality (as well as Blackness) are identity elements that become highlighted in the midst of bodies colliding. The fight also makes evident the kind of distress Leakes' wig undergoes. It is no longer tamed and straightened like it was before. Now, it looks distressed which surely reflects the current state of the environment (see Fig. 6). And because of the vibrancy of platinum blonde Leakes body stands out amongst all of the drama. Though all of the attendees are members of the Black upperclass, that they get

"hood" in a luxury hotel further shows that social class does not match perceived notions about proper behavior.



Figure 27. Leakes distressed at her guests fighting during the pillow talk.

The Narrative of Refinement

Over the course of her television career, Leakes has gone through several blonde transformations, on and off television, that reflect the trends of the moment in which she wears it. These transformations take place during her time on RHOA and well after her departure from the show due to disagreements with executive producer Andy Cohen about pay as well as allegations of racism on set.[180] These transformations are best seen during the reunion specials of RHOA. The reunion specials in the *Real Housewives* franchise are the time that the cast members reconvene to reflect on the season and discuss any lingering drama. It is also a moment that the characters have a chance to put together a look that demonstrates the progression of their fashion. Leakes' season 4 reunion look showcases the freshly tinted platinum blonde bob with a neatly combed bang that covers her forehead, while in the season 5 reunion the bob is styled in a wave pattern. In the season 6 reunion, Leakes does away with the bob and wears a

179. Rebecca Alter, "NeNe Leakes Dismisses Racism Lawsuit Against Bravo, Andy Cohen," *Vulture*, published Apr. 21, 2022, accessed Apr. 6, 2024.

honey blonde low chignon, reminiscent of old Hollywood stars like Joan Crawford. In the season 7 reunion, Leakes returns to the bob but with the hair extended in a fuller side-swept curl. Notably, Leakes wears a white form fitting pant suit that reveals her cleavage. This is a stark difference from her other reunion looks that cover up her body. Finally, in the season 8 reunion Leakes premiers a straight blonde bob with a lace bodysuit (see Fig. 28). This is the last time Leakes wears her hair in a bob style.



Figure 28. Leakes' Season 8 reunion look.

Following this look, she starts to wear longer extensions in a sleek straight style that follow the trend in popular culture of embracing hair extensions. As Fashion historian Jessica Glasscock notes, by the 2010s, people wearing hair extensions was no longer considered taboo. Many celebs began embracing the look and even the fashion industry took note with their experimentations with extensions.[181] Most recently in the summer of 2023, Leakes made a cameo in the rap artist BIA's music video "MILLIONS" in a 32-inch blonde lace front (see Fig. 29). The look not only represents the ways that Leakes continues to represent her brand as current through hair length, but also it represents the ways that she maintains access to

180. Jessica Glasscock, *Wigging Out: Fake Hair that Made Real History*, (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2023): 226-43.

quality human hair extensions that appear to be her real hair. Leakes also frequently posts her looks on her Instagram and they never divert from the straight and long hair style that she started adopting in 2018.[182] In this way, Leakes' hairstyle is representative of the styles that other rap artists like Nicki Minaj adopt in the new millennium. That the rap and hip-hop industries become reflected in Leakes' style further proves the importance of these industries in popular Black aesthetics.

The appeal to sleekness is really a commentary that the ratchet aesthetic makes about the modern. Specifically, Black women's creative contributions to the modern are reflected in the way that hair extensions are styled in simplified, straightened ways paired with outfits that reveal the body. The embrace of hair extensions and bodysuits are somewhat of a twenty first century development due to cultural shifts around styling practices and technology. Considering the historical implications about Black women's bodies as always already hypersexual, that someone like Leakes positions herself in the modern by showcasing the body does work to assert power over dominate ideas about Black women's hypersexuality.[183] With questions about how the modern is represented in Black culture, the process that Black hair undergoes to produce looks that are artificial in nature does work to reveal the versatility of Black hair. The trend of straight hairstyles on Black women is related to a history of hair strengthening rituals that Black women developed in order to assimilate into white society.[184] With the proliferation of straight hair styles that Black women adopt in popular culture,[185] scholars of Black hair and culture must contend with the appeal of straight hair and not fall into a simple conclusion about "selling out" or self-

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181. See Linnethia Leakes (@neneleakes). Instagram account. https://www.instagram.com/neneleakes/?hl=en.

182. See Davis, Adrienne D. "Don't Let Nobody Bother Yo' Principle": The Sexual Economy of American Slavery, in *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, Sharon Harley et al. eds. (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 15-38.

183. See Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training during Segregation*, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2003); Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2010); Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

184. Emma Tarlo, "Black Hair," in *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*, (London: Oneworld, 2016).

hate. It becomes clear that in the twenty first century straight hair is a Black aesthetic. Additionally, the embrace of plastic surgery and other forms of body modification further emphasize artificiality as a form of Black expression. Leakes has been open about the work she has had done to her face and body to refine her look.[186] The topic of plastic surgery in entertainment is not a conversation that scholars of Black media and culture have paid attention to due to Blackness's supposed authenticity. These procedures that modern day Black performers receive and their openness about it does work to remove Blackness from the bind of authenticity.

Leakes' performance of blondeness in the reality television canon in particular and in popular culture in general adds to a long history of Black women appropriating blonde hair for their own needs. Blonde hair in a Black context holds particular weight in various social spaces because of its association with high levels of maintenance and the wealth one has to have in order to maintain it. Leakes branding of herself as a blonde removes the hair color from its associations with whiteness and places Black femininity as central to a narrative of blondeness. Her performance of ghetto fabulous identity signifies the ways she navigates upward mobility and the achievement of more access to wealth. As Leakes is representative of upward mobility, the functionality of her blondeness and the performance of ghetto fabulousness exceeds the boundaries of the hood and the ghetto, but not without the hood and the ghetto being frequent references to the kinds of excessive performances of Black femininity that she might willfully adopt should certain moments call for it.

185. *Essence*, Nene Leakes Admits to Nose Job and Liposuction, published Oct. 29, 2020, accessed Apr. 6, 2024, https://www.essence.com/celebrity/nene-leakes-admits-to-plastic-surgery/; Tweety Elitou, "NeNe Leakes Explains Her Choice To Get Liposuction and A Brazilian Butt Lift!" *BET*, published August 18, 2022, accessed Apr. 6, 2024, https://www.bet.com/article/qduh7c/nene-leakes-explains-her-choice-to-get-liposuction-and-a-brazilian-butt-lift.



Figure 29. Leakes' cameo in BIA's "MILLIONS." Notice the minimalist, futuristic set design.

Coda:

The Ratchet Aesthetic in the Twenty-First Century

Throughout my dissertation I have theorized "the ratchet aesthetic" as both an aesthetic language that rejects the politics of respectability and a reading method for redressing performances of Black female hypersexuality and excess 1990s and early 2000s. Chapter 1 titled "Preliminary Thoughts on the Ratchet Aesthetic" framed ratchet performance theory and its relationship to Black aesthetics. In it, I explored how scholars of Black aesthetics have left out considerations of working class Black femininity in their discussions of Black style and fashion. Chapter 2 titled "The Televisual Ratchet Aesthetic" examined the performance of the ratchet aesthetic in the character Sheneneh Jenkins played in drag by Martin Lawrence in the 1990s television sitcom *Martin*. In this chapter, I extend the work of E. Patrick Johnson and Jose Esteban Muñoz to explore how ratchet performance makes impossible an "authentic" black masculinity. In this way, I rested with the creative possibilities that ratchet drag offers the series. Chapter 3 titled "The Cinematic Ratchet Aesthetic" utilizes the 1997 film *Black American Princesses* starring actress Halle Berry and the late comedian Natalie Desselle as a case study for what I term the *cinematic ratchet aesthetic*. Working with theories of the close-up, I read noticeable and significant close-ups in *Black American Princesses* that capture Black beauty and styling. Along with thinking about the cinematic performances of Berry and Desselle, I speculated about the "hidden labors" of screenwriter Troy Beyer, costume designer Ruth E. Carter, and hairstylist Kim Kimble—all representing a Black female creative community that drove the success of the film's cult following. Finally, Chapter 4 titled "The 'Real' Ratchet Aesthetic" examines the career of the reality television star Nene Leakes from *the Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-present). This chapter argued that Leakes' performance of

blondeness divests blondeness from its associations with white femininity and reasserts Blackness as blondeness.

What follows are my brief observations on the state of the ratchet aesthetic in the 2020s. Using the rapper and reality television personality Sukihana as an example, I reflect on the current themes and trends that define a modern ratchet aesthetic. Sukihana, and other baddies like her, demonstrate a rawness that has not previously been made precipitable to popular audiences.

@sukihanagoat: The Performance of Fakery[187]

On August 16, 2022, American rap artist and reality television personality, Sukihana aka "Suki With The Good Coochie," sat down for an interview with comedian Funny Marco.[188] The interview is candid and meme-worthy, but also insightful in terms of how many female artists in the rap industry appropriate the image of the "video ho" to acquire financial success. Much of Sukihana's content explores themes of explicit sexuality. Her songs are mostly about performing sexual acts, having sexual acts performed on her, or being "a ride or die for her nigga," a trope commonly associated with the "Trap Queen."[189] Poised in the interview chair, she is dressed in a spandex leopard body suit and wears long green hair that hangs past the bottom of the chair (Fig. 30). She wears furry blue slippers. This look is fun and seems to give off an animalistic vibe. It is both incongruent and cohesive. Visually and linguistically, Sukihana turns the politics of respectability on its head. What follows is one of the most informative parts of the conversation:

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186. See Suki With The Good Coochie (@sukihanathegoat). Instagram account. https://www.instagram.com/sukihanagoat/?hl=en.

187. Breakfast Media, "Sukihana Talks Her Good C**chie, Disses John Legend, Claims She Freestyles Her Songs, Fighting Ho*es," *YouTube*, August 16, 2022, video, 24:38.

188. See Bowen, Sesali. *Bad Fat Black Girl : Notes from a Trap Feminist*. First edition. New York, NY: Amistad 35, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2021. Bowen's ideas on "trap feminism" have been invaluable to how I think about ratchet aesthetics.

> Funny Marco: Is [your] great grandparents, anybody older, grandma, auntie, still around?
>
> Sukihana: Mhmm.
>
> Funny Marco: How do they listen to your music at the family reunion?
>
> Sukihana: At the family reunion? How do they listen to it? First of all, I come from a long line of tricks and hoes…I come from a long line of hoes. I'm not the first one. Maybe in this generation, but it go all the way back to slaverytime and before then with the Egyptians and the Moors. A long line of selling pussy. I'm not the first one. My auntie…grandmama, great grandmama, great great great grandmama.

In her response, Suki makes it clear that she is not the first ho in her family's lineage, claiming she comes from a long line of women "selling pussy." But let's be real: the idea of pussy being sold during the institution of slavery is quite complex. Here, Suki is suggesting that though Black women were being sexually exploited under the conditions of slavery that there were some elements of "Black pussy power" they leveraged.[190] This line of reasoning shatters common perceptions about Black women as passively taking their abuse by enslavers. Instead, the ho fought/fights back. The idea of pussy being sold in the institution of slavery is quite insightful: it suggests that though Black women were sexually exploited by enslavers, there may have been some elements of power still present in captivity. In this way, Sukihana represents the creation of what was not meant to be--a Black woman with full awareness and autonomy of her body and her sexuality--considering the sexual exploitation of Black women during enslavement. As an artist, Sukihana has used the mediums of rap and reality television to fashion her own version of the video ho. As the figure is a creation of male fantasy, Sukihana reclaims the fantasy of the video ho as her own and adds an authentic voice to this voiceless figure.

189. See Roach, Shoniqua. "Black pussy power: Performing acts of Black eroticism in Pam Grier's Blaxploitation films," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2018): 7-22.



Figure 30: Sukihana is interviewed by Funny Marco.

Funny Marco asks this question to engage Sukihana's oeuvre in a conversation about Black respectability politics. This language is bolstered by the manners of dress in which the interview and interviewee contrast on. Funny Marco wears what one would consider respectable casual wear: a nicely, but not excessively shaped tan hat, a dress shirt that is opened exposing his cleavage, fitted slacks, and dress shoes. These symbols through styling place him in the visual ideal of the Black respectable class. We can then think of his line of questioning from the perspective of someone who is trying to "correct" Sukihana's use of sexually explicit language and imagery. Sukihana contrasts with Funny Marco in terms of aesthetic and posture. Funny Marco sits in a professional manner, while Sukihana is relaxed, but expressive. In one part of the interview, Sukihana employs quare movements with her hands when listing the long line of hoes she comes from, having her hands topple on each other as she lists the names of possible ho relatives. This moment further signifies the idea of a ho lineage and of this lineage being grander

than her. While her quare body is in constant contrast to the aesthetics of respectability, it communicates a futurity of the "ratchet elsewhere" that is formed in the afterlives of slavery.[191]

Sukihana does not come from a vacuum and her video ho identity is not singular to her lineage alone. Many of the rappers—Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, Megan thee Stallion, to name a few—that visually draw from the video ho image are not performing the sexual acts that are often attributed to full-service sex workers. In the creation of this image in the rap industry, these artists pull from Black and brown urban, working-class aesthetics to produce a fully realized and consumable ho that audiences and brands want to engage with.[192] The digital landscape of social media has changed the way that independent artists and signed artists alike engage with fans. The appearance of sexual availability is packaged and sold by the rap industry to be intimately consumed by a wide variety of audiences. In its current form, the video ho image offers many Black women and femmes the entrepreneurial success that they have been looking for. Yet, there is a lot of fakery that goes into producing the video ho image.

Sukihana, and many rappers like her, often claim being "real bitches" in their music, but are okay admitting that employ fakery in other instances. Artists like Sukihana get plastic surgery in order to make their bodies into their idea of desirability. In the interview, Sukihana mentions her fakery—her body is done (which you can follow her body transformation narrative on her seasons on *Love and Hip Hop: Miami*) and her teeth are not real. In one moment from the interview, Suki talks about a scene from *Love and Hip Hop: Miami* in which she kicks her

190. For my definition of the "ratchet elsewhere," please see Chapter 3; For a discussion of "the afterlives of slavery," see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small axe: a journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

191. The video ho aesthetic, a version of the ratchet aesthetic, is being endorsed by mainstream fashion brands, as can be seen with collaborations like Megan thee Stallion with Mugler, Cardi B's rise in the fashion industry.

partner out of a luxury car (Fig. 31).[193] When Funny Marco brought this instance up, she denied that this moment ever happened because she does not know how to drive. When the footage from the episode is replayed to her, she says "Oh, that was fake." The nonchalant admittance of the fakery of this scene makes clear that it is acceptable to be fake in some instances; namely, in a reality television series purporting to be a documentation of "real" life. Suki gives insight into how the blurring of the real and the hyperreal creates one as a profitable, and therefore hypervisible, subject.



Figure 31: Sukihana all styled out "driving."

Sukihana blurs the lines between real and hyperreal in terms of ratchet aesthetics. It is in this in-between space of the real and the hyperreal that ratchet aesthetics in the twenty first century populate. Jillian Hernandez has noted that "corporeal fakery" has the potential "to agitate established hierarchies of gender, race, beauty, and sexuality that privilege middle- and upper-

192. *Love & Hip Hop: Miami,* season 4, episode 7, "Wrong Way," aired October 4, 2021, Paramount+.

class white ciswomen."[194] With the explosion of Black female rappers over the last five years who rap about sexual acts and sexual pleasure in powerful ways, the idea of leveraging hypersexual performance for profit in an economy that once exploited Black women's sexuality for white profit has very political implications. These artists position the Black female body as a work of art that maintains its authenticity through artificiality.

The fanbase of the newer generation of ratchet performances is not shocked by the explicit sexual language and performances, the experiences of online and live sex work, the conversations about body shape and body contouring, and the dramatic, raw displays of performer's "authentic" lifestyles caught on camera, distributed widely, and watched repeatedly. These fans are certainly not clutching their pearls. Some viewers of these performances might hold on to some Black respectable ideology while simultaneously engaging in the pleasure of viewing ratchet performances. The potential benefit of viewing ratchet performance in the twenty first century is that it unsettles the viewer's norms about how people in real life are supposed to act, and more specifically, how Black women and femmes are supposed to act to achieve the myth of racial progress. Put another way, ratchet performances in the twenty first century shatter the myth of racial progress by existing in a self-produced world that exists outside those boundaries.

One can get lost in this world of hyper-produced realities. Viewers engage with these performances through various social media platforms and digital networking sites, in addition to attending live performances, and viewing the performer's other media content and supporting their other businesses that they promote. There are multiple streams of income that ratchet performers maintain which suggests that anyone engaging in "ratchet capitalization" must be

193. Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 155.

business savvy in order to maintain their image and reputation.[195] Paying attention to the forms of labor involved in producing ratchetness gives insights into the strategies black performers employ to secure a bag.[196] Emotional, personal, and physical labor are all aspects the ratchet performer is aware of. This is why the focus on the ratchet aesthetic provides a deeper look into the layers of ratchet performance.

What does it mean to get paid for your appearance and personality? How does the Black femme performer value oneself in an increasingly and heavily surveilled society? How does the black femme performer perform worth and value through aesthetic and stylistic choices? What does the work of sexuality and hypersexual performance do for the Black femme performer? These questions, and more, can only be explored through an understanding of the ratchet aesthetic as worthy of beauty—and therefore, hyperexcessive Blackness as beautiful.

194. April D. Lundy, "Caught Between a Thot and a Hard Place: The Politics of Black Female Sexuality at the Intersection of Cinema and Reality Television," *The Black scholar* 48, no. 1 (2018): 9.

195. This colloquial term for "getting money" is also a reference to a fashion accessory.

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