Confessions of a Video Vixen¹: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory

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The video vixen holds a special place in American society’s underbelly. Good hair, firm breasts, round ass, slim waist, and pouty mouth, she is beautiful according to European and African American standards. She personifies sex. After seeing Case serenade and propose to Beyoncé in his music video “Happily Ever After,” I wanted to be the video vixen. I wanted my desirability memorialized in a video. Nelly was my chance, or so I thought. In this autocritography, I use performative writing to confess my short-lived career as a video vixen. My intention is to trouble boundaries of gender and sexuality by telling and re-telling my experience on the set of Nelly’s “Country Grammar (Hot Shit)” music video shoot alongside my anthem at the time, Jay-Z and Pharell’s “I Just Wanna Love You (Give It 2 Me).” I illuminate how bodies move between and beyond boundaries established by language due to the intersectional properties of our experiences, counter-memory, and re-membering.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Sexuality; Video vixen; Memory; Autocritography

The video vixen holds a special place in American society’s underbelly. Good hair, firm breasts, round ass, slim waist, and pouty mouth, she is beautiful according to European and African American standards. She is both reprimanded and applauded for her roles as the model, the part-time prostitute when necessary, the vixen who steals married and taken men. She personifies sex. I never wanted to be her, until I saw Case serenading and proposing to Beyoncé in his music video “Happily Ever After” (Henderson and Woodard). I wanted someone to plan an excursion around New York City, doll me up, make me feel beautiful, and ask me to be his wife, even if I was going

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¹ NOTE: The original text contains a superscript “¹” which is not necessary in a natural text representation. It should be removed.
to say no. I wanted to be desired. If I could not have that in real life, I at least wanted the fantasy to be memorialized in a video. Nelly was my chance, or so I thought.

The Demarcation of Desire

What does it mean?
to be sexually healthy
to be a Black woman
with a sexual appetite coursing through her veins
a willingness to satisfy her desires
to be at peace with her phenomenal hips swaying to the rhythm of an 808
to chant alongside the drum line with nothing on her mind
but
lust
to enjoy exploring her own
moans
What does it mean?
to know Saartjie Baartman and Superhead as her only role models personifying sex?
What does it mean to see other Black women hide their desires for fear of being a spectacle?
What does it mean to watch her hide the lust in her eyes for fear of being controlled by an image designed to push her below the poverty line?

What does it mean to be a critical intersectionality scholar who desires a heteronormative fantasy? sometimes

What does it mean to be me?

May 2012. YouTube. I revisit a scene from my past. I click play. The base line booms through my computer alongside a glorious shot of the St. Louis, Missouri, arch. I watch my body dance nervously among a crowd of women on an inner-city street in North St. Louis. I watch myself hide behind glasses and hair, afraid to be too seductive. What if someone notices me and identifies the girl in capri pants and a
halter-top on top of the low-rider as Dr. Jaye? I scroll down. Thousands of comments abound on the screen. My heart stops.

A Bunch of hoes with no talent does not make a video.
Damn them some fat hoes.
Them some pug ugly hoes.
The women in this video are kind of out of shape.
There are some straight monsters in this video and all of them are half naked.
Gross! LOL!
All the girls’ outfits in this video can also be Halloween costumes.
St. Louis must have the ugliest chicks ever. i havent seen one chick that i would say “damn thats a bad bitch”
Half of these women were on the Maury Povich show and heard the words:—“You are not the father” hahaha. I mean come on, just look at these women
Damn those are some Nappie headed hoes

THEY ARE ALL HEIFERS!!!!!!!!!!! —YouTube Comments in response to “Country Grammar (Hot Shit)” by Nelly

I Must Tell My Story

If I rely on YouTube commentators
to tell it for me,
they will reduce my body to a
pug ugly,
hypersexual,
out of shape,
hoe.
I must tell my story.

Spring 2000. I was an undergraduate communication major modeling on the side for extra money. My agency, Centro Models, the biggest talent agency in the city, sent me on a job to be in a music video. I did not want to do it, but I knew that if I turned it down, I would not be called back for another job. The rapper was a local celebrity, but beyond the city streets of St. Louis, no one knew his name. I figured it would be fine since he was no Jay-Z or LL Cool J.

The video was being shot on the north side of the city, an area known for extreme poverty, violence, and neglect, thus the perfect landscape for a new rapper trying to gain street credentials. I was one of three girls cast as principals. We were told to
arrive for hair, makeup, and wardrobe at 8 a.m. on the set—a multipurpose room inside a building located on a residential street. When I arrived, it was easy to spot the other two principals. Like me, they were both light skinned, with long hair, flawless faces, and bodies belonging to video vixens. They were dressed in casual clothing, and sat off to the side. Heather was the then-girlfriend of a major St. Louis Rams National Football League star. Farah was an acquaintance I often worked with on different jobs. None of the other twenty or so women in the room fit the normative “model” description. Many of them were full-figured and dressed in their own lingerie. Heidi, Farah, and I sat together, exchanging modeling stories, and getting to know one another. We were each called individually to get hair and makeup done, and then it was off to wardrobe. When the other two girls returned from wardrobe, I grew anxious immediately. They were practically naked. They both sported shorts too short to be called shorts. One wore a bikini top adorned with fringe, and the other a bandeau top barely covering her breasts. Their outfits were bright, easy-to-spot colors. I must have looked terrified when I walked over to wardrobe because the stylists handed me capri pants and a halter-top. I looked like I could have been on my way to class.

After we were all dressed and ready, we sat on chairs scattered around the large multipurpose room guarded by muscled men only letting credentialed participants in and out of the space. We could not see what was being set up outside, we just saw the people who came through the room. A group of eight or so Black men came in and sat next to us. One of them introduced himself as Cornelius and thanked us for coming. They were very nice, very articulate, and very relaxed. If the rest of the people on the set were like them, it would be a good day. When they got up to leave, I asked the other girls who they were. They laughed at me. Cornelius was Nelly, the rest were his entourage, the St. Lunatics. When it was time to start shooting, we left the safe space of the secure waiting area and went outside. I did not expect what greeted us.

A Rhetorical Turn in Autocritography

Following Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Awkward posits that autocritography utilizes autobiographical recall, textual criticism, and institutional analysis in a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that bridges the personal, social, and institutional conditions that helped to produce the scholar (7). Wenshu Lee, invoking Awkward, E. Patrick Johnson, and Gust A. Yep as she Kuaers queer theory, utilizes autocritography to create a layered reflection of her marginalities and privileges as she negotiates and turns them into scholarly inquiry (164). Bryant Keith Alexander reflects on his own narrations of intellectual performance and Black identity as autocritography, engaging what D. Soyini Madison calls the performance of possibility (Alexander 16). I employ autocritography as symbiosis of the rhetorical and autoethnographic in a search for the experiences that shaped my own academic career. I am especially interested in how words find their homes in the re-telling of those experiences to reposition the body and perform memory that highlights oppression and resistance (Pezzullo 231). While the
ethnographic perspective allows the researcher to make visible the ways in which everyday talk reflects community and communicator identities, the rhetorical perspective highlights individuals as choice-making agents and is concerned with how everyday talk and texts influence identity (Tracy 40). Each person’s choices about how to talk build her unique identities, which are dynamic and performative. Using autocritography and rhetorical criticism techniques, I focus on my lived experiences as a model living in St. Louis, and the ways in which my rhetoric alongside the rhetoric of hip-hop and gender influenced my perception of self and others. Drawing on my crafted memories, I am acutely aware, as a self-reflexive gesture, of the ways in which my words influence perception—for both my audience and myself—through different iterations of the same experience as telling and re-telling.

Through the telling and re-telling of problematic memories, the researcher experiences the frustration Dustin Bradley Goltz so eloquently advances. The “I” frustrates the researcher because “I” teases us for not knowing us, pushing we to dialogue with we in a “never-finished relational process” (387). We tell our stories as an “I,” and re-tell them through scholarship, only to reveal that with every re-telling, we know our “I” less and less. As my story progresses through different phases of understanding in my own life, the story itself changes, holding the teller accountable to false renderings, and the reader accountable to discover potential reasons for the different readings that are entrenched in intersectional social structures like sex, class, race, ethnicity, geography, beauty, and so on. As Kristin M. Langellier reminds us, “this is why personal narrative performance is especially crucial to those communities left out of the privileges of dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense” (129). My goals in this essay are to: (1) generate different perceptions and standpoints of the same experience (Conquergood 9); (2) use critical reflexivity to engage my story as a form of resistance and provide a fluid, open text to perform variations and test the limits of certainty (Adams and Holman-Jones 112; Gingrich-Philbrook 297; Madison 32; Pollock 236); and (3) trouble boundaries of binary labels attached to gender, class, sexuality, and race, and the ways in which markers of authenticity, desire, and positionality influence our perceptions of self (Boylorn 180). These practices allow both the researcher and the reader to render new memories, experiences, and the potential for understanding and possibility.

Bernadette Marie Calafell and Shane T. Moreman explicitly state the usefulness of autoethnographic work due to its acknowledgment of subjectivity and the “potential to allow Others to narrate their own experiences as a corrective move against imperialist ethnography” (126). Ironically, they also point to an absence of reflexivity and positionality in scholarship centered upon (absent discussions of) Whiteness (126). It is my hope that this essay pushes against hegemonic ways of theorizing in performative research; thus I rely on the rhetorical to perform specific forms of linguistic reflexivity as well as autocritography to make clear the social, political, and cultural forces that defined me—not only throughout the experiences laced in these pages as I lived them, but also throughout my journey into my own scholarship because of them.
Another charge against persons of color using performative writing is the move toward categorizing such work as narcissistic naval gazing (Calafell and Moreman 124–25). Specifically in theorizing about sexuality, critical use of the “I” and the embodiment of experience is germane to fostering new ways of understanding the dynamic intersections of sexual behavior. As Elizabeth Bell warns us in her call for heterosexual feminists in performance studies to problematize sex, scholars conducting sex research leave out the personal (207). To pay “such brave attention” to personal sexualities is to partake in “liberatory technologies of self-crafting and world fashioning” (187).

This essay responds to Bell’s invitation by presenting a personal account of sexuality lived by a non-heterosexual woman of color. I answer Calafell and Moreman’s call by engaging the “I” for the sake of theorizing lived experiences and by refusing to make correlations to Whiteness (125). I also enter into the positionality and reflexivity work required of such dense personal and political investigation so deeply entrenched in a politicized history that it is indeed laborious, painful, and self-implicating (Jones 124). My goals here are to trouble boundaries of gender and sexuality by telling and re-telling my experience on the set of Nelly’s “Country Grammar (Hot Shit)” music video shoot alongside my anthem at the time, Jay-Z and Pharell’s “I Just Wanna Love You (Give It 2 Me).” I hope to illuminate how bodies move between and beyond boundaries established by language due to the intersectional properties of our identities.

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Four old-school, classic cars filled the width of the street. Behind, between, and around the cars, from infants to seniors, sat thousands of primarily African American people with a few White people sprinkled among them, none of whom were paid to be there. They loved Nelly and the St. Lunatics. They wanted to be in the first major music video coming out of North St. Louis. Even though we three principals were the only paid participants, we were herded into the crowd like everyone else. No longer protected by the windowless walls, the bodyguards, or the possibility of this being a nice shoot; we were exposed and vulnerable. The production assistants ushered us between the two middle cars, front and center, and told the other twenty or so girls to fill the space behind and around us. We were told to dance. So simple an action. Just dance. They played Nelly’s music, rolled tape, and the mania started.

Men began taunting us. Shake that ass, hoe. Damn that pussy fine, I wonder what it taste like. Aye girl, let me taste your pussy. I never felt more degraded, shamed, exposed, unprotected, and dirty in my life. I tried to ignore the shouts. I told myself they were not talking to me, but to the other girls who did not seem to mind as they danced harder, or flirted back with the crowd. The girls who danced the hardest were able to dance solo for a panning camera in front of all four cars. Girls pushed and shoved to get to the front, hoping to get selected to be one of the soloists. As a principal, I was supposed to be one of those girls by default. I quietly shifted behind the other girls, telling them to step in front of me. They looked perplexed, as if I was giving up the opportunity of a lifetime. The directors kept pushing the other girls back, bringing me and the other two principals forward. Every time they signaled for
us to move forward, I would quietly reposition myself backward. At one point, I was called out to get on top of the hood of a car. I was terrified. I did not want to be the hypersexual hoe dancing for money on the top of a low-rider. Fortunately, they did not ask for that. I just sat and bobbed my head to the beat as if I could not hear the shouts a mere ten feet behind me. Damn them bitches fine. Aye girl, I'll eat yo pussy you so fine. I would fuck one of them bitches right now.

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Portrayals of Black women as stereotypical matriarchs, welfare recipients, mammies, and jezebels have been essential to maintaining hegemonic systems of power and domination over Black women’s bodies. “African American women inhabit a sex/gender hierarchy in which inequalities of race and social class have been sexualized” (Collins 165). At the institutional and interpersonal level, the domination exerted over women’s bodies by men can be evidenced in hip-hop music videos, the life of the video vixen, and the reduction of Saartjie Baartman—or the Hottentaut Venus—to her sexual anatomy, which clearly defined a future era for Black women at the intersections of skin (Black), sexuality (heterosexual), and gender roles (pleasure giver). The vixen and the Venus together reveal the contested presence, and more often, absence, of the Black woman’s body in history. Harvey Young questions the absence of Baartman, wondering why there are so many sources concerning her history even though her body and voice are invisible (132). In his analysis of contemporary plays dedicated to her story, he recalls how both the men who captured and subjugated Baartman as well as the playwrights and directors who re-tell her story continue to reduce her body to sexual performance while primarily White audiences pay to see her otherness exhibited (132). This type of gazing and sexual representation continues in the music industry.

Literature on video vixens, hoes, and porn stars abounds. According to Christopher Kendalls, Black women have long been portrayed as the vixen—loose, dangerous, greedy, and morally corrupt—regardless of the director being male or female. Tricia Rose reveals more complexity, suggesting that complicity and the ability to counteract negative stereotypes occur throughout the history of Black women in music videos (169). Using artists like Queen Latifah and her desire to depict Black women positively, Imani Perry supports Rose’s position, offering potentially new ways of being, living, and understanding our roles in American society (95). However, none of these depictions are mutually exclusive or independent. Some women participate in legitimizing stereotypes of female sexual objectification by claiming to be bad bitches or using pseudonyms like “Superhead” and “Queen B,” while purposefully discussing the trauma, ills, and power associated with such moves and branding. Perry suggests that one’s ability to navigate cultural terrain previously patrolled by men indicates how the landscape of hip-hop music videos has changed over time, resulting in new discursive, cultural, and physical spaces (155). While I can only speak for myself and my own experiences, I, too, wonder, like Rose and Perry, about the complexity of women’s bodies, voices, and presence in hip-hop, and the ways intersectionality and internalization change our reactions to particular experiences in which hip-hop serves as the soundtrack.
I imagine that for some women penetrating the hip-hop scene, being a video vixen was about resistance and wanting to be sexual, powerful, and commanding without having to be labeled, stereotyped, or judged. That was the case with my body and mind. It is a sexual body, not in a stereotypical way, but in a way that suggests I am human and have biological and socialized desires. I like to give and receive pleasure, and I am critical of those moments that bend my desire to fit non-normative positions, as well as question my desire, as if it is wrong. One such moment that warrants exploration of this type of resistance occurs when consuming artists such as Jay-Z. While Jonathan W. Gray coded Jay-Z’s lyrics as positioning women as mindless consumers and denied a complex rendering of intimacy between heterosexual Black men and women (410), I argue that hip-hop occupies a specific place for some youth. As a 19-year-old woman, I gravitated to Jay-Z. His lyrical anthems and bass lines spoke to my mind and body on several levels.

In October 2000, Jay-Z and Pharell’s “I Just Wanna Love You (Give It 2 Me)” hit the airwaves. The moment I heard the line “can’t keep her little model hands off me,” my body became a part of the music. The same girl desiring desire because of a Card and Beyoncé music video was satisfied. Jay-Z liked models. He rapped about them, expressed his attraction to their bodies. “Little model hands” became my entrée and my signature move. My dance partner, also known as my object of desire and, by default, my desiree, morphed into my Jay-Z as I would rub my hands and fingers seductively along his/her body on the dance floor, securing my place in the sexualized spaces of hip-hop, my place in their club experience, and my affirmation of privilege, even in my own imagination. I am model, hear me roar. “I Just Wanna Love You (Give It 2 Me)” became my anthem. The lyrics exuded so much sexuality and desire I could not help but feel powerful and vulnerable simultaneously. I was far from mindless as I consumed the lyrics and developed into the sexually ravenous person I can be at times. The way I internalized the lyrics was more important than the lyrics themselves.

I’m a hustler baby
I just want you to know
It ain’t where I been, but where I’m about to go
Now I just want to love you
And be who I am
And with all this cash
You can forget your man
Now give it to me. (Jay-Z and Pharell)

Jay-Z persuades his consumers—those who want to be in his position, and those who want to give it to him—that he is the hustler, slanging words for cash and turning hooks into profit and desire. He stakes claim to being himself, all the time, loving those who desire him, and investing in his own swag. These lyrics become a
blueprint for sex as architecture, and ooze powers within the walls of language. I listened to these lyrics not as the pleasure seeker, but as the boss, the hustler, the woman with enough swag to persuade others she could make them forget their partners. I was her. It was not about being a passive or mindless consumer, but about recognizing the swag surging through my body and feeling powerful.

The same song also made me vulnerable. The lyrics from the verse put me in the position of the desired. The girl who knew she could make a wo/man forget her/his own life for four minutes and want to propose in the middle of the club dance floor. Liquor and the lyrics of a party scene can get a person open, uninhibited, ready. “When the Remi’s in the system/ain’t no tellin’ will I f**k ’em will I diss ’em/that’s what they be yellin’” (Jay-Z and Pharell). I found my body in the club environment, “Drunk off Crist’, mami on E/Can’t keep her little model hands off me” (Jay-Z and Pharell). I was that model, literally, molding my fingers around the muscular chests of the boys, the buoyant breasts of the girls, donning my California fashion, feeling beautiful, desired, wanted. I drank the nectar from 300-dollar bottles of store-bought liquor as if it were ambrosia. I moved my hips and ass to the melodies and watched their eyes watching, shifting from left to right, like a tennis match sans balls. I made them wish they had never met me; I complicated things by stirring a forbidden desire. I watched the boys and girls of the club pretend to be “stingy with dinero” at first, then quickly move into a different mode. “F**k it, I might wife you and buy you nice whips” (Jay-Z and Pharell). In this verse, I become the winner. The woman with just the right moves, just the right taste, just the right narrative to win his heart or her cash flow. It was all a game. What can I do to get the promise in one night at the club? And promises I got. Those promises were souvenirs of my own desirability, and I collected. I could get men and women to shift from seeing my body as mass property, something to be used and discarded, one worth “zip, zero” to “f**k it, I might wife you and buy you nice whips.” One worthy of being held up, and never let down.

What Gray fails to address in his analysis is the space within the lyrics to queer gender, race, and sexuality. I was the model with the little model hands. Jay-Z was singing to me. He made me feel sexy, like an agent of my sexuality. I also sang the chorus, as if I was one of the boys/boiz: on the prowl, exercising my power to choose and perform sex. This entire system is complex. We cannot assume that misogynistic lyrics do not have a place in the lives and mentalities of women as agents, nor should we ignore the fact that gender is fluid. Women are not just passive consumers of media; sometimes we use and exploit men and other women in the same fashion that hip-hop exploits us. By exposing the intersections of critical consumption, we bring to the light the dynamic ways our intersectional identities interact with media.

Desire

A game played by pawns, qings, and kweens alike.

Shuffling social currency to the beat of a snare

Hoping someone with a need will take notice,

latch on, bat his eyes, beat on her chest
Engage you.

Desire.

knows no language, no boundaries, no class, no race.

Desire.

It only knows bodies, heat, passion, lust.

It is the desiring body that allows her biases to root.

If only the desiree knew and could be more careful, she wouldn’t have her feelings hurt when the person holding the power chose to deny versus pursue.

I remember watching Jay-Z and Pharell’s music video for the first time. A girl with voluptuous breasts in an A-tank—also known as a “wife beater”—and cut off shorts, and with a short haircut danced seductively on a kitchen counter. There was something so mesmerizing about her performance of sexuality. I wanted her, I wanted to be her, I wanted to be in her. She was powerful, drawing the attention of men and women across the globe, even Jay-Z. The emerging critical scholar in me took note of her place. She was in the kitchen of a million-dollar home, but she did not clean, wash, or cook. She repurposed that space as her stage, confronting what we know about hegemonic femininity in her shirt made for men to wear under button ups, with her boyish haircut during a time when short, natural hair was not as popular for Black women, embracing her sexuality unapologetically. This woman, in her “wife beater,” repurposed power from a space of sexual performativity. She was no victim of sexual or domestic violence; instead, she toyed with her gazers directly, invoking a masculine aura while wielding the power of the P-U-S-S-Y. Her image stirred so many questions. Is it okay to be on display gyrating on a kitchen countertop? Does this position my body as one to be consumed in this way? It is okay if I am okay with that? Cultural memory tells us media designated the Black female body as one of primitive, uncontrollable, undesirable sexuality. I wonder if we believed it so much that we became sexual recluses. Do we deny ourselves the moment to be vulnerable and sexual in public? Do we allow ourselves to feel the eyes of others watching and parading our bodies without feeling like we are being controlled? Can we create a counter-memory that creates space for Black women to be both respectable and sexual? Where did we go wrong? Perhaps when culture coined the phrase, a lady in the streets, a freak in the sheets, we rendered the Black woman’s sexuality invisible. We put her in her place. Hip-hop helps me unleash her. The perceived private space of the bedroom is no place for a work of art that can and perhaps should exist in multiple spaces. Problems arise when we choose to put our sexuality on display in front of people who do not share the same critical view of sexuality as we do. The end results can be devastating.

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We danced on the set for over three hours. Eventually, they hauled us girls back in. I quietly returned the clothes and left the scene with my head down. I headed home feeling different emotions. Shame and blame for putting myself in that situation.
Anger for being treated as a second-class citizen. Pity for the women who were okay with it. Violent toward the men who insulted us.

Because so many people attended the video shoot, cops blocked off several streets and kept people away from the set. I was determined to get out of the area. Searching for an exit, not an entrance, I slid fluidly between a cop car and the sidewalk. As if I were some random groupie trying to get a good look at Nelly himself, the cop yelled at me, “get your ass out of here.” I broke down. Men were bad people. Even the cop trained to protect me had turned on my female body. He was yet another person telling me to do something with my ass. I lost it. I laid in bed for days, depressed, as the truth of my experience began to set in, and the intersections of my identity began to collide.

Intersectionality

Ange-Marie Hancock defines intersectionality as “both the normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research… that considers the interaction of race, gender, class, and other organizing structures of society a key component influencing political access, equality and the potential for any form of justice” (75). Kimberlé Crenshaw sketches the qualitative differences between women’s experiences with sexual assault and domestic abuse across intersections of race, gender, and class. What Crenshaw’s work contributes to communication scholarship is a delineation of the multiple and overlapping ways in which bodies not only perform as political entities through discourse, but also endure the systematic attempts to maintain power through representation, politics, and institutions. The labels attached to our bodies mimic more than arbitrary words designed to highlight difference; they also have the ability to (re)enforce and challenge power structures as divisive systems of oppression. Those divisive systems of oppression enter our own messy intersectional identities, forcing us to question the categories assigned to us (and avowed) on the basis of religion, gender, race, class, sexuality, geographic location, body type, beauty, education, ability, etcetera. My own identities overlap and interact in different ways depending on where I stand, what I am doing, and what other bodies accompany my own. Within the confines of this analysis, the most salient identities intersect at gender, race, class, desire, beauty, and education. I wanted to be desired, but at what expense? I wanted to believe I was better than the other women on the set. That is evident in the way I choose to tell the story. The rhetoric of my experience, the excuses, the delineations between clothing price, style, hair, makeup, body type, skin color, and education level, show my own normative hierarchies. Certain things become highlighted by way of me saving myself from myself. The story I share above is a testament to the way rhetoric works. We tell stories that are beneficial to us, sometimes changing the details, however minutely, to serve a higher purpose.

I fought with myself at the intersections of race, sexuality, and education. Learning about bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Marsha Houston, Olga Davis, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, I felt guilty for wanting to be desired and for positioning my body alongside
cars designed for consumption. My Black female body was undoing centuries of social justice work. I should have known better. Instead of standing up for myself and interrogating the messy intersections of identity, I cowered. I performed a lie. I created a narrative that would help emancipate me from the guilt of respectability politics. It was not until I learned to navigate the intersections of sexuality as a beautiful, Black femwomanist that I could even tell myself the real story. Instead, I performed Stanly Aronowitz and Henry Giroux’s notion of counter-memory, reorienting myself to a story in a way that helped me save face (124). Here, I share with you the truth. I lied. I meant to lie. It was deliberate. Even as my story changes in each telling, over time, with consciousness and in context, my tellings are always strategic. And as Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson contend, “we can interrogate the strategic function of performing narrative by comparing the distribution of communication relations in the story with the distribution of communication relations in the telling of it” (28).

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The first time I saw the music video for Case’s “Happily Ever After” (Henderson and Woodard), I wanted to be in a music video, but the intersections of identity did not afford me that opportunity. I was not rich, superstar, beauty symbol Beyoncé. I was a middle-class girl standing at an intersection in North St. Louis. Regardless of those differences, I wanted her dream. Something about being sexy, a woman, fine, and in that moment, appealed to me. So when my agency called me in for an audition, I gladly went.

Lie #1: I did not receive a phonecall to be in the video, nor did I feel pressure from my casting agency to perform.

Instead, I received a phonecall about an audition for a music video. In a room full of St. Lunatics, I was told to state my name and then dance. I dropped it like it’s hot. I danced from age 3 to 17, so I knew how to move, shake, and create earthquakes with my hips, thighs, and ass. I turned around to give them a front-row seat to my sexuality. Even though I turned around because it was harder to face them and watch them watch me, I wanted them to watch me. And as they cheered and enjoyed the scene, casting me as one of three principals, I felt accomplished. I was a star—even if only for a brief moment—in many of their fantasies. I felt validated.

When I got the phonecall from my agent saying I had booked the job, she told me she could not believe I could shake it like that. She—a 30-something, chubby White woman who wore too much makeup and tried to dress like a teenager—further validated my sexuality. And I needed that. I needed to feel beautiful, desirable, sexual.

Me auditioning and not being forced changes everything.

My willingness to audition on camera changes everything.

This re-telling of the story shows my own agency in creating the situation, my participation as a consumer of hip-hop’s sexuality and desire, and my vulnerability as a Black woman seeking validation from those in the center. Getting cast meant my desire to be desired would be satisfied. But that is not what happened. Who is doing
the desiring matters. I placed myself in a compromising position because I wanted a hetero-patriarchal story to come true, but did not think about the intersectional differences between the two scenarios.

Nelly was a new artist, with a small budget, and desire for street credentials. Nelly was a rapper and a product of the hip-hop generation that changed the game for female bodies in music videos. It was due process to hire a few models and strategically place them among women who volunteered their time until you could afford to pay everyone. In that moment, the three of us blended in with everyone else.

Lie #2: I was not different. I created a narrative to highlight the differences I constructed rhetorically in my head to feel better about my presence on set. As long as I was not one of them, I did not have to hold myself accountable to the roles ascribed to my body by the shouting fans.

I created the lie for myself and anyone who found out about my presence in that video to shield my fragile identity from being one of those video hoes. I did not know how to talk about my sexuality in an empowering way that countered hegemonic constructions of hypersexuality at the intersection of race. I did not know how to be sexual and scholarly. In re-telling the story, I realize how the language of being a paid principal comforted me and legitimized my participation. I was not some girl from the inner city trying to be in a music video. I was chosen by the artist himself and paid. Even if it was only $300, it separated me from the video hoes who were the targets for those comments. Ironically, is that not the definition of a hoe? One who sells his or her body for cash? The other women were having fun, flirting with the audience, wanting to be there. They were rejoicing in their city and local celebrity’s newfound fame. I did not want to be there. I was ashamed, afraid, and sick. I put myself in jeopardy for money. Unfortunately, I did not know how to tell that story. Instead, I performed a counter-memory of victimization—my agency made me do it. As I work through the counter-memory and toward what Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas calls (re)memory, or putting the narrative back together (26), I begin answering some of my own questions. What does it mean to be sexy? To want to gyrate on a kitchen countertop? Can I enjoy eyes watching my body without feeling like I am being controlled? Like I am a slave to hip-hop fantasies? Can they just be my fantasies stemming from a place of human desire?

In Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley’s essay on the politics of respectability and Black women’s negotiations of sexuality, she proclaims that the “articulation of class and sexuality at the intersections of race and gender provides a lens of interpretation that does not simply celebrate a discourse as resistant, but also seeks out the manner in which it disciplines and controls” (256). We police bodies that do not appear to be “good,” thus, the answer to the aforementioned questions appears to be no. Being sexy means being “bad,” which is then pitted against being “good,” and the policing of bodies emerges. In an attempt to be good, respectable women instead of bad, sexual women, not only do we devalue all women’s bodies that assume some level of sexual performance, we also justify the ill treatment toward those women’s bodies.
Further, we deny Black women the space to be both good and sexual, as if they are mutually exclusive.

I remember talking to a peer at the university I attended a week or so after filming the music video. Shame and regret still lingering heavily on my heart, I confided in her how I felt that day when the men on the set taunted us with profane language. Her response, “you should have known better; it’s a music video.” To justify the men’s behavior according to political respectability is to shame my body for wanting to be sexual, to hold my body accountable for what other bodies do to insult it and commit violence upon it, and to ignore the assailants as if their behavior is warranted. This results in what Reid-Brinkley calls “the queen vs. ho dialectic,” which “functions to create a boundary to exclude from ‘safe spaces’ those black women who choose to perform inappropriate black femininity” (252). In reality, however, it does not matter how much one respects him/herself. There is no safe space free of the ways society polices and commits violent acts upon our bodies because we are “good” Black people. History proves that whistling Vivaldi does not mean your body will be respected (Steele; Cottom). We do not need to hide, clean up, or make representable our sexuality. We only need to be who we are. I am learning to unleash the sexual woman in me, unapologetically, one essay at a time, through productive counter-memories and re-membering.

Re-claiming and Counter(re)Memory

Phaedra C. Pezzullo, in her exploration of toxic tours as cultural performance, delineates the negotiation of the politics of memory, absence and presence, and remembering and forgetting. She asks us, what has been lost? Whose memory must be told (246)? While Pezzullo is less interested in individual memories and more concerned with cultural memories entangled in cultural production, I argue that my individual memory is tangled in an extremely popular cultural memory archived in digital space. A YouTube video with millions of views and hundreds of thousands of comments works as a site of cultural memory that, once recalled, prompts me to create a counter-memory due to the heavily oppressive comments dynamically intertwined in the world of digital archives. These sites as communal spaces so wrought with subjugation compelled me to re-tell and offer the real experience. Similar to Rachel Hall’s contestation of the real Patty Hearst, the idea that we fashion what we want from photographs, memories, and/or experience signifies a rhetorical experience that, within the element of choice, we can make clear the social, political, and cultural elements surrounding the experience (367). Thus, as I sit down and create this “cultural performance to politicize memory… and denaturalize how we recall history for rhetorical purpose,” I too am rebuilding community for all of the women and men implicated in this text (Pezzullo 228): The vixens, the sexually free, those who have learned to free themselves from the politics of respectability, and those still bound by its piercing claws. I hope to make visible my own identity negotiations about what to tell, how to tell it, and how the rhetoric of representations reinvents, re-memories, and
pushes against that which has already been told and archived in digital space. I hope to do what Bernadette Marie Calafell (53) and Young (135) refer to as creating future.

In creating future, I think of the contested space between fiction and truth as a question of memory, or a space to perform the tension of oppression and resistance (Pezzullo 231). “Like the dialectical movement between presence and absence, remembering and forgetting history are interlinked politically” (231). Tensions rub amid what changed between the moments of truth-telling and fiction-telling, the subtle and not-so-subtle differences in rhetoric, and the conscious decision to stop telling the fictitious account as the sole account and instead tell it alongside the truth. The fiction-telling is a political performance rooted in respectability. The fiction-telling alongside the truth-telling is a self-reflexive performance that creates space for my body to be. The self-reflexive performance then is the critical moment of performing counter-memory and what it means for memories, re-memories, and counter-memories to coexist. As evidenced in this re-telling, there is much to unpack within the lines of difference across those narratives. In the lies and/or truths of telling and re-telling is where the meat of self-reflexivity exists.

In my own re-telling, I begin and end with my body and my body’s responses—emotional and otherwise—to a hostile sexual environment. To tell the simple story of female objectification in hip-hop would undermine my body’s position and place within the history of hip-hop, Black women’s sexuality, and desire. My body was an active participant. To re-tell the story, both versions, is to allow the body to perform, remember, and heal. As Floyd-Thomas reminds us, “in writing her story, the author creates a space where others are called to participate, sharing in the re-memory process (recovering what was once known) by re-membering (bringing together that which has been taken or torn apart)” (26). My process involved putting my own body on display, allowing that body to work through the trauma, and moving beyond and within that story as a form of self-emancipation. To re-memory that experience is to free my body from the shackles of historical sexuality and my own acceptance of that history. My disgust with sexual objectification did not fall out of the sky; politics of respectability placed it in my lap seductively. To remember that experience through truth-telling is to re-claim and acknowledge the layers of experience.

As Young notes:

Re-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one. The prefix tells us this. To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your possession. It is to remain aware of its previous “claims” even as you articulate your own. It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future. (135)

Calafell sustains Young’s position when she writes, “[i]n the performance or reembodiment of memory, not only are present and past conditions affected, but in this telling the future is opened” (53). My counter-memory is a form of re-claiming. Both stories exist rhetorically side-by-side on the page and in language, and together, tell a story of sexual reclamation as performance. Channeling Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta
Sternbach, Calafell reminds us that recovering the past activates ethnic memory that, once evoked, projects itself in future performance (53). This process creates a future in that it allows my body to exist as the sexual body it is, fashioned with possibility and desire. As I perform reinvention (Pezzullo 229), I create future (Young 135; Calafell 53).

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At every university I work for, my short, secret life as a video vixen comes to light. Students find out. They think it is cool. I used to tell the fictitious account to save face. But as a woman who finally understands her sexuality, I am learning to embrace this experience as a teachable moment with which to interrogate the complexities of intersectional identity. Now, I tell both the fictitious account and the truth side-by-side, uncovering and performing the tensions of what it means to be oppressed yet resist.

This story unpacks some of the intersections we walk every day as we negotiate what it means to be us. The policing of bodies has changed how we see and understand our own bodies. As Mireille Miller-Young contends:

Implicit critiques of [Black women’s sexual autonomy] are bound up in assumptions that it is, first, morally wrong for a woman to use her sexuality as a commodity (because it is sacred or only to be given as a “gift” in the context of love, romance, or heterosexual marriage, for example) and, second, that because of the history of racialized sexual coercion of black women by legal and economic institutions in the Americas, black women should protect their sexualities from the exploitations of the marketplace. (282)

Our bodies are metaphorically tied to histories, politics, and social stigmas that not only render us silent and undesirable as sexual beings, but also cast us as hypersexual and uncontrollable should we choose to be sexual anyway. We stand at a fork in the road, with only two unhealthy options. It is no wonder that so many Black women I know go from being told not to have sex—to keep their legs closed and books open—to being asked when they are going to get married and have babies. Where is the section in the middle wherein she learns to explore her sexuality and engage her moans? I applaud those women who stand up for what they believe despite society telling us to sit down, hide, be ladies. I applaud those women who clear their own paths, acknowledging that their sexualities are beautiful, remarkable, and meant to be celebrated, highlighted, coveted, shared, embraced. I agree with Miller-Young when she writes that “the cultural work of non-conformity to normalizing and oppressive social structures must be analyzed as daily tactics of agency and autonomy, through which pleasure is a political act of reclamation in the context of social annihilation” (285). It is up to us to navigate the intersections of our sexuality, and to find productivity in the sometimes perverse (Shimizu 26), sometimes deviant (Cohen 90), sometimes explicit (Miller-Young 261), but always our own, sexual exploration, conviction, and performance so that we can (re) write, (re)imagine, and (re)think our desires. So while this essay does not offer concrete answers in terms of acceptability, desire, or respectability, the stories begin to reveal how culture and power shape our experiences, and the ways in which the re-telling and re-membering of those experiences help us navigate our own intersections.
Desire Completá

What does it mean to be me?
It means being a sexually healthy
Black woman with a sexual appetite coursing through her veins
and a willingness to satisfy her desires
It means being at peace with her phenomenal hips
swaying to the rhythm of an 808
and chanting alongside the drum line with nothing on her mind
but
lust
at times
it means enjoying exploring her own moans
without worrying if someone can hear her.
It means forgiving herself for needing a role model and instead
looking to her own desire
because paths don’t exist with her name inscribed just yet
It means never hiding
or fearing control.
Control is a gift to be given,
sometimes…
not a state of mind.
It means being a sexual scholar, because those identities can and do coexist
It means she can only be her, in her own center,
Complete.
A nucleus of sexuality, race, intellect, skin, politics, place, history, memory
Unapologetically.

Notes
[1] The title for this text was inspired by two entities, the title of Karrine Steffans’s book about being a professional video model, as well as Bryant Keith Alexander’s notion of confessional tale as scholarly inquiry.
[2] I changed the names of both models to ensure anonymity.
[4] I channel Gloria Anzaldúa and her work on history, body, and mestiza identity when I write completá and of the body as a nucleus.
Works Cited


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