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*(Contro)stereotipi di genere nella cultura nera contemporanea:
rappresentazione e resistenza*

*Gender (Counter)Stereotypes in Contemporary Black Culture:
Representation and Resistance*

Abstract

Storicamente, gli afroamericani sono stati il bersaglio di rappresentazioni di genere stereotipate. Infatti, immagini degradanti e contraddittorie di femminilità e mascolinità nera sono state usate per secoli per legittimare la schiavitù e la segregazione razziale nel contesto di una società basata, almeno teoricamente, sui concetti di democrazia e meritocrazia. Di conseguenza, la sessualità nera è stata spesso ritratta come la controparte deviata della sessualità bianca normativa, e la famiglia nera è stata considerata disfunzionale in quanto non conforme al modello di famiglia bianca patriarcale.

Scopo del presente articolo è discutere il lavoro di artisti afroamericani contemporanei che rappresentano politiche sessuali alternative al sistema patriarcale, ma che possono tuttavia fungere da modelli sostenibili ed *empowering* nel vivere la propria sessualità e la propria identità di genere. Tramite un corpus di due testi cinematografici e svariati progetti di arti visive, analizzo come rappresentazioni di mascolinità e femminilità nera non tradizionali vengano usate per dimostrare sia l'assenza di fondamento degli stereotipi sugli afroamericani, sia le problematiche del sistema patriarcale.

Keywords: stereotipi, afroamericani, politiche sessuali, patriarcato

Abstract

African Americans have historically been the target of stereotypical representations of gender identity, and degrading and contradictory images of black femininity and

masculinity have been used for centuries to legitimize slavery and racial segregation in the context of a society shaped, at least theoretically, around the concepts of democracy and meritocracy. As a consequence, black sexuality has often been portrayed as the deviated counterpart of white normative sexuality, and black families have been deemed to be dysfunctional in that they often do not conform to the white patriarchal family model.

Aim of the article is to discuss the work of contemporary African American visual artists who are representing black sexual politics that are alternative to the patriarchal system but constitute nevertheless viable and empowering ways of living one's sexuality and gender identity. In a corpus of two cinematic texts and several visual arts projects I analyze how non-traditional representations of black masculinity and femininity are used to show both the groundlessness of stereotypes on black men and women and the flows of the patriarchal system.

Keywords: stereotype, African Americans, sexual politics, patriarchy

In addressing the need for a redefinition of gender politics within the African American community, Patricia Hill-Collins has famously written that «black women can never become fully empowered in a context that harms Black men, and Black men can never become fully empowered in a society in which Black women cannot fully flourish as human beings. Racism is a gender-specific phenomenon» (Hill-Collins, 2005, 7). Emphasizing the intersectionality of categories such as race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, Hill-Collins' statement points out that racial discrimination against African Americans in the contemporary scene is clearly differentiated along gender lines: if slavery and racial segregation in the United States left a heavy legacy for the African American community, this legacy is reflected differently, although equally painfully, in the lived experiences of black women and men.

The election to the White House of the first black American president has reinforced the illusion of the United States as a post-racial society in which the American dream is finally fulfilled, but stereotypes on black gender identity continue to be pervasive in

popular culture. In particular, in recent times it has become evident how forms of discrimination that several critics contextualize in the frame of so-called New Racism—most notably police brutality and mass incarceration—disproportionately target black young men, increasing the stereotyping of males of African descent as aggressive and dangerous subjects, while at the same time clichés depicting black women as, alternatively, lascivious Jezebels and/or angry welfare queens have not subsided (Harris-Perry, 2011). Consequently, addressing equitable gender politics in black communities in the United States becomes, today more than ever, a necessary step to the foundation of inclusive, progressive, and ultimately effective antiracist strategies.

Notably, feminist critics have pointed out that stereotypes of black masculinity and femininity spread by mass media are often intended to satisfy the desire for exoticism of mainstream public, and that they regularly promote the idea of black sexuality as something primitive and wild, closer to nature than to civilization, in which the body of the Other, because of its very diversity, carries out the promise of a greater, more intense and more immediate gratification (hooks, 2002; Hill-Collins, 2005, Harris-Perry, 2011). As a result, the increased presence of black bodies in the mass media can support the false impression of a post-racial society—black bodies are, after all, made more and more visible and blackness is often celebrated as desirable—while encouraging mainstream public to ignore the uncomfortable question of how artificial these images are. In particular, Melissa Harris-Perry has emphasized how stereotypical representations of black women and men not only contribute to diffuse distorted ideas on the sexuality of implicated subjects, but can also be accepted and internalized by those same subjects, who end up participating in their own oppression (2011, 28). Moreover, hooks has explicitly linked lack of control over pervading images to the maintenance of a racial discrimination based on white privilege, stating that “there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images” and that “control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (hooks, 2002, 2). As a consequence, having little or no control over circulating images of black femininity and masculinity poses several problems to the African American community, and strategies for fighting, counteracting and/or appropriating these images are necessary.

As a matter of fact, the stereotypical representation of black women and men in the United States is far from being a new phenomenon. Since the beginnings of slavery, African Americans' sexuality had been portrayed as an uncontrollable and dangerous force that only slavery could tame, so that black people's desires—and of course their reproductive capacities—could be controlled only if they were put at the service of a white master (Spillers 1987). The capacity of the “peculiar institution” to curb black people's appetites was usually mentioned by pro-slavery campaigners as one of their main arguments, and white women's safety was used as the central pillar of this thesis. In this light, stereotypes on black men started to circulate, describing them as aggressive and dangerously strong and muscular, an image that was of course functional in justifying the idea that men of African descent are naturally suitable to exhausting physical labor, the only way to channel their virility towards something good and productive. At the same time, contradictory stereotypes about black women started to circulate, portraying them, alternatively, as lascivious wild creature always available for sex, or as servile but physically unattractive “Mammies”: both images, evidently, worked to condone the systematic rape of women slaves by either justifying it or making it seem implausible. It is therefore clear that in the United States pervasive images of black sexuality as threatening have contributed in creating a theoretical frame in which to justify and legitimize first slavery, and the post-Emancipation segregation. These images have been the basis for the emergence of eighteenth and nineteenth century scientific racism, which based classification of the races on the very diversity of the bodies of men and women of African descent compared to their white counterparts¹ (Scacchi, 2006, 16). Black women's bodies, in particular, were at the center of these pseudoscientific theories. It is notorious the case of Saartjie Baartmann, a native of modern-day South Africa who, starting from 1810, was exhibited in London and Paris in so-called “freak shows” as the Hottentot Venus, and whose steatopygic body—characterized by pronounced buttocks and thighs and elongated labia—came to be seen as the mirror of a deviate black sexuality, naturally inclined to promiscuity (hooks, 2002, 115-131; Scacchi, 2006, 16-19).

¹ One of the first and most famous publications on the classification of human races was Johann Blumenbach's *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* (1775). Blumenbach distinguished five human types based principally on skin pigmentation: white, black, brown, yellow and red. The same classification will be used by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). For a wholesome explanation of race classification according to pseudoscientific racism, see Tucker, 1994.

The consideration of black women's bodies and their role in shaping racial policies have been a source of inspiration for several African American artists, who have reflected on these images' legacy and have denounced how their effects remain in large part ignored. Two black feminist artists who have recently caused a sensation for their honest confrontation of the violation of black women's bodies are, for example, visual artist Kara Walker and photographer Nona Faustine, both engaged in representing scenes of "ordinary violence" against black bodies by appropriating and signifying on stereotypes, with the final aim of awakening public opinion and making people aware of the fact that the subjugation of people of African descent has been an integral part of American history. Kara Walker, famous for her irreverent silhouettes, has recently gained public attention with her ambitious installation project "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant" (2014), a huge female sphinx coated in sugar and placed in the dismissed Domino Sugar Refinery of Brooklyn which represents and signifies on both the Jezebel and the Mammy archetypes. On the other hand, Nona Faustine's series *White Shoes* (2015) uses the photographer's naked body to unveil sites of slavery in the city of New York: one of the most famous images of the series, for example, portrays Faustine as a naked slave being sold on an auction block placed between Wall Street and Pearl Street, in the hearth of New York's financial district, where the first slave market of the city took place, denouncing how slavery reduced people to the state of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben aptly termed "bare life" (1995).

As these works point out, while stereotypical representations of black sexuality, on the one hand, have been effective in justifying the exploitation of people of African descent, on the other they have also constituted the perfect background on which to construct by difference the fiction of a white normative sexuality characterized by men who are strong and authoritative, but also guided by reason and able to dominate their instincts, and women as representatives of Victorian "true womanhood", angels of the household and guardians of the community's morals. This led to the conception of two polarized and opposite frames of sexuality, both revolving around several gender and racial stereotypes: white heterosexual "normative" sexuality, and black sexuality, seen as "dysfunctional" in that slavery stripped black men of patriarchal power and placed black women outside the sacred realm of domesticity (Scacchi, 2006). As we can

observe, it is bitterly ironical that slavery was considered both a necessary institution to contain black people's explosive sex drives, and the very cause of their dysfunctional sexuality, an irony several African American artists have signified upon. The frame in which black sexuality has been constrained in the United States has had deleterious consequences for the African American community, which has developed in the course of the centuries a series of strategies and counter-stereotypes to promote an image of itself as distant as possible from the stereotypical ones. Starting from the end of the nineteenth century, for example, many African American women chose to embrace an aesthetics based on the cult of respectability and temperance known as *culture of dissemblance* to oppose the image of black women as promiscuous (Higginbotham, 1992), while many African American men have tried to appropriate a model of masculinity based on the patriarchal system Neal.

In academic discourse, most literary and sociological criticism until the 1970s and beyond has focused principally on how slavery and racial segregation have irreparably damaged the structure of nuclear African American families, fostering the emergence of strong and independent women who do not conform to the values of "true womanhood" and of men lacking patriarchal authority and suffering from an irremediable inferiority complex. The most notorious essay of this kind is 1965 *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* by Senator Patrick Moynihan, better known as the Moynihan Report, that connects the problems of the African American community in terms of unemployment, endemic poverty and high incarceration rates to an alleged gender role inversion and to the disintegration of black nuclear family. However, more recent criticism underlines that many African Americans were able to find valid alternatives to the patriarchal model and that they structured their families and their gender roles differently. Talking about the period of her childhood, for example, bell hooks pointed out that finding work—especially as domestic servants and nurses—was sometimes easier for black women than for black men, so that women often worked while men stayed at home with the children and elders of the community. However, hooks claims that a lot of these "stay-at-home dads" were not suffering from any inferiority complex and were often happy to avoid underpaid jobs at the service of racist employers, and this way before contemporary feminisms promoted the idea that it is acceptable for women to be breadwinners and for men to be homemakers. In her own words: "Critics who look at black life from a sexist standpoint advance the assumption that black men were psychologically devastated" hooks states, but "the truth may very well be that those

black men may simply have felt relieved that they did not have to submit to economic exploitation” (2002, 93). As hooks suggests, in fact, not only the patriarchal model was impossible to conform to for the majority of African American men and women, but it is possible that many of them were not interested in adhering to it at all. As a consequence, it is important to give a voice to those who chose to embrace different models, a challenge that has been accepted by several contemporary African American visual artists, who are trying to decolonize the way in which black sexuality and gender politics are represented.

In cinema, for example, several filmmakers have celebrated the image of African American men who are the opposite of the stereotypical hypersexualized *buck* and of the absent black father, and who embrace their parental role responsibly. It is the case of *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), first movie of African American filmmaker John Singleton, set in a Los Angeles neighborhood between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The protagonist is young Tre, an African American boy who lives with his father Furious and spends his adolescence amidst the poverty and dangers of ghetto life. The situation of Tre is portrayed as unusual in that he is the only boy of his neighborhood to enjoy the attentions of a loving father and, as a consequence, has a more regular and healthy lifestyle than his peers: he is not in a gang, goes to school regularly, works a part-time job, and has a steady girlfriend, while his friends are involved in petty crime and spend their free time on the streets. It is immediately clear to the public that Tre’s success in life—he is the only one of the group who will stay out of the self-destructive logic of the ghetto where he lives and will end up in college—is in large part due to the influence of Furious, and despite the far too simplistic connection between responsible fatherhood and successful child, Furious’ role is still interesting in that he presents a definition of black masculinity that detaches itself from the stereotype of the hypersexualized black macho, summarized in his motto: “any fool with a dick can make a baby, but only a real man can raise his children” (*Boyz n the Hood*). True masculinity, as a consequence, is not defined in terms of sexual prowess, but in terms of constant and loving child care, a traditionally feminine duty. As a matter of fact, Furious is often shown at home and particularly in the kitchen, the quintessential place of domesticity, involved in activities such as cutting Tre’s hair, cooking his meals, and educating him on the importance of childbirth control. The identification of Furious in traditionally womanly roles is emphasized in a meeting during Furious and Tre’s mother Reeva, in which the woman reminds him that: “what you did is no different than what mothers

have been doing from the beginning of time. It's just too bad more brothers won't do the same. But don't think you're special" (*Boyz n the Hood*). In a certain way, however, *Furious* is special, in that even if he is the only father of the area taking care of his son, his masculinity is not undermined by this. *Furious'* maleness is different from both that of the traditional patriarch and that of the stereotypical gangster, but he is still admired and respected as a real man in the neighborhood. His virility seems actually implicit in his very name, which emphasizes his ability of self-determination through struggle. The kind of struggle he chooses, however, is in contrast with both the dynamics of the ghetto and the tropes of black masculinity portrayed by 1970s *blaxploitation* cinema.

Another example of reversing traditional gender roles in contemporary African American visual culture is the TV-movie *Bessie* (2015) directed by Dee Rees and starring Queen Latifah in a splendid interpretation of famous blues singer Bessie Smith. *Bessie* stages a female protagonist in open contrast with both the traditional values of true womanhood, which excluded black women anyway, and with the politics of respectability that many African American women adhered to in an attempt to reverse the Jezebel stereotype. In fact, Bessie refuses to be the representative for the morality and respectability of the whole race, a role that black women were often forced to impersonate, and expresses her sexuality openly and confidently. The opening scene of the movie shows Bessie outside of a theater in the company of an admirer: the woman initially accepts the sexual advances of the man and reciprocates his kisses, but fights him fearlessly when he tries to rape her, and after knocking him out she runs onto the stage for her upcoming performance. It is significant that from the very beginning the public is acquainted with a protagonist who lives her sexuality freely, is in control of her body and has a job to guarantee for her financial stability: Bessie in fact embodies, already from the first scenes, a model of femininity alternative to true womanhood and respectability, in which poor working women, who were forced to leave the safe space of domesticity to make a living, could identify.

Critics such as Angela Davies (1999) and Hazel Carby (1998) have argued that blues singers promoted a new ideal of femininity, which appropriates stereotypes on black women instead of fighting them. In fact, while black bourgeoisie was mostly committed to the culture of dissemblance, so that women had to conform to patriarchal models and were required to suppress their sexuality, blues women were less concerned with self-discipline and the concealment of their desires and often displayed behaviors

traditionally associated with masculinity, such as discussing sexuality in their songs, embracing an aesthetic of hypervisibility and showing off their financial independence (Davis, 1999; Carby, 1998). In *Bessie*, the protagonist clearly sings to a poor working-class public, and is not required to adhere to the ideals of temperance and chastity of the black middle-class. Therefore, there are frequent scenes in which Bessie has sexual encounters with both men and women, drinks gin, dresses as a man and gambles with her mentor Gertrude Ma' Rainey, or gets into fights. It is especially interesting the scene in which Bessie, wielding a hatchet, chases several Ku Klux Klan members who had tried to set fire to the tent in which she was performing. It is also noteworthy that the protagonist refuses traditional canons of beauty imposed by white mainstream society, anticipating the “black is beautiful” movement: in fact, Bessie selects the dancers who will perform in her routines through the traditional “brown paper bag test”, according to which the girls’ skin should have been lighter than a paper bag, but in this case she reverses the rule and chooses only girls who are darker than the bag. By doing so, Bessie clearly protests mainstream standards of beauty defined by the white community, according to which light skin equals attractiveness. The distance from patriarchal models is further emphasized through Bessie’s choice to build her family according to her own preferences and not to traditional patterns. First, she forces her boyfriend to undergo a sort of “trial period” before committing to him, after that she buys with her own money a beautiful villa for the two of them, and finally she adopts, without consulting her husband, a child who impressed her with his intelligence and wit. Bessie therefore stands as the breadwinner and head of an alternative nuclear family, which is not based on biological ties but on affinity and sincere affection. With her non-conventional attitude, at times certainly questionable but mostly admirable, Bessie portrays a decidedly positive model of femininity, capable to catalyze the experiences of those women who could not—or chose not to—conform to the patriarchal model of submission and domesticity.

The game of gender role reversal, which is evident in *Boyz n the Hood* and *Bessie* is also very present in the production of several African American painters and photographers. Glenn Ligon’s *Malcolm X (version 1) #1*, for example, portrays the famous activist in drag attire, with blue eyeshadow and purple lipstick. The portrait is the result of Ligon working with local children during his residency at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2000. The artist gave them coloring books for African American youth from the 1960s and 1970s, which represented famous black icons but,

surprisingly, he noticed that the children did not recognize many of the characters portrayed in the books and felt free to depict them as they pleased. Through the children's unawareness of fixed paradigms of gender identity, *Malcolm X (version 1) #1* points out how traditional rules internalized by adults can be displaced and substituted. Moreover, the portrait ironically hints at the fact that queer masculinity was usually silenced during the Black Power movement, in which a representation of black men as authoritarian and virile prevailed. Yet more controversial is the case of Renée Cox's *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, a five-panel photographic montage exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art which depicts the naked photographer standing with her arms stretched out and embodying Jesus among eleven black Apostles and a white Judas. The choice to represent the God of Christianity as a naked black woman, openly challenging the patriarchal views of the Catholic Church, provoked a scandal: New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani defined it "disgusting" and "outrageous" and called for a panel establishing rules of decency for works exhibited in museums that receive public funds (Bumiller, 2001).

Black visual artists working to debunk race and gender stereotypes are recently spreading their message through social media as well. One particularly interesting and popular project with this function is Paula Akpan and Harriet Evans's "I'm Tired Project", in which the two photographers denounce the effects of microaggressions based on racial and sexual discrimination, inviting the protagonists of their pictures to express what they are tired of through a message written on their bare backs. Akpan and Evans state that "we chose micro-aggressions because those tend to be the forms of discrimination that get overlooked because the perpetrator doesn't 'mean' to be racist or sexist, or in fact, doesn't actually know that they're perpetuating any kind of harm"². As a consequence, at a time in which all of us can be creators and promoters of pervasive images, Akpan and Evans are turning to social media as a way to raise public awareness about pernicious forms of discrimination, and to reach subjects that have little or no control of the stereotypes that target them. To this end, they invite anybody who feels victim of some sort of discrimination to send pictures of their backs to enrich the "I'm Tired Project", or to contact them to have their backs photographed. In this way the project will encompass a series of more and more diversified subjectivities, which is crucial given that stereotypes are based on the supposedly monolithic homogeneity of

² Paula Akpan, personal communication with the author, 17/06/2016.

an entire category. On the contrary, the bodies photographed in the project are given a unique voice, and are put in a condition to offer a different point of view than that reiterated by stereotyped pervasive images.

As Mark Anthony Neal recently pointed out, “[t]here is no blueprint that exists to help produce young black men in America who are even remotely sensitive to the differing realities of women, particularly black women,” and still the need for progressive gender politics in black American communities is stronger than ever (Neal, 31). The hope is that the diversity of approaches used by contemporary black visual artists will help to establish the basis for a discussion on equitable gender politics in black communities with the aim of fostering more inclusive and effective antiracist strategies, and to decolonize the ways in which black sexuality is perceived. Changing representations of black women and men is only possible as collective enterprise, but contemporary black artists seem up to the task.

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