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“Black Americans and HIV/AIDS in Popular Media” Conforming to The Politics of Respectability

Alisha Lynn Menzies

University of South Florida, amenzies@mail.usf.edu

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“Black Americans and HIV/AIDS in Popular Media”

Conforming to The Politics of Respectability

by

Alisha L. Menzies

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Rachel E. Dubrofsky, Ph.D.
Aisha Durham, Ph.D.
Ambar Basu, Ph.D.
Sara Crawley, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate dissertation work to my mother and father. Your passion and dedication to nurturing my education has driven me to be the scholar that I am today. The sacrifices my parents made throughout this journey will live within me as a constant reminder of the way love should look. To my mother Frances Menzies, your laughter and wisdom are two things I cherish most in life. My appreciation for you is magnified in that your lighting of my path never faded, even as the light in your life was dimmed with the passing of my father Robert R. Menzies. Dad, this work stands as my most precious memorial to you. Thank you for always believing in me, I miss you every day.

Next, I dedicate this dissertation to my two amazing, courageous, and loving sisters, Ashlee and Veronica. Ashlee you have been my partner in crime, my confidant, and my biggest cheerleader. In my most challenging times, I always knew you were in my corner. Thanks for your quick wit and timely conversations that always kept me uplifted and motivated. I love you sister.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines narratives about racialized gender, sexuality, and class through media images of black Americans with HIV/AIDS. Through textual analysis of media sites featuring HIV/AIDS and blackness (*The Announcement*, *Precious*, and Marvelyn Brown's website, www.marvelynbrown.com), this project analyzes how the politics of respectability—a set of precepts that govern how black men and women can present themselves in public spaces to align with white ideals of gender and sexuality—construct black people in media representations of HIV/AIDS. This work examines how respectability politics deployed in media representations of HIV/AIDS and black Americans reclaim notions of acceptable black sexuality by reifying age-old stereotypes of black masculinity femininity. I argue that the goal of respectability politics in countering anti-blackness through limited parameters for acceptable presentations of racialized gender and sexuality continue to challenge and complicate media representations of HIV/AIDS and black Americans.

INTRODUCTION:

BLACK BODIES AND HIV/AIDS

On Oct. 7, 2010, I settled into my couch to watch an episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* entitled, “Why She Sued her Husband for 12 million Dollars and Won.” The show opened to Bridget Gordon telling the story of her fairy tale romance with her handsome and successful husband. Gordon was a beautiful, poised black woman living the American dream, with an ivy league degree a successful high powered corporate career. After all her success she met the man of her dreams. Gordon describes the love she felt for her husband, “my wedding day was a celebration, we wanted everyone to feel the love that we shared for each other” (Oprah.com.). However, her perfect world came crashing down when she became mysteriously ill immediately after coming home from their magical honeymoon. After a battery of medical tests, Bridget received a devastating diagnosis—she had contracted the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (hereafter HIV/AIDS). She could not figure out why, because the only unprotected sex she ever had was with her husband. Months later, Bridget discovered she contracted the virus from her husband who was secretly sleeping with her and men simultaneously. In an unprecedented California Supreme court civil case, Gordon sued her now ex-husband for 12.5 million dollars and won. While Oprah focused on the scandalous nature of Bridget’s husband’s “down low” sexual behavior, I was not shocked when Gordon revealed her husband’s supposed deceptive behavior. The “down low” (DL) refers to black men who have hidden sexual relationships with other men while heterosexual and often married or in relationships with women (McCune, 2008; Weekley, 2015). Media coverage of the down low is nothing new, discussions about black men on the down

low have appeared in several media outlets: in the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *The Today Show*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and J.L. King's bestselling book, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of Straight Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (McCune, 2008; Weekley, 2015). Popular down low discourses perpetuate many widely accepted assumptions about HIV/AIDS and black women and men. For example, popular media sources report black men on the down low serve as "bridges" for HIV from gay men to heterosexual women, and this explains the high rates of HIV for black heterosexual women (Weekley, 2015, p. 180). While there is little epidemiological evidence to support this claim, popular media still relies on the down low to explain HIV/AIDS in the black community (Cohen, 1999; McCune, 2008; Weekley, 2015). Gordon's story reflects the same timeworn down low narrative. However, the pivotal moment in the episode is when Oprah attempts to console Bridget with encouraging words and support. Viewers watch Oprah sit in silence while Bridget tells her story. When she finishes, Oprah compliments Bridget on how healthy she looks and leans in to say: "I know this seems like a burden, I could not even imagine, but you look at people like Magic Johnson, and realize you can live a long healthy life, he shows us ..." (Oprah.com), Bridget stops Oprah midsentence and states:

Let me stop you right there, Magic Johnson can have any doctor, any medication in the world. He has people who cook for him, who clean for him. Yes, people can live with it, but it is not simple like everybody says. You look online it looks like oh you just take some medicine, it's not that simple, the medicine is wretched...now I am hot, now you have pissed me off.

Oprah then goes to a commercial break.

This media moment was riveting to me. Besides the fact that we rarely, if ever, see guests correct or interrupt Oprah, Gordon's indignation put on display a visceral-seeming reaction from

an HIV positive black woman to having her lived experience misrepresented. Here, we see Gordon divulge how HIV/AIDS impacted her career, family relationships, and ended her marriage. In response, Oprah equates Gordon's life to Magic Johnson's success living with HIV; even though Oprah hears Gordon's story first hand, she still does not acknowledge Gordon's individual HIV/AIDS narrative. Gordon's confrontation with Oprah is noteworthy because it creates a moment for viewers to think about HIV/AIDS, black Americans, and representation. Reflecting on the interaction between Bridget and Oprah, I am reminded of a quote by Stuart Hall (1992): "the question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of" (p. 71). Hall demands that we consider the urgent issue of who is not discussed in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Oprah's interview with Gordon illustrates that despite the plethora of different people living with HIV/AIDS, popular culture presents particular ideas about what HIV/AIDS looks like and sounds like in the United States. Now, more than thirty years after discovering HIV/AIDS, I take up the poignant question, when we are talking about HIV/AIDS, who are we talking about?

As a heterosexual black woman and 80s baby, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the black community has always been part of my understanding of my cultural identity. Although media attention at given points in time in the epidemic made HIV/AIDS feel extremely close and simultaneously distant to my lived experiences. What I do know is that the rates of HIV/AIDS infections among black Americans both bewilder and anger me. They also frighten me. It is from this socio-historical standpoint that I conduct my critical examination. Working within the field of black feminist scholarship and critical media studies this project extends Hall's original question to consider *how* individuals are represented in media images of HIV/AIDS. Media representations

of HIV/AIDS reveal the different popular ideals about HIV/AIDS in the United States. Moreover, media representations animate the largely unspoken ideology that surrounds HIV/AIDS—which bodies are impacted by HIV/AIDS, notions of sexual identity, and the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. Beyond thinking about who is discussed in conversations of HIV/AIDS, I am interested in how individuals are presented so we can consider the implications for representations of HIV/AIDS for certain bodies. This dissertation examines the ways black Americans are constructed in the HIV/AIDS epidemic through media representations. Its primary investment is to give attention to the ways in which the politics of respectability—a set of precepts that govern how black men and women can present themselves in public spaces to align with white ideals of gender and sexuality—construct black bodies in presentations of HIV/AIDS. I argue respectability politics’ practice of countering anti-blackness through limited parameters for acceptable presentations of racialized gender and sexuality impact representations of HIV/AIDS and black Americans in U.S. culture.

Talking About HIV/AIDS= Talking about Black Sexuality and Gender

Paula Treichler (1999) describes HIV/AIDS as an “epidemic of signification” (p. 111), because HIV/AIDS produces a plethora of subjects and identities, and substantial meanings that exceed their biomedical significance. In turn, an important aspect in discussing media representations of HIV/AIDS and black men and women is the significance of racialized stereotypes of gender and sexuality for these depictions. A focus of black feminist theory scholarship (BFT) has involved detailing the histories of white racist presentations of black men and women’s sexuality and the construction of black people as sexually aggressive, promiscuous, hypersexual, oversexed, and endowed with insatiable sexual appetites (Carby, 1992; Collins, 2004;

Griffin, 2015; Hammonds, 1992; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jackson, 2006). BFT scholars argue that notions of promiscuity and excessive sexuality produce contemporary images of black sexuality that shape the way black femininity and masculinity are presented in popular culture. My work is also concerned with the ways media images mirror and reinforce stereotypes of black sexuality, however, I extend the conversation to underline the need to examine the contradictory and complex ways media representations of HIV/AIDS articulate blackness, gender, sexuality, and class. To examine the discourses used in depictions of media representations of black Americans and HIV/AIDS, in this dissertation, I ask: How is HIV/AIDS and blackness constructed through racialized tropes of gender and sexuality in media representations? In what ways do discursive representations specific to black identity govern representations of black bodies and HIV/AIDS?

Scholars across disciplines are doing important critical work analyzing popular discourse about HIV/AIDS and blackness in a variety of U.S. media sites (Cohen, 1999; Cole & Denny, 1994; Collins, 2004; Day, 2013; Hammonds, 1997; Harper, 1996; King, 1993; Weekley, 2010, 2015). According to the scholarship, HIV/AIDS media representations of black men and women portray them within a binary of sexual invisibility and hypervisibility. Early popular media depictions presented HIV/AIDS as a white gay man's disease and rarely discussed black Americans. However, as the epidemic progressed and more epidemiological evidence proved that HIV/AIDS rates were steadily rising among black Americans the media coverage of HIV/AIDS and blackness increased (Hammonds, 1997; King, 1993; Weekley, 2015). As the epidemic progressed rising rates of infection for black Americans resulted in more media coverage of HIV/AIDS and blackness. As a consequence, black men and women became hypervisible in media images of HIV/AIDS in specific ways. For example, HIV/AIDS is presented as a consequence for black women's excessive sexual behavior which makes them "dangerous vectors

of transmission” (Weekley, 2015, p. 182), for their children or they are presented as unwitting victims of black men’s down low sexual behavior. In addition, HIV/AIDS representations equate black men’s sexuality with excessive duplicitous behavior regardless of their sexual identity (Cole and Denny, 1994; Hammonds, 1997; Harper, 1996, McCune, 2014).

In this dissertation, I build upon the work of scholars who contend that representations of black sexuality and gender, as animated in discourses about HIV/AIDS, are steeped in conflicting and complex discourses (Cohen, 1999; Hammonds, 1997; Harper, 1996; Weekley, 2010), by illustrating how the politics of respectability functions as a discourse to resist and reinforce black sexual pathology. As I discuss in Chapter 1, in the context of black American history, respectability politics is a strategy used to align black cultural practices with white middle class normative values and morals. Specifically, performing black respectability demands black people practice and display sexual decorum based on white middle class ideals of sexuality and gender in public spaces to resist and diminish dominant racist stereotypes of black masculinity and femininity (Durham, 2012; Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009; Weekley, 2015). Given the current HIV/AIDS epidemic and black Americans, and respectability politics historical legacy as a social and political strategy of survival for black Americans, I consider if performing respectability presents black men and women as more vulnerable to racist constructions of sexuality and gender in HIV/AIDS media representations. I look for ways to complicate respectability politics to consider possible approaches to challenge the construction of racialized gender and sexuality in HIV/AIDS representations.

For black bodies, the significance of racialized sexuality and gendered class, combined with the stigma of HIV means that representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness are not necessarily associated with black Americans, but with assumptions about black American sexual practices.

More specifically, as discussed in chapter 1, the politics of respectability frames class through the public display of gender decorum and sexual restraint. For black Americans, respectability and by extension class status is significantly based on behavior. While scholarship indicates that black Americans are disproportionately impacted by HIV/AIDS in part due to socioeconomic factors (Bowleg & Raj, 2012; Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, & Tschann, 2013; Cohen, 1999; Dworkin, Fullilove, & Peacock, 2009) media representations of black Americans and HIV/AIDS construct class status through perceived difference in gender and sexual behavior. Thus, while I recognize conventional U.S. standards connect class with economic status and monetary wealth, I interpret class status for black Americans as the cultural performance of respectability. In my media sites, I examine how each individuals' performance of respectability politics represents class status and class differentiation.

Media Sites

This project is the first to present a set of case studies focused exclusively on analyzing media narratives of HIV/AIDS and black bodies in popular culture. At the time of this dissertation, the scholarly discussion about media representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness focuses on Cathy Cohen's (1999) book, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, a comprehensive analysis of the social and political implications of ignoring the HIV/AIDS epidemic in black communities. Cohen examines how black popular magazines including *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Black Enterprise* framed HIV/AIDS and black Americans from 1981-1993. After conducting a thematic analysis, Cohen identifies and analyzes prominent themes each magazine uses to discuss HIV/AIDS and blackness. Cohen notes the magazines construct HIV positive black men and women as innocent of victims in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. She argues that presenting blacks as victims of HIV/AIDS positions

them as deserving of sympathy and support from both dominant white society and the black community by distancing them from stereotypes of excessive black sexuality. A common way the magazines presented black Americans as worthy victims is by connecting their HIV/AIDS narrative to what is referred to as a “come to Jesus moment” (Weekley, 2010, p. 55), in which black men and women reveal their past sexual transgressions or lifestyle choices that lead to them contracting HIV/AIDS. In turn, their gender and sexuality is redefined as acceptable, and readers are invited to understand them as ready to transform their lifestyles despite their HIV/AIDS status. I extend Cohen’s analysis to include media representations of blackness, HIV/AIDS, and respectability politics to examine how the themes of innocence and redemption continue to function in contemporary depictions of black Americans and HIV/AIDS.

As stated, my specific concern is with how media images of HIV/AIDS and black bodies contribute to cultural conversations about racialized gender and sexuality in the United States. My method is primarily critical textual analysis of popular media featuring black Americans diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. When Cohen originally conducted her analysis there was a dearth of popular media narratives of HIV positive black Americans. Despite a continued lack of representation of black bodies living with HIV/AIDS in the media, the sites I draw from span from 1991-2015, which allow for important comparisons as well as for telling and significant contrasts I concentrate on a range of sites that provide access to the ways in which media representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness are constructed in different formats and genres. The primary sites that form the basis of my analysis are a documentary (*The Announcement*), a movie (*Precious*) and a web blog (www.marvelynblogspot.com). Each site is noteworthy for its place within the cultural trajectory of HIV/AIDS representations, and for depicting HIV/AIDS and black lives. However, I recognize that each media site is important for the distinctive ways in which it presents racialized gender and

sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS. I read each representation of HIV/AIDS and blackness as “particular, contingent, and contextual” (Dubrofsky, 2011, p. 2), and consider how each invites viewers to think about racialized gender and sexuality in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

I begin in 1991 because in this year basketball super star Magic Johnson publicly announced he was HIV positive. Scholars in psychology, critical media, cultural studies, and sports sociology have emphasized the importance of Magic Johnson’s 1991 public HIV/AIDS announcement (Cole & Denny, 1994; Harper, 1996; King, 1993; Leonard, & King, 2011). Johnson was the first sports celebrity or well-known public figure to publicly announce his HIV status. As Nelson George states, “to have someone like Magic Johnson announce that he caught the HIV virus changed the dynamic for America because at the time he was the greatest athlete in the world, and when he contracted the virus it just shifted the whole dialogue” (Nelson, 2012). More than 20 years after Johnson’s ground breaking press conference, ESPN film documentary *The Announcement* revisits that significant moment and chronicles Johnson’s life with HIV/AIDS. Because Johnson is the most famous black person living with HIV, *The Announcement’s* documentary style format enables a discussion of how he is perceived as the “HIV hero” (King, 1993, p. 272). I analyze the ways Johnson’s HIV/AIDS narrative continues to resonate with cultural understandings of HIV/AIDS through *The Announcement’s* presentation of Johnson’s heterosexuality and masculinity. Moreover, scholars note the dearth of scholarship focusing on black heterosexual men and representations of HIV/AIDS. (Bowleg, et al., 2015; Bowleg et al., 2013; Bowleg & Raj, 2012; Harper, 1996; McCune, 2014; Neal, 2005; King, 1993; Treichler, 1999). I examine *The Announcement* to aid in filling in that gap.

The back of Marvelyn Brown’s bestselling memoir, *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful and (HIV) Positive* (2008) describes it as: “The surprisingly hopeful story of how a straight, non-

promiscuous, every day girl contracted HIV and how she manages to stay upbeat, inspired, and more positive about life than ever before.” While she does not have the same status celebrity as Johnson, Brown is one of the most known black spokespeople for HIV/AIDS prevention. Brown won a 2007 Emmy Award for Outstanding National PSA for the THINK MTV HIV/AIDS documentary, and her HIV/AIDS story has been featured on *BET*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. In 2007, Brown established www.marvelynbrown.blogspot.com which functions as another component to her HIV/AIDS advocacy work. On her blog, Brown shares her experiences as a black woman living with HIV/AIDS through personal narratives, pictures, poems, and video messages. Brown’s blog is an example of black women’s use of new media to articulate gender and sexuality. As Cruz (2015) notes, “the internet is increasingly becoming an extension of our physical selves, a sphere where we project, present, and represent our physical bodies” (p. 83). Brown’s blog provides an opportunity to consider what it means for a black woman to share her HIV/AIDS narrative when it is framed as speaking directly to the public. Brown’s blog reveals a profound investment in the representation of HIV/AIDS and blackness: Brown’s HIV/AIDS status mediates how she presents her gender and sexuality. Brown’s blog is an important site because it explicitly engages with the politics of respectability in her HIV/AIDS narrative. In turn, I can analyze how respectability functions when it is directly connected to her HIV/AIDS identity.

Released in 2009, *Precious: Based on the Novel by Sapphire*, is the first film exclusively focused on an HIV positive black girl. The film received tremendous critical acclaim, winning two Oscars, three Sundance Film Festival awards, and six NAACP awards (Hirschberg, 2009; IMDb, 2012; NAACP, 2012). Moreover, *Precious*’ controversial subject matter and critical acclaim garnered significant attention in popular culture. For example, in 2010 *Precious* was the most watched film about a teenage girl (IMDb, 2012), and in 2012 hip hop artist Kayne West referenced

the film in his song *Mercy*. While *Precious* is a film that people associate with societal ills: poverty, physical violence, child abuse, education inequality, people do not frame *Precious* as a story about an HIV positive black girl. This makes *Precious* a fruitful site to discuss how media images present social inequalities in ways that mask the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the black population. I also examine *Precious* because the main characters' socioeconomic conditions and familial issues place them outside the normative boundaries of respectability.

A Retrospective in Black and White: A Brief History of HIV/AIDS in the United States

The world changed forever on June 5, 1981, when the Centers for Disease Control published the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) detailing the mysterious death of five gay white men in Los Angeles, CA, from a rare form of pneumonia called pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) (Treichler, 1999, p. 46). Notably, early cases of HIV/AIDS in the United States caused wide spread cultural panic because U.S. media representations framed HIV/AIDS as a sexually exotic and distant African epidemic. As Stillwaggon states, "U.S. news coverage made sweeping generalizations about a pan-African culture of sex as commodity and fertility as a duty to one's ancestors" (2001). For example, in the early 1980s, U.S. news coverage of AIDS in Africa centered on stories discussing African men and women refusal to use any form of sexual protection because of their cultural and religious beliefs (Patton, 1998). Consequently, when doctors began reporting HIV/AIDS cases in the United States it was a national wake up call. Despite media images that depicted HIV/AIDS as a foreign problem, there was now medical evidence the epidemic was present in the United States.

Over the course of several months, medical professionals in various large metropolitan cities reported similar symptoms and causes of death for gay male patients, which lead to the cases

being linked to gay sexual practices. From the beginning, the CDC discussed and framed the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic as isolated within the gay white male community. as an epidemic isolated within the community of gay white men. Subsequently, HIV/AIDS was presented as no threat to the ‘general population,’ despite doctors and researchers reporting cases of the disease homosexual and heterosexual people of color to the CDC during the first year of the epidemic (Cohen, 1999; Treichler; 1999; Collins, 2004). The disease was informally named Gay Related Immunodeficiency (GRID), which resulted in popular media reinforcing the idea that GRID was a “gay epidemic” (Patton, 1990). However, while most of the medical and popular discourse continued to focus on gay men, researchers soon realized the disease was not gay specific and the CDC renamed GRID “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome” (AIDS) in 1982 (Patton, 1990). Many people recognize the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States as devastating whole communities of middle class gay white men living in large cities. However, it was clear within the first year of the epidemic that black men and women, were part of the growing American HIV/AIDS population. Between 1986 and 1987, the CDC reclassified the AIDS case definition to expand the list of diseases that could determine an AIDS diagnosis (Treichler, 1999; Weekley, 2010). The more inclusive definition resulted in an increase in the number of reported HIV/AIDS cases nationwide. Notably, black Americans represented the highest increase in HIV/AIDS cases, growing from 24% to 36% of the total AIDS cases reported in the United States (CDC, 1988). Thus, the CDC began discussing and targeting blacks as a specific “at risk” population. Notably, in 1996, black Americans (both homosexual and heterosexual) exceeded the portion of white Americans diagnosed and living with HIV/AIDS for the first time (CDC, 2000).

A Snapshot of an Epidemic: HIV/AIDS and Black Americans

The United States will become a place where new HIV infections are rare and when they do occur, every person, regardless of age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic circumstance will have unfettered access to high quality life extending care, free from stigma and discrimination. (“National HIV/AIDS Strategy,” 2010)

The quotation above is from President Barack Obama’s 2010 executive order for the United States’ first comprehensive National HIV/AIDS Strategy. The National HIV/AIDS Strategy is a five-year plan that details priorities and measurable outcomes researched by the Obama administration’s Office of National AIDS Policy (ONAP) for moving the nation forward for a collective national response to addressing and combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. In line with the national initiative, the CDC reports that the overall risk of HIV in the United States has declined to 1 in 99 over a lifetime, in contrast to 1 in 78 in 2005, which is a 19% decrease (CDC, 2016). However, while the overall rates for new infection are declining for Americans, black Americans are disproportionately hardest hit by the HIV epidemic. In February 2016, the CDC released the first study focusing on racial identity as a lifetime risk factor for contracting HIV/AIDS. The statistics for black Americans were staggering; blacks make up the largest share of people living with HIV; surpassing any other race. In addition, the CDC reports that the states with the highest populations of black Americans: of Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas now have the highest rates of new HIV diagnoses and people living with the disease (CDC, 2016). At the end of 2012, an estimated 496,500 black Americans were living with HIV, representing 41% of all Americans living with the virus (CDC, 2016). Moreover, the CDC estimates that at least 14% of black

Americans living with HIV/AIDS do not know they are infected. Moreover, black Americans have the highest lifetime HIV risk, 1 in 20 black men and 1 in 48 black women will contract HIV/AIDS in their lifetime. This is in contrast to the overall HIV infection rate for white men, which stands at 1 in 32 and 1 in 880 for white women. While many statistics for black Americans and HIV/AIDS focus on homosexual black men, the CDC notes, 68% of all HIV/AIDS contracted by heterosexuals among men in 2014 were black men (CDC, 2016).

Medical statistics make clear that HIV/AIDS disproportionately impacts the black population in the United States, however epidemiological statistics and rates only represent a fraction of the picture. The ways that black Americans are presented in relation to HIV/AIDS resonates in popular culture because these representations frame who the epidemic is about and how to negotiate the multiple behaviors and identities associated with HIV/AIDS. Many prevention and outreach campaigns in the United States pay little attention to the ways in which media representations animate HIV/AIDS and black women and men. Collins (2004) argues the importance of seeking ways to depict black gender and sexuality which enables the development of progressive understanding of sexuality to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the black population. Media representations not only provide a narrative for specific discussions of racialized sexuality and gendered class, they offer a starting point from which people can talk about issues. In a cultural moment when black Americans are 8 times more likely than any other racial population be diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in their lifetime (CDC, 2016) it is imperative we consider how the meaning of HIV/AIDS and blackness is translated and consumed in U.S. culture.

Chapter Preview

Since respectability politics are part of the contemporary representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness, in Chapter 1, “A Genealogy of Respectability,” I perform a genealogy of the politics of respectability and black Americans. As a point of entry into the complexities of depicting racialized sexuality, gendered class, and HIV/AIDS, this chapter traces the way respectability politics is deployed by blacks as a strategy to counter racist stereotypes that render black men and women’s sexuality deviant and problematic in U.S. culture. Engaging a genealogical approach, I describe how respectability politics are coded and employed differently among black Americans in terms of their presumed conformity or nonconformity to white middle class ideals of gender and sexuality. Lastly, I consider the limitations and possibilities of respectability politics disrupting dominant discourses about black American sexuality and the implications of this for media presentations of HIV/AIDS and blackness. In Chapter 2, “Magically Exceptional: Magic Johnson, HIV/AIDS and The Politics of Respectability,” I bring together scholarship on black masculinity, sports culture, black exceptionalism, and respectability politics in analysis of the ESPN film *The Announcement* (2012), which chronicles Johnson’s twenty-year HIV/AIDS journey. *The Announcement* breaks from normative popular culture representations of black male athletes as sexually excessive and aggressive by presenting Johnson’s HIV narrative via his performance of respectability politics. Although the film shows women constantly surrounding Johnson, I argue viewers can only understand Johnson’s HIV/AIDS identity and by extension his masculinity through a hyper performance of black masculine respectability, which limits and narrows the space to discuss to heterosexual black men in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Chapter 3, “A Burden to Bear: Marvelyn Brown, HIV/AIDS, and The Politics of Respectability,” analyzes how HIV/AIDS activist Marvelyn Brown’s presents her HIV identity in her video blog, *TEN YEARS, TEN*

QUESTIONS, TEN ANSWERS that she posted on July 17, 2013, to publicly commemorate the milestone of living with HIV for a decade. Brown's discussion of her sexuality and femininity signal the need to consider respectability politics as a malleable and contestable discourse because she simultaneously challenges and reifies tropes of respectable black femininity and stereotypes of black women and HIV/AIDS. Brown questions the parameters of respectability and representations of black women living with HIV/AIDS by choosing to define her performance of respectability without silencing or sanitizing her sexual behavior prior to contracting HIV. Conversely, Brown's performance of respectability is troubling given her pronounced use of the controlling image of the welfare queen, a stereotype of black women manipulating the welfare system for economic mobility, to differentiate her HIV/AIDS narrative from stereotypes of working class HIV positive black women. In Chapter 4, "Deserving or Innocent: HIV/AIDS Depictions in the film *Precious*," I examine the film *Precious*, with its focus on the tragic life experiences and ultimate redemption of a young poor black girl, as a lens through which to examine how the film presents HIV positive black women through the dichotomy of pathology and innocence, using stereotypes of the welfare queen. I argue the film presents Mary and Precious as deserving and underserving of HIV/AIDS through the cultural markers of the welfare queen and respectability.

CHAPTER ONE:
A GENEALOGY OF THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

On May 13, 2014, Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s HIV positive status became the object of unrestrained ridicule by Donald Sterling. In early March 2014, Sterling, the white former owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, received a lot of media attention when celebrity gossip website *TMZ* posted a 10-minute audio recording of Sterling making incendiary and derogatory comments against black Americans and lashing out at his girlfriend Vivian Stivano for socializing with black men, including Johnson, comments that drew widespread condemnation from players, fans, and the league. To quell the public storm, Sterling sat down with CNN’s Anderson Cooper for an exclusive interview to explain his actions. After repeatedly insisting he was not racist, Sterling asked for forgiveness from the nation for his comments and told Cooper the audio tape did not reflect who he is as a person. When Cooper asked Sterling to share his personal feelings about Johnson, he said:

What kind of guy goes to every city has sex with every girl, then goes and catches HIV? Is that someone we want to respect and tell our children about? I think he should go into the background. What has he done for black people? Big Magic Johnson, what has he done? He got AIDS. (Moore, 2014)

Many NBA players and coaches viewed Sterling’s comments as an ignorant rant. As Golden State Warriors coach Mark Jackson states, “This is a different time, it’s unfortunate and we cannot allow someone with those feelings to profit” (Bieler, 2014). Despite people dismissing Sterling’s sentiments as insensitive discrimination, significant discussion about HIV/AIDS stereotypes in popular media followed his comments. For instance, in the *New York Times*, Charles Blow (2014,

May, 14) states: “In attempting to AIDS shame Johnson, Sterling further shamed himself—if that is even possible—and proved supremely disrespectful of and destructive to people living with HIV and those who are working to reach the affected and protect those at risk” (p. A01). Indeed, the NBA found Sterling’s comments and behavior so offensive they forced him to give up ownership of the Los Angeles Clippers and he was banned from any further involvement with the NBA (Boren, 2014). Sterling’s public commentary is noteworthy since it perpetuates familiar stereotypes of immoral black male sexuality. Sterling suggests that Johnson’s sexual behavior and subsequent HIV status is something Johnson should be ashamed of and exiled for, casting Johnson’s manhood as suspect and dangerous. His words frame Johnson as a hypersexual black man whose excessive sexual behavior made his contraction of HIV inevitable.

Why is Johnson’s sexuality central to Sterling’s condemnation of his HIV/AIDS status and moral character? How is Johnson’s identity as a heterosexual black man part of discussions of his sexual behavior and HIV/AIDS diagnosis? While as a sports and cultural icon, Johnson falls outside the boundaries of typical U.S. black American identity, this project is concerned precisely with the convergence of racialized sexuality, gender, and HIV/AIDS animated by Sterling’s comments about Johnson. The majority of the time when we are discussing black American representations in U.S. culture it is through sexual scripts. As a disease associated with stigmatized sexualities and behaviors, HIV/AIDS is a particularly loaded site to examine the discourses of racialized and gendered sexuality for black women and men, who are problematically constructed as hypersexualized. In her analysis of HIV/AIDS and black Americans, Cathy Cohen (1999) notes that as media representations increasingly depict the disproportionate rates of HIV transmission in the black population, black Americans use discursive representations specific to black identity to manage the stigma attached to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. An essential discourse to countering the

stereotypes associated with HIV/AIDS and blackness is the politics of respectability—which includes a particular set of precepts that determine how black men and women should present themselves in public spaces to align with white middle class ideals of gender and sexuality (Collins, 2004; Higginbotham, 1993; Jenkins, 2007; Thompson, 2009). This chapter seeks to unpack and consider the paradoxical implications of negotiating dominant discourses about HIV/AIDS and black bodies via the politics of respectability. I ask two interrelated questions: In what ways does the politics of respectability govern black femininity, masculinity, and sexuality? Secondly, how might the tenets of respectability politics—concealing sexuality and a reliance on notions of assimilation—create spaces where certain depictions of racialized sexuality and gender are privileged in contemporary representations of HIV/AIDS and black bodies? I examine the ways that respectability politics works as a discourse to counter racist constructions of racialized gender and sexuality and the manner in which this limits spaces to discuss black gender and sexuality. I argue that these limitations have implications for the ways HIV/AIDS and blackness are discussed in popular culture.

Method

In this chapter I use Foucault's (1984) genealogical approach to articulate the historical and discursive significance of the politics of respectability for a discussion of HIV/AIDS and black Americans. Foucault argues that a genealogy is important in discussing critical history and a way to bring about a "revaluing of values" in the present day (Garland, 2014, p. 372). Genealogies allow scholars to examine the inconsistent and discontinuous process in which contemporary discourse and cultural knowledge emerge from specific struggles, conflicts, and exercises of power (Driscoll, 2007; Garland, 2014). "The goal of a genealogy is not to locate causes or origins in

history, as much as to map how ideas and practices (such as the performances of racialized femininity, masculinity, and sexuality) are possible in a given cultural context” (Driscoll, 2007, p. 4). While I do not address specific representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness in this chapter, a genealogy of respectability politics helps further an understanding of media depictions of HIV/AIDS, the focus in the remainder of the project, all of which are animated by respectability discourse in some manner.

A genealogy raises questions about how current practices and categories came to be cultural knowledge. I recognize that respectability politics is a discourse that depends on and contributes to a particular set of knowledges about black American identity; it does not provide determined knowledge of black bodies. Sexual contact is the primary way people contract HIV/AIDS, therefore representations of blackness and HIV/AIDS make us consider how respectability politics frame black gender and sexuality. A genealogy of the politics of respectability for black Americans will situate how the use of respectability in media representations of HIV/AIDS to discuss gender and sexuality provides important ideas about what it could mean to be HIV positive and black in the United States. A genealogy reveals the popular discourses about HIV/AIDS and blackness and allows us to examine some of the cultural anxieties about racialized gender and sexuality.

Respectability in the Present: A Contested Idea

Black Americans are central to U.S. history, and placing their lived experiences at the center of history opens spaces to recognize new perspectives and opportunities to challenge dominant narratives of American identity. The politics of respectability constitutes a racialized discourse that attempts to place the black lived experience at the center of U.S. history rather than

the margins. First coined by Evelyn Higginbotham (1993) in her history of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, respectability politics is defined as strategy to counter white racist constructions of blackness, gender, and sexuality. Respectability politics promotes adhering to and upholding white normative societal ideals to claim and assert American citizenship outside the confines of white racist stereotypes.

Although respectability politics has a historical trajectory dating back to the nineteenth century, it remains a prominent discourse black Americans use to resist both social and systematic racial discrimination. The story of respectability politics in the United States is one of black people constantly questioning if their images are polished, sanitized, or acceptable enough for white society. In other words, do certain representations make “us” look bad in front of “them”? Black scholars assert that we must not demean or negate the politics of respectability's effectiveness as a strategy for both social and political advancement, since for many black Americans it served as the primary mechanism to leverage power in dominant white society, while it simultaneously worked as a way to establish basic humanity and equality for black Americans (Carby, 1992; Cohen, 2004; Higginbotham, 1993; Kennedy, 2015; McBride, 1998). The politics of respectability was not an unwitting ideological movement that developed over time, it was a direct response to the political and personal systemic racism black Americans faced in their daily lives.

Respectability politics proponents advocate that being mindful of public presentation and avoiding saying or doing anything that reflects badly on black people will aid in countering negative racial stereotypes and help secure potential allies in addressing racial injustice. Yet, the politics of respectability has become a target for derision in discussions in popular media about black identity and representation in the United States. Black scholars, public intellectuals, and activists argue that “respectability will not save us” (Smith, 2013). They see the current

expectations and parameters of respectability for black people as flawed, harmful, and ineffective (Coates, 2015; Collins, 2004; Cooper, 2015; Neal, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Weekley, 2015).

Brittany Cooper (2016) states:

In the 1890's post reconstruction context in which this strategy was codified, after the U.S. government abandoned black people to the violent terrorism of the post-Civil War South, such thinking makes sense, however in the 21st century this thinking does not make sense. In this contemporary moment such thinking reinforces the myth of black respectability as the antidote for anti-black rhetoric and violence. (Cooper, 2016)

Performing respectability is measured by the ability and willingness to assimilate to white middle class heteronormative gender and sexual codes. Cooper reminds us that in its inception, respectability was created as a strategy for adopting "white" practices of gender and sexuality not intended for black people. In the contemporary moment, we must stop and consider the utility of respectability politics as a discourse that still aligns with antiquated and binary notions of gender, class, and sexuality. In many cases, these expectations are no longer even applied to white bodies.

A genealogy of respectability allows us to question how media representations produce disparate and messy cultural knowledge about black gender and sexuality. For example, as I discuss in chapter two, the complex articulations of respectable black masculinity work to simultaneously frame Magic Johnson as a black sports celebrity, the most recognizable face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and present his sexuality as nonthreatening. Popular discourse about black male athletes as sexually excessive and aggressive combined with the cultural stigma of promiscuity associated with HIV/AIDS suggests that Magic Johnson's lifestyle choices position him outside the cultural definition of an HIV/AIDS hero. However, his performance of respectability enables us to read him as sexually nonthreatening while sanitizing his HIV/AIDS

status. Therefore, we must consider the implications of analyzing the politics of respectability as a discourse to access white heteronormative ideology to define black bodies. Especially when discussing HIV/AIDS and the disproportionate rates of infection for black bodies, I challenge the politics of respectability's efficacy to define black gender and sexuality through the constraints of white middle class sexuality and gender. I point this out not to suggest that black American identity is dependent on white middle class values for its coherence; rather, I seek to illustrate the ways in which gender and sexuality have always been presented as part of racialized survival discourse, as an important aspect for mental, physical, political, and social safety in the United States. Lastly, I recognize that representations of black gender and sexuality inextricably link to class ideologies and are imbued with class dynamics. Standard definitions of the black middle class vary (Carby, 1992; Cohen, 1999; Gaines, 1996; Summers, 2004; Thompson, 2009). Black scholars (Jenkins, 2007; Thompson, 2009) characterize black middle class Americans as constituting both an economic, but mostly a social category. Middle class black status can be difficult to define because it is presented in society both interracially and intraracially, as vague, elastic, and based as much on income as behavior. How is class defined by respectability politics? Scholarship discusses the politics of respectability as a strategy deployed by middle class black Americans (Carby, 1992; Cohen, 1999; Collins, 2004; Higginbotham, 1993; Summers 2004; Thompson, 2009). As I will discuss further, although socioeconomic status classifies black identity and lived experience in the United States, for this project, I interrogate how discourses of black middle class respectability are predicated on black American's ability to present themselves as the arbiters of racialized gender and sexual propriety to white Americans and black Americans.

See Me as Human: Black Gender and Sexuality

The practice of chattel slavery was essential to establishing the ways that white middle class norms of gender and sexuality continue to be deployed to stigmatize black gender and sexuality as uncivilized and deviant in the United States (Carby, 1992; Collins, 2004; Hammonds 2009; Jenkins, 2007). White racist stereotypes linked enslaved black women and men's commodification and objectification to their gender performances and presumed sexual deviance (Collins, 2004; Giddings, 1984; James, 2014; Omolade, 1994). Most notably, slavery functioned as gender oppression, which took different forms for black men and women (Collins, 2004; Higginbotham, 1987). For example, the cult of true womanhood, an ideology based on Victorian era values, illustrates the ways defining black women's bodies through sexual behavior, gender, and enslavement worked to exclude them from notions associated with ideal femininity. The ideology delineated the principles necessary for appropriate white middle class feminine behavior. Barbara Welter (1999) notes that the cult of true womanhood entailed "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society" (p. 44). By both temperament and ability, the cult of true womanhood deemed white women ill-suited for manual labor. The cult of true womanhood exalted being a wife and mother as the "purpose of all women's being" (Spruill, 1972, p. 220). A (white) woman's place was with home and family, rearing and taking care of children, running the household, and taking care of her husband. The four primary criteria for judging a white woman's acceptable performance of femininity was based on her presentation of her "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter, 1999, p. 44). The emphasis on religion was highly valued because Christian biblical teachings reinforced beliefs that a woman's ultimate duty was to her children and her husband. Moreover, biblical teachings also reiterated the social and moral consequences if a woman acted

on sexual temptation. The ideal of purity was especially coveted because in order to possess the other feminine virtues associated with ideal womanhood, it was necessary that women repress any behavior that could indicate overt sexuality. Practicing submissiveness gave women the ability to focus solely on their children and husband because men were in charge of financially supporting the home. The ideology of true womanhood did not allow for any deviation from the performance of modesty, as Welter (1999) notes, “purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence considered unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact no woman at all, a member of some lower order” (p. 46). The embodiment of purity denied that white women had any knowledge of sexual desire, the only passion they expressed was in regard to taking care of their home, husband, and children. Welter’s description makes it evident the cult of true womanhood did not include all women. Instead, performing chastity and sexual innocence, granted certain white women a privileged class position and status, thus elevating them to symbolize ideal femininity.

White women retained their status as bearers of ideal femininity, by contrasting their racial, gender, and sexual identity with that of black slave women’s lived experiences. Indeed, as Candice Jenkins (2007) notes, “the cult of true womanhood relied on the backdrop of black female “nonwomen” in order to more clearly define true womanhood as white, frail and virtuous—everything black women supposedly were not” (p. 7). The conditions of slavery rarely afforded black women the opportunity to embody white feminine ideals. While white women’s ability to avoid manual labor elevated her social standing, the subjection to strenuous field work and excessive domestic chores, prevented black women from exemplifying the gentility and fragility of “true womanhood.” Moreover, because enslaved blacks were seen as property for capital accumulation, in many cases there was no effort to keep slave families intact. In turn, black slave women rarely had the opportunity to fulfill the role of the dutiful mother the cult of true

womanhood called for. Also, the demands of slavery did not allow black women to focus their energy and effort on their children. Furthermore, slave marriages were not recognized as legal marital unions, so black women were not afforded the title of adoring wife.

A primary assumption of the principles underlying the cult of true womanhood was the ability of white women to “civilize” the carnal sexual desires of white men (Carby, 1987, p. 27). White women’s supposed chasteness made them worthy of protection from men because their sexual naiveté and modesty were considered as “qualities that delight and fascinate men” (Clinton, 1963, p. 8). White women’s femininity could be used to tempt men, but it was always masked by performances of meekness and chastity. In contrast, popular white racist stereotypes of enslaved black women’s femininity emphasized their supposed excessive sexual appetites. When white slave owners committed sexual violence against black slave women, it was presented as part and parcel of black women’s sexual desires. As Hine (1994) states:

An aspect of black women under slavery took the form of the white master’s consciously constructed view of black female sexuality. This construction which was designed to justify his own sexual passion towards her also blamed the female slave for the sexual exploitation she experienced. (p. 28)

The idea that it was impossible to sexually violate black slave women because they were already excessively promiscuous masked the sexual exploitation they endured at the hands of their white owners. Slave owners were not regarded as being responsible for their actions against black enslaved women. On the contrary, it was black women who were stigmatized and labeled as a threat to the martial sanctity of the white middle class mistress’s sanitized femininity for exposing her white husband to excessive black female sexuality (Carby, 1987).

Notions of virtuous masculinity during slavery also subscribed to white middle class Victorian era mandates to construct ideas of appropriate manhood. White middle class men claimed a masculine identity that allowed them rule over their wives, children, and property. Under Victoria era assumptions, maintaining a family and having material wealth were essential to masculinity. Notably, these are aspects of life enslaved black men were not allowed to access or choose for themselves. The ability of white men to beat and kill black men at will and force them to separate from their female partners and children served not only as a form of racial control, but also gender control. Moreover, white middle class masculinity was marked by practicing sexual self-control (Gaines, 1996; Gordon, 1997; Jenkins, 2007; Summers, 2004). Having self-control over sexual behavior allowed white middle class men to protect and uphold white middle class women's ideal femininity.

In contrast, black masculinity was represented as male sexuality run rampant. Enslaved black men were framed as savage, violent, and mostly motivated by carnal sexual desires that needed to be controlled (Collins, 2004; Gordon, 1997; Jenkins, 2007; Summers, 2004), which was connected to the hypersexualized body of black women. As Gilman (1986) notes, in white U.S. culture black women's bodies were assumed as the ultimate "source of corruption and disease and came to symbolize an icon of black sexuality in general" (p. 250). For instance, the controlling image of the sexually excessive and promiscuous black Jezebel illustrates a particularly dangerous assertion of black sexuality that was established during the slavery era. Black enslaved women were assumed to possess an aggressive sexual desire that could not be tamed, and in turn not only was their perceived sexual licentiousness a justification for positioning them outside the boundaries of normative femininity, their excessive sexual bodies were deemed a detriment to the

entire black population and white Americans as well (Collins, 2004; Jenkins, 2007). This cultural sentiment was reflected in a Georgia newspaper editorial in 1904:

Negro women evidence more nearly the popular idea of total depravity than the men do. When a man's mother, wife, and daughters are all immoral women, there is no room in his fallen nature for the aspiration of honor and virtue. I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman. (Giddings, 1984, p. 56)

Here we see the cultural myth of black women's sexual depravity impacting black men from inception, and black women's sexual depravity results in domestic failure, primarily in raising healthy black men. In essence, black women are responsible for the failures of the race as a whole. As Giddings (1984) writes, black men "were thought capable of sexual crimes because of the lascivious character of the women of the race in a time when women were considered the foundation of the group's morality" (p. 209). The historical repercussions of conceptualizing black women's bodies and sexualities in these ways remains an intrinsic part of how the politics of respectability continue to be enacted by black women and men in the twenty first century.

Here we understand that the history of chattel slavery marked black men and women's sexuality as deviant and not worth protection. White culture's disregard for black American life was framed not as a result of discrimination, but on black people's own flawed sense of morals and excessive sexual impropriety (Jenkins, 2007). The method of genealogy focuses on the body, which Foucault conceptualizes as a material surface, "as flesh upon which the micro-physics of power leave their mark" (Garland 2014, p. 373). He particularly stresses this point, "The body is the inscribed surface of events... genealogy is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history" (Foucault, 1991, p. 83). The treatment of enslaved black men and women created a historical trajectory for the assumed

sexual excessiveness of black male and female bodies which is still connected to stereotypes of racialized gender and sexuality today.

A Response to the Limitations: Defining The Politics of Respectability

Black Americans carried the stigma of promiscuous and excessive heterosexual desire long after slavery. In response to continued racial discrimination, the politics of respectability is a social and political reaction to white racist narratives of black pathology. Developed in the early twentieth century by members of the Black Christian Women's Convention, the politics of respectability deploys, to some extent the same Victorian era values that were used to construct black gender and sexuality as immoral and deviant based on white ideals of normative sexuality and gender. Higginbotham (1993) defines the concept politics of respectability:

the politics of respectability constituted a counter discourse to the politics of prejudice, it entrusted to blacks themselves the responsibility for constructing the "Public Negro Self," a self-presented to the world as worthy of respect. Respectability demanded that individuals in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational, and economic lines. The goal was to distance oneself as far as possible from images perpetuated by racist stereotypes. (186)

While respectability promoted racial uplift and equality for all black Americans, black women activists were attentive to the ways cultural stereotypes reflected a limited and problematic construction of black women that extended to the entire black population. In turn, the politics of respectability is a gendered discourse which relies on black women's public behavior to set the example for performing respectable black identity. As Higginbotham (1993) notes, "respectability tended to hold black women primarily accountable for the rise and the fall of the black family, and

by extension the rise or fall of the entire race” (p. 202). Combining strategies prompting religious devotion and white middle class normative moral ideals, black women used the politics of respectability as a recuperative tactic to counter the assumptions of sexual promiscuity and lewdness associated with their lived experiences. As discussed earlier, black womanhood and white womanhood were culturally and socially constructed as contradictory embodiments of sexuality (Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012; Griffin, 2012; Higginbotham, 1993). Black womanhood was conceived as a pathology; all black women, despite their education, income, or occupation were viewed as the embodiment of deviance (Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009; White, 2003). In turn, while it worked to resist dominant stereotypes, a primary goal of the politics of respectability was a refiguring of black womanhood, both individually and collectively.

Jenkins (2007) writes, “the performance of respectability was explicitly bound to the “emulation and promotion of bourgeois values that white women of the middle class had long held dear” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 13). Notably, while an aspect of respectability was assimilating to white middle class ideals, the precepts reject income or social status as definitive of one’s ability to perform respectability. For example, Women’s Convention leader Nannie Burroughs (1903) wrote in a newspaper editorial discussing respectability politics’ social importance: “Every mother can become a benefactor to the race. It matters not how poor the mother if she possesses a character in which honor and integrity, and every other wholesome virtue hold sway” (1903, Oct, 10). The Women’s Convention recognized the importance of all black women in the struggle to resist racist and sexist stereotypes. Black women use the *aspiration* for respectability as a marker for class standing. Mitchell (2004) uses the phrase “aspiring class” to describe black women who were not a part of the black economic elite, but still sought respectable class status by foregrounding morality and civility in their public behavior. She notes that “the characteristic common to the

overwhelming majority of the black aspiring class during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an abiding concern with propriety” (Mitchell, 2004, p. 55). The key is that black women must desire respectable femininity; they must want to emulate a particular version of black womanhood which in turn helps establish middle class identity. Thus, while performing respectability articulates class difference, it was, and continues to be, primarily defined through behavioral terms. Harris (2007) notes, “by linking worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness, respectability served a gatekeeping function, establishing a behavioral ‘entrance fee,’ to the right to respect and the right to full citizenship” (Harris, 2007, p. 213). Respectability is not primarily defined by the typical class status markers: material wealth, education, and occupation. Respectability promotes a sense of agency for black women because visibility is linked to specific feminine behaviors.

Performing respectability was black women’s deliberate concession to the principles of the cult of true womanhood. Respectability worked to reframe the racist stereotypes of black women as immoral and sexually deviant by claiming the dominant attributes of normative white femininity as essential to black femininity. In turn, just as white middle class women’s allegiance to the cult of true womanhood made them constantly aware of their feminine performance, respectable black women had to be vigilant to their displays of sexual chasteness, politeness, cleanliness, and religious virtue. As White (2003) details in her study of the black women’s club movement, “To be kind, gentle, calm, and serene were the traits that were critical for women who strove to be examples of perfect black womanhood” (p. 199). Ultimately, appropriating the meaning of “true womanhood” allowed black women to create alternate resistive images of themselves and undermine white racist discourse that framed black femininity as inferior to white femininity.

Performing respectability elevates black women's class status because the tenets of respectability suggest black women possess all the morals and virtues associated with ideal white femininity.

While the politics of respectability began in a large part as a strategy to resist the public defamation of black women's sexuality, it evolved to become an essential element of the racial uplift and the civil rights movement for all black Americans (Cohen, 1999; Durham, 2012; Higginbotham, 1993; Neal, 2005). Higginbotham (1993) writes, "the politics of respectability entailed 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 relations" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187). In other words, respectability does not merely equate to an attempt to mimic behaviors associated with normative gender. Instead, the politics of respectability is a highly conscious performance with a political emphasis. From public spaces to private spaces, the politics of respectability assumed that the behavior of black people, especially sexual behavior, was always under scrutiny to white people (Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012). As Higginbotham (1993) states, the black Baptist women who developed the tenets of respectability politics "spoke as if ever cognizant of the gaze of white America, which focused perpetually upon each and every black person and recorded his or her transgressions in an overall accounting of black inferiority" (p. 196). Therefore, it was incumbent on black Americans to perform respectability to counter systematic structures of racism in the public sphere and to attempt to mitigate the impact of racism on their private lives. Performing respectability involves a constant self-discipline that has both political and personal implications. While many black Americans believed respectability signified racial pride by countering dominant white narratives of black people's perceived inability to adhere to white middle class "manners and morals," the goal of respectability was something more: performing respectability served as a mechanism for blacks to establish inviolable identities as both black and

American. As discussed earlier, from slavery onward, black Americans have endured a stigmatized experience of American identity rooted in white stereotypes of deviant sexuality which is connected to terror and violence in the United States. Respectability politics illuminated the need for strategies to counter the vulnerability black Americans faced from racist and sexist constructions of black sexuality that contributed to both the justification of violence and denial of national being. As Jenkins (2007) notes, white racist attitudes about black sexual depravity “were getting black men lynched and black women raped and exploited” (p. 13). The performance of respectability was black women and men’s attempt to gain the same legal protections and rights afforded to white women and white men in the U.S. (Durham, 2012). However, while performing respectability enabled black women and men to challenge racist images and practices, respectability was not directed solely at white Americans. Respectability also functioned as a tactic to address and regulate what were perceived as negative behaviors and practices in the black community. Therefore, respectability politics had two audiences: black Americans, who were encouraged and challenged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown that black people could be respectable (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187). Thus, while working as a tactic of political and social redress for black Americans to white Americans, respectability politics also insists that black Americans individually conform to the tenets of respectability to improve life experiences for all blacks in the United States.

I vs. We: Respectability, Black Americans, and Class Differentiation

Cohen (1999) notes that the power to deny group rights or define group membership is not only exercised by dominant sources. The process of defining and regulating marginal groups happens among its own members. As discussed earlier, black women activists in the early

twentieth century created respectability as a strategy to emulate white middle class norms of gender and sexuality to counter racism for all black Americans. However, black people's conformity to white ideals of gender and sexual behavior have class laden meanings in the black community beyond resisting white racism. Black people including both the middle and working class, rely on the parameters of respectability to gain class mobility and to differentiate class distinctions among themselves. Respectability politics discourse took shape during the civil rights movement, when a growing class distinction among black Americans was becoming very evident (Higginbotham, 1993). In one realm, emerged middle class blacks with white collar careers (lawyers, educators, physicians, ministers, bankers). In the other realm were the individuals deemed as the underclass of black culture, criminals and prostitutes, men and women whose lifestyles clearly did not fit the normative ideals of gender and sexuality in white society or the tenets of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993). In between these two extremes was the black working class. While proponents of respectability espoused that all black Americans should adhere to the principles of respectability, the strategy's emphasis on individual behaviors worked to police the gender and sexual behavior of working class black men and women. I use the term police here to indicate the regulation of behavior, attitudes, and public image of a group (Carby, 1992; Cohen, 1999). The policing of black working class people's gender and sexual behavior through the politics of respectability divides the black community. Blacks whose behavior is thought to fulfill stereotypes of black sexuality, or whose sexual practices transgress the expectations of respectability in public spaces are considered a detriment to achieving racial equality.

Coming Full Circle: Respectability, HIV/AIDS and Black Americans

In an effort to establish the importance of genealogy as method, Foucault asserts that in contrast to dominant and familiar narratives of history, a “genealogy is gray, entangled and confused” (Foucault, 1977, p. 139). A genealogy of respectability creates space to discuss how popular media representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness get intertwined in the gray areas of respectability politics. A genealogical approach entails working to unravel the strands of cultural knowledge that in hindsight, can be woven together to constitute a particular moment. This genealogy recognizes that performing respectability is the process of doing. In other words, to be marked as respectable, black Americans must conceal or display their sexuality and gender in specific ways that cultural discourse and media representations typically do not associate with black femininity and masculinity.

As a social and political strategy, respectability is the acceptable “public” face of black gender and sexual behavior because in U.S culture, performing respectability allows black men and women a particular type of public social visibility. In the last part of this chapter, I consider how the performance of respectability is a kind of social, political, and popular narrative for black Americans that impact discussions of HIV/AIDS and blackness. In other words, if respectability is the “face” of black gender and sexuality, how does it serve the “face” of the racialized population most impacted by HIV/AIDS?

In the book *The Boundaries of Blackness*, Cohen (199) provides a critical analysis that details the specific ways respectability politics is a hindrance to black Americans in combatting the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Respectability politics constructs a group identity for black Americans which redefines blackness for both white culture and black culture. However, Cohen argues the intraracial and interracial dynamics of black identity come to an impasse when discussing

HIV/AIDS and black bodies. Cohen (1999) challenges the limits of respectability politics when the understanding of who is perceived as respectable (thus visible) excludes black Americans whose gender and sexual identities fall outside the parameters of respectability. She argues that the regulatory nature of respectability discourse disregards the black people most impacted by the epidemic (Cohen, 1999). Because black Americans who subscribe to respectability politics are more concerned with presenting a “respectable” image to white Americans, the necessary discussion of HIV/AIDS in the context of racialized sexuality and gendered class, is largely absent.

I extend Cohen’s argument to consider how the politics of respectability’s emphasis on individual responsibility to the collective shapes representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness in popular culture discourse. As discussed earlier, while respectability is a bridge discourse to white cultural acceptance, it also functions as a social contract within the black community. Respectability assumes that individual behaviors of black Americans determine the collective fate of the black population (Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009). Moreover, still aligned with its original tenets, respectability continues to dictate that black people’s public behavior is the most powerful mechanism for confirming or challenging racist representations of gender and sexuality. At the root of the process of policing gender and sexuality within the parameters of respectability is the idea that black Americans can reconstruct themselves for the white gaze and each other. However, the intraracial definition of respectable blackness also conflates behavior and lifestyle choices. Thus, definitions of conventional respectability politics that seek to redefine and empower blackness to dominant culture work to exaggerate the boundaries of difference for marginalized black Americans. Performing respectability suggests there is a *right* and *wrong* way to perform black femininity and masculinity. Blacks that transgress the ideals connected to respectability are constructed as unacceptable to both black and white Americans.

This genealogy has articulated the ways in which the politics of respectability functions as a political and social response to white racist constructions of black gender and sexuality. As I discussed in the introduction, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the black community does not unify black identities of gender and sexuality. It must be noted that respectability reinforces the narrowest interpretation of gender and sexual identity. It's reliance on Victorian era values present it as a fundamentally heteronormative project that says being straight is right, being gay or lesbian is wrong, and that engaging in sexual behavior outside of the heteronormative union of marriage or monogamy is wrong. If the racial logic of respectability circulates particular discourses of black gender and sexuality in the United States, what spaces are created for representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness? In each case study that follows, I take up this question by considering how the articulation of class, race, and sexuality work to contest and reify the notions of respectability in representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness. Allowing me to ask, what makes for an ideal performance of respectability in representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness in popular culture? What are the critical implications?

CHAPTER TWO:
MAGICALLY EXCEPTIONAL: MAGIC JOHNSON, HIV/AIDS, AND THE POLITICS
OF RESPECTABILITY

Magic in the city of stars, was as big as anybody, and to have someone like Magic Johnson announce that he caught the HIV virus changed the dynamic for America because at the time he was the greatest athlete in the world, and when he contracted the virus it just shifted the whole dialogue. (Nelson, 2012)

On November 7, 1991, major television networks *interrupted* their scheduled programming to cover what has been called the “saddest press conference in sports history” (Cole & Denny, 1994): Earvin “Magic” Johnson announced he would immediately retire from the NBA because he tested positive for the HIV virus. From the moment he publicly shared his HIV diagnosis to the present day, Johnson’s HIV narrative can be understood using Mary Poovey’s (1988) idea of a “border case.” As Treichler (1999) explains, “when an event contradicts the perceived natural order of things, it becomes a cultural dispute that generates vast quantities of discourse designed to shore up existing distinctions and resolve contradictions” (p. 205). Notably, while he is the first, Johnson is not the only famous black heterosexual man to reveal his HIV diagnosis publicly. In 1992, world-renowned tennis player Arthur Ashe publicly acknowledged he contracted HIV from a tainted blood transfusion. Additionally, in 1995, infamous gansta rapper Eazy-E shared he was HIV positive before dying of AIDS related complications a month later. While the importance of these public figures sharing their HIV status cannot be understated, as Zita (1998) notes, the day Johnson revealed his status “the world realized that AIDS was not just a closeted issue, but a plague

that could penetrate as far as the idealized body of Magic Johnson” (Zita, 1998, p. 11). The six-foot nine-inch, superstar of the Los Angeles Lakers, the NBA’s Most Valuable Player three consecutive years, and America’s most popular athlete, was now a heterosexual black man who contracted HIV. This chapter examines his performance of black masculinity and by extension black male sexuality, presented in the ESPN Films documentary *The Announcement* (2012). By analyzing the production of black masculinities in the film, as well as the depiction of Johnson as a legendary sports celebrity in U.S. culture, I describe the ways the politics of respectability, which are informed by heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality, shape how racialized sexuality is depicted in the film to consider the larger implications of deploying respectability politics as a cultural marker for the discussion of HIV/AIDS and black bodies in contemporary popular culture.

The Face of HIV

At his press conference, Johnson stated: “I have the HIV virus...sometimes we think only gay people can get it, or it’s not going to happen to me. Here I am, saying it can happen to everybody, even me, Magic Johnson” (CNN, 1991). Johnson’s words are poignant because they reflect how his announcement significantly shifted the representations and dialogue surrounding HIV/AIDS. In the early 1990s, popular press largely discussed and presented HIV as a disease acquired by particular individuals, specifically gay white men, intravenous drug users, prostitutes and men and women from Haiti living in the U.S. (Cohen, 1999; Crimp, 1992; King, 1993; Treichler, 1999), not heterosexual sports superstars. Johnson’s announcement revealed that HIV can happen to anyone. Americans received the message loud and clear. Within a month of Johnson’s announcement, the number of people seeking HIV tests in New York City rose by 60% (Specter, 2014), and a similarly sharp increase was noted across the nation. By December 1991, it

took seven weeks to get an appointment for a HIV/AIDS test at New York's testing centers (Specter, 2014); prior to Johnson's announcement, most testing centers could accommodate walk-in testing requests. Discussing the impact of Johnson's public acknowledgement of his HIV positive status Dr. Marsha Martin explains:

The public at large learned something and Black folks learned something. You can live with this, and you don't have to discuss the how, when, and why. That's not what is important. What's important is you can get tested, you can get treated. And if you do your best, try to be as healthy as you can, take your medicines, do your exercise, eat properly, have the support of your family, you can make it. (Moughty, 2011)

Martin's comments demonstrate why Johnson's HIV narrative means so much in the United States. His story influences how we conceptualize and discuss HIV/AIDS. Prior to Johnson's announcement, in the United States fear and anxiety about HIV/AIDS gripped the cultural consciousness. After Johnson's announcement, Americans witnessed him go on living a healthy and successful life, humanizing HIV/AIDS. Twenty years after Johnson first shared his HIV status with the world, *The Announcement* (2012) chronicles his personal battle with HIV/AIDS and his work to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. The film, which features narration by Johnson and interviews with family, former NBA colleagues, and close confidants, explores both the personal and cultural impact of Johnson becoming the "face of HIV/AIDS" (King, 1993, p. 33). Given the public attention Johnson's HIV announcement received in 1991, and the cultural narrative it produced and continues to produce because of Johnson's celebrity status, numerous sites are available to examine presentations of his HIV status. *The Announcement* is a key site to analyze the cultural presentation of HIV/AIDS and blackness because much of the story is

articulated through Johnson's performance of respectability politics which is central to the racialized and gendered way the film presents his HIV status.

Critical scholars are doing important work when it comes to addressing the implications of representations of HIV/AIDS and black bodies (Cohen, 1999; Collins, 2004; Gilman, 1987; Hall, 1992; Hammonds, 1997, 2009; Weekley, 2008, 2010). While most academic research about HIV/AIDS and black bodies focuses on black gay men and heterosexual black women (Cohen, 1999; Collins, 2004; Gilman, 1986; Hammonds, 1997; Malebranche, 2008; McCune, 2014), my work is situated within the small body of critical work examining representations of heterosexual black men and HIV (Cole and Denny, 1994; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997; Harper, 1996; Zita, 1998). Cultural critics and health experts note the dearth of scholarship focusing on black heterosexual men and representations of HIV/AIDS. (Bowleg et al., 2015; Bowleg et al., 2013; Harper, 1996; King, 1993; McCune, 2014; Neal, 2005; Raj & Bowleg, 2012; Treichler, 1999), which is problematic because black heterosexual men constitute the highest heterosexual male population to contract HIV/AIDS (CDC, 2013). An analysis of *The Announcement* opens up a discussion about black masculinity (Harper, 1996; Jackson, 2006; McCune, 2014; Neal, 2013) and black sexuality (Collins, 2004; Hammonds, 1997; hooks, 1992; Neal, 2013) in media representations.

In this analysis, I also extend the conversation to consider how the politics of respectability intertwines with discourses about black men and HIV/AIDS. In negotiating social and cultural identity in the predominantly white United States, historically, Black people have employed respectability politics. As Higginbotham (1993) notes, "respectability demanded that every individual in the Black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-determination along moral lines" (p. 61). More specifically, the politics of respectability is a form of discursive self-representation that refigures Black people as strategically conforming to the

hegemonic manners and morals around gender performance and sexual propriety in an attempt to access and secure social legitimacy (Harris-Perry; 2011; Higginbotham, 1993; Miller-Young, 2008). In this chapter, I build upon scholarship that examines how respectability works to police representations of black gender, sexuality, and class (Durham, 2012; Gundry, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Higginbotham, 1993; Weekley, 2008) by analyzing how *The Announcement* centers and privileges Johnson's performance of respectability when discussing HIV/AIDS. I treat the presentations of individuals in the film as media expressions (produced moments, edited to tell a particular story) expressing particular configurations of race, gender, and sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS. I look at the film as a whole, with an emphasis on certain segments that are helpful in accessing the construction of key ideas about HIV/AIDS, Blackness, masculinity, and sexuality. This examination of Johnson considers the implications of a narrative that suggests the performance of respectability positions certain HIV/AIDS black bodies outside of conventional popular discourses and representations of black masculinity and sexuality. I highlight the cultural understandings and anxieties about black men and HIV/AIDS that are reflected and produced in the film's presentation of Johnson's masculinity and sexuality.

Magic Johnson: The Heterosexual HIV Hero

Throughout the film, *The Announcement* illustrates the magnitude of Johnson's celebrity status as a professional basketball player. For example, the film shows vintage footage of the fanfare surrounding Johnson at the end of the Laker's basketball games. Viewers see fans lining the halls of the Forum stadium and flooding the parking lot in hopes of seeing Johnson leave the locker room. In one instance, we see a black woman attempt to get Johnson's attention while he sits in his chauffeured car with the windows rolled up. The woman gestures for Johnson to roll his

window down while she smiles and winks at him. Despite her enthusiasm, Johnson only smiles, shrugs his shoulders, and motions for the driver to move the car forward. As Johnson's car pulls away, viewers see the woman jumping up and down and waving at the car, emphasizing the difference in her and Johnson's behavior.

Johnson's seemingly ambivalent reaction to this woman's advances counters other media presentations of his sexual prowess and behavior at the height of his professional basketball career. For years, stories of Johnson's sexual exploits during his time in the NBA circulated in both the sports world and mainstream culture. On several occasions Johnson's former teammates, colleagues, and close friends publicly confirmed that Johnson engaged in sex with hundreds of women while he played for the L.A. Lakers (Markovitz, 2010). An example of how popular culture discusses Johnson's sexual behavior is shown in the HBO sports film *Magic and Bird: A Courtship of Rivals* (Taylor, 2010). The film chronicles the on court rivalry and off court friendship between Johnson and Larry Bird, the white former Boston Celtics player, which began with the 1979 NCAA Basketball Championship game and lasted throughout their NBA careers. A key portion of the film presents the fundamental differences between how Johnson and Bird successfully approach and play basketball. The discussion of Bird's athletic superiority focuses solely on how he mentally mastered the game, and makes no mention of Bird's sexual behavior or encounters with women off the court. In contrast, the film discusses Johnson's expert technical skills on the basketball court, but also includes stories and examples of his promiscuous sexual activity off the court. For instance, former Lakers team physician Michael Mellman describes Johnson's penchant for women when the team traveled for away basketball games:

Earvin's vice was women, women loved Magic, and Magic loved them. This was before hotels had voicemail, each room had a mailbox and Magic's was always stuffed from the

moment we got into town. They were ready and so was he. Messages from women: Susan and a phone number, Joyce and a phone number, Linda and a phone number, this was every week. Magic was always ready. (Taylor, 2010)

Later in *A Courtship of Rivals*, in an archived interview, Johnson shares his sexual experiences in the NBA:

Reporter: Sex with several women at one time?

Johnson: Yes, like I said before women have different fantasies, some want to be with two or three, some want to be with multiple people. I want to make women's fantasies come true; one time I had six at one time. (Taylor, 2010)

While his personal life is not the focus of *Magic and Bird*, the film's narrative establishes Johnson's sexual behavior as a significant part of his basketball career and sport celebrity status, this is important because this aspect (even potentially Bird's lack of sexual promiscuity) is absent from the story told about Bird. Johnson's promiscuity is front and center, thus suggesting excessive sexual behavior was a major part of his professional basketball career. Johnson's job was not over after the basketball game finished, he also worked to "make women's fantasies come true" (Taylor, 2010).

Noteworthy is that in *The Announcement* the narrative shifts away from Johnson's sexual promiscuity to expressly present him through his performance of respectability politics. Summers (2004) argues an important marker of respectable black masculinity is the public display of sexual continence. Displaying self-imposed sexual restraint is a crucial aspect of black men's respectability because it serves as a counter performance to the societal stereotypes of black masculinity and sexuality. Historically, images of black masculinity and sexuality present black men as physically aggressive and sexually insatiable (Bogle, 2001; Collins, 2004; Harper, 1996;

hooks, 2004; Johnson, 2006). In turn, contemporary U.S. culture continues to present black masculinity as the merging of manhood and hypersexuality (hooks, 2004), because the cultural imagination presumes Black men are “more prone to be guided by base pleasures and biological impulses” (West, 1993, p. 27). Race, gender, and sex differences collide in the bodies of Black male athletes. Popular cultural myths perpetuate that black men are physically and athletically superior, which contributes to the stereotypes about black men as purely sexual and physical beings. Griffin (2011) asserts, “during slavery, Black males were ideologically fixed as animalistic, dangerous, and hypersexual,” with such stereotypes “reproduced by black male participation in sports” (p. 162). The contemporary image of black male athletes sexualized in popular culture through various narratives of black male sexual prowess and superior physicality (Dyson, 1993; Hawkins, 1998; Hoberman, 1997) promote and display hypersexual and hypermasculine black manhood. Leonard (2004) argues that mainstream media’s constant coverage of black male athletes’ sexual behavior presents them as sexual predators, offering significant cultural currency to the historical stereotypes of black masculinity. Notably, scholars (Cole & Denny, 1994; Leonard, 2004, 2006, 2010; Markovitz, 2006) contend professional basketball proves to be a complex cultural space to discuss racialized gender and sexuality representations because the NBA functions as a racially coded space associated with deviant black masculinity due to the large number of black players in the league. Tucker (2003) sums up the cultural perception of black NBA players by stating, “in ways absent from other sports, the [B]lackness, sexuality, and the physicality of the players are stamped on the game of basketball” (p. 313). Through such pervasive media coverage, black male athletes’ masculinity is marked deviant regardless of their actions on or off the basketball court.

In contrast to the documentary *Magic and Bird*, which pairs Johnson's superior athleticism with his hyper masculinity, *The Announcement* illustrates Johnson's appeal by pairing his masculinity with his display of respectable sexual resistance. The framing of Johnson's encounter with the woman discussed above is telling. She is presented as clearly sexually interested in him, but Johnson is shown choosing to put distance between himself and the woman by telling the driver to move along. The film's editing of Johnson's actions in this scene reinforce scholars' notion that the performance of respectability and black masculinity is a willful assertion of agency (Gordon, 1996; y, 2012; Summers, 2004). In the context of sexual behavior, the performance of respectable black masculinity demands that Black men practice self-restraint despite the social expectations of the environment. *The Announcement* confirms Johnson's sexual appeal and shows his formidable presence in professional basketball--instantiating Johnson as the embodiment of black masculinity and hypersexuality (irresistible to women), at the same time as it shows him as agentic by explicitly making the decision to reject the woman's sexual advances. When Johnson dismisses her, the film presents the woman at a clear disadvantage. Although the adoring woman's desire is visible through her flirtatious behavior, the film suggests her conduct does not affect Johnson's performance of respectability. Johnson's public display of disinterest clearly indicates the interaction is over when he *chooses* to tell the driver to move forward. Johnson is shown as having agency and explicitly making the decision not to engage in the interaction. Conversely, in *Magic and Bird*, Johnson is presented as taking advantage of his celebrity status; by welcoming the advances of women and taking advantage of whatever sexual opportunities available.

Excessive Restraint or Excessive Sexuality: The Performance of Respectability

Despite presenting Johnson performing respectable black masculinity by publicly displaying sexual restraint, throughout *The Announcement*, he is depicted as keenly aware of women's sexual desire for him. Summers' (2004) assertion that public displays of sexual restraint are a key component to the performance of Black masculinity is useful for this analysis. However, Summers does not consider how the performance of black male respectability works in conjunction with displays of female sexual desire. In the film women are presented as clearly desiring Johnson, which allows the construction of Johnson as sexually restrained. Gordon (1997) notes that performing respectability requires black men to present their heterosexual identity through discretion and conservative self-presentation. This complicates and extends how black men display sexual restraint because the tenets of respectability suggest that it is not enough for them to avoid sexual behavior that could be perceived as deviant or immoral. This presents a conundrum, respectability politics demands that black men must simultaneously display sexual restraint while acknowledging they are aware of their heterosexual appeal. Thus, performing respectable black masculinity dictates that black men not show their heterosexual identity through overt displays or advances, but the subtle recognition of women's attraction to them.

An instance that depicts Johnson's display of reserved heterosexuality comes when *The Announcement* discusses the famous Forum Club. When the Forum stadium opened, the Forum Club was a family-oriented restaurant and lounge fans frequented before and after games. However, during Johnson's illustrious Lakers career, the Forum Club symbolizes how Johnson represented the association of sports and celebrity. Discussing the impact of Johnson's popularity for the Lakers basketball franchise, former coach Pat Riley states, "at one point the Forum Club was just a club, but as soon as Magic came to the Lakers it was a night club, it was hopping after

games.” Immediately following Riley’s description, viewers see limousines filled with celebrities lining the Forum entrance, and once inside, the film shows a club full of women dancing and partying with Lakers basketball players while loud, rhythmic music plays in the background. In the midst of all the activity, a series of close up shots show Johnson entering the club. As Johnson walks through the crowded venue, the camera depicts women standing on each side of the club, trying to touch him as he walks by. The women surrounding Johnson are framed as speechless and in awe of his presence. Johnson’s body language suggests he is aware that he is completely surrounded by women giving him their full attention, but he chooses to handle it with discretion. Viewers see Johnson stroll slowly through the nightclub making periodic eye contact while laughing sheepishly at the women’s evident energy and attraction. At one point, he pauses and allows a few women to touch his arm or shoulder, but he does not make eye contact or speak with the women. He maintains his gaze above the women’s heads, suggesting he is surveying the action in the club. Presenting Johnson’s awareness of the women’s sexual attention works to construct his agency and self-restraint, while the women seem content focusing on their attention on him, once again, we see him choose to not fully engage with the women. In a voice-over, comedian Chris Rock describes the club’s atmosphere: “it was ridiculous, the groupie capital of the world, it was always the after party.” As viewers hear Rock’s words, the film presents footage of Johnson sitting in the VIP area surrounded by his teammates, celebrities, but most importantly, women. To end the segment, we hear Johnson’s own thoughts about his celebrity status, “Basketball was only part of the scene, I didn’t smoke or drink because it interfered with the game, but there were a lot of things to tempt me.” Immediately following this statement, viewers watch an attractive black woman wave and wink at Johnson from across a couch in the VIP section. We see Johnson make eye contact with her, the film making it clear that she represents the temptations Johnson works to

avoid. In the next moment, Johnson averts his eyes from the woman's seductive gaze and continues to talk his teammate.

Rock's reference to the Forum Club as a "groupie mecca" paired with showing Johnson's limited interactions with the women in the club indicates the film frames Johnson's respectability in opposition to the cultural stereotype of the groupie. Sharpley-Whiting (2007) intimates that famous people have followers and fans, but groupies occupy an entirely separate category. In professional sports, groupies are not simply passionate fans or autograph seekers: groupies are the women who show up where professional athletes congregate in the hopes of capturing their attention. More specifically, groupies are available for and willing to have sex with athletes. In popular culture, the term "groupie" connotes women and sexual rewards, in other words, groupies trade sexual favors for celebrity attention. In the context of the film, Rock's reference to "groupies" implies the women were a significant and permeant part of NBA culture, in addition to Johnson's professional basketball career. Leonard (2004) argues the discussion of groupie culture authenticates stereotypes of black male athletes' masculinity and sexuality because it allows popular media to imagine black male athletes as hypersexual bodies eager and ready to sexually receive and accommodate heterosexual women. *The Announcement* uses the groupie trope in key moments showing Johnson interacting with women to complicate this stereotype. Despite his megastar status and his assumed access to women, Johnson is presented as both sexually restrained and sexually excessive to establish his performance of respectability. Notably, the film presents beautiful available women willingly offering Johnson their sexual attention, which fulfills the heteromasculine fantasy of groupies and Black male athletes. However, what is striking about Johnson's suggestion that the women in the club were sexually tempting coupled with how the film presents him interacting with them is that we hear and see Johnson confirm he was in

situations in which he knew women were attracted to him, but he is presented as choosing to resist their advances.

In *The Announcement*, women groupies are used to mark the boundaries of Johnson's respectability. As Sharpley-Whiting (2007) indicates, the understanding of groupie culture behavior is heavily contingent upon female acquiescence and accessibility. Thus, labeling and depicting women desiring Johnson is both part of presenting his heterosexuality and respectability. Viewers see that Johnson is exposed to spaces of sexual excess, however, the film frames his encounters with women as seductive excess. The groupies in the club are presented as beautiful and glamorous temptations whose motivations and actions could possibly spoil Johnson's respectability because they are attracted to his black masculinity. As we watch women reach out to grab Johnson as he walks through the club, it becomes evident that the women are characterized as solely attempting to gain Johnson's attention, hoping to literally physically attach themselves to his body. In this moment, displaying Johnson's performance of discretion and restraint is crucial; instead of witnessing Johnson acting aggressive sexually, as is the stereotype of black men, the women's sexual aggression is on display. Because the film connotes their groupie status, whatever their motivations, the women vying for Johnson are presented as a singular mass of female hypersexuality. They are a group of nameless women that do not acknowledge sexual discretion when they interact with Johnson. Effectively, presenting the women as sexually available, aggressive, and desirous in contrast to Johnson's restraint, illustrates Johnson as respectable.

The film treats Johnson's HIV diagnosis as a reaffirmation of his appeal to women. *The Announcement* does not vilify Johnson for his promiscuity or for having unprotected sex. Instead, the film centers on Johnson performing respectability while his athletic black male body is on

display in a room full of beautiful women fighting for his attention. As Chris Rock reminds viewers in a voice over during this scene, “it’s very difficult to say no to gorgeous women.” Johnson’s actions are far removed from the sexually aggressive stereotypes associated with his celebrity status. By depicting Johnson’s unwavering attempts to display sexual restraint when he interacts with women, the film suggests Johnson is HIV positive because one groupie’s sexual allure compromised his commitment to sexual control and by extension, his respectability. The film positions Johnson’s HIV diagnosis as a result of a possible momentary lapse in judgment, but not as the result of deviant or excessive sexual behavior. HIV is framed as the unfortunate consequence Johnson receives being subjected to a sea of seductive women, despite his steadfast efforts to resist sexual temptation.

Not My Family: Performing Respectability

A major portion of *The Announcement* focuses on the care and consideration expressed by Johnson when he tells his family he is HIV positive. To frame the significance of presenting Johnson in this way for my argument I draw on Neal’s (2010) notions of black male respectability and family connections. Neal (2010) notes that, historically, while the performance of respectability is privileged, for the black family, it is black men who serve as the supposed head of the black family, which sets the example of respectability. Consequently, as the head of the household, respectable black men are charged with keeping their families unified despite outside influences or agitations. The film illustrates this tenet of respectable black masculinity because in this segment Johnson explicitly describes his HIV diagnosis as a personal crisis he would not let affect his family.

A significant aspect of the narrative about Johnson's HIV status in the film centers on his marriage to his college sweetheart-turned wife, Earletha "Cookie" Johnson. A pivotal moment illustrating Johnson's respectability comes when Johnson recalls the immediate hours after he discovered he was HIV positive and realized he had to share the news with Cookie. Immediately before Johnson begins his only face to face interview in the documentary, a picture montage of Cookie and Johnson's relationship scrolls across the screen: showing them hanging out during their college years, Cookie cheering for Johnson from the Lakers stands, and finally a picture of them sharing a passionate kiss on their wedding day. At end of the montage, we see Johnson place his head in his hands, take a deep breath, look directly into the camera, and state:

I have played against the best in basketball, Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, I thought that was going to be the most difficult times, those didn't compare... the most difficult thing in my life was driving from the doctor's office to tell my wife Cookie I had HIV. I just kept thinking, I gotta deliver this devastating news to my best friend, the woman I love, who always has my back.

The film's emphasis on Johnson's sense of obligation to Cookie and the picture montage is narratively central in *The Announcement*. Both aspects of the film suggest that Johnson's marriage is at the center of understanding his transition from HIV negative to HIV positive. This presentation and focus on the Johnson's marriage is significant because popular deviant images of black femininity and masculinity shape presentations of love and marriage for black Americans. Numerous media portrayals of Black men characterize them as unfaithful and troubled by the monogamy associated with marriage (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2004; Weekley, 2008). In contrast, popular culture representations of white heteronormative marriage construct the role of husband and wife through the notions of fidelity, loyalty, and stability. Married white men are expected to

cherish and protect their wives, while popular media depictions present black men as less capable and less willing to align with the normative gender expectations of heteronormative marriage. (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). To counter stereotypes of infidelity and aversion to marriage, the performance of respectable black masculinity calls for a black man to publicly display his love and commitment to his wife. This demonstration and declaration of fidelity functions as a strategy to resist racist discourses of Black male pathology. In line with the tenets of respectability, the film clearly establishes Johnson's devotion to Cookie. For example, despite just receiving shocking medical news, Johnson emphasized he was not concerned with his own well-being, or the public scrutiny he faced about his HIV diagnosis. He makes clear he understands that the most important thing he had to do in that moment was tell Cookie, his wife, he was HIV positive. Johnson also recalls how he told his son Andre from a previous relationship, that he is HIV positive, "I tried to let him know I was reckless, having unprotected sex, and all that, and I hope he makes better decisions than I did, but I knew he needed to hear the news from me." This explicitly produced moment illustrates how Johnson embodies respectability as a devoted family man and separates him from conventional representations of black men as irresponsible family men and inadequate husbands (Harris-Perry, 2011) by carefully contextualizing his HIV status as a family burden he shoulders alone. Throughout the segment, Johnson emphasizes how important it was that his family learned about his HIV status directly from him, emphasizing the importance he places on the impact of his diagnosis on his family.

Viewers see a similar performance of respectability when Johnson reflects on the possibility that he could have transmitted HIV/AIDS to Cookie. Johnson recalls what he told Cookie immediately after finding out she is not HIV positive:

I don't know what I would have done if she had HIV, this was my problem, my fault, and I didn't want my foolish attitude and the way I conducted myself to affect Cookie and I said hey, I can understand if you want to leave me, I get it.

Johnson's words are especially telling because this is the first time in the film he is shown openly acknowledging that he understands that his prior sexual behavior was dangerous to Cookie. While the film presents Johnson's HIV status as the result of casual unprotected heterosexual sex, Johnson's desire to shield Cookie, a black woman, from harm associated with HIV/AIDS gains salience in a historical context. Black men's efforts to defend black women have a complex and painful history in U.S. culture. Beginning in the antebellum era, dominant notions of femininity and the protections that proper women deserved were inextricably linked to white women and denied to black women (Collins, 2004; Thompson, 2009). Oftentimes, because of the threat of physical violence, black men were unable to protect black women from the discursive and physical violence associated with racism (Collins, 2004; Gordon, 1997; Griffin, 2000; hooks, 2004). Hence, the discourse of respectability politics emphasizes what Griffin (2000) deems the "promise of protection" (p. 35), which articulates black men's desire for and duty to protect black women's psychic, emotional, and physical safety (Griffin, 2000). While the promise of protection grants a semblance of physical and discursive safety to black women from black men, more importantly in the context of marriage it restores a sense of masculinity and respectability to black men through the role of protector (Gordon, 1997) and shows black men's motivation and ability to safeguard black women. In the film, Johnson is framed as his family's protector through the frame of self-sacrifice. His words fit the operative logic of respectability; Johnson's sentiments are conveyed as instinctive and unquestionable even if it means facing HIV/AIDS alone because Cookie's well-being is stake. He takes responsibility for his actions. HIV/AIDS is a devastating illness that

nobody should have to face, regardless of their behavior. And yet in the film, Johnson's HIV/AIDS status is framed as the result of his personal behavior, something for which he has to be accountable for. His promiscuity is mitigated because his performance of respectability atones his sexual behavior.

Immediately after we see Johnson convey that he understood he could have potentially lost Cookie because of his sexually promiscuous behavior, the camera zooms to Cookie shaking her head in disbelief saying:

I looked at him and said are you kidding me? I'm not leaving. I just focused on what was in front of me and that was the fact that it was life or death situation and I knew I loved him and went from there.

Neal (2010) argues that it is often the burden of black women to embody respectability as a reflection of respectable Black masculinity. He points out black men's performance of respectability gains validity from how black women present and embody respectability, which, as Thompson (2009) suggests, involves "the aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility" (p. 2). Cookie's indignant response is significant in establishing Johnson's respectability because the film emphasizes that she is monogamous. While the film suggests Johnson was sexually promiscuous during the time he dated Cookie, she is presented as sexually faithful to Johnson from the beginning of their relationship throughout their marriage. While Johnson presents an aura of respectable masculinity through his devotion to his marriage his dedication is only solidified when he becomes Cookie's husband. In contrast, Cookie is presented as unwavering and exceptional because she affirms her fidelity and love for Johnson despite knowing he was unfaithful to her and he is HIV positive. By situating

Cookie's discussion of Johnson's HIV status in the context of her marital vows, the film shows that she accepts her role as Johnson's wife and affirms that her priority is loving him.

We continue to see Cookie's performance of respectability redeem Johnson's respectable Black manhood when the film discusses the rumors surrounding Johnson's contraction of HIV. Looking at the camera, Cookie shrugs her shoulders and says:

To me it is one thing when people talk about other women or whatever it was, but there are a couple things I think people don't really realize. It could have happened ten years ago, who knows? There is no way to prove it (when Johnson contracted HIV) there really is no way to prove it, so why drive yourself crazy? I am only concerned with the future, loving and supporting each other.

Not only is Cookie presented as willing and dedicated to standing by Johnson, she definitively declares she is not concerned with the details of how he contracted the virus. Indicating ambivalence about more than just the mode of transmission, Cookie's "who knows what happened" stance implies she is also indifferent about the possibilities of Johnson's promiscuous sexual behavior. We see Cookie refusing to dwell on Johnson's sexual past and instead affirming that he is a good husband, she loves him, and she will stand beside him. Thus, Cookie aligns Johnson's sexual activity prior to their marriage with hegemonic heterosexuality and masculinity. She explains Johnson's HIV diagnosis through the construct of heterosexual promiscuity, and reinforces his respectability by presenting Johnson as a victim of women's sexual desires. In the previous segment we saw Johnson avoiding women's sexual advances, now we hear Cookie confirm he was subjected to excessive sexual behavior. The multiple possibilities Cookie suggests for Johnson's HIV status refers to all of women (possible groupies) who tempted and possibly tainted Johnson before he was her husband. It becomes evident that Johnson's respectability is

always established via the women shown and discussed in the film; the tempting groupies and his devoted wife. At one point in the interview, Cookie silently places her head in her hands, after a few moments she lifts her head and speaks directly to the camera, “I knew he needed me, and this family needed him. We had to fight this thing together.” In the following scene, the camera zooms in on Johnson holding Cookie’s hand and viewers hear Johnson say, “I don’t know what I would have done if she had left me, I probably wouldn’t have made it, she is my best friend.” Moments later, Cookie, smiling, turns to Johnson and says, “I love you.” In this moment, viewers witness how Cookie and Johnson’s performances of respectability work together. Their exchange reinforces Neal’s (2010) claim that for black men, marrying a respectable black woman further establishes their respectability by suggesting their spouse can elevate their embodiment of respectability. Cookie represents the understanding, forgiving, patient, and respectable wife, attributes needed to pardon Johnson’s sexual exploits and support his performance of respectability. Cookie’s declaration of love and commitment to Johnson suggests she fully understands her role as helpmate, is crucial to Johnson’s well-being and for that of the entire family. In turn, Johnson is shown as fully appreciating and honoring Cookie because he understands it is Cookie’s dedication and care that provides him with both physical and mental well-being.

The film presents the Johnsons’ marriage as a relationship that has matured, evolved, and continues changing for the better, despite Johnson’s HIV diagnosis. Effectively, it depicts the Johnsons as the exemplars of respectability. Harper (1996) notes that popular constructions of Johnson and his HIV status shored up his masculinity (p. 23) because Johnson’s HIV announcement raised questions regarding his sexual practices and his masculine identity. “Male homosexuality, which HIV has always been associated in the United States” (p. 23) is constructed

in media representations as the most shameful way to contract HIV. Johnson's body, which is now framed as infected with HIV, engenders a heightened consciousness of male homosexuality, so insistent references to his uncontrollable black male heterosexual desire are necessary. I counter Harper's argument by suggesting that *The Announcement* works to shore up Johnson's respectability. As discussed earlier, popular press sources have extensively discussed the rumors of Johnson's sexual exploits in the NBA in the contexts of both homosexuality and heterosexuality. *The Announcement* shifts this narrative, and exclusively discusses Johnson's HIV narrative in a heterosexual context. This time through Cookie's explanation of Johnson's HIV status. Cookie's words and presence in the film work to stabilize Johnson's respectability. She is presented as proof that despite his sexual dalliances, Johnson's masculinity is respectable because he did not infect the person that means the most to him and is now her loving committed husband, and she wholeheartedly supports him. With Cookie by his side, viewers understand Johnson's ultimate role is devoted husband and father which suggests speculation and gossip should fall to the wayside.

Concluding Thoughts

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has plagued the United States for over 30 years, and despite medical advancements and prevention efforts, black Americans continue to be the population most affected by the disease. Black Americans account for almost half of all new infections in the United States each year and represent more than one third of all Americans living with HIV (CDC, 2016). The rates of infection illustrate we need to look at how the story of HIV/AIDS and black Americans in the United States is being told.

In this analysis, I have emphasized two facets of *The Announcement*: the framing of Johnson's respectability through his public display of sexual resistance, which is dependent on

presenting women as excessively and aggressively attracted to him; and the presentation of Johnson's HIV/AIDS narrative through his marriage. Each of these depictions are linked to the other in that each relies on particular notions of respectable black masculinity. Performing respectable black masculinity is constructed as a display of agency, positioning black masculinity outside the confines of racist stereotypes of racialized sexual and gender behavior (Summers, 2004). In the film, Johnson is presented as making a choice: he chooses not to engage with women that are not his wife, and protects Cookie from the negative consequences of his past sexual behavior. *The Announcement* depicts Johnson as being in control of the relationships in his life. However, if we look closely, while the film suggests Johnson is agentic, his display of respectability depends on gender roles. Viewers understand Johnson's sexual self-control because women are presented as excessively and aggressively attracted to him. Johnson's performance of respectability is framed and negotiated through his interactions with women. The film establishes Johnson's commitment to Cookie as something he realized after she remains devoted to him despite his HIV/AIDS diagnosis. In this sense, the film frames Johnson's HIV/AIDS status as a tragic exception. In one moment, his respectable behavior faltered and sexual temptation changed the course of his life. However, despite his mistake, Cookie's devotion to Johnson enables him to redeem himself: his HIV diagnosis does not define his respectability.

While many perhaps understand that Johnson's celebrity status and wealth position him differently than most Americans, Johnson is respected as an HIV/AIDS icon. His HIV/AIDS story is used all over the world as an exemplar for living a healthy, productive, and successful life with HIV. We must examine what makes his HIV/AIDS narrative prominent in U.S. culture. *The Announcement* shapes how we discuss Johnson's iconic HIV/AIDS narrative. The presentation of Johnson's respectability calls attention to the ways in which HIV/AIDS narratives are presented

as sanitized stories with narrow definitions of gender and sexual behavior. Most importantly in the context of heterosexual black men, HIV/AIDS is still told through the story of women. Despite Johnson's own admission of sexual promiscuity in several media interviews, *The Announcement* is edited in a manner that merely suggests the possibility that Johnson had multiple sex partners during his NBA career. In a cultural context in which HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for black men ages 25-44, and the second leading cause of death for black women ages 25-44 (CDC, 2016), it is imperative we consider HIV/AIDS media representations' efficacy as sites to discuss the cultural anxieties associated with HIV/AIDS. For the black community this is a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER THREE:
A BURDEN TO BEAR: MARVELYN BROW, HIV/AIDS AND THE POLITICS OF
RESPECTABILITY

HIV is not an adjective so it does not define me. I think MARVELOUS would be more appropriate. I am not living with HIV; HIV is living with me. (Brown, 2013)

At the age of 19, Marvelyn Brown, a black woman, had everything going for her. She was the captain of her high school basketball team, home coming queen, popular, college bound, and in love with her high sweetheart (Brown, 2010). Everything changed when Brown was admitted to the hospital with a severe case of pneumonia. Recovering in the hospital ICU, Brown received the news that she was HIV positive. Thirteen years after her diagnosis is one of the most vocal contemporary HIV/AIDS activists in the United States. Since her diagnosis in 2003, Brown has shared her personal story nationally and internationally. Her 2008 bestselling book, *The Naked Truth: Young, Beautiful, and (HIV) Positive*, is described as, “the surprisingly hopeful story of how a straight non-promiscuous, every day girl contracted HIV.”¹ Brown’s dedication to HIV prevention earned her a 2007 Emmy Award for Outstanding National PSA. In 2010, the Magic Johnson Foundation and the Black AIDS Institute inducted Brown into The Heroes in the HIV/AIDS Struggle Photo Exhibit, and notably, *Clutch* magazine declared, “Marvelyn Brown one of the most important people in the fight against HIV/AIDS” (Danielle, 2011). Since 2003, HIV rates among heterosexual black women have been disproportionately higher than other populations in the United States (CDC, 2013; Weekley, 2015). Notably, Smith and Agrawala (2010) argue that

¹ From the book jacket of the 2008 paperback edition.

the shift in the population demographics most affected by HIV from gay white men to heterosexual black women has made “the popular discourse regarding HIV rates in the United States go from visible to invisible” (p. 86). Moreover, despite the calamitous impact that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has had on black women, the primary focus of cultural discussions and media representations of black Americans and HIV/AIDS centers on gay and bi-sexual black men (Bowleg et al., 2015). Thus, data about black women and HIV/AIDS largely ignores the fact that they represent a disproportionately high number of HIV/AIDS cases in U.S. In this cultural context, what does it mean that Brown, a young black woman, is a prominent voice in both white and black culture’s discussion of HIV/AIDS when representations of black women are largely absent? What is the significance of labeling Brown as “straight” and “not-promiscuous” in the discussion of HIV/AIDS? I interpret race and gender as socially and culturally constructed presentations, “not a biological fact determinative of behavior” (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008, p. 374). In his discussion of popular culture representations of racialized gender and sexuality, Snorton (2014) writes that the study of media representation, “allows us to apprehend broader cultural and social forces in operation [and] perceive how the process of representation mirrors processes of identification, namely in its ability to articulate relationships between, meaning, language and culture” (p. 109). I use Snorton’s call to examine the cultural meanings of HIV/AIDS, and the discursive frameworks used to discuss black femininity and sexuality in the context of HIV/AIDS.

In 2007, in addition to her public work as a spokesperson for HIV/AIDS research and awareness, Brown established her blog www.marvelynbrown.com, which functions as another component of her HIV/AIDS advocacy. Through her blog, Brown constructs an intimate and accessible platform through which she chronicles and shares her thoughts, feelings, and experiences as a black women living with HIV/AIDS. Formatted as an online diary, Brown uses

her blog to share narrative posts, past recollections, pictures, and video clips with viewers to help them see and understand different aspects of her life journey with HIV/AIDS. Brown's blog is an important part of the cultural discussion of racialized gender and sexuality and more specifically HIV/AIDS. It is a highly mediated site. Although the blog is structured to give a sense of a personal, authentic, and direct line to Brown's life with HIV/AIDS, it must be noted that she ultimately controls what thoughts and experiences she shares with viewers in her blog. Consequently, while Brown is constructed as publicly sharing her experiences, viewers receive a media presentation of Brown's life with HIV/AIDS. My interest is not in uncovering the "real" Marvelyn Brown, but rather in how the blog articulates racialized gender and sexuality in relation to HIV/AIDS. This analysis focuses specifically on Brown's video blog message (vlog) *TEN YEARS, TEN QUESTIONS, TEN ANSWERS (TEN)* on July 17, 2013, to publicly commemorate the milestone of living with HIV for ten years. In her vlog, Brown answers the most frequently asked questions she receives about her HIV status. While many of Brown's vlog messages focus on how she manages her daily experiences living with HIV (e.g. medical treatments, exercise routines, diet, pill regimen), in *TEN* Brown explicitly discusses and connects her femininity and sexual behavior to her HIV status. She discusses the impact of HIV/AIDS on her sense of womanhood and current sexual behavior.

Black Feminist Theory

Critical scholars are doing important work to address the complex and often contradictory ways black women living with HIV/AIDS are presented in U.S. media (Cohen, 1999; Collins, 2004; Hammonds, 1997; Treichler, 1999; Collins, 2004, 2015). According to their research, popular culture representations of womanhood portray black women in limited ways, reminding

us that media representations of black women's femininity and sexuality inform the way that contemporary U.S culture engages HIV/AIDS and black women (Collins, 2004). As bell hooks (1992) contends, "representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of nineteenth-century racism and which still shape perceptions today" (p. 69). In turn, black women living with HIV/AIDS are characterized as overly sexual and are subjected to harsh criticisms for their sexual behaviors because beliefs and attitudes about black women's sexuality are sanctioned by a culture that continues to embrace racialized and gendered stereotypes about sexuality. While my work is also concerned with how media representations of HIV positive black women constructs stereotypes of black women's sexual behavior, I focus specifically on how the discourse of the politics of respectability—a sexually conservative performance of femininity based on chasteness, purity, propriety, and lifestyle choices (Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009) articulates black women's femininity and sexuality in HIV/AIDS narratives.

In her vlog, Brown presents a complex and at times, contradictory portrait of respectability, black femininity, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS that simultaneously contests and reinforces cultural stereotypes associated with black women and HIV/AIDS. While we must resist simplistic readings that compel us to assess what is good and bad for black women, it is also possible to consider how the desire for black women to convey respectability disrupts and coincides with racist, sexist, and classist cultural constructions of black womanhood. As such, in this chapter, I first examine how Brown uses her performance of respectability to convey her capacity for self-love despite her HIV status, which challenges associations of black women's use of respectability to police their sexual behavior in HIV/AIDS representations. Secondly, I examine how Brown uses the racist and sexist "controlling image" (Collins, 2004, p. 76) of the welfare queen to embody respectability as a black

women living with HIV/AIDS. Finally, I reflect on Brown's vlog as a media site albeit troubling in some ways, that challenges depictions of HIV/AIDS and black women in important ways.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a useful framework for critically analyzing media representations because it calls attention to dominant characterizations of black womanhood (Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012; Griffin, 2012; hooks, 1981, 1992). The overarching commitments of BFT include but are not limited to: exposing the prevalence of controlling imagery, fostering self-definition and self-determination, drawing upon individual and collective knowledge, and resisting systematic oppression (Collins, 2004; Griffin, 2013, 2015; hooks, 1992). Considering the commitments of BFT to increasing critical consciousness, black women's "distinctive angles of vision" (Collins, 2004, p.15) are crucial to examining what Hammonds describes as a "crisis of representation for black women in the HIV epidemic" (1997, p. 210). Enriching critical media research, Griffin (2014) asserts BFT paired with the method of black feminist spectatorship creates a means for black women to critically examine how we are represented in media. hooks (1992) defines a black feminist spectator as a black woman who acknowledges the "power in looking" (p. 115) by engaging an "oppositional gaze" (p. 166). The oppositional gaze is critical, interrogational, consciously aware, and seeks to document the intersections of identity, the power of representation, and reproduction of domination in media and popular culture (Boylorn, 2008; Griffin, 2014; hooks, 1992). Thus, black feminist spectatorship can be an act of agency because practicing critical black feminist spectatorship enables black women to deconstruct oppressive images to articulate the empowerment of self-definition (Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2004; Griffin, 2012, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Madison, 1995,). When black women position themselves as spectators, they use their critical eye to resist debased representations of black women. Moreover, hooks (1992) explains, black women "do more than resist as critical spectators, black women

participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revise, and invent on multiple levels” (p. 128).

As a black feminist spectator viewing Brown’s vlog I center how currently relevant respectability politics is to the discussion of black women and HIV/AIDS. I can deconstruct how Brown uses respectability politics in her HIV narrative to negotiate the complexity of black women’s sexuality and femininity. However, acknowledging black feminist spectatorship’s commitment to positionality (Bobo, 1995; Boylorn, 2008; Griffin, 2012, 2014), I must acknowledge that my intersectional identity is simultaneously privileged and marginalized. While I racially identify with the population most impacted by HIV/AIDS, I am currently HIV negative and as such, I live quite differently than Brown; I do not experience the physical, mental, and social stigma associated with HIV/AIDS in U.S. culture (Bowleg et al., 2015; Hammonds, 1997; Treichler, 1999). Therefore, offering “a black woman’s critique of black women’s marginalization” (Coleman, 2011, p. 39), this analysis considers how Brown’s HIV/AIDS narrative illustrates how black woman contest and grapple with representations of black femininity.

HIV: A Welcomed Burden

In U.S. culture, media depictions of racialized sexuality and gender present black women living with HIV/AIDS in totalizing terms. Across media formats, from the evening news to motion pictures, the narrative of black women and HIV/AIDS portray their lives as “chaotic and unruly” (Hammonds, 1997, p. 180). Representations of black women living with HIV/AIDS reveal very intimate details of their lives: maternal status, lack of socioeconomic resources, purported uncontrolled past sexual behavior, and their dependence on unreliable male partners, all of which

render them deserving of the virus. Effectively, media depictions suggest black women's lifestyle choices prior to HIV/AIDS render them morally irredeemable. In turn, performing respectability is the most significant defense black women living with HIV/AIDS have to articulate their HIV status.

As discussed earlier, the tenets of respectability construct a particular type of black woman; ideally she is a professional, educated, church-going Christian who conforms to normative feminine gender roles and conservative heteronormative sexual behavior (Durham, 2012; Harris-Perry, 2011; Higginbotham, 1993, Weekley, 2015). Most importantly, performing respectable femininity depends on black women consciously presenting their bodies a manner that physically and discursively aligns with white middle class ideals of femininity. What you say and do can validate or negate presenting respectability, therefore black women are constantly negotiating displays of racialized gender and sexuality. The notion of performing respectability takes on a heightened meaning for presentations of black women living with HIV/AIDS. Hammonds (1997) notes, because of the sexualized stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and black women, respectability discursively constructs HIV/AIDS positive black women using the binary of women as innocent victim or deserving of HIV/AIDS. The disease is s the great leveler in performing respectability. Media images of HIV/AIDS and black women perpetuate racist stereotypes of black women's supposed uncontrolled sexuality and deviance that neither class privilege or religious affiliation can refute. Thus, in presentations of HIV/AIDS, respectability becomes the essential backstory black women must perform. Claiming respectability in their lives prior to HIV/AIDS allows black women to distance themselves from the stereotypes of excessive sexuality associated with HIV/AIDS and black femininity. While performing respectability did not save them from

contracting the virus, using the tenets of proper black womanhood to tell their HIV/AIDS narrative allows black women to frame themselves as undeserving HIV/AIDS victims.

The first question Brown tackles in *TEN* addresses the impact HIV/AIDS had on her life. As Brown sits alone, viewers see the question scroll across the screen: “do you regret contracting HIV?” Looking directly at the camera, while touching her hand to her heart, Brown states:

No, I don't regret contracting HIV, HIV has taught me self-love, self-responsibility, and self-respect. Don't get me wrong, I absolutely hate the virus and I wish I had another teacher, but HIV came into my life at a time, and taught me, it gave me a purpose for my life and a reason to fight for my life. So for that I am actually very grateful I contracted HIV. (Brown, 2013)

Brown's response extends HIV/AIDS, black womanhood, and performing beyond the binary of underserving and deserving behavior. Instead of sanitizing her past lifestyle choices, Brown undermines the power of her past behavior to define her current respectability. In her answer, Brown uses respectability to affirm her value as a black women living with HIV/AIDS.

Brown's word challenge Cohen's (1999) argument that in the context of HIV/AIDS, respectability discourse diverts attention from the disproportionate rates of HIV among black women because, “these women do not tell their stories of HIV as acts of empowerment in their struggle against AIDS but as worthy victims” (p. 55). Cohen argues that black women's reliance on respectability to tell their HIV/AIDS narratives is troubling because, while their narratives are meant to raise awareness for HIV, respectability discourse presents them as victims. Moreover, establishing respectability simultaneously reifies stereotypes of HIV positive black women as sexually immoral and promiscuous. Aligning respectability politics to black women's HIV/AIDS narratives does not simply negate stereotypes of black femininity associated with HIV/AIDS.

Respectability deployed in presentations of black woman and HIV/AIDS preserves an image of upstanding womanhood and still suggests that there is some inherent racial connection between the image of HIV/AIDS and black women. It implies that black women with identities that do not match the behaviors associated with respectability cannot be victims of HIV/AIDS.

Brown forgoes this setup and presents what it means to be a black woman, HIV positive, and respectable outside the boundaries of normative respectability politics. Brown challenges the assumption that to articulate her womanhood as a black woman living with HIV she must reveal her respectable backstory. She does not use her HIV/AIDS as an attempt to reconcile her past behavior; she marks her respectability within her current situation. She negotiates her performance of respectability by explicitly discussing the ways HIV allows her to love herself. Brown defiantly confirms her commitment to love herself when she states: “HIV has taught me self-love, self-responsibility, and self-respect. HIV came into my life at a time, and taught me, it gave me a purpose in my life.” Brown shifts the discourse of respectability, making it clear we should not recognize her worth as a woman because of who she was before HIV/AIDS, rather we should appreciate her as a woman living with HIV/AIDS. Viewers are not given an exceptional set of circumstances detailing how Brown contracted HIV, in fact, Brown provides no information about how she was infected with HIV. Thus, it becomes evident that she does not subscribe to strict divisions of deserving and underserving womanhood to present her respectability. Brown’s presentation suggests she only shares the aspects of her HIV/AIDS narrative she deems important.

In this moment, Brown subverts respectability politics when she conveys she is not a victim to HIV/AIDS, and by extension not a victim of racialized stereotypes that influence the perception of black women’s gender and sexuality. BFT scholars (Hammonds, 1997; Higginbotham, 1993; Griffin, 2015; Thompson, 2009) argue that the politics of respectability assert that black women

who perform and adhere to the behaviors of proper black womanhood (e.g. sexual chasteness) have a heightened sense of pride and self-worth. For black women, performing respectability in a culture that debases and negatively stereotypes black femininity is a choice which equates to a form of self-love. However, to articulate this self-love black women must verbally or visually present their respectability. Specifically, it is important for black women to articulate their respectability because HIV/AIDS is associated with promiscuous sexual behavior. In turn, by proclaiming self-love, Weekley (2015) argues black women can present themselves with an assumed identity of innocence. Respectable black women are presumed innocent because their commitment to performing respectability means they have too much self-pride and love for themselves to engage in the immoral behaviors that are associated with HIV/AIDS (e.g. promiscuity, excessive sexuality). Once again, performing respectability frames HIV/AIDS as an undeserved fate for particular black women.

By not subjecting her HIV/AIDS narrative to the binary of deserving/underserving, Brown's proclamation of self-love challenges respectability politics. Brown's answer to the question does not allow her the luxury of assumed innocence. When she does not provide her respectable back story, Brown places her sexual past and feminine behavior in question. Brown risks being labeled promiscuous or adulterous, but her refusal to share her backstory suggests she is willing to blur the binary of deserving and undeserving HIV/AIDS victim. I describe Brown's answer to the question as a blurring because we must also acknowledge there is a possibility that her HIV/AIDS narrative is not read as deserving victim because she does not articulate her sexual past. This blurring is significant because it challenges how respectability is conventionally discussed. The politics of respectability posit a particular performance of black femininity as seamless, positioning black women who adhere to it as embodying ideal black femininity.

However, there can be no deviation from the performance. As Higginbotham (1993) notes, “there can be no laxity as far as sexual behavior and politeness are concerned.” Brown does not provide us with a polite HIV/AIDS narrative. If Brown adhered to the deserving/undeserving binary, we could consider her HIV/AIDS narrative polite. Instead, Brown says life with HIV might not be perfect, but she asserts that herself love and faith that her life has meaning ultimately helps her live with the virus. She does not position her past sexual behavior as her saving grace when she asserts that she believes that her life with HIV is something of worth. She presents her respectability and HIV diagnosis as a pedagogical journey; she is a woman living with HIV/AIDS who is maturing and changing, values herself, and most importantly, loving herself. Brown’s performance of respectability resonates with what Higginbotham contends is the essence of respectability politics. Higginbotham states, “the politics of respectability, and this is the key thing about it, gives you the moral authority to say to the outside world, I am worthy of respect. You don’t respect me, but I am worthy of respect” (Foster, 2015). The concept of moral authority is significant in performing respectable black femininity. Respectability counters demeaning and stereotypical images of black womanhood by demanding that black women are visible. Brown demands her own moral authority because she presents HIV/AIDS as a painful but ultimately empowering experience that allows her the autonomy to articulate her embodiment of respectability on her own terms. While Brown does not provide her vlog viewers full insight into her HIV/AIDS narrative, her engagement with respectability and her commitment to moral authority when she explains her femininity and sexuality present provide a space to redefine what respectability and HIV/AIDS can mean.

Thank Goodness That's Not Me: HIV/AIDS and the Welfare Queen

Despite conveying an edict of self-love and respectability, Brown also uses the welfare queen stereotype to articulate her respectability and HIV/AIDS identity. Brown positions herself as the anti-welfare queen because she is HIV positive. The second question Brown answers in her vlog, *TEN YEARS, TEN QUESTIONS, TEN ANSWERS* is: “where would you be in life without HIV?” Brown begins with the following answer:

Yikes! That's a scary question. At the time I contracted the virus I was down a path of self-destruction, I had not a care in the world (Brown, 2013).

At first glance, Brown's declaration that HIV saves her from “a path of self-destruction,” seems to further her proclamation of self-love and worthiness. However, Brown's performance of respectability and her description of her future without HIV/AIDS is striking because it aligns with popular culture constructions of the welfare queen. The welfare queen is a class specific depiction of a socio-economically challenged black woman who abuses government assistance (e.g. food stamps). As Lubiano (1992) notes:

Categories like “black woman,” “black women,” or particular subsets of those categories, “welfare queen,” are not simply social taxonomies, they are also recognized in the national public as stories that describe the world in particular and politically loaded ways-and that is exactly why they are constructed, reconstructed, manipulated, and contested. (p. 330-331)

The welfare queen functions as a cautionary tale of pathologized racialized sexuality, gendered class, and reckless behavior, that relegates black women to the margins of respectability. As discussed earlier, popular media suggests that HIV positive black women experience the virus because of what they do, how often they do it, and with whom. Specifically, for the welfare queen,

contracting HIV/AIDS is the social consequence of her irresponsible lifestyle and the medical outcome of her hypersexual behavior. Media representations bring together the racist and sexist stereotype to stigmatize black women living with HIV/AIDS (Cohen, 1999; Hammonds, 1997; Weekley, 2010). To counter negative images, many presentations of black women living with HIV/AIDS illustrate how black women use silence and concealment as part of performing respectability. Hine (1993) argues that the “culture of dissemblance” which the politics of respectability created, is a strategy black women use in the hope that their silence alongside their embodiment of white middle class femininity counters negative stereotypes of black women. In doing so, black women engage in attitudes and behaviors that have the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shield the truth of their inner lives (Hine, 1993). In other words, the performance of respectability is the visual and rhetorical enactment that allows for the culture of dissemblance. This silence is vital because it allows black women to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” (Hine, 1989, p. 915). The notion of sanctity takes on a particular meaning for HIV/AIDS black women. In her discussion of HIV/AIDS and black women, Hammonds (2009) writes, “It should not surprise us that black women are silent about sexuality. The imposed production of silence reflects the deployment of power” (p. 100). Because media depictions present black women with HIV/AIDS in terms of their supposed uncontrolled sexual behavior and deviant lifestyle choices, the practice of dissemblance allows them a way to avoid discussing lifestyle choices or life experiences that can be interpreted as immoral or used as justification for contracting HIV/AIDS.

Brown ruptures the practice of silence in her HIV/AIDS narrative when she begins her answer to the vlog question by divulging her past behavior. She stares directly into the camera with a somber expression and states: “at the time I contracted the virus, I was down a path of

destruction,” continuing she shakes her head back and forth and declares, “I had not a care in the world.” Brown’s body language and physical movement (e.g. shaking her back and forth) suggests she understands the expectations that accompany performing respectability and still decides to share her story. In contrast to black women concealing the truth of their inner lives, Brown, through subtle details, acknowledges her past behavior which translates into her current self-presentation of respectability. Respectability relies on “an aggressive shielding of body and a foregrounding of morality” (Thompson, 2009, p. 2). As discussed earlier, while the principles of respectability suggest the burden is on Brown to present her lifestyle in an acceptable and normative manner by silencing or sanitizing her HIV/AIDS narrative, Brown’s description of her past life as a “path of destruction” and “carefree” challenges respectability’s demand that black women foreground their morality when discussing HIV/AIDS.

Brown’s response offers a new cautionary tale about welfare; if she had not contracted HIV, she would have continued on a destructive path which would have ultimately led to her becoming a welfare queen. Brown positions HIV as the life event that sets in motion her enactment of respectability. Notably, Brown does this by suggesting that her past behavior authenticates her embodiment of respectability. In this answer, Brown extends her counter narrative from her earlier vlog response. Now she is willing to discuss her backstory, but she does not present it through the tenets of respectability. She implies she has no desire to present herself as pure and chaste because juxtaposing her destructive past to who she is currently is part of presenting and establishing Brown as both respectable and HIV positive. When Brown contextualizes her past behavior as “not having a care in the world” she is negotiating her own backstory, one in which she suggests that all her life experiences account for her current situation. She challenges the notion that her past behavior dictates her future. Her assertion that she is not perfect nor inherently flawed allows

viewers to question and challenge the boundaries of respectability and HIV/AIDS Brown asserts that her prior indiscretions and her HIV/AIDS status are not mutually exclusive to her embodiment of respectability.

Brown's answer is complex, while she challenges the notion of silence and respectability in her HIV/AIDS narrative, her answer suggests HIV/AIDS regulates her lifestyle choices. Unlike her previous answer in which she maintains her moral authority to define HIV/AIDS as the moment she learns to love herself, here she presents her respectability differently. While she explicitly declares that HIV is not punishment for her past, Brown suggests that HIV/AIDS gave her the ability to perform black respectable womanhood. Brown insists that instead of reflecting the end of her life, HIV/AIDS was a new beginning. We must consider the implications of Brown suggesting that a sexually transmitted virus (HIV) is the mechanism she needs to discipline her behavior. BFT scholars argue that discourse about the politics of respectability limits how we talk about black women's actions (Griffin, 2013, 2014; Thompson, 2009; Weekley, 2015). Performing respectability seldom serves black women well. Respectability has not resulted in more protection for black women from sexual violence and it has not ended racist and sexist stereotypes of black woman's sexuality (Weekley, 2015). Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative is exemplary of this claim since she suggests she could not live up to the expectations of respectability without HIV disciplining her lifestyle choices. Brown uses the normative discourse of respectability politics to suggest that HIV allows her to present her womanhood in ways that align with proper womanhood. Her respectability is ultimately dependent on her prior lifestyle choices which lead to Brown contracting HIV/AIDS. Therefore, while Brown conveys respectability, her narrative is dependent on the negative stereotypes associated with black women's sexual behavior. Ultimately, Brown's respectable back story frame HIV/AIDS as a disciplining mechanism for her lifestyle choices.

Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative animates the possible ways respectability works to both police and challenge notions of black womanhood.

Baby Mama Drama: Interpreting The Welfare Queen

Commensurate with popular culture's construction of black women and HIV/AIDS, are concerns about the welfare system and social anxieties about the sexual behavior of black women (Collins, 2000; Foster, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Lubiano, 1992). Popular representations of HIV/AIDS construct black women as, "the unmarried, procreating low-income woman of color" (Juhasz, 1990, p. 33). Cohen (1999) argues that media representations construct black women with HIV/AIDS in a way that suggests black women refuse to accept their risk for HIV/AIDS infection by framing them as complicity engaging in high-risk sexual behavior. Specifically, the welfare queen stereotype suggests that black women welfare recipients exhibit excessive and uncontrollable sexuality, which leads them to have children with multiple men with little thought about the consequences of their actions (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). In turn, the welfare queen is always precariously close to HIV/AIDS because her fertility becomes her source of income; her babies mean more welfare income, so consequently she has no incentive to practice safe sex.

How does Brown flip this script and assert HIV/AIDS saves her from becoming a welfare queen? Brown simultaneously challenges and reifies the association between the welfare queen, black women, and HIV. Earlier, Brown suggests HIV/AIDS continues to discipline her sexual behavior, in the latter part of her answer she explicitly states them. In her vlog, Brown appears to simply be thinking about her own fate if she had not contracted HIV/AIDS when she states: "Do you want the *truth*? I would probably be twenty-nine with multiple children and multiple baby fathers living off government assistance." While Brown never mentions the word welfare queen, the words: "multiple children" and "multiple baby fathers living on government assistance" are

tropes used to describe the welfare queen (Collins, 2004; Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Brown's use of these words are important. She suggests she is not a welfare queen because she is HIV positive. Brown frames her respectability as contingent on the lifestyle HIV/AIDS allows her to avoid: HIV allows her to escape the confines of what she predicts her future would have held.

Brown uses her HIV status to police black women's racialized gender and sexual behavior. I use the term police to indicate the regulation of behavior, attitudes, and the public image of a group (Carby, 1992; Cohen, 1999). Throughout the blog, Brown complicates the seeming dichotomy of welfare queen and respectable black woman as she describes her close similarity with the welfare queen. Brown suggests she is respectable because her HIV/AIDS diagnosis disciplines her sexual behavior. Performing respectable black femininity equates class status with sexual behavior, and by connecting respectability to sexual propriety it serves as a gatekeeping function. It reflects a way to distinguish who is respectable and who is not (Harris, 2007). Stereotypes of black women living with HIV/AIDS suggest that contracting the virus is the behavior that prevents them from claiming respectability because HIV/AIDS is indicative of their lifestyle choices, and by extension sexual behavior. As discussed, media representations present the welfare queen and HIV/AIDS as a condition limited to race, class, and gender (Hammonds, 1997; Weekley, 2010). In contrast, Brown positions her HIV/AIDS status as part of respectable femininity and suggests that HIV/AIDS allows her to stay sexually chaste. While Brown's assertion challenges how we think about respectability and HIV/AIDS, it also works to stereotype black working class women's sexual behavior. Brown presents herself as the gate keeper for the welfare queen's supposed deviant sexual behavior. Her confession of how close she was to being a welfare queen before she contracted HIV implies that working class black women whose

sexuality is not disciplined by HIV/AIDS are likely to engage in promiscuous and excessive sexual behavior that will inevitably make them welfare queens.

Concluding Thoughts

As a media site for examining how respectability politics function to articulate racialized gender and sexuality, Brown's blog is provocative and unique. Moreover, Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative illustrates that analyzing media images that construct black women within the HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from simple and is not without problems or contradictions. Although I believe Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative is vital for people to hear, hooks (1981) offers insight into the problematic implications of the undeserving and deserving binary respectability presents "to be strong in face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation" (p. 61). Drawing on her wisdom, we can read strength in Brown's discussion of her HIV status, yet despite her resilience, we can also question the ways in which her HIV narrative is nonetheless tethered to troubling stereotypes of black womanhood. While Brown is presented as confident and proud of who she is as an HIV positive black woman, if we dig a little deeper, we see that her narrative is not quite progressive. She premises her respectability on the controlling image of the welfare queen. Brown frames the welfare queen as a universally known marker for black women's sexual pathology, which allows her to only need to describe the attributes associated with the stereotype to establish her respectability. Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative presents many of the common contradictions and tensions BFT scholars address when discussing the utility of respectability politics for articulating racialized gender and sexuality. As Brown's vlog answers illustrate, respectability discourses that are intended to recuperate black

women's femininity and sexuality from racist and sexist stereotypes, contribute to delineating the boundaries of acceptable black womanhood.

From a BFT perspective, as I watch Brown attempt to present her HIV/AIDS narrative, I recognize that in Brown's case respectability must be acknowledged as a both/and discourse. The binary of respectability does not work to present her HIV/AIDS narrative. What is noticeable about Brown's respectability is her ambivalence in sharing her HIV/AIDS narrative. I do not mean she is presented as ambivalent in a way that suggests that she does not care, I use the word ambivalent to refer to the way she presents her respectability. Historically, the performance of respectability is discussed as a highly conscious performance that black women engage. As discussed earlier, there is no room for laxity or deviation from moral behavior. However, Brown's presentation does deviate, she both recites and rejects the prevailing demands of respectable black femininity in her HIV/AIDS narrative. By articulating her racialized gender and sexuality through both challenging and policing respectability politics, Brown represents a different enactment of respectability. She brings together all the cultural anxieties performing respectability is supposed to eliminate for black women—sexual deviance, non-conformity, otherness, marginalization, and exclusion—and embraces them in her performance of respectability. Brown's presentation of her femininity is distinct in a media landscape in which representations of black women living with HIV are dominated by depictions of sexual irresponsibly and precarious behavior.

In the current cultural moment in which 1 out of 48 black will contract HIV/AIDS in their lifetime, the need for diverse representations of black women's femininity and sexuality will increase. We must recognize the way media representations present black one living with HIV/AIDS in one dimensional deviant ways that align with stereotypes of racialized gender and sexuality. More importantly as scholars we must be critical of ideas that only proscribe limited

binaries for black women to talk back to stereotypical depictions. On the surface, respectability is about black women resisting racist constructions of black womanhood. However, when we consider the way that Brown presents her respectability we see it is a negotiation of the multiple discourses that are placed on black women's bodies. In turn, a binary does not work to negotiate the discourses together so that we can find new ways to talk back to racist and sexist presentations of black womanhood.

CHAPTER FOUR:

DESERVING OR INNOCENT: HIV/AIDS DEPICTIONS IN PRECIOUS

Precious, released in November 2009, is the film adaptation of Sapphire's controversial debut novel *PUSH* (1996). Aligning with films such as *The Color Purple* (1985), *Beloved* (1998), *For Colored Girls* (2010), and *Pariah* (2012), *Precious* focuses on black womanhood since as Griffin (2013) states, "it addresses the suffering that black girls and women can and do endure (p. 1). The film tells the story of the educational, economic, and family tribulations of poverty-stricken sixteen-year-old Claireece "Precious" Jones. Living in Harlem during the late 1980's, illiterate and welfare dependent Precious is the mother of a special needs child, and pregnant with her second child, both the result of rape by her father. Precious also endures sexual, physical, and verbal abuse from her terrorizing mother, Mary. The film's storyline centers on Precious' determination to break the cycle of socioeconomic dependence and urban squalor she experiences living with Mary. *Precious* pushes the boundaries on some very racially charged stereotypes in the United States: the unemployed black mother depending on the welfare system for economic survival ("welfare queen"), the uncaring and absent black father, hypersexual black women, and an obese black girl who eats, among other things, fried chicken and pig feet. However, in the midst of all her struggles, we learn one more aspect of Precious' oppressive life: she is HIV positive.

In *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* Kelley (1997) reminds us that when it comes to the Black poor, Black people's dysfunctionality fascinates society; "it is alluring" (p. 8). Cultural discourse and images of black poverty construct impoverished black bodies as vividly and shockingly different from mainstream society. Therefore, media representations that depict these differences

draw attention in U.S. culture. This allure was so strong for former first lady Barbara Bush that she was compelled to hold a special screening of *Precious* in her hometown, Houston, TX. Describing her reaction after watching the film, Mrs. Bush states:

There are kids like Precious everywhere. Each day we walk by them: young boys and girls whose home lives are dark secrets. Without the reading skills they need to lead a productive life, the chances are they will continue the cycle of poverty. I planned to say a few words when the movie was over—but I was speechless, the movie is so strong and so honest. I covered my eyes several times. I want to go back now, and I want to see it again (Bush, 2009).

Bush's commentary echoes the author of *Push* (1996), who asserts, "Silence will not save African Americans. We've got to work hard and long and our work begins by telling our stories out loud to whoever has the courage to listen" (Sapphire, 2010). Bush forces herself to listen to Precious' story. More pointedly, in a *Newsweek* article, she labels *Precious* a new "call to action," and gives Newsweek readers a "homework assignment:" to see the movie and ask themselves how they can help children like Precious in the United States (Bush, 2009). In her public praise of *Precious*, Mrs. Bush seems to suggest a fictional film can provide society an understanding of the social significance of racialized poverty and illiteracy in the United States. Mrs. Bush's comments about *Precious* illustrate that it is a fruitful site to analyze media representations of racialized gender and class. Specifically, my analysis considers the tendency for media representations to portray depictions of working class black women as a marker of racial authenticity, despite the complicated issues associated with racialized class and gender identities in the United States. Moreover, in a cultural moment when 1 out of 48 black women will contract HIV/AIDS in their lifetime (CDC, 2016), the conversation about the film must go beyond if Precious can read or not.

This chapter analyzes the performances of black femininity—and by extension, black feminine respectability—that function in Lee Daniel’s Oscar award winning film, *Precious* (2009). By analyzing how the film presents Mary and Precious’ performances of femininity via the controlling image of the welfare queen, I argue that discourses of racialized gender and class shape how HIV/AIDS and black women can be understood in the film.

Media Images of Black Femininity: The Dangerous Welfare Queen

The story of *Precious* is premised on the controlling image of the black welfare queen (Collins, 2000). Despite recent census data revealing that a record number of U.S. citizens (48.6%) of all races and ethnicities are accessing and receiving some form of government assistance (Blake, 2012); the stereotype of the welfare queen still persists. This image is a class-specific depiction of working class Black women who are single, poor mothers, who receive government assistance (e.g. food stamps) (Collins, 2000). At its core, the welfare queen stereotype attaches the condition of poverty and deception to black women who refuse to work, have several children, and bilk the welfare system for survival (Lubiano, 1992). The stereotype of welfare queen is not only racialized, it is also gendered; the label welfare queen does not apply to black people in general, or to all women welfare recipients, but specifically to black single mothers who receive welfare. We see this cultural narrative in *Precious*, as the film presents Precious and Mary as deserving and undeserving respectfully, of government assistance based on how they exhibit the cultural and social markers of the welfare queen.

A significant body of critical media scholarship discusses how socioeconomically challenged black women are presented in U.S. media (Durham, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Lubiano, 1992; Thompson, 2009; Zachery-Jordan, 2009). According to the research, media

images of working class black women often construct black women as deviant, immoral, callous, lazy, and unfit parents, and more pointedly, as an economic drain on government resources. Notwithstanding the necessity of continued examination of media portrayals of working class black women, I analyze *Precious* to consider how representations of working class HIV/AIDS positive black women function. While critical media scholarship continues to examine representations of working class black women, depictions of working class black women living with HIV/AIDS are often left out of the scholarly conversation. Moreover, scholarship that examines representations of black women and HIV/AIDS tend to focus on middle class black women (Hammonds, 1997, Weekley, 2015). This is problematic because 56% of black women living with HIV/AIDS live below the poverty line and reside in the five states that have the highest rates of poverty for black Americans (Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida) (CDC, 2014). An analysis of *Precious* opens up a discussion about black working class women (Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012; Hammonds, 1997; Griffin, 2013; Weekley, 2015) and HIV/AIDS (Cohen, 1999; Hammonds, 1997; Treichler, 1999; Weekley, 2015, Zita, 1998) in media representations.

In this analysis, I also extend the conversation to consider how the politics of respectability intertwines with discourses about black working class women and HIV/AIDS. In negotiating social and cultural identity in the predominantly white United States, historically, black people have employed respectability politics. As Higginbotham (1993) notes, “respectability demanded that every individual in the Black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-determination along moral lines.” (p. 61). More specifically, the politics of respectability is a form of discursive self-representation that refigures black people as strategically conforming to the hegemonic manners and morals around gender performance and sexual propriety in an attempt

to access and secure social legitimacy (Harris-Perry; 2011; Higginbotham, 1993; Miller-Young, 2008).

As discussed in Chapter 1, while socioeconomic wealth can be a factor in the performance of respectability, class differentiation is established and secured through specific gender and sexual behavior. In other words, black Americans do not have to be wealthy to perform respectability, but they must aspire to the behaviors and principles governed by respectability politics to be deemed acceptable as middle class. Thus, notions of respectability continue to be directed at working class black women to police their lifestyle, gender, and sexual choices as deviant and out of control. In this chapter, I build upon scholarship that examines how respectability works to police representations of black gender, sexuality, and class (Durham, 2012; Gundry, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011; Higginbotham, 1993; Collins, 2004) by examining how Mary and Precious' performance as welfare queens positions them outside the boundaries of respectable black femininity. I conduct a close textual analysis of *Precious*, focusing on the segments of the film that are helpful in accessing the presentation of key ideas about HIV/AIDS, working class women, and respectability. I recognize that *Precious* is what Walters (1995) defines as a “symptomatic text,” which informs us of cultural phenomena—in this media site, the ongoing stigma of working class black women living with HIV/AIDS. By analyzing *Precious*, as a symptomatic text “clues about the workings of a larger cultural context can be discussed” (Rennels, 2015, p. 4). In this chapter, I examine how *Precious* presents HIV/AIDS and black women in a manner that blurs socioeconomic status and HIV/AIDS identity. I highlight the cultural understandings and anxieties about working class black women, HIV/AIDS, and respectability that are reflected and produced in the film's presentation of Mary and Precious.

Always Prepared: The Welfare Queen Performs

Jordan-Zachery (2009) argues that because of the controlling image of the welfare queen, the use of welfare no longer represents a state of poverty, but rather a way of life. The stereotype equates welfare queens with black women who do not expend energy unless doing so results in maintaining or increasing their welfare benefits. Reflecting this cultural sentiment, in the film a social worker visits Mary's home each week to monitor her efforts to find a job and her living conditions. Even before the visit starts, the audience sees how Mary manipulates the welfare system. For instance, although Precious' first daughter Mongo lives with Precious' grandmother Toosie; when the social worker visits, Toosie brings Mongo to Mary's house, so the social worker thinks Mongo lives there. Describing the living arrangement, Precious explains that this setup ensures that "my mother gets the moneys and food stamps for me and Mongo." Precious' explanation of Mary's actions illustrates how the welfare queen conspires to keep her economic assistance, while remaining unemployed. Mary is presented as having no desire to work, as conveyed by Precious who is positioned as a reliable witness, who says, "My momma don't work she just collects her paycheck and plays her numbers." Precious verifies Mary would rather lie about her situation and buy lottery tickets than find a job. Mary's refusal to work positions her family members as the main source for her welfare benefits. Before the visit begins, viewers watch Mary lay on the couch and smoke a cigarette while Precious and Toosie scurry around attempting to straighten up the apartment. When Ms. Turner rings the buzzer earlier than expected, Mary berates Precious for not alerting her, and demands Precious find her wig, while she applies lipstick. Just before Ms. Turner enters the apartment, Mary roughly pulls Mongo onto her lap. Viewers see Mongo squirm and whimper uncomfortably in Mary's tight grip while Toosie pleads for Mary to "let that child be." Mary ignores Mongo's discomfort and tells Toosie, "mind your own goddamn

business.” Nevertheless, the moment Ms. Turner steps inside, Mary is affectionate toward Mongo, referring to her as “my sweet grandbaby” bouncing and nuzzling Mongo on her lap.

When Ms. Turner, the social worker, enters the apartment, and begins asking Mary about her efforts to find employment, her answer varies greatly from Precious’ description of her lifestyle. “I filled out several applications, but they all say the same thing, they will call me back,” Mary humbly tells Ms. Turner while she shakes her head back and forth. Mary leads Ms. Turner to think Mary tirelessly fills out applications every week, without any luck. However, Mary lets Ms. Turner know she is not giving up, as she smiles at Ms. Turner and states, “I will keep looking though.” In this moment, because viewers hear Precious describe her unwillingness to work, the film presents Mary’s determined and optimistic answers to Ms. Turner’s questions as deceptive and conniving, definitive behaviors associated with the welfare queen (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011). Mary is not simply a welfare cheat; she is dangerous because she knows what Ms. Turner expects to hear; that she wants to work. What makes Mary the welfare queen is that she constantly attempts to manipulate the system for her benefit. The film presents Mary as having no trepidation about what she says to Ms. Turner because Mary is in control of her dishonesty. Mary’s conversation with Ms. Turner confirms how her deception verifies she is a welfare queen. Mary maintains her deceptiveness despite Ms. Turner asking her questions and surveilling her house, which indicates she is conscious that presenting herself in a certain manner is crucial. Furthermore, conveying Mary’s dishonesty relies on showing that Mrs. Turner believes her lies. Despite giving viewers the “inside scoop” on the situation by making us witness to Mary’s outbursts and contempt for Ms. Turner, Ms. Turner is fooled into believing Mary’s performance, instantiating the stereotype of the welfare queen who is skilled at bucking the system. Mary’s manipulation of the system is active, she sets out to deceive, and the audience sees she is successful. Mary is not simply

a welfare cheat. She is dangerous because she knows what Ms. Turner expects to hear: that she wants to work, and is grateful for her welfare assistance

As the visit progresses, Mary's interactions with her family continue to vilify her as the welfare queen. Hancock (2004) and Thompson (2009) note, the image of the welfare queen connects notions about black women and familial relationships, because welfare queens disrupt the notion of "good" motherhood. In U.S. culture, a "good" mother is defined as self-sacrificing and protective of her children. Media depictions often suggest welfare queens fall outside this definition because they have no moral compass in regards to their exploitation of welfare benefits in relation to their family. When Ms. Turner asks about Mongo's medical progress, Mary hugs Mongo tightly and says, "The doctor says she is doing real, real good." While Mary lovingly discusses Mongo's progress, Toosie and Precious are in the kitchen and living room, respectively, and never say a word but shake their heads to corroborate Mary's words. In the middle of the interview when Mongo accidentally drops her candy sucker on the floor, Mary pats her leg gently and reassures her it is ok. Ms. Turner watches the interaction between Mary and Mongo smiling and nodding her head in approval of Mary's seemingly loving attitude towards Mongo. In this moment, Mary conveys to Ms. Turner that she is willing to find a job and endure the burden of taking care of family, including her disabled granddaughter,

Ultimately, Mary presents the outward façade of a functioning family unit to Ms. Turner, which is in sharp contrast to what occurs as soon as Ms. Turner leaves the apartment. The humility, love, and care Mary expressed in front of Ms. Turner vanishes and the audience witnesses her immediately revert back to the person she was prior to Ms. Turner's visit; as she relights an old cigarette and rips her wig off her head. Mary proceeds to berate Precious' "stupidity" as the cause of Ms. Turner's questions during the visit as she throws Mongo off her lap and onto the couch.

Looking directly at Mongo, Mary yells, “goddamned animal, come get this mother fucker, moving around and shit while I’m talking to this bitch, make me fucking itch, dropping her candy on the floor and shit.”

In this abrupt shift, the film reveals Mary is nothing like the kind and gentle mother and grandmother she presented to Ms. Turner. Instead, Mary is controlling, angry, domineering, selfish, and manipulative, so much so, she uses her disabled granddaughter to secure welfare assistance for herself. It is clear that Toosie, Precious, and Mongo are only props for Mary to use when she is cheating the welfare system. Mary’s actions do equate with a black mother trying to keep her family intact; instead she is a lazy, heartless, manipulator who relies on welfare. Mary is the dictator in the home, all family members work to satisfy her desires, which mostly focus on maintaining her welfare benefits. In these ways, Mary reflects the characterization of the welfare queen as a woman who has no remorse about receiving welfare, believing she is always entitled to assistance (Collins, 2004; Hancock; 2004; Jordan-Zachery, 2009).

Jordan-Zachery (2009) notes that media representations frequently depict welfare queens as emotionally bankrupt women who will say anything to secure their welfare, regardless of the consequences. Mary exemplifies this idea. Still angry after Ms. Turner leaves, Mary states, “bitch gonna come up here and I gotta fucking pretend, I’m so goddam sick of it.” Mary admits to shaping her image in front of Ms. Turner, and her outrage makes it clear her actions are premeditated. The kind and loving words she said when Ms. Turner was in the apartment were insincere. When Mary’s behavior is linked to the welfare queen (read black women) and placed in the context of racialized gender norms and ideas about motherhood, the film presents her actions as a cultural warning to black working class women. Mary’s actions reflect the “agenda of destruction” (Jordan-Zachery, 2009, p. 44), popular media associates with the welfare queen. Mary demands that Toosie

and Precious go along with her lies and manipulation, which ultimately shackle Toosie and Precious to her welfare dependency. Although the film does not present them encouraging Mary to cheat the welfare system, viewers learn that Toosie and Precious are inevitably tied to Mary's deceptive behavior. Everything Toosie and Precious say or do is subject to Mary's wrath because Mary controls all the economic resources in the family.

You Must Talk to Get Paid: Poverty and Confession Collide

While the film presents Mary as undeserving of welfare, Precious is constructed differently, in part through the trope of confession. I analyze how the act of confession works to delineate racial authenticity through a critical examination of how Precious' willingness to confess (and the confession itself) is key to verifying that she is worthy of welfare and is not a welfare queen.

To maintain and potentially increase the welfare benefits in the household, Mary forces Precious to go to the welfare office and meet with a case manager. One morning, as Precious prepares for school, Mary yells, "You better stop worrying about those fucking books, and take yo ass down to the welfare office," she makes it clear that she is not concerned with Precious' education and thus reifies her identity as the welfare queen. Mary's words reinforce Jordan-Zachery's (2009) claim that media portrayals depict welfare queens as bad mothers because they have excessive accessibility to their children. Welfare queens are habitually unemployed; consequently, they have limitless time to immerse their children in a culture of poverty. Thus, in the film, when Mary demands Precious go to the welfare office instead of attend school, the film implies she is beginning to teach Precious how to cheat the welfare system.

When she arrives at the office, Precious meets with Ms. Weiss who attempts to learn more about Precious and her home life, asking Precious about her interactions with her mother, her progress in school, and her relationship with her father. When Precious only reveals mundane details, Ms. Weiss pressures her to disclose more. At one point, Precious accidentally reveals that both her children are the result of an incestuous relationship with her father. Immediately, Ms. Weiss leans in closely, jots down a quick note, and raises her eyebrows, indicating this is important information. The camera cuts to Precious as she uncomfortably shifts in her chair and crosses her arms to her chest, presented as closing herself off through nonverbal behavior. Ms. Weiss insists Precious repeat the information, but Precious quickly refuses and declares that Ms. Weiss misunderstood what she said about her father. Precious becomes defensive, leaning toward Ms. Weiss and yelling, “bitch, can we change the subject please?” The camera focuses on Precious scowling at Ms. Weiss daring her to something, but it is too late. Ms. Weiss stares at Precious, places her notebook on the desk, and replies, “That’s fine honey. If you don’t want to talk, that is fine, I will see you on your next appointment, or maybe you will see somebody else, but you are going to have to talk to someone if you want your money.” The camera shifts back and forth while Precious and Ms. Weiss sit in complete silence, staring at one another; the only sound in the room is Precious tapping her foot on the floor. Finally, Precious begins to speak:

Ms. Rain (her teacher) almost fall out when she find out I never been to no doctor, no one knows I had my first baby on the kitchen floor with mama kicking me up side my head, me screaming in pain. Are those them kind of things you be talking about when you say to say what comes to my head?

Precious’ confession followed by Ms. Weiss’ silence is depicted as simultaneously earth shattering and obligatory. Confession serves as a form of discourse which implies a privileged

relationship to the truth, and as Brooks (2000) notes, “bares a special stamp of authenticity” (p. 144). In writing about confession and racial representations, hooks (1991) notes it is not enough to tell the story, confessing in and of itself is not profound, the confession must be read as true. Precious’ confession is pivotal in this scene because it shifts her identity in the film. When Precious tells Ms. Weiss about her home life and all it entails: her father impregnating her twice, enduring sexual and physical abuse from her mother, no medical care during her pregnancy, her confession reveals that her troubled life is inherently tied to her economic situation. Precious does not have the economic resources to improve her home life, and now in order to receive any monetary assistance she must tell Ms. Weiss her family secrets. Ferguson (2004) and Yancy (2008) argues that confession takes a unique form for black bodies, who are often expected to confess on behalf of their race, thus creating knowledge of racial difference and authenticity about blacks as a collective. In turn, Precious’ confession does not only produce truth about her situation by revealing her economic situation and her home life it also articulates an archive of stereotypes associated with the welfare queen. Precious’ confession to Ms. Weiss presents a particular truth about working class black women. However, although both Mary and Precious are welfare dependent, Precious’ confession excuses her welfare dependency. The film suggests it is Mary’s fault that Precious is caught in a cycle of welfare dependency. She is caught between having no monetary resources and Mary’s abusive behavior. How can we expect Precious to survive Mary’s wrath without welfare?

Precious’ initial plan to withhold information from Ms. Weiss is replaced by her confession, which positions her as deserving of welfare assistance. A key aspect of the welfare queen is her detachment from emotion and the ability to control how she articulates her economic need (Harris-Perry, 2011). In contrast to Mary’s calculated interaction with Ms. Turner, Precious’

interview with Ms. Weiss is chaotic and disjointed; she is unable to answer Ms. Weiss' questions in a way that keeps the interview moving forward, which gives Ms. Weiss an opportunity to challenge her responses. In fact, the audience sees Precious lose emotional control and struggle to regain control of the interview; she is clearly overwhelmed by Ms. Weiss' questions. This moment reminds viewers that no matter how hard Precious tries, she will never be Mary. Although Precious grew up watching Mary cheat the welfare system, and knows the results of the manipulation (welfare benefits), she cannot do it. Precious' inability to enact Mary's behavior makes it clear she is not the welfare queen, rather is the victim of a welfare queen—her mother Mary. Ultimately, confessing is the act Precious is willing to do that Mary is not.

As she rides the bus home after the interview, Precious contemplates the consequences of her confession, “That’s the end of those welfare checks, but I couldn’t lie anymore, I shouldn’t have said none of that. Momma gonna kill me,” she says as she slouches down in the bus seat. Precious’ words reflect Ferguson’s (2004) claim that confession for black bodies work to produce racialized discourses that create dichotomies of good and bad. Precious’ confession to Ms. Weiss is complex; she understands she is sacrificing her family’s welfare benefits by acknowledging her abusive and dysfunctional home; her revelation of abuse means Mary will be under additional surveillance, which places her welfare in jeopardy. However, despite her effort to withhold information from Ms. Weiss, Precious recognizes she can no longer carry the burden of her family secrets, which in turn, means she can no longer carry the weight of securing Mary’s welfare benefits. When she uncomfortably concedes, “I just couldn’t lie anymore,” her confession is presented as instinctive. Confessing is the only option Precious has because she does not want the life Mary has, she does not want to be the welfare queen.

The implications of Precious' confession become clear when Precious gives birth to her second child Abdul, and returns home from the hospital. When Precious walks in the door Mary asks to hold Abdul. Precious gives her permission and Mary sits down on the couch and begins to cradle him. Suddenly, as Precious stands in front of the sink running a glass of water, Mary drops Abdul on the floor, throws a vase at Precious' back, and slams her against a wall. "You took my man, you had those fucking babies, and you got me put off the welfare, for running your goddam stupid ass mouth," Mary screams at Precious. "The scene continues with Mary punching and kicking Precious while Precious attempts to defend herself and protect Abdul. The horrendous display of Mary's rage and physical violence towards Precious is central in situating Mary as the welfare queen. Mary is so angry that she cannot comprehend that her lies and deception are the reason she lost her own welfare benefits; she places the blame solely on Precious. In this moment, Mary's physical violence toward Precious is a visceral reminder that Precious had no choice but to confess to Ms. Weiss. Viewers see that once again Mary will stop at nothing to ensure her welfare benefits.

Welfare Dependency and HIV/AIDS

To understand how the discourses of black working class women and HIV/AIDS function to present Precious' and Mary's respectability, I will focus on the few moments of the film that discuss HIV/AIDS. Thus far, I have suggested that Mary's deception and Precious' confession work to present Mary as the underserving welfare queen, while Precious is presented as deserving of welfare. Now I trouble how Precious' HIV/AIDS diagnosis works to delineate and simultaneously blur her working class status.

The film presents Precious' confession as her saving grace. Viewers watch Precious gradually become more than a victim of Mary's welfare manipulation. After the physical altercation Mary and Precious had when Precious returns home with Abdul, Precious relocates to a group home. Precious thrives in her new space. She is taking care of Abdul, attending alternative school, and learning how to fill out job applications, all things which indicate she is beginning to create an identity outside of Mary's shadow. In the first scene after Precious leaves Mary's house, we see Precious in her room at the group home sitting on the bed playing with Abdul. Moments later, Precious is notified that she has a visitor who will not give their name. As Precious slowly walks down the hall to greet her visitor, the camera shoots forward and we see that Mary is the visitor waiting for her. As Precious enters the room and sits down across from her, Mary begins to speak without ever looking up at Precious. She states, "Yo daddy dead, he had that AIDS virus." Precious sits in silence for a few moments, just a staring at Mary, finally she speaks and asks Mary, "you got it?" Mary smirks at Precious and asks, "Got what?" so Precious is forced to ask the question again, "The AIDS virus, you got?" Mary leans closer to Precious and responds, "No because we never did it up the ass," implying Precious and her father did. After her last comment, Mary raises up from her chair and tells Precious, "now it's time to come on home." After Mary leaves, Precious sits in silence staring at the wall.

In this moment, the film shifts Mary and Precious' identities. While they are both welfare dependent, Mary's suggestion that Precious contracted HIV marks Precious' welfare dependency differently. Hammonds (1997) argues that media representations align low socioeconomic black women living with HIV/AIDS as the welfare queen. Media images suggest welfare queens' poor lifestyle choices and uncontrolled sexual behavior serve as indications of their welfare manipulation. Despite Mary's horrible behavior toward her, Precious' life circumstances reflect

the chaotic association of welfare dependency and HIV/AIDS for black women. She is an uneducated teenage mother and her sexual behavior is presented as out of her control.

Following Mary's visit, the next scene shows Precious walking down the street alone while soulful rhythmic music plays in the background. Precious walks with her head down and her shoulders slumped, her hands jammed into her jean pockets. The only time Precious changes her stance is to check an address on a piece of paper in her pocket. Viewers see her take the piece of paper out, verify the address and slowly shake her head back and forth, suggesting she is headed somewhere that will put her in a dark and somber mood. As the music continues to play, we see Precious enter a dark and dank building. Precious walks down a narrow hallway and opens the door to a crowded waiting room. Posters on the wall list HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment tips, and a jar of condoms sits on the reception desk, indicating she is at a HIV/AIDS clinic. Moreover, the film suggests Precious enters a HIV/AIDS clinic packed with welfare queens. Mueller (2013) argues that contemporary depictions of the welfare queen do not present the Regan-era stereotype of the welfare queen. During the 1980s popular media images of welfare queens implied black women on welfare used their welfare benefits to buy expensive jewelry and clothes. Currently, media representations portray welfare queens as ragged, obese black women, implying their deception and over consumption is evident and manifests in their body size, dress and personal hygiene. *Precious* provides an exemplary portrayal of the contemporary stereotypical image of the welfare queen. The waiting room is full of disheveled looking black women in various states of dress: some in tank tops and jeans, some with their shirts hanging off their shoulder, some with their coats tied around their necks. Most of the women's hair is unkempt and they are not wearing makeup. The music continues to play as Precious takes a seat and waits to hear her name called.

We see close up shots of the women in the room, gradually distorting the images until all the women's faces and bodies fade into black.

In these two scenes, the film shifts Mary and Precious' identities. While they are both welfare dependent, the possibility that Precious contracted HIV marks her welfare dependency differently. Hammonds (1997) argues that media representations depict working class black women living with HIV/AIDS as welfare queens. Furthermore, conflating Precious' identity as an HIV/AIDS welfare queen necessarily implicates her as incapable of performing respectable black femininity. The attributes associated with the welfare queen do not align with performing respectability. As discussed in chapter 3, the welfare queen works as a cautionary tale of pathologized racialized sexuality, gendered class, and careless behavior, which demotes black women to the margins of respectability (Hammonds, 1997). Particularly, for the welfare queen, contracting HIV/AIDS is the social and medical consequence of an excessive sexual lifestyle (Hammonds, 1997). In contrast, the tenets of respectability politics construct a specific type of black woman; she is modest, educated, adheres to feminine gender roles and practices conservative sexual behavior (Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009). The latter scene reifies this stereotype: convention dictates that a respectable black woman would not find herself sitting in a crowded HIV/AIDS clinic waiting room surrounded by unkempt black women waiting for an HIV test. Her moral decorum and sexual propriety exempt her from the sexual consequences and irresponsible lifestyle choices welfare queens make. However, Precious *is* sitting in the waiting room, thus the film does not present Precious embodying the politics of respectability, instead her identity aligns with welfare queen characteristics.

Precious' life circumstances reflect the negative association of welfare dependency and HIV/AIDS for black women. She is an uneducated teenage mother and her sexual behavior is

presented as out of her control. *Precious* is ostensibly about Precious overcoming her need for government assistance and escaping Mary's abusive control, yet the film blurs Precious' identity with stereotypes and images of working class black women and HIV. Despite her confession to Ms. Weiss and the horrible way Mary treats her, viewers see Precious blend into the waiting room full of welfare queens. Her dark skin, obese body, clothes, unkempt hair, and past life experiences confirm she is just another welfare queen in the room waiting for an HIV test.

Confession: Part Two

Earlier I discussed how the trope of confession worked when Precious revealed her abusive home life to Ms. Weiss. Her confession was the action that separated Precious from Mary because she could not be deceptive and lie to Ms. Weiss. The film presents Precious using the trope of confession again, but this time she is divulging that she is HIV positive to her teacher, Ms. Rain and her fellow classmates. I analyze this part of the film to consider how the trope of confession functions in Precious' HIV/AIDS narrative.

The film shows Precious sitting at her desk, attempting to write in her journal. She looks distracted and depressed as viewers see her hold her head in one hand and the pencil in the other. Finally, at the top of the page, Precious writes, "why me" and puts her head down on her desk. Ms. Rain walks up to Precious and asks why she is not writing. After looking back down at the words on her paper, Precious says out loud to the entire class, "nurse says I'm HIV positive... I ain't got nothing to write today. The whole class stops and stares at Precious. Finally, Ms. Rain attempts a bit of tough love as she tells Precious, "remember you once told me you had a story to write, so write." Ms. Rain places the pencil in Precious' hand and begins to walk away. The next voice viewers hear is Precious,

“Fuck you, you don’t know anything I have been through, I ain’t ever had no boyfriend, my daddy says he gonna marry me. How he gon’ marry me if fucking me is illegal?” Precious begins to sob and says, “I’m tired Ms. Rain, I’m so tired.” Ms. Rain reminds Precious she can escape her past if continues to learn to read and write. Ms. Rain states, “Write. Write. If not for yourself for the people that love you.” Just when it seems Precious is going to follow Ms. Rain’s advice, the camera moves in for a close up as she demands, “Please don’ lie to me Ms. Rain, love aint ever done nothing for me, but beat, fuck me, make me sick.”

Precious confesses her HIV status and her toxic family relationships to the entire class. In contrast to her first confession, this time Precious is not coaxed, her welfare check is not in jeopardy, and she is not confessing to a stranger, However, in this moment, Precious’ confession works counter to Ferguson’s (2004) claim that confession functions to separate black bodies from the collective cultural archives of black identity. Previously, her confession illustrated that Precious was different than Mary and by extension the welfare queen stereotype. While the film blurs Precious’ socioeconomic class and her HIV diagnosis, Precious’ confession is imperative to how the film treats her HIV/AIDS narrative. Her own words verify she is a welfare queen.

I Ain’t Got Time for That: HIV and Respectability

Near the end of the film we see Precious return to Ms. Weiss’ office for their final mandatory appointment. Viewers watch them catch up and discuss what is going on in Precious’ life. Close to the end of the meeting, Precious asks Ms. Weiss to get her a soda because she is thirsty. As Ms. Weiss goes to get the soda from the breakroom, Precious jumps out of her chair and begins to rummage through Ms. Weiss’s client records. Precious finds her file and stuffs it in

her bag just as Ms. Weiss comes back into the office with the soda. As she walks home, Precious tells viewers what she discovered in her case file. “Ms. Weiss say I got HIV and I am going to die from it. I aint worried about dying I am worried about how I am gonna feed these kids.” In this moment, Precious acknowledges she does not have the time or energy to think about her HIV status because finding ways to support her children comes first. Notably, this is the final time viewers hear Precious mention her HIV status. At the conclusion of the film, Precious no longer lives with Mary, is applying for jobs, has almost completed her GED, and is taking care of Abdul full time. While Precious’ determination to improve her economic and educational situation is remarkable, viewers never see or hear Precious discuss her HIV diagnosis in relation to her physical well-being. There is no indication that Precious can maintain her HIV health so she can continue to improve herself and support Abdul, despite the reality that she is HIV positive and will be for the rest of her life. This ambivalence about Precious’ HIV status is a constant in the film’s narrative. *Precious* constructs HIV/AIDS as part and parcel of working class black women’s identity.

As discussed in chapter 1, Mitchell (2004) uses the phrase “aspiring class” to describe black women who were not a part of the black economic elite, but still sought respectable class status by foregrounding morality and civility in their public behavior. She notes that “the characteristic common to the overwhelming majority of the black aspiring class during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an abiding concern with propriety” (Mitchell, 2004, p. 55). Black class aspiration, in the context of respectability politics, is not simply about economic mobility: it is about adhering to the tenets of respectability in a manner that positions financial status irrelevant to performing respectability. In essence, performing respectability articulates class status, regardless of actual class status. I argue the film troubles the notion of respectability and

class aspiration by suggesting Precious' determination to better her socioeconomic situation, not her behavior, constitutes her black feminine respectability. Mary and Precious' lifestyles place them outside the bounds of normative black respectability (e.g. sexual chastity, modesty, education), however the life changes Precious makes throughout the film and Mary's abusive behavior mark Precious as respectable in ways Mary cannot be. The film consistently presents Mary as the demonic welfare queen. For example, the film, villainizes Mary's actions when she attempts to coax Precious into returning home after she tells Precious her father died from HIV/AIDS. Mary is not concerned with Precious' well-being, she will receive more welfare benefits if Precious and Abdul live with her. After declining her offer, Precious confirms Mary's devious intentions. As she walks back to her room at the group home she states, "damn mama try anything to get that check." Even during moments of death and sadness, Mary's primary goal is securing her welfare money. Here, again, viewers are reminded that Mary's greed and manipulation make her unable to embody respectability. The film's presentation of Mary's obsession with getting welfare benefits overshadows discussing her sexual decorum or gender propriety. Thus, Mary's identity does not align with performing black feminine respectability. In contrast, the film's depiction of Precious refusing to return to Mary's house indicates Precious' class aspiration, and by extension her respectability. When she returns to her room after Mary's visit, viewers see Precious open her books and slowly practice writing the cat, bat, and ball in her school notebook. By showing that Precious does not succumb to Mary's deception and establishes her own economic and educational identity, the film suggests Precious is choosing lifestyle that will empower her to perform respectable black womanhood. Her actions make the aspects of her life that do not align with principles of respectability (e.g. sexual behavior, teenage mother, welfare) irrelevant.

Final Thoughts

On August 13, 2013, the director of *Precious*, Lee Daniels sat down with Larry King to talk about gay identity and homophobia in the black community. When King asks Lee why he thinks the rates of HIV infection are so disproportionately high for black Americans, Lee gave this candid response:

See, I did this movie called *Precious* and when I was doing the research for *Precious*, I walked into the gay men's health crisis center in New York City and I expected to be studying AIDS and HIV, I expected to see a room full of gay men, but there are nothing but women that are there—black women with kids, I thought I had walked into the welfare office, but they service black woman with AIDS. (Brown, 2013)

I watched *Precious* prior to Lee's comments, but when I watched the film again, I was haunted by Daniel's comments and the dismal scene that depicts Precious learning her HIV status.

This chapter illustrates the ever present depiction of lower socioeconomic black women in *Precious*, while highlighting the considerable absence of HIV/AIDS in the film. In a film focusing on representations of poor black women, it is not surprising that I found the conventional racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes used and reaffirmed through presentations of deserving and undeserving respectable black womanhood. However, *Precious* constructs a very particular story of race, gender, poverty, and HIV. The film illustrates how notions of deserving/undeserving economic need intersect with depictions of HIV/AIDS and black women. Viewers see Mary behave as a monstrous welfare queen while they watch Precious work to overcome her economic limitations. However, if we look closely, we see that HIV/AIDS is presented as part of Precious' identity that keeps her tethered to the welfare queen stereotype. Throughout the film Precious is produced as at risk, but that risk is primarily articulated through her socio economic circumstances.

The film does not show Precious being agentic in taking care of herself as a HIV positive woman, we only see her empowered to change her economic future. The implications are significant: Precious' aspiration to be economically independent takes precedence over maintaining and managing her HIV status. Thus, the film suggests HIV is an assumed condition for poor black woman. The images in *Precious* not only relegate impoverished black women to the margins of class respectability, they also present the health and well-being of black women living with HIV/AIDS as an afterthought.

Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) suggest a key element of critical media scholarship is developing ways of looking at how conventional tropes of gender and race function and understanding how these ideas become culturally naturalized. This examination allows us to consider media representations of black working class women and HIV/AIDS that still place black women in the binary of deserving and undeserving, not only in terms of economic assistance, but HIV/AIDS infection as well.

CONCLUSION:
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:
RACIALIZED SEXUALITY, GENDERED CLASS, AND HIV/AIDS

On Dec 1, 2013, to commemorate World AIDS Day, The National Minority AIDS Council debuted a new HIV/AIDS public service announcement on the Black Entertainment Television Network (BET). The PSA starts with black talk show host Wendy Williams declaring, “HIV Ends with us.” Standing behind Williams are black, white, Hispanic, and Asian, men and women linked arm in arm. Each person is wearing a shirt that says “HIV ends with us” and smiling into the camera. Williams begins her PSA monologue by stating, “HIV is not the same epidemic it was 30 years ago, but we have the tools to stop it.” As she makes this statement, people of different races are shown handing Williams the tools she declares will end HIV/AIDS (HIV/AIDS pamphlet, apple, stethoscope, condoms). As the PSA concludes, Williams stands in the middle of all the actors as interracial pairs of two (e.g. one black man and white woman) repeat “HIV Ends with Us.”

While I appreciate the PSA’s message and effort to make HIV/AIDS prevention visible in the media, I cannot help but question how representation functions in the larger project of ending HIV/AIDS. As I discussed earlier, growing up in the 1990s, I practically had a degree in HIV/AIDS, or at least that it is what it felt like. I grew up in an era when HIV/AIDS was presented as the sexual boogeyman, my sexual education presented HIV/AIDS as the ultimate consequence of unprotected sex, and media representations of HIV/AIDS reaffirmed this danger. The years since have brought better tests, treatments, and prevention efforts, and people are much more

informed about the disease. Popular media increasingly presents HIV/AIDS as a chronic health condition, not a death sentence, and in many ways it has fallen off the mainstream news radar. However, not everyone in the United States has the luxury to forget about HIV/AIDS. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from over for black Americans. For example, in Washington D.C., a city in which black Americans make up 49.5 % of the population, the rate of HIV/AIDS for black people sits at a staggering 3 %. To put this in perspective, the rates of HIV infection in D.C. surpass the rates of infection found in Kenya. Also in the current HIV/AIDS epidemic, disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS are not confined to large metropolitan areas as they were at the beginning of the disease in the 1980s. Black Americans living in southern states are disproportionately affected by HIV, accounting for 54 % of new HIV diagnoses in 2014. Notably, black women living in the southern states endure an especially disproportionate burden of the disease, accounting for 69% of all HIV diagnoses. In 2013, black Americans in southern states accounted for nearly half of the 16,281 deaths from HIV/AIDS complications (CDC, 2016). Perhaps most concerning is that statistics show that black Americans living in southern states make up the largest population of Americans living with undetected HIV.

I am brought back to the question I posed in the introduction, “how are black bodies depicted in HIV/AIDS representations?” “What are the implications?” Given the current ambivalence in popular culture when it comes to presentations of HIV/AIDS, examining media images of HIV/AIDS opens up a discussion enabling a consideration of the importance of depictions of HIV/AIDS and blackness. Dow (1996) suggests that media helps us negotiate the parameters for debates about key issues and can tell us how ideas are being articulated in popular discourse. Indeed, the analysis of media representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness in this project offer an opportunity to explore how images of black Americans and HIV/AIDS articulate

racialized gender and sexuality, especially the cultural anxiety around these issues, which in turn, may help us better understand the current HIV/AIDS epidemic.

What can we take away from the media sites analyzed in this project? Each case study raises several interrelated and contradictory questions about race, gender, sexuality the politics of respectability, and HIV/AIDS. I argue that media images of HIV/AIDS and blackness reinforce problematic ideas about racialized gender and sexuality that present black Americans as excessively sexual. Through close textual analysis of my media sites, I demonstrate how presentations of respectability politics frame these ideas about black bodies. While stereotypes pathologizing black sexuality are presented differently in each media site, a unifying theme in all the representations is the presence of the politics of respectability. In each media depiction, the black person with HIV/AIDS performs respectability in a manner that challenges the stereotypes of black sexual and gender deviance, suggesting that despite their HIV/AIDS status, the bodies most likely to be presented as outside the boundaries of respectability are in fact presented as respectable.

When I set out to write this dissertation, I was confident I would be able to identify problematic representations of racialized gender and sexuality and articulate the ways in which the politics of respectability limit discussions of racialized gender and sexuality. Instead, I find that the discussion of racialized sexuality and gendered class, especially in the context of respectability politics, is complicated and opens up far more questions than it answers. In this conclusion, I leave readers with the most pertinent questions this analysis raised for me, and provide possible directions for this research.

The Binds of Respectability

Chapter 1 took a genealogical approach to the politics of respectability to articulate the historical and discursive significance of the politics of respectability in the discussion of media images of HIV/AIDS and black Americans. The genealogy of respectability politics helped to situate how performing respectability in HIV/AIDS representations reveals popular discourses about racialized gender and sexuality and allowed us to examine some of the cultural anxieties about racialized gender and sexuality in U.S. culture. The genealogy of respectability illustrates the gendered burden of black sexual pathology, where black women's sexuality is characterized as harmful to both black women and men. In turn, black women are implicated in the representational burden of performing black respectability. BFT scholars argue that to combat racist stereotypes, the politics of respectability is used to place black women's sexuality and gender in the dichotomy of good/bad, respectable/unrespectable, and right/wrong (Hammonds, 1997; Harris-Perry, 2011, Weekley, 2015). Resisting racist stereotypes and distancing oneself from associations of deviant sexuality demands black women present their femininity within the parameters of respectability—there is no room for ambiguity—to be visible in public spaces. While respectability can function to present black women's gender and sexuality in dichotomous ways, the politics of respectability offer limited options for black femininity, options that are essentializing and need to be rethought. Indeed, Thompson (2009), argues respectability's antiquated expectations present black femininity as a no-win situation. In contrast to depictions of respectability that present black women's femininity as governed by the principles of sexual chasteness, and silence, the media images of black women analyzed in this dissertation present black femininity as a complicated performance that negotiates how to challenge the parameters of respectability. Marvelyn Brown and Precious' performance of respectability as HIV positive black

women go against conventional notions of respectability, and consequently open up new questions for examining HIV/AIDS, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Paradoxically, the women I analyzed present themselves as not beholden to the politics of respectability, yet their articulations of gender and sexuality are distinctly bound to respectability discourse. Thus, in the context of media representations of black women and HIV/AIDS, we must consider the ways black women use respectability to talk back to limited representations of black womanhood.

In chapter 3, Brown illustrates the tension in presenting black womanhood both outside and within the discourse of respectability by suggesting that the potential stigma of being labeled a welfare queen is so detrimental that HIV/AIDS is the better alternative. In doing so, Brown uses her HIV/AIDS narrative to both challenge the notions of sexual self-restraint while she simultaneously limits the possibility of respectability for women that do not share her HIV/AIDS status. Brown claims she is not the welfare queen because HIV/AIDS disciplines her sexual behavior. While Brown is presented as confident and proud of who she is as a HIV/AIDS positive black woman, her performance of respectability calls to attention the seemingly impossible task of presenting black womanhood outside the binary of good/bad black femininity.

The presentation of sexual decorum is an intrinsic aspect of respectability discourse (Carby, 1987; Harris-Perry, 2011; Higginbotham, 1993; Thompson, 2009; Weekley, 2015), yet Brown refuses to sanitize parts of her HIV/AIDS narrative that fall outside the parameters of respectability. Brown challenges the tenets of respectability by rupturing the code of sexual denial that surrounds performing black feminine respectability. This is an important intervention because media images that connect black women living with HIV/AIDS and respectability tend to center on presenting what I call their “respectable backstory,” which demands that they articulate how they performed respectability before becoming HIV/AIDS positive, through claims of sexual

chasteness, monogamy, and morality. Brown resists this set-up and divulges her sexual behavior and lifestyle choices prior to contracting HIV/AIDS. This allows Brown to claim her identity as an HIV/AIDS positive black women and establish her respectability without depending on a respectable back story.

Brown's suggests she only shares the aspects of her HIV/AIDS narrative she deems important. Thus, she is depicted as using respectability discourse to establish that she is not a victim to HIV/AIDS, and by extension, not a victim of racialized stereotypes that influence the perception of black women's gender and sexuality. This allows Brown to claim her identity as an HIV/AIDS positive black women and establish her respectability without depending on a respectable back story.

At the same time, as discussed in chapter 3, Brown contrasts her respectable HIV/AIDS narrative to the welfare queen stereotype. Within media representations of black women and HIV/AIDS, the irresponsible and sexually promiscuous welfare queen is always precariously close to HIV/AIDS (Hammonds, 1997). In turn, media images suggest HIV/AIDS becomes the medical marker for Brown's lifestyle choices. The performance of respectability allows black women living with HIV/AIDS to distance themselves from the welfare queen stereotype by positioning their HIV/AIDS narrative in a 'us' and 'them' binary (Hammonds, 1997; Weekley, 2015). Brown flips this association and claims that HIV/AIDS does not seal her fate as a welfare queen, in fact HIV/AIDS ultimately saves her from welfare queen status. HIV/AIDS disciplines her sexual behavior and allows her to avoid of all the pitfalls of not performing respectable black femininity (single motherhood, promiscuity, multiple baby fathers).

I argue Brown's performance of respectability illustrates a double bind for representations of black women's gender and sexuality. I use the words "double bind" to articulate the way in

which discussing respectability leaves black women dependent on the defining tenets of the discourse. The other option is to negotiate the racist and sexist stereotypes attached to black gender and sexuality through the discourse of the stereotype. Dow (1996) suggests in her work on television representations of feminism that in order to change or reorient discussion of cultural issues, one must understand the context. Similarly, I argue Brown negotiates her respectability by demonstrating that she understands the tenets of respectable black femininity, which allows her to articulate her femininity and sexuality in both similar and contrasting ways. Her knowledge of the discourse allows her to reorient the discussion of respectable black femininity. While I can interpret Brown's dependence on the double bind as a problematic part of presenting black women's femininity and sexuality in media images, the most productive way to think about Brown's HIV/AIDS narrative is to think about how it offers a chance to recognize the multiple discourses attached to black women's gender and sexuality. As Hortense Spillers (1984) explains in her landmark essay "Interstices: A Small Drama in Words," "the discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides decisively between the have/have-nots, those who may speak and those that may not, those who by choice or by accident of birth benefit from the dominative mode, and those who do not" (p.79). In popular media, images of respectable black woman rarely present them openly talking about sexuality. We see Brown attempt to negotiate the stereotypes of black womanhood and the parameters of respectability. Brown's vlog answers establish her respectability because she is presented as sharing her HIV/AIDS narrative on her own terms; she engages silence in specific parts of her answers, and is open about her past behavior in other parts. Placing both these things together in her narrative shows how Brown negotiates the double bind of respectability. What I see is that Brown presents herself as cultivating a portrayal of sexuality and gender for herself albeit, in a messy and contradictory fashion. While

she seems to expressly challenge respectability politics, Brown cannot. Her performance is so severely caught in the double bind of respectability that she presents HIV/AIDS as the only option for performing respectability. Spillers (1984) explains the lack of sustained ways to talk about black women's sexuality in popular culture, "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (p. 74). Here, we see that HIV/AIDS is Brown's verb, she uses her HIV/AIDS status to differentiate her performance of sexuality and femininity from black women that are not HIV/AIDS positive. Brown negotiates the double bind of respectability and forces us to consider that black women's articulations of femininity and sexuality might possibly include every presentation of black femininity that we as critical scholars are trained to question and challenge, from the welfare queen to the limitations that respectability discourse places on black women's articulation of sexual behavior and sexual desire.

In my analysis I found that Johnson's negotiation of the double bind functions differently. While *The Announcement* presents Johnson's respectability as key to his masculinity and sexuality, the gendered nature of performing respectability means that we do not see Johnson negotiate the double bind. In contrast to Brown's negotiation, Johnson does not have to depend on the tenets of respectability to articulate his masculinity and sexuality. Instead of being bound to the discourse of respectability, Johnson's performance of respectability is framed and negotiated through his interactions with women. In essence, Johnson's negotiation of the double bind is his respectable response to women. Throughout the film viewers see that women are constantly drawn to Johnson because of his celebrity status. Johnson is depicted as performing respectability in response to the excessive sexual attention he receives from women. Viewers watch Johnson continually avoid sexual temptation by displaying public sexual restraint, a key component to performing respectable black masculinity. As we watch women reach to grab Johnson as he walks through public spaces,

the film connects his masculinity to their excessive sexual behavior. Ultimately his sexual restraint distinguishes his respectability from the stereotypes associated with excessive black masculinity.

The film depicts the double-bind in which respectability politics places Johnson in the depiction of his marriage to Cookie. Johnson's respectability is constructed through Cookie's performance of respectable black womanhood. She is presented as Johnson's committed wife; she loves him despite innuendoes that suggest Johnson contracted HIV/AIDS from promiscuous sexual behavior. In addition, she frames Johnson's HIV/AIDS diagnosis as just another reason to love him. In turn, Johnson presents his respectability through the "promise protection" (Griffin, 2000), which articulates black men's desire to protect black women emotionally, physically, and psychologically. Johnson discusses his duty to protect Cookie from any harmful emotional and social consequences his HIV/AIDS diagnosis may inflict because she is so loving and committed to him. HIV/AIDS functions to make Johnson more respectable. In contrast to Brown, Johnson is depicted successfully negotiating the double bind. He is shown negotiating and maintaining his respectability in two different spaces. Thus, Johnson presents the ultimate negotiation of the double bind, we see him respectably interact with nameless groupies in the club, and negotiate his respectable masculinity in response to his wife's needs.

Back to the Start: HIV/AIDS and Respectability Politics

In October, 2015, twenty years after she theorized the concept of the politics *Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Higginbotham sat for an interview to discuss the often ignored complexity of the politics of respectability. When she was asked how her research on the politics of respectability have been misinterpreted, she states:

The idea of respect is that you look upon me in a way that makes me feel that you believe there's something of worth in me. That's respect. There's something about the word respectability that I think conjure in people's minds this front, this façade of a feeling that you are better than other people when, in fact, that's not really the meaning of respectability (Foster, 2015).

After I read Higginbotham's words, I took a moment to reflect on the question I posed to conclude chapter 1: what constitutes an ideal performance of respectability in representations of HIV/AIDS and blackness in popular culture? While I still do not have an answer, I recognize the nuances involved in each performance of respectability I analyzed. In media presentations of HIV/AIDS and black Americans, performing respectability is offered as the baseline of what constitutes an acceptable presentation of HIV/AIDS and blackness, however as I have shown, every performance of respectability does not align with the tenets of conventional respectability. For example, in the film *Precious*, Precious' life circumstances place her outside the boundaries of respectability. However, as she works toward changing her life, she is framed as aspiring to respectable black womanhood.

While Precious' journey and possible ability to secure respectability is presented as difficult because of her lower socio-economic status, Brown and Johnson seem to easily present their respectability and HIV/AIDS status to the public. The presentations I analyzed presented Brown and Johnson as confident and poised, they were not trying to convince others of their respectability, or give a redemptive story. Reflecting on Higginbotham's statement above, both Brown and Johnson are presented as seeing worth in themselves. Higginbotham (1993) describes this tenet of respectability as moral authority. In performing respectability, moral authority enables black Americans to claim respect for themselves, despite what others might think. As I have

demonstrated, performing black respectability connotes a particular presentation of racialized gender and sexuality, one that is promoted as accessible to all black Americans. The media images I analyze demonstrated respectability as the gatekeeper for black gender and sexuality. Furthermore, it is clear that performing respectability is key to presenting each individuals' HIV/AIDS narrative. Johnson's HIV/AIDS narrative in *The Announcement* presents Johnson as the sports celebrity of the times, he had access to anything he wanted, when he wanted. Women, cars, cash, he was living the life. However, *The Announcement* suggests that all he wanted was to be left alone by groupies and loved by his committed wife Cookie. This presentation is remarkable given his status and star magnitude, but it is also clearly housed in respectability discourse, which works to construct his black masculinity and sexuality as nonthreatening (Summers, 2004). I want to consider what it means to construct the most famous black American, and definitely the most famous heterosexual black man living with HIV/AIDS, masculinity and heterosexuality through respectability discourse. In other media presentations of Johnson's HIV/AIDS narrative, he is presented as hypersexual; he is the NBA star that loved the groupies. In *The Announcement*, we are presented with the sanitized counter narrative to make him respectable. In turn, representations of heterosexual black men are limited to the confines of respectability. In contrast to *The Announcement*, *Precious*, presents HIV/AIDS and blackness as part and parcel of lower socioeconomic black women's identity. *Precious* depicts economic need as only genuine when presented as deserved because of dire life circumstance. Mary's deception and her manipulation of the welfare system suggests that despite being subjected to Mary's lifestyle, Precious does not want to be the welfare queen. However, the film's extreme portrayal of Precious' socioeconomic status leaves no room to consider the impact contracting HIV/AIDS has on her life. Media representations present working class black women living HIV/AIDS via the welfare queen

stereotype. Therefore, HIV/AIDS becomes another part of Precious' dismal economic condition; she articulates the inability to manage and cope with her HIV/AIDS diagnosis because improving her current economic situation takes priority. Furthermore, the film presents Mary and Precious' lifestyle choices outside the boundaries of respectability (sexual chasteness, morality, monogamy which is indicative of the ways respectability is used to police working class black women's sexual and gender behavior and further marginalizes black women living with HIV/AIDS. Indeed, scholars writing about HIV/AIDS and black women note media representations stigmatize HIV positive the ways working class black women are stigmatized in the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Cohen, 1999; Hammonds, 1997; Weekley, 2010). While the film is problematic for its treatment of HIV/AIDS, it speaks to some key issues in popular representations of working class black women and HIV/AIDS. For example, Precious only articulates her HIV identity through her economic status. We do not see Precious articulate what it means to be HIV/AIDS positive in the context of her health or sexuality. Therefore, the way her respectability is constructed is not in terms of her HIV/AIDS narrative, but in her aspiration to better herself and break the cycle of welfare dependence to which she is subjected while living with her mother. In turn, Precious' claim to moral authority is presented as more substantive than Johnson's and Brown's. For Precious, claiming respect for herself is more than life or death in association with her HIV/AIDS status, her economic status also depends on it.

Final Comments

Hammonds (1997) writes, "everyone who confronts AIDS narratives and representations experiences a desire for some boundary, some demarcation between themselves and the chaos and stigma that the disease represents" (p. 117). Growing up in the 1990s I wanted what Hammonds

describes. I wanted to and needed to understand HIV/AIDS through a “me” and “them” binary. However, spending countless hours working with HIV/AIDS outreach programs and volunteering with prevention campaigns, I now know, especially as a black American woman, there is no “them” and “me.” Even if a black person in the United States is not HIV/AIDS positive, media representations of black gender and sexuality stigmatize them in the same ways they do black people living with HIV/AIDS. The media sites analyzed in this project illustrate how media representations construct respectability politics as a classed identity based on sexual behavior and moral values. The contradictions of black gender, sexuality, and class as governed by the politics of respectability, become even more clear in media representations of black Americans living with HIV/AIDS.

The media images I analyzed present black Americans simultaneously challenging and reinforcing, but ultimately negotiating the parameters of respectability to claim their gender and sexual identity on their own terms. Finishing this project encourages me to encourage other critical scholars to consider the paradoxical limitations of performing class, gender, and sexuality for black bodies. We need to consider how the politics of respectability counter dominant stereotypes by reducing racialized sexuality and gendered class into “good” and “bad” binaries. This dissertation illustrates that if we continue to rely on the conventional notions of respectability politics, we miss opportunities to engage media images of black gender, sexuality, and class that portray the multiple facets of black identity.

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