

**PARADISE JACKED:
PRIMITIVISM, DISIDENTIFICATION & FEMINIST CULTURAL PRACTICE**

KAREN MIRANDA AUGUSTINE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Program of Interdisciplinary Studies
York University
Toronto, Ontario

April 2008

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MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explicate contemporary feminist artworks whose aim is to disengage from the “primitive” moniker placed upon them. With the inclusion of my own work, I have purposely chosen a disparate group of artists whose disciplines range from performance, the visual arts, film, installation and spoken word. The deliberateness of choosing such a group will touch on the Guattarian/Deleuzean concept of the rhizome as the interconnectedness of all things, as all share a commonality: their art is self-centred, aims to dismiss the “Master Narrative,” and obstructs perceptions of those stigmatized by cultural identity, ability and history. My accompanying video project is a short, experimental piece combining mixed media, performance art and spoken word, serving as a conceptual montage of the ideas explored in this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

[This] is not an exercise in representation, or a critique of representation, but an effort to do something else instead.... [This] tries to drag things into view, to follow lines of association, and to mimic felt impacts and half-known effects...caught in the powerful tension between what can be known and told and what remains obscure and unspeakable.... Far from presuming that meanings or values run the world, it is drawn to the place where “meaning” per se collapses and we are left with acts and gestures and immanent possibilities.... (Stewart)

PRIMITIVISM, STIGMA & DISIDENTIFICATION

Western thinking frequently substitutes versions of the primitive for some of its deepest obsessions. A fluid and persistent concept, which transcends issues of racialization, it marginalizes all who are relegated outside the cultural mainstream: the immigrant, the impoverished, the queer, the woman:

Each society has a distinct “tradition”...that determines its stereotypes. A rich web of signs and references for the idea of difference arises out of a society’s communal sense of control over its world. No matter how this sense of control is articulated, whether as political power, social status, religious mission, or geographic or economic domination, it provides an appropriate vocabulary for the sense of difference. (Gilman 21)

During the late nineteenth century in Europe, developments in science, anthropology, ethnography, the advent of mass media and the Modernist movement, coupled with the societal outcomes of worldly expeditions to “primitive” places, the primitivization of “disreputable” groupings of people (which included prostitutes, the obese, and the

disfigured) was validated through a pathology that can best be described as “medical myth.” Cultural theorist Sander Gilman has documented a wide range of results from scientific studies done during this time period. These studies, in the hopes of understanding and eradicating sexually transmitted diseases, connected the European prostitute to the lesbian, the lesbian to the obese, the obese to the African woman, the African woman to the mentally ill, the mentally ill to the primate, the primate to the leper, and the leper to the African in general — a classical stereotypical ideal of the primitive:

What is most striking is that as she ages, the prostitute begins to appear more...mannish. Billroth's *Handbook of Gynecological Diseases* links...the prostitute and the lesbian....

[Writer] Lombroso accepts [the anthropological writings of] Parent-Duchatelet's image of the fat prostitute, and sees her as being similar to Hottentots [African women] and women living in asylums. The prostitute's labia are throwbacks to the Hottentot, if not the chimpanzee....

The favorite theory, which reappears with some frequency in the early nineteenth century, is that skin color and physiognomy of the black are the result of congenital leprosy. (96–98, 101)

Additionally, it can not be overlooked that Europe's widespread human spectacles circa fifteenth century,¹ yet prevalent more so throughout nineteenth and twentieth century Europe and America, created a justifiable scientific tradition on the back of developing primitivist thought which, for Europeans and Euro-Americans, represented an inexact expressive whole both for societies “out there” and subordinate groups within the West (Torgovnick 20).

Primitivist ideology, if we are to take a look at its imprint on the modern day, has evolved, becoming more refined. Reflected in everything from hairstyles to world events, it

does not make itself known only in a vulgar, distant past, but avails itself to the will of various groups for their own end at the expense of the “primitive” themselves:

During the twenties and thirties, ideals derived from images of primitive life were used by the Right — in fascist slogans of “folk” and “blood”...and in Nazi...emblems like the swastika.... Especially since the Sixties, versions of the primitive have been used by the Left — in antitechnological protest... [and] as model for communal life. (9)

The co-optation of the primitive’s cultural currency is, time and again, used in various liberation movements or as expressions of freedom and agency, while the primitive group as a whole is viewed with disdain. We see this in the “culture vulturism” of pop stars like Madonna and Britney Spears, who have appropriated elements of African-American and gay subculture to project cutting-edge and sexually-liberated iconography. It is also appropriated in the mainstream, notably by the acceptance of certain ethnic cuisines, fashion, and body adornment, yet there is often a lack of trust in, respect for, or sociological concern for the cultures or countries from where these cultural signifiers have originated. This is due namely to the stigmatization of these same “primitive” groups.

Stigma is the relation of a subject to the subject matter of deviance. All who are stigmatized by their peripheral position to the dominant culture are considered primitive.

Stigma, theorist Erving Goffman notes, falls into three main categories:

First there are the abominations of the body — the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character.... Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family. A stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype.... (Goffman 3–4)

During the eighties, stigmatized communities heeded the call of the identity politics movement. This grassroots movement was a vehicle concerned with relations of power and

how that power subordinated those who were marginalized in society. Those marginalized by gender and sexuality were challenged to consider the ways that they reinscribed class and white privilege, which suppressed the voices of racialized, immigrant, and working-class groups within the feminist and queer movements and communities. French theorist Michel Foucault became the academic of choice as he saw the connection between knowledge and power as central. Foucault encouraged “us to measure ourselves against complex formations, no longer analyzable in terms of progress, but of confrontation, of the interweaving of relations of power” (Rella 74). The movement fostered interest in “post-colonialism,” which critiqued how the West “orientalized Others.” The colonizer’s gaze was deconstructed, with cultural theorists like Gayatri Spivak and the late Edward Said leading the pack. Performance artists like Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, conceptual artists like Adrian Piper, and public art/interventionists like the Guerrilla Girls used their work as a voice for the indigenous, the African-American and the women’s communities by focusing on issues related to colonialism and history, everyday experiences of racism, and the position of women artists within the art world.

Since the nineties, the praxis of current North American feminist and gendered art practice have become less collectively concerned, further positioning the personal narrative as central (Isis Rodriguez’s *My Life as a Comic Stripper* series is a good case in point as she explores her work experience as a stripper throughout her work). It is possible that this shift away from collectively concerned work may be a critique of the shortcomings of the identity politics movement, where some felt it “essentialized” identities rather than acknowledged and embraced the diversity of multiple identities. For these artists, reflecting an individual truth in their work may touch on more universal connections: their means of creating may

enable a farther-reaching dialogue not fraught with the limits of regulated political disposition (i.e. community is where you make it). Often, these works have the potential to act as a restorative: their powerful meanings, as analyst C. G. Jung would say, are inherently curative (Lippard 11), affirming points of view otherwise relegated to the back-of-the-mainstream bus. By delving into the complex fictions of history, transgression, and the experiential, marginalized artists who create from a subjective base have found tactics to disengage from the stigma attached to them, giving it little ground on which to breed. This is most evident in the stand-up of Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho who — by channelling the persona of her immigrant mother onstage, heavy accent and all — engages and entertains audiences through a character who normally would have been subject to ridicule.

Not following this trend are African-American artists like Kara Walker (a current darling of the mainstream art world), whose large-scale, stencilled wall installations speak to the horrors of slavery through graphically sexual and violent imagery utilizing antebellum caricatures. Taking a cue from the conceptual art movement of the eighties (led by the celebrated few African-Americans like photographer Lorna Simpson), Walker's work can appear so heavily anchored with stigma symbols that it deflects opportunities for a more dynamic, far-reaching analysis about present-day acts of racialized and gendered sexual violence. Interestingly, the community she has set herself as being a voice for have provided the bulk of negative feedback. We will observe how using symbols such as these, which provide a very specific, but limited, frame of reference, often eliminates the ability for a more timely and significant discussion to come to the fore. We will also observe how it can

reinscribe the stigma from which the artist attempts to disengage. There *is* something to be said about leaving room for more broadened and engaging discussions:

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.... In what does it consist, if not the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known. (Marks 122)

How then does the stigmatized artist address an audience that comes already equipped with a huge repository of representations? What techniques do these artists use to disengage from the stigma placed upon them? What methods do they use to engage the viewer's senses — the gut — to experience what German cultural critic Walter Benjamin called “the flash”: that connection between experience and “the things in which we intuit the social relations of the epoch” (Wayne)? How then does the stigmatized artist pass through the catastrophe and destroy the cliché (Smith)?

A 2001 study at the University of California, Davis, titled “Defining Who You Are by What You're Not: A Study of Organizational Disidentification and the National Rifle Association,” focused on the plight of workers who were stigmatized by their former corporation/organization. Published in the management journal *Organizational Science*, professors found that within the context of the business world, in order to strategically effect change and to strengthen company management, stigmatized employees should be encouraged to disassociate themselves from certain aspects and elements of a pre-existing corporate identity. They were encouraged to participate in organizational disidentification:

Disidentification, they concluded, is motivated by individuals' desires both to affirm their positive differences from a negatively perceived organization and to fend off potential threats to their existing social identity from incongruent values and negative stereotypes attributed to that organization. (Elsbach)

For the stigmatized artist, this idea of disidentification may be applicable as well.

The purpose of this thesis is to explicate the work of selected contemporary feminist artworks whose trajectories disidentify primitivist projection. Along with my own visual artwork, for this written study I have purposely chosen the following artists because their works are comprised of a complicated layering of allegory, approach, medium and technique: (i) Coco Fusco and Rebecca Belmore: two performance artists whose works speak of indiginity and the colonial gaze; (ii) Shirin Neshat: the Iranian-born photographer who documents the lives of militant Muslim women; (iii) Harmony Korine, whose documentary-styled film *Gummo* explores “white trash” life; and, (iv) Jenny Saville, Tracey Emin and Shary Boyle: three distinctly impressive artists who visualize the effects of the meta-narrative on the body, mind and spirit. Additionally, my accompanying video short serves as a montage of the issues discussed in this paper and features additional works by spoken-word artist Sandra Alland, performance artist Louise Ethel Liliefeldt, comedian Martha E. Chaves, and multidisciplinary artist Sook-Yin Lee.

All of these artists share a commonality: their art cites without quotation marks (Buck-Morss 67) and is unconcerned with majoritarian cultural response. Their work is self-referencing, delving into praxes that reach beyond simplified issues of representation. With cultural identity in the background, the foreground is a patchwork of autoethnobiography, memory, self-possession and critique — what writer Kathleen Stewart would call “still life.”

These visual works will be explored in the theoretical context of disidentification, a theory that writer José Esteban Muñoz defines as:

[A] mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. [It is] about the management of an identity that has been “spoiled” in the majoritarian public sphere. This management is a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self. (Muñoz 185)

If art proposes to give some real form of subjectivity that refutes the existing order of reality (Rella 100), then Deleuze’s theories of the rhizome work well here as he acknowledges the mediation of a complicated network of incomplete or cross identifications, which focus on a subject’s desire, rather than its reaction to power. This focus on power — more of a Foucauldian concept — is what I will be avoiding: How can a subject ever become self-actualized — bear any sense of agency — if continually positioned in a state of opposition when, in all reality, “trauma digs itself in at the level of the everyday” (Cvetkovich 20)? The category of “shock,” as Benjamin notes, is a way of describing modern life in an effort to characterize its effects on the senses, which is an affect of life under capitalism (19). Moreover, the power dichotomy, prevalent in much so-called “post-colonial” discourse, reinscribes the very structure it is attempting to break down; e.g., “white male privilege” can in no way include one who has been relegated to “white trash” status; or, the language of said academic discourse (i.e. “Third World,” “minority,” “the Other,” “post-colonial”), which African writer Ama Ata Aidoo accurately notes, “breeds a pernicious fiction” (Johnson-Riordan).

The theorists central to this work are Gilles Deleuze, Kathleen Stewart, Ann Cvetkovich and Walter Benjamin, as their writings are concerned with the practice of disidentification, issues concerning individual identity and life under capitalism, and the creative process as a form of “truth-telling.”

We begin with the performance art of Coco Fusco and Rebecca Belmore as they tackle the grand narrative of primitivist discourse: both have created performance pieces that reflect the audience as wild life. Section two follows with this question in mind: How does the personal voice emerge within this grand narrative? Through my artwork on rap pornographer Lil' Kim and the stigma of Hottentot history, I explore the issue of self-definition in the lives of young Black women. As well, the work of Shirin Neshat documents a vast array of female Muslim experience that disassociates from the title of her work, *Speechless*. This section also includes my artistic response to Paul Gauguin's painting *Annah the Javanese* as a way to discuss the submerged stories that begin to break through and to parody the dominant narrative at large. The third section is concerned with how autoethnobiography is used in Harmony Korine's film *Gummo*, which positions the real life of the stigmatized subject at the centre. Through his montaged-style narrative, Korine explores society's underbelly, the "white trash" community. Sections four and five are concerned with the corporeal and the spiritual, and uses the works of Jenny Saville, Shary Boyle and Tracey Emin to explore how stories are experienced on the body, through our senses, and the mind.

1. THE GRAND NARRATIVE: THE AUDIENCE AS WILD LIFE

[D]iverse social realities...must have their say....

[I]f the relations within a historical space are relations of power and not of meaning...how are we to *negotiate* the meaning which nevertheless is produced and opaquely extends itself, or which articulates and diversifies itself around these relations? (Rella 53–61)

CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE ART BY COCO FUSCO & REBECCA BELMORE

PLATE 1: *Undiscovered Amerindians*, 1992
Coco Fusco and
Guillermo Gómez-Peña
Courtesy of
medienkunstnetz.de



I begin with the
works of Coco
Fusco and Rebecca
Belmore as I believe
that within the

context of marginalized artists whose work disidentifies, they have produced critical performance and mixed-media works that have strong similarities in presentation, historical reference and outcomes. These pieces are centred around colonial history and rely on a certain amount of engagement about the past in ways that do not fully disengage from a specific dialogue around power. They are more Foucauldian than Deleuzian, if we are to

take up ranks with theorists — definitely more identifiable with identity politics of the eighties, in terms of cultural movements. I will note here that I see neither as *true* participants of the disidentification process that forms the basis of this thesis. For either artist to take up Muñoz's theory of disidentification, she must do away with the opposition altogether (Colebrook 125). Yet, Fusco's and Belmore's works rely on the opposition in order for their pieces to "work." I do, however, see significant relevance in what they have attempted to explore and believe they serve as an important starting point into this discussion as a whole. Both anchor the stigma of primitive identification onto large segments of the general population (i.e., it is very easy for other marginalized groups, who are knowledgeable of human exhibition/World Exhibition history, to relate), as their work positions the primitivist narrative in a public, thereby establishing an historical and sociological context for how stigmatized people are perceived as a whole:

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories.... [I]o enable us to anticipate [her] category and attributes, [her] "social identity".... We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.
(Goffman 2)

As we will see from both Fusco and Belmore, their works attempt to mirror the West's grand narrative about indigenous colonized subjects in order to disidentify from it.

Spain, 1992: During the commemoration of the Columbus Quincentenary, professor and performance artist Coco Fusco, along with collaborator Guillermo Gómez-Peña, staged the *Undiscovered Amerindians* performance at the Edge '92 Biennial. A satirical commentary on the live human spectacles of nineteenth century's World Exhibitions in England and Europe,

they enclosed themselves in a ten-by-twelve-foot cage, and presented themselves to museum goers as previously unknown specimens of the Guatinalui people. In so doing, they performed the role of the cultural “other”:

While on display, the artists’ “traditional” daily rituals ranged from sewing voodoo dolls, to lifting weights, to watching television, to working on laptop computers. During feeding time, museum guards passed bananas to the artists, and when the couple needed to use the bathroom, they were escorted from their cage on leashes. For a small donation, Fusco could be persuaded to dance (to rap music) or both performers would pose for Polaroids. Signs assured the visitors that the Guatinanuis “were a jovial and playful race, with a genuine affection for the debris of Western industrialized popular culture....” (Fusco)

PLATE 2: *The Couple in the Cage: A Guatinani Odyssey*
Video jacket, 1993
Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia
Courtesy of cityofwomen.com

Although many reviewers questioned the success of such a performance, for the artists, the real spectacle was of those who remained outside the cage: it was the audience who was surveyed, evaluated and objectified. It became apparent that these very same viewers did not understand that the visual information they were consuming was simply “colonial

inventions, museum bound,” that the “tribal” people before them were examples of “discontinuous artifacts in a colonial road show” (Vizenor 413–14). The audience’s response confirmed the contemporary world’s engagement with backward, outdated world views.



Perhaps, due to the highly subjective content of the performance alone, one may deduce that its “imitation subverts the identity of that which is being represented, [or that] the relation of power, if not altogether reversed, certainly begins to vacillate” (Young 147). It is clear that in “such encounters with the unexpected, people’s defense mechanisms are less likely to operate with their normal efficiency; caught off guard, their beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface” (Fusco 40). In the context of Western feminism, this became even more evident. Gendered interpretations of Fusco’s work revealed the ways in which unquestioned power dynamics over racialized women affected the way European feminists failed to acknowledge the larger dialogue within the work:

Several feminist artists and intellectuals at performances in the United States approached me in the cage to complain that my role was too passive, and berated me for not speaking but only dancing, as if my activities should support their political agenda. (Fusco 55)

The outcome of Fusco’s performance is that the caricatured subjects, seen as the lowest cultural denominator, were deemed somewhat invisible. The audience’s reaction (in fact causing a spectacle), made them the focus of the show: But is that really a twist? Fusco’s work leaves us with the impression that it is impossible to be such a subject without dependence on the object of perception (Piper 1:248). Interestingly, it brings us back in history to what the real World Exhibitions may have been like, as it somewhat personifies a staged “reality” of the subjects displayed throughout this period.

From Die Schwarze Venus (Hottentot Venus), a South African Khosian woman who was paraded around naked as a vulgar sex show in Britain and France, to Ota Benga, a Pygmy male from the Belgian Congo, and to Native American Geronimo, who was caged, with animals, in the Bronx Zoo, these subjects and countless other “specimens” endured

unspeakable, inhumane treatment, which drove many to mental hospitals or to commit suicide. *Undiscovered Amerindians* speaks to this graphically traumatic past, in addition to the “contemporary tourist industries and cultural ministries of several countries around the world [that] still perpetrate the illusion of authenticity and cater to the Western fascination with Otherness” (Fusco 43).

Undiscovered Amerindians reminds us that there are far-reaching extremes in how the colonizer creates a “complementary” image in relation to his/her own self. Scientific primatology, exploration, colonialism, gender, class, geography: all impact and inform primitivist ideologies that are at the very heart of European and Euro-American imagery:

Since the early days of European “conquest,” “aboriginal samples” of people from Africa, Asia, and the Americas were brought to Europe for aesthetic contemplation, scientific analysis, and entertainment. Those people from other parts of the world were forced first to take the place that Europeans had already created for the savages of their Medieval mythology.... (Fusco 41)

The strongest element in Fusco’s work is her ability to show how the World Exhibition tradition served then, and in the present day, as a tool for European and Euro-American self-definition that cannot tell the difference between the real and manufactured image in relation to others.

Canadian First Nations artist Rebecca Belmore treads over similar territory as Coco Fusco’s *Undiscovered Amerindians* performance. In April 2002, Ojibway artist Rebecca Belmore’s intervention/installation *Wild* was performed at the Grange (Art Gallery of Ontario). Part satirical commentary to the nineteenth and twentieth century World Exhibitions held in Europe and America, the performance-installation allowed Belmore to concoct a “paradise”

of her choice that welcomed the viewer into a universe of cultural misunderstanding, while also dislocating and questioning the viewer's gaze, with similar audience reception.

PLATE 3: *Wild*, 2001
Bedcover, canopy, fabric,
fabric braiding, hair and fur
Rebecca Belmore
Centre for Contemporary
Canadian Art (The Art
Gallery of Ontario
Collection)
Toronto, Canada



Set up in a room of great opulence, the installation set the stage of a virtual old-

world bedroom of the bourgeois class. A large, ornate canopy bed was draped with a bedcovering of human hair, fur and fabric — alluding to the historical exclusion of Aboriginal peoples, and suggesting a connection to this “exclusion” in the context of wealth acquisition within the so-called New World. As soon as Belmore entered the room and got into the bed, questions about First Nations women's experience within this historical context arose, and quickly the tenuous relationship between audience and subject — considering the participatory nature of interventions/installations — who is the viewer and the viewed, came into question:

...[the] work...made an impression on viewers, but usually only after some interpretation. This may have been the case due to the way in which the audience was kept at a distance from the work (i.e. behind a safety barrier)... [O]n those occasions when the artist herself lay in the bed during public viewings of the work, the visitor experience and curiosity was greatly

enhanced.... In those instances when visitors were seen to look at *Wild* without the aid of a volunteer or an interpretive paddle, the visitors would not even realize that the intervention was located in the room in which they were looking.... Some visitors were heard remarking to volunteers that they found Belmore's work "odd," or that it was somehow inappropriate, because "in those days, Indians wouldn't have been able to come into the house" — thereby demonstrating that they had not understood what Belmore was trying to say through her intervention. (*MERT Journal*)

This form of subversion, of putting oneself back into the picture, is a strategy that is not exclusively concerned with how mass culture packages groups of people: it works as a tool for those outside the racial mainstream to negotiate majority culture. The purpose is not to align oneself with or against exclusionary works, but rather to transform these works for one's own cultural purposes. In many ways, these works build on Homi Bhabha's theory of mimetic desire.

Belmore's title, *Wild*, conjured up a series of responses that cloak duality: the untamed, backward, sexualized Pocahontas, leaving one to question just what is that dirty little Indian doing in that bed? Who is she waiting for? But on the other hand, the bed is also a place of comfort, of cocooning, our most intimate space. The bedcover was a beautiful patchwork of materials with cultural significance and specificity — what Walter Benjamin would refer to as a montage, as a layering of meaning and understanding. It draped the artist and the ornate, aristocratic bed, adding to the room's opulence, and disrupting the interiority of the space. Belmore's presence was affirmed within a manufactured ideal of ultimate comfort, wealth and protection. "So much of Aboriginal discourse has been patiently tailored to the ignorance of non-indigenous people: the unspoken context for Aboriginal utterance is white ignorance. Almost every aspect of communication involves negotiation and translation: between cultures, within cultures, between the past and present" (Fink).

Yet, there is also an aspect of comic sarcasm, as if Belmore is throwing the “Indian Princess” à la Pocahontas style, in one’s face. We see her twisting this perception in her accompanying Sculptey sculpture *Apache*, where a First Nations couple is revisioned like a Royal Doulton, glammed in indigenous finery, sitting on an opulent couch. In relation to Muñoz, Belmore has re-formed an object that has already been invested with powerful energy (Muñoz 39). An example of that “object” is Disney’s “New Age” version of the film *Pocahontas*:

We live in a society that suffers from historical amnesia, and we find it very difficult to preserve the memory of those who have resisted and struggled over time for the ideas of freedom, democracy and equality.... Screen images today are descended from such influences as the captivity narratives of the eighteenth century and the romance novels of James Fenimore Cooper. The modern version of a “real” Indian princess in *Pocahontas: Friend of the White Man* is entirely a product of Western colonialism and is paradoxical.... [It forms] parallel tensions between myth and science, myth and history, myth and music, and “primitive” and “civilized.” (Pewewardy)

PLATE 4: *Apache* 2001
 Sculptey, polyester, silk, rice,
 glass and found object, 12 x 17 x
 11 inches
 Rebecca Belmore
 Centre for Contemporary
 Canadian Art
 The Art Gallery of Ontario
 Toronto, Canada



As in the relationship
 between French painter,
 Paul Gauguin and his

underage Southeast Asian “mistresses/models,” consistent portrayals of the child
 Pocahontas, in relation to Captain John Smith, rarely question the European or Euro-

American male's domain of historically subjugated women, regardless of female agency. In the Disney context, it is even more disturbing considering a history that invalidates those existing within the periphery. As evidenced throughout the Disney film, "the obstacles and assaults that pressure and fracture such young lives are as brutally physical as a police billy club...and as insidiously disembodied as homophobic rhetoric in a rap song or the racist underpinnings of Hollywood cinema" (Muñoz 37). And, considering the continued life of children's songs like "One Little, Two Little, Three Little Indians," it is absolutely incredulous that, in 1995, part of Disney's score included the children's song "Savages, Part 1," with the following lyrics:

What can you expect / From filthy little heathens?
Their whole disgusting race is like a curse
Their skin's a hellish red / They're only good when dead
They're vermin, as I said / And worse
They're savages! Savages! (Pewewardy)

In all fairness the chorus, "Savages, Savages," is chanted by *both* English settler and Native American cartoon characters. Are Disney's young audiences actually sophisticated enough to understand the double meaning or do their parents take the time to explain? Or does the use of hurtful, period caricature (spoken, sung or visualized), continue to assault Aboriginals?

Examples like this remain in one's own cultural databank when observing *Wild*. That Belmore's piece also relates as a museum piece — as a place where you'll find remnants of a primordial past through found/stolen artifacts — she has set herself to be the unexpected life and proof of a flourishing aboriginal existence that we don't expect:

John Berger, who wrote the influential *Ways of Seeing* in the early 1970s, was concerned with questioning and altering the way we see the past. In an age of what Berger, following Benjamin, called pictorial reproduction, we are free to see art not just as more information, but as a point of departure for making further meaning, for both seeing ourselves and acting in the world

differently.... As Berger puts it, “in an age of pictorial reproduction, art as information can neither be put to use nor ignored. Information carries no special authority within itself. To put information to use is either to modify it for a particular time, place or purpose, or to change it totally to fit given needs and given conditions.” (*MERT Journal*)

Both Belmore’s and Fusco’s work, in their physical location, play with perceptions of where one believes another should be. Since stereotypes rely “upon generalisation...there is perhaps no better way of insisting on cultural specificity than telling jokes” (Fink). And in this case, the humour is hauntingly wry: for Belmore and Fusco, indigenuity is set in the museum, a place where artifacts from ancient cultures, primordial people, and fallen civilizations meet.

2. SUBMERGED STORIES: EXCAVATING PAST LIVES

Make room for another kind of story in the face of hyperrepresentation....
(Cvetkovich 23)

HIP-HOP HOTTENTOT?

PLATE 5: *Lil' Hot*, 2000
Giclée colour output onto stretched canvas, 46 x 22 inches
Karen Miranda Augustine

How do we rethink the line between exploitation and empowerment, Black female sexual expression and a community's historical memory? These were the questions I focused on when I created *Lil' Hot*. Comprised of an illustration of Saartjie Bartmann (the Hottentot Venus) and a photograph of American x-rated rapper Lil' Kim, my overarching concern remained: Does the present always have to be about the past? With young Black women's sexual prowess constantly discussed in terms of somebody else's ownership and other people's desires — throw in a dash of



slave history and stir — it is no wonder that the history of traumatic events continues to stigmatize us, anchoring us within a “culture that for the most part forgoes eroticism and reproduces two-dimensional stereotypes.... The simultaneous desire for and disavowal of Black women’s sexuality maintains [our] status as marginal fetishes in relation to white women” (Miller-Young). To disidentify with it all means we discuss issues of sexual desire and expression in relation to ourselves, making the projected stigma as meaningless as the gossip it has become.

Stigmas can be a battleground on which many wage wars. More times than not, that which is demeaned, defiled and disrespected can later become an appropriated intellectual commodity within the mainstream, but usually in a palatable, co-opted (as in the case of various “liberation” movements) or commerce-producing form: the nudist and sexual liberation movements versus the naked “primitive”; West African and Caribbean national dress versus the Mammy image; or, Paul Gauguin and Picasso versus every native Oceanic, African and Latin American folk artist. Usually, at the very heart of representation theories, a European-based reduction of what Black cultural expression is, and what its reflection says about people of African descent in particular, remains the recurring theme.

In regards to hip-hop music, Angela Davis has commented: “Many of the rappers call upon a market-mediated historical memory....” (Dent 327). True, especially now, with a regressive corporate movement in popular culture, messages are even easier to misconstrue when placed within the strictures of the dominant cultural media. Based on the issue of appropriation alone, the issue of sexual misrepresentation and cultural interpretation of Black women is often discussed in colonial concepts of womanhood with little regard to an historical context outside of slavery. The result omits pauses for celebration: the

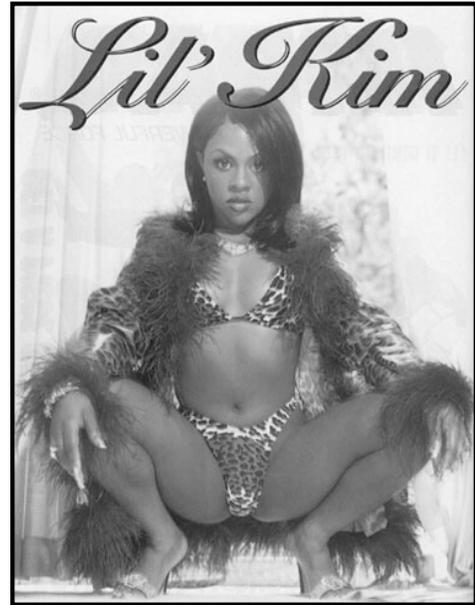
misconstrued image, because it places little value on the African subject, belittles elements of ownership (i.e., the Mammy/West African and Caribbean national dress element or class-biased criticisms regarding dynamic or “vulgarized” usage of speech or dance), making ugly what in a larger context definitely is not.

If we are to take Davis’ comment to heart, that some things may be classified as “offensive” about the hip-hop culture: the gang-related posturing, the machismo, the materialism, how then does one navigate that culture through the minority within: the women, without lumping them into one slot of heavy negation?

To decipher the graphic nature of some young Black women’s voices in rap can be seen as a paradox, for one’s sexual expressions of desire are as complicated as the controversy surrounding it when placed in the context of “the market,” the mainstream, the colonial reduction. Yet, I would stress that for many x-rated female rap artists like Lil’ Kim — the short-lived early nineties duo BWP (Bitches With Problems) are a notable predecessor — what is rarely discussed is that these women stand squarely on the shoulders of a lengthy lineage of very sexually graphic Black female performers such as blues singer Bessie Smith:

Black females have historically not been in the position to determine either their individual or collective images in the popular consciousness. The black female image has generally been polarized into stereotypes of the oversexed Jezebel and the asexual, castrating mammy, with only biology, not self-determination as a contributing factor. In certain arenas, however, black females have established a strong voice with regard to bodily matters: for example, from the early blues music of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith in the 1920s to the contemporary rap music of Queen Latifah, Salt ‘n’ Pepa, and Lil’ Kim, black women speak a definitive, very public position vis-à-vis the expression of their bodies. (Williams)

PLATE 6: Lil' Kim, 1996
 Media kit photo
 Courtesy of fortunecity.com
 Photo: Atlantic Records



The sexual content in the following Bessie Smith song may appear linguistically mild in comparison to Lil' Kim's contemporary street-styled rap, but when placed in an historical context of what pushed "decency" boundaries in the 1920s, one will note a familiar tone:

BESSIE SMITH (1929) You've Got To Give Me Some [excerpt]	LIL' KIM (1996) Not Tonight [excerpt]
<p>...Sweet as candy in a candy shop Is just your sweet, sweet lollipop... I love all-day suckers, You gotta give me some</p> <p>To the milkman, I heard Mary scream Said she wanted lots of cream... Catch it when you come, Sir, You gotta give me some</p> <p>Hear my cryin' on my bended knees If you wanna put my soul at ease You gotta give me some...</p> <p>Jaybird said to the peckerwood, I like to peck like a pecker should But give me some... I'm crazy about them worms...</p>	<p>...The moral of the story is this You ain't lickin' this, you ain't stickin' this... Ask any nigga I been with They ain't hit shit till they stuck their tongue in this</p> <p>I ain't with that frontin' shit I got my own Benz, I got my own ends, and media friends....</p> <p>Good dick I cherish I could be blunt I treat it like it's precious, I ain't gonna front But limp dick niggas that's frontin' like they willy Suck my pussy till they kill me, you feel me?</p> <p><i>CHORUS: I don't want dick tonight, eat my pussy right</i></p>

TABLE 1: "You've Got to Give Me Some," 1929
 Written by S. Williams

"Not Tonight," 1996
 Written by Kimberly Jones and Jermaine Dupri

The issues these women face are quite similar to those waged by sisters working in the porn industry. With the sex market hijacked by the growing popularity of “hip-hop porn” — lead by Snoop Dogg and Two Live Crew’s former frontman, Luke Campbell, among others, along with the predominantly exploitive culture of the female hip-hop video dancer — the close connection between both industries is definitely not lost. That Lil’ Kim’s song “Not Tonight” comes from her debut album titled *Hard Core* is no coincidence: without shame or apology, its graphic sentiments align itself with many women working in the porn industry and speak to the trajectory of many sex-positive feminists.² For Black eighties porn legend Jeannie Pepper, “a deep passion for sexuality encouraged her to join the sex industry.... ‘It made me feel free.’ She consciously rejected conceptions of sexualized Black women as either deviant or victims:

Because of the brutal history of racialized sexual coercion and violence, many Black women have inherited what feminist Darlene Clark Hine calls Black women’s “culture of dissemblance,” or self-imposed silence about sexuality, which has functioned as a mechanism to protect a sense of self, womanhood and identity from attack....

“You’re not supposed to talk about liking sex, because you are already assumed to be a whore,” Pepper argued. Her comment underscores the ways in which this strategy of self-protection limits notions of acceptable sexual behavior within Black communities. Not only do Black women in hardcore have to defend themselves against the stigma of sex work, they are forced to transgress the boundaries of the types of sexual practices and discourses that are sanctioned within the Black community. (Miller-Young)

One may argue that the lyrical content and Lil’ Kim’s public attire of choice (a cross between Las Vegas showgirl meets semi-topless Josephine Baker) is lewd and obscene. And, one may also question the notion of choice for young Black women who choose to present themselves as such within a difficult, unbelievably sexist, industry that is dominated by men. It is true that a good number of successful male rap artists — many of them marginalized,

coming from low-income backgrounds — have seen the entertainment industry as one of the few options available to them. Marginalized women who participate in this field — and do so expressing very strong, unapologetic sexual content in their work — also participate in this industry out of a position of severe socioeconomic and political disadvantage:

In light of the historical invisibility of Black women's lives, these women's desire for visibility may be read as a potentially empowering move. For them, the power to buy a lifestyle of access and excess is crucial. Although this goal does not challenge capitalist consumption and exploitation, the choice to work to be seen, known and desired, and to define an aspect of consumer culture...symbolizes a profound aspiration on the part of some Black women to utilize an embodied commodity fetishism for the purposes of self-advancement. (Miller-Young)

In fact, the embodied commodity fetish of the sexualized, “primal-looking” woman, with skin as dark as the Sudanese, propelled the career of performer Grace Jones. Of her carefully crafted image, Jones has stated quite frankly, “I think I’m doing a service to black women by portraying myself as a sex machine. I mean, what’s wrong with being a sex machine, darling? Sex is large, sex is life....” (Jones). Although Jones never brought out her remarkable, over-the-top sexuality in her lyrics, she became notorious for it through her stage shows, in her public life, and as artistic muse for visual artist Keith Haring and stylist Jean-Paul Goude.

The question of visibility, then, must be distinguished from some other issues: the known-aboutness of the attribute, its obtrusiveness, and its perceived focus. This still leaves unconsidered the tacit assumption that somehow the public at large will be engaged in the viewing.... In general, then, the decoding capacity of the audience must be specified.... (Goffman 50–51)

To decode *Lil’ Hot*, one needn’t be able to recognize by name the image of the rap star; knowing the photograph is of a modern-day Black woman is more than enough. It is, however, the montaged caricature of Saartjie Baartman (the Hottentot Venus), which carries the referential weight of the negative, as the coarse illustration is obvious in being an

uncomplimentary consideration. A Khosian (South African) woman of comparable age, a slave who was paraded around naked (as a “sideshow,” and often in a cage) due to the repugnant fascination of her sexual parts, it is perhaps the painful details of her body’s treatment after death that conflates the “working” conditions of her life, strongly impacting the contemporary hyperrepresentation of Black women in general:

The spectacle of Baartman’s body, however, continued even after her death at the age of twenty-six. Pseudo-scientists interested in investigating “primitive sexuality” dissected and cast her genitals in wax.... Anatomist Georges Curvier presented Baartman’s dissected labia before the Academie Royale de Medecine, in order to allow them “to see the nature of the labia” (Gilman 235). Curvier and his contemporaries concluded that Baartman’s oversized primitive genitalia was physical proof of the African women’s “primitive sexual appetite.” Baartman’s genitalia continued to be exhibited at La Musée de l’Homme...long after her death [and was removed, due to public pressure, only in 1997].

[These]...forms of spectacle often served to promote Western colonial domination by configuring non-white cultures as being in need of discipline, civilization, and industry. (Thomson)

These women have been on the world stage under significantly different circumstances; how then does one accept that Black women’s sexual expression is far-reaching — normal — when the stigma of colonial history is imprinted on our gaze? If the past is ever present, how then are we to accept contemporary motivations in the face of historical trauma? Can we accept that for young Black female MCs, sexual exploration, even if it appears to commodify their sexuality, can be an act of agency — that it continues a distinct musical tradition— with little concern given to white male desire or imperialist judgement? Deleuze and Guattari would say that one must liquidate “the illusion of the subject that sits in opposition to an object in order to organize it according to its laws...,” that the true dimension of an event “lies in its displacement from history, in the experience of the void, in the celebration of obscurity” (Rella 45–53).

Given that these stereotypes are also deeply connected to science and religion, I would say one must go deeper still into the obscure and question the impact of Christianity on African descendants and its hand in moulding judgement towards Black womanhood. If female purity is directly connected to biblical icons, then Ifá (and all of its strands), the regulating system of the Yoruba, provides an alternate view, which aligns female desire with self-actualization, self-possession to one who is assumed to lack personal power:

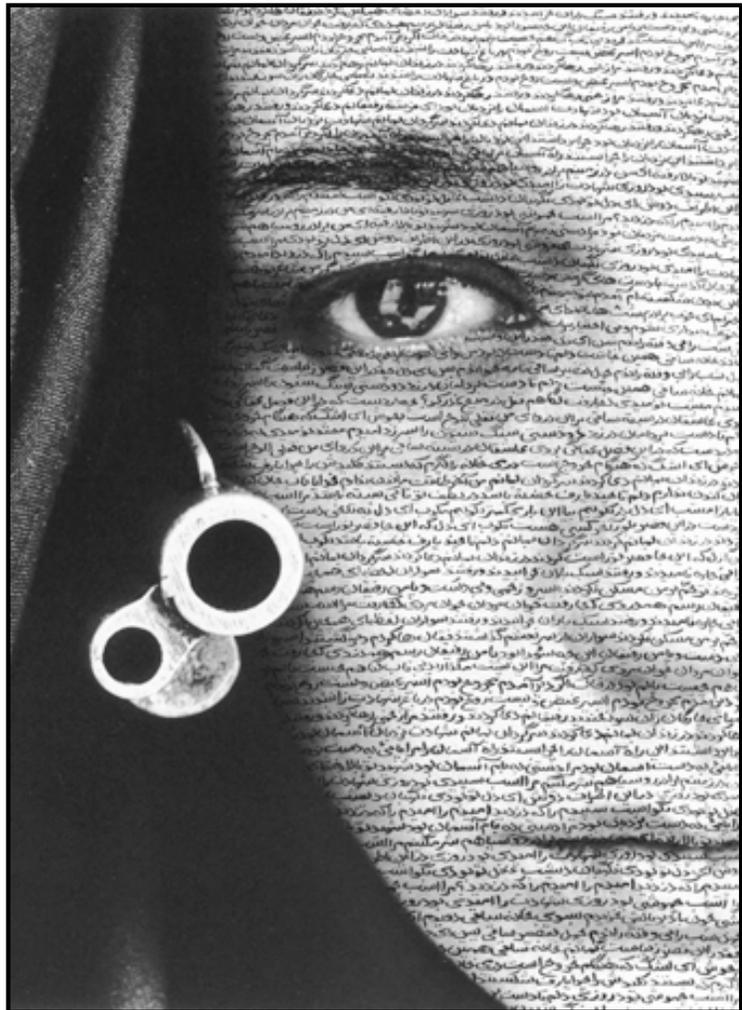
“True chastity is a virtue which lies here,” she points to her head, “not here,” she points to her body. “We want our children to realize their full potential. How could they if they didn’t experience sex?” (Bramly 152–53)

SHIRIN NESHAT

The “traditional” in the context of religion is often looked at with suspicion, fulfilling claims as an outdated, backward and oppressive state. The newspapers are filled with it, teenagers fight against it, and various activist groups challenge it. And depending on class, geography or cultural background, there is that almighty habit of casting a broad net of judgement over specific groups of people. It is like a form of institutionalized contempt. Theorist Judith Butler writes that for “an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary...” (Butler 260). Yet for members of the Muslim community, for followers of Islam, the global projection is almost consistently one of extremism, barbarism, backwardness and fear. How then does an artist give visibility to a subject that is bound to the devaluation of the “traditional” in her religion and culture without tearing that very religion and culture apart?

PLATE 7: *Speechless*, 2000
Pen and ink over gelatin silver
print
Shirin Neshat
Galleri Fauruschou
Denmark

Photographer and
filmmaker Shirin Neshat was
raised in Iran and moved to
the United States to study art
after high school. Living in
exile for eleven years (during
the Islamic Revolution, the
artist wasn't able to go back
to her homeland), she later
returned in the early
nineties and created



“Women of Allah,” an exceptionally striking photographic series focused on militant Muslim women. Her photograph *Speechless* is a provocative piece: a gorgeous cropped portrait offering a refreshingly powerful perspective on tradition, religion and female participation within.

I remember coming across Neshat’s work a few years ago in a local bookstore. I was moved at the genius in which one image, pressed between the pages of a Phaidon collection, could challenge the many perceptions dominant in North-American feminist critique of Middle Eastern women’s condition: always, the veil has been upheld as a symbol of

oppression, of the lack of Muslim women's agency, and of the supposed cultural backwardness of Islam, with very little margin remaining for an alternate viewpoint. Yet:

If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor the dominant culture. So that when women decide to lift the veil, one can say that they do so in defiance of their men's oppressive right to their bodies; but when they decide to keep or to put back on the veil they once took off, they may do so to reappropriate their space or to claim anew difference. (Minh-ha 245–46)

Neshat's photograph shows not only how her subject can conceal a weapon: a weapon, which dangles from her ear like a piece of expensive jewellery (her *chador* casually brushed aside like a fashion model's mane of hair), coupled with her subject's unwavering gaze. Her subject presents a vision of a grounded woman who is ready, willing and able to assert herself. She is not as "speechless" as originally presumed:

To the non Arabic-literate viewer the text remains a mute, decorative form whose meaning is inaccessible. This double effect of inscription and concealment is echoed by the black *chador*, which for a Western audience is a symbol of oppression and suffering, while in the Islamic world the *chador* makes female entrance into the public sphere possible through its obliteration of the private, individual realm of the visible female body.... For those who understand the texts, these also maintain positions of ambiguity and struggle. They are authored by Iranian women, some of whom, like the feminist Forough Farokhzad, complain of being trapped in Iranian culture; others, such as the poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh, express passion for the Islamic revolution.... (Phelan and Reckitt 181)

That the issue of the veil is not *the* critical focus, that its presence never comes into question, allows the artist, without apology or explanation — and why should she? — to affirm both heritage and religion, rather than dismantling or denigrating either. Additionally, the beauty of the work also reflects that there is beauty in her subject and all that is attached therein. And it's a breath of fresh air. Her work was developed with an element of filmic

verité, of just allowing a “story” to form in order to capture a slice of life (much like filmmaker Harmony Korine, discussed more at length in the following chapter). Neshat, like Korine, has utilized somewhat of a “centrist” position (quite common in many works that disidentify) in order for her subjects (in reference to Deleuze) to “become”:

I had been working on the subject of the female body in relation to politics in Islam and the way in which a woman’s body has been a type of battleground for various kinds of rhetoric and political ideology....

From the beginning I made a decision that [my photographic] work was not going to be about me or my opinions on the subject, and that my position was going to be no position. I then put myself at a place of only asking questions but never answering them. The main question and curiosity was simply being a woman in Islam. I then decided to put the trust in those women’s words who have lived and experienced the life of a woman behind a veil. (Neshat 286)

Despite a feminist spiritual movement, I would argue that for both racialized women and/or women who have found their own comfort within various institutionalized religiosities, the feminist movement is still a site where spiritual identity and social autonomy are heavily compromised. Unless one is talking about a specific construct of Goddess reverence (i.e., Greek, Hebrew, Hindu or Pagan) there can be a tendency for feminists to quickly dismiss the notion that some women do find a true sense of spiritual satisfaction within the constructs of mass organized religion. A certain strain of intellectuals, on the other hand, may dismiss the currency of religion by theoretical default. In Caroline Ramazanoglu’s book *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, she notes the significance of religion in the lives of women globally:

Western common sense defines religion fairly narrowly in the image of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In the [E]ast, and in smaller societies...the ways in which people order their lives by their beliefs is very variable.... New-wave feminist texts often pay little attention to religion except to identify particular religions as sources of patriarchal ideology and practice.... Yet religion can be the dominant factor in the personal identity and cultural

location of millions of women around the world.... [R]eligion is one of the most important and immediate factors which enables a woman to know who she is, and give meaning to her life.... (Ramazanoglu 149–51)

At the 2004 Kodak Lecture Series, held at Ryerson University in Toronto, where Neshat was a guest speaker, it was interesting how a handful of (both Muslim and non-Muslim) female attendees prodded the artist with questions focused on how religious tradition oppressed Muslim women, hoping she would denounce the veil and Islam altogether. It became an example of North America's primitivization of the non-Western — Islam specifically — the old and the arcane: there was a presumption that Neshat would feel tainted by an assumed backwardness of her tradition, her cultural affiliation, her religion, in the same way that it is presumed that diaspora African and Latin males are more sexist and homophobic:

In many more conversations, I noted how even progressive Europeans equated “traditional” appearance with “oppressive” culture and minorities resistant to assimilation.... I heard too many horror stories about Muslim treatment of women...assertions that “traditional” men didn't allow their women to be feminists (European style)... No one spoke of the simultaneous embrace of a culture and the rejection of the people who originate it as a contradiction. (Fusco 113)

Neshat's work stands on the shoulders of Fusco's and Belmore's performance installations. Her work is layered with symbols that are used to open up a space for critiquing religious and cultural preconceptions. Goffman would note them as “*stigma symbols*, namely, signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual” (Goffman 43–44). The text, the gun, the Arabic script, the Muslim woman, the *chador*: all are the only content and, by default, the only signifiers to be found in *Speechless*. It is these layers of signifiers, of stigma symbols, which

form a new sign that breaks up an otherwise coherent picture, but in this case the effect is positive — not so much establishing a new claim as throwing severe doubt on the validity of the virtual one, what can be referred to here as disidentifiers (44).

GIRL GONE WILD: *ANNAH THE JAVANESE*

Rob the hierarchy of paired oppositions...have the last word.
(Stewart 89)

Perception is in the details: “we see things only by retaining the memory of past perceptions and anticipating and connecting future perceptions” (Colebrook 127). Although positions can be political, educated, and well-intentioned, with an intellectual predilection for embracing a more “correct” way of seeing, that same “correctness” can deflect the viewer from seeing a wider reaching truth. In a feminist context, particularly a context that may be considered racially “enlightened,” lived reality and visual representation can at times be at odds with the cluttered complexity of what really is, was, or could have been. For women stigmatized by the history of colonialism, perceived as victim of, overpowered by, wrongfully over-sexualized by the European male (of course), can it ever be possible to truly see, acknowledge, and accept that there have been relationships — negotiated especially during the most oppressive of times — which have worked purposefully to the advantage, desires, and needs of these women? If the colonial trajectory has re-positioned the racialized female body within these theoretical constraints, if these situations were reversed, could the same statement ever be true, be factual?

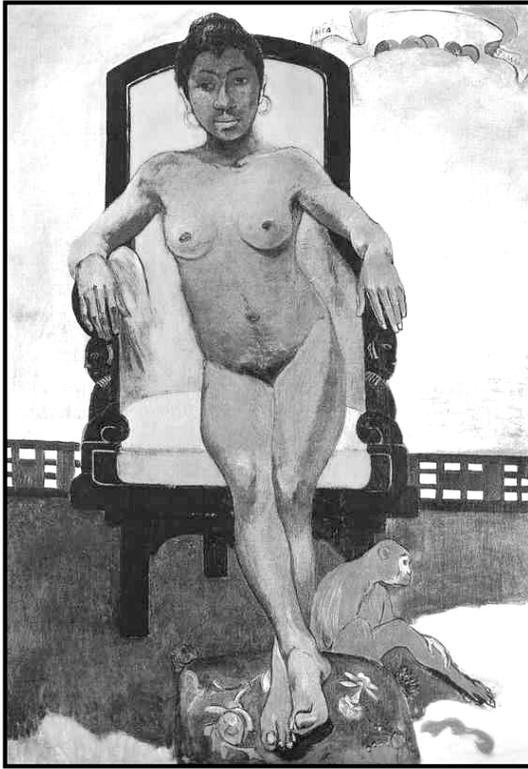


PLATE 8: *Aita Tamari vahina Judith te Parari*
(The Child-Woman Judith is not yet Breached)
 a.k.a *Annah the Javanese*, 1893–94
 Oil on canvas, 3.8 x 2.6 feet
 Paul Gauguin
 Private Collection

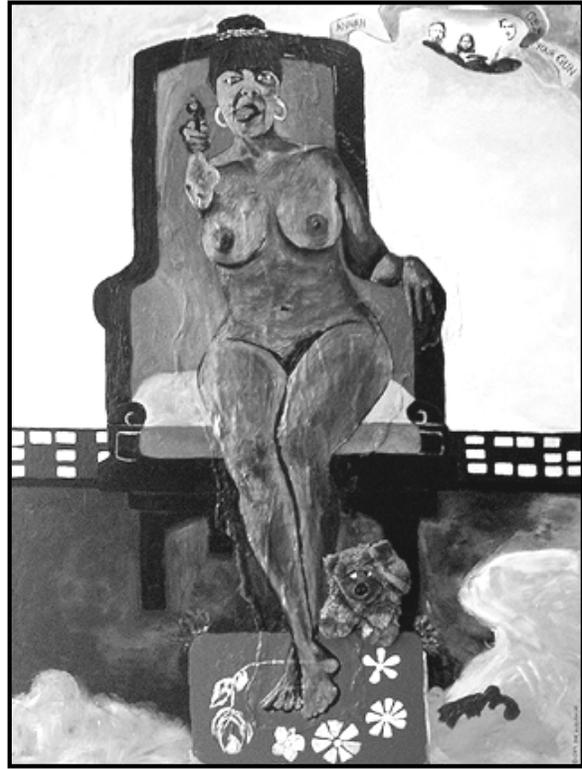


PLATE 9: *Annah, Get Your Gun*, 2004
 Acrylic, découpage, spray paint, photocopy, fibres
 and stuffed monkey on canvas, 4 x 3 feet
 Karen Miranda Augustine

My mixed-media painting *Annah, Get Your Gun* is a parody. It explores the projected victimization and infantilization of indigenous child model Annah the Javanese, the best-known mistress and model to French painter Paul Gauguin — one of the most aggressive primitivizers and a prolific Lothario of pedophilic proportions. It is a character trait well-noted by Gauguin biographer Nancy Mowll Mathews:

Gauguin's obsession with adolescent girls, which he had apparently been allowed to act on in Tahiti, was another feature of his behavior.... Annah was the most visible and shocking manifestation of his predilection, and her presence is noted in virtually every account or reminiscence of Gauguin in 1894. But her race, like that of Tehamana [his thirteen-year-old Tahitian

bride], actually deflected the attention of Gauguin's European friends away from her age. (Mathews 205)

Using the relationship between Gauguin and his darkly exotic child-mistress, Annah, I will illustrate that through *Annah, Get Your Gun*, comic relief is served to his original painting, *Aita Tamari vahina Judith te Parari (The Child-Woman Judith is not yet Breached)*, more popularly known as *Annah the Javanese*. For “in a war in which you have no weapons, you must take those of your enemy and use them for something better — like throwing them back at him” (Fusco 33).

Usually, the “coloured” female subjects painted in the works of the “great masters” are nameless, no different than a *Newsweek* magazine spread harvesting photographic piles of dead victims of some civil war, off in a land previously unknown. Yet in many of Gauguin's works, these women — girls to be precise (tweens, if you prefer) — can be identified. They are painterly snapshots of his rampant sex tourist predilection throughout the South Pacific. For him they represented that which was “something superhuman — or perhaps something divinely animal” (Gauguin 34). And in his desire for an alternate way of living — away from industrialized France and all the trappings that lifestyle entailed — the painter's unrelenting hunt for the “noble savage,” which, in many ways led him to create a series of debased, yet beautiful, caricatures, also spurred him on to develop a somewhat skewered exaltation of the female and heavily romanticized perspective on these very cultures that he embraced:

Among peoples that go naked, as among animals, the difference between the sexes is less accentuated than in our climates. Thanks to our cinctures and corsets we have succeeded in making an artificial being out of woman. She is an anomaly, and Nature herself, obedient to the laws of heredity, aids us in complicating and enervating her. We carefully keep her in a state of nervous weakness and muscular inferiority, and in guarding her from fatigue, we take away from her possibilities of development. Thus modeled on a bizarre ideal of slenderness to which, strangely enough, we continue to adhere, our

women have nothing in common with us, and this, perhaps, may not be without grave moral and social disadvantages. (46)

After all, living outside of France, he felt as if “he had escaped everything that was artificial, conventional and customary” (XIV). He was living the true Modernist’s dream. In his home, as a respectable stockbroker turned artist, in many ways he had become a sociological conundrum, an outsider. Surely, these females may have brought to him a sense of unconditional acceptance. Truthfully, I think of Gauguin’s romanticized view of the primitive as writer Jonah Weiner views the cultural Feng Shui of South Asians in a Wes Anderson film: one can justifiably deduce that these subjects, these cultures, are being transformed into a form of therapeutic scenery (Weiner).

In my first encounters with Gauguin’s work, I was enamoured of his representation of women: they were stocky, full of flesh, manfully solid. They reminded me of South American and Caribbean (particularly Haitian) folk art in their rendering of painted portraiture. When I began to read about these women subjects, I had to separate the man from his work. Realizing that they were not women at all but rather underaged sexual conquests, ranging in age from eleven to early teens, my initial response changed to one of repulsion. I began to see him as I do any man who I classify as a predator: the middle-aged male aggressively seeking out grossly underaged females for his own sexual gratification, particularly when those females are predominantly non-European and the male is not.

In her book *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, Nancy Mowll Mathews suggests that there may have been an incestual relationship between the artist and his own daughter. She also reveals the inappropriateness of his painter-model relationships with young French girls:

The portrait [of Vaïte Goupil] is indeed a startling one of a girl not yet ten years old.... Her parents’ shock at seeing the portrait probably had less to do

with the abstract style than with their uneasiness about Gauguin's inappropriate view of their daughter and perhaps other suspicions they may have had about Gauguin's behavior with young girls, even those from good, European families. (Mathews 221)

His "inappropriateness" appears to be a recurring theme for Gauguin and is an issue that is projected onto this famous painting for which Annah is best known — the female subject, originally, was to be another young French girl:

The more famous of these was [thirteen-year-old] Judith Gérard, the daughter of Ida Ericson, a Swedish sculptor who rented the apartment below Gauguin's in Paris.... Consequently, Judith was allowed to attend Gauguin's... to pose for her portrait....

[W]hen Ida discovered that Gauguin was painting [Judith] as a full-length frontal nude, she soon put a stop to the sessions....

The full-length nude that was completed shows Annah instead of Judith, but the scandalous Tahitian title of the work, *Aita Tamari Vabine Judith te Parari* (The Child-Woman Judith is Not Yet Breached), made it clear that both girls were to be imagined in similar states of undress. (205)

These facts suggest that Annah was another car in the train wreck of Gauguin's severely debauched, intimate life. Little is known of her own biography. What is known is that she came to make a life for herself in Paris during the height of the European art period of the late 19th century: a period marked by hardcore primitivism, which was the backbone of Europe's artistic counterculture; a period affected by explorations, which saw primordial cultures as irrational, overly sexual and highly mystical; a period rampant with World Exhibitions, a circus of sorts, that inhumanely displayed "primitive" peoples as objects of entertainment; and, a period that heavily influenced the development of what can now be classified as early (and heavily flawed) anthropological study. The Modernist period, to the European artist of the time, was also a heavily bohemian, anti-mainstream scene (kind of hippy/punk rock in a sense) inspired by the very culture of primitivism itself. Within this context, someone like Annah, who was deeply immersed in Parisian artistic culture, would

hold a very interesting position outside of the one first presumed as victimized sexual child exotica.

I wanted to challenge the negation of her agency within this colonial-specific history and to initiate a dialogue on the various ways racialized females lived their lives during a period loaded with some of the most debased and unquestioned stereotypes. *Annah, Get Your Gun* has been my way of dissolving the victim/oppressor dynamic, of extrapolating on biographical possibilities:

To enhance the impact of the art and the stories and create the appearance (and if possible, the reality) of an erotic life, [Gauguin] took in a dark-skinned young woman who was believed to be “half-Indian, half-Malayan,” known only as Annah the Javanese. Though still in her teens [most reports approximate her age at twelve or thirteen], she apparently participated in artistic life as a model and companion.... She had a flamboyant theatricality of dress and manner similar to Gauguin’s, and the two made a startling couple when they attended art events and openings together. Her...presence at his readings helped to make his Tahitian stories more vivid. (197–98)

A similar relationship to that of Annah and Gauguin’s is illustrated in Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson’s book *The Salt Roads*, which delves into the relationship between “mulatto” prostitute and former slave Jeanne Duvall and Modernist art critic Charles Baudelaire. The work acknowledges that issues of power are fluid — that the European male artist and the former African slave both need each other for very different reasons. The exotic has the power to validate the bohemian: what better way during this time does an artist prove how “down” he is with the primitive outsider, her culture, and hence, the “realness” of his work? On the flipside, in Hopkinson’s work the bohemian affords some stability to the exotic, and is perhaps a “passport,” or at the very least a form of financial security (however meagre), for the navigation of Duvall’s life in Europe. Annah’s association with Gauguin afforded the artist a form of cultural currency and greatly

legitimized his work, regardless of how it was received economically in the French art market at that time.

Yet truthfully, Annah presents an utterly interesting situation. In my version of his famous painting, I revision her B-girl style, nude, voluptuous, older (bearing great *chutzpah*, an audacious attitude and mindset), pointing a gun at the viewer. The huge “don’t even begin to mess with me” expression across her face clashes with Gauguin’s original rendition: the dainty, wallpaper version of a primitive girl with pet monkey, who ended up being an uncontrollable handful. In 1893, Paris, the forty-five-year-old Gauguin painted his mistress-model, Annah. This thirteen-year-old “Javanese” girl, who (not quite as demure as he artistically conceived), following a disagreement with Gauguin, would soon destroy several of his paintings, disappear with all of his money, trash the contents of his studio, and position herself to become a close companion to another well-known French artist:

Little is known about Annah’s reaction to her role in the drama, but the fact that she left Gauguin at the end of the summer and continued her career as artist’s model and companion with Alphonse Mucha [the highly respected Czech Art Nouveau artist] indicates that she neither sank into hopeless degradation after her experience with Gauguin nor retreated from the artistic world into a safer sphere.... [I]f the report is true that she stole whatever she could from Gauguin’s apartment in Paris, it is difficult not to believe that she deserved whatever she took as compensation for her long run as prop in the Gauguin mythmaking production. (204–05)

Pauvre Gauguin. Was this paradise lost? Or paradise jacked? With respect to his original painting, I wondered: Who is the sexy monkey sitting demurely — these indigenous girls whom he claimed could be bought for pieces of chocolate? In *Annah, Get Your Gun* — bearing in mind the *true* temperament of the real Annah the Javanese — I wanted to turn Gauguin’s original work into a contemporary temper tantrum, *sans* infantilization or victimhood of the real indigenous girl model, centre stage within his work. I consider it a

form of “socioacupuncture”: that which “reverses the documents, deflates data, dissolves historical time, releases the pressure in captured images, and exposes the pale inventors of the tribes.... [For truly], it was the [artist] who would have vanished without our images” (Vizenor 415).

3. AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: SNAPSHOTS OF ~~WHITE TRASH~~ EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself — and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. (Deleuze 28)

HARMONY KORINE: ~~ROMANTICIZING & PATRONIZING~~ THE WORKING POOR

My mother was deeply saddened when I told her that Johnny Cash had passed away. We were on the phone as she reminisced on his life, and it reminded me of the stories she would tell me about the late Jim Reeves back in the mid-1970s: how popular his music was back in her homeland of Dominica — that cross-cultural overlap of song, which touched the country's landscape with religion, heartache and the everyday. I thought of this heartened connection that an older generation of Caribbean people made to these rural, working-class American singers while I was watching Harmony Korine's film *Gummo*. It brought up a variety of thoughts on how artistic practice can elicit strong emotions and memories, beyond the boundaries of gender and race, that can create a distinct personal connection, a bond based on relational autobiography.

Coming from an immigrant, single-parent household, growing up in Metro Housing in the pits of what was new “Scarberian” development of the 1970s, I strongly identified with Korine's film. *Gummo* reminded me how well class connects what may appear to be disparate groups of people. To me, his characters and their daily experiences felt so familiar. They

reminded me of the broad spectrum of people I came across, befriended, and had grown up with in what was an emerging priority neighbourhood in the GTA. Back then, Caribbeans were far and few between, with my building heavily populated by the poor single-parent families, the elderly, the teen mothers, the uneducated, and the chronically unemployed Euro-Canadians. Although racial issues were a part of the fabric of this environment, what united us was the common ground of our class categorization — of our stigma — that we all shared.

If poverty is a stigma, and the perceived primitiveness of long-term, low-income reality is a fully developed culture and experience onto itself, then Korine's ability to disengage from a more corporate, exploitive and popular view of this demographic (i.e., *Jerry Springer*) within his films affords the ability of that culture to become disidentified from the periphery. That he is also able to do this, while centralizing gendered, racialized, and minority subjects who bear the brunt of disability and physical difference (e.g., a midget, the deaf, and an albino without toes), not only enables his work to embrace a truly feminist and very special cultural trajectory, but also to normalize several marginalized experiences, while eliciting absolutely no regard to those who live outside it.

Filmmaker Harmony Korine, a male in his early thirties, uses his class background and memories of adolescence authentically throughout his film. His subject matter is the Euro-American working poor, a demographic that is commonly called "white trash." As theorist John Hartigan Jr. explores in his essay "Name Calling," poverty is a stigma that demonizes poor whites that are left outside the boundaries of their racial status and the dominant culture in general:

Social scientists have yet to coin phrases and terms that do not implicitly or explicitly inscribe and convey the derisive judgments held by the broader society towards the “poor.” And it is deceptive to suppose that “poor white” is a strictly neutral term, sanitized of any stigmatizing connotations.... “[P]oor white” resonates with all of the degrading inflections of any name for those living in poverty.... [T]hese classed forms of Otherness are as intimately involved with confirming a perception of the-poor-as-different.... [S]ymbolic differences between the “poor” and everybody else are reconstituted by the very studies that seek to render them neutrally. (Hartigan Jr. 51)

In Korine’s film *Gummo*, we see the remnants of a poor, small town community (Xenia, Ohio) in the wake of a fierce tornado. “Prepare to visit a town you'd never want to call home” is the tagline for this film, which is physically set up as a montage that uses a combination of film, video and Super 8. With the aid of a loosely scripted narrative that reflects the everyday that is both touched and yet unscathed by the disaster or outsiders, the film reads more as documentary. The cast includes only a handful of professional actors. The “found” set is the filmmaker’s actual hometown in Tennessee; the amateur actors are current residents. Artistically, the texture of his film takes on a painterly quality, particularly in his process of “set design”: his use of “already existing materials establishes an ethnographic level in [his] work. It brings a real place and time into the esthetic reality. Its selection... locate[s] a place, a culture familiar...self-made or procured” (Schnabel 2006). The work takes on a true autoethnobiographical element.

Of his intentions in making of the film, Korine stated, “I’m not interested in politics. I think of it more like Walter Benjamin, who said the greatest novel of the century would be a book full of someone else’s quotations. I’m really into the idea of a randomness — a sort of just looking at things without being told any kind of message” (Hays). But really, what is more important is that Korine has created a snapshot narrative without the burden of judgment. Throughout the film cats run wild, only later to be caught and drowned by a

group of young boys; the landscape is a collage of debris (that was left in the aftermath of the tornado and, one strongly suspects, was there already); parents are rarely present (at work, dead or having abandoned the young); teenagers sniff glue; there is heavy drinking, pot smoking, cursing; a couple of skinheads spew the odd racist remarks; and, there is the one businessman who makes unwarranted advances to young girls, trying to offer them money in order to cop a feel.

It is remarkably ridiculous how littered the film is with characters that would at one time be choice material for a Diane Arbus photo shoot: the neighbourhood teenage prostitute with Down's syndrome, an albino woman born with no toes who speaks passionately of her love for actor Patrick Swayze, or the neighbourhood African-American midget (an actual childhood friend of Korine's). However, unlike Arbus (who was in fact quite privileged and had no relation to her subjects other than as documentary photographer), what is different is the filmmaker's familiarity with the subject matter and the community. It is apparent in his approach to the film in which "white trash" culture plays out with realism in scenes that resonate with those of us who are indeed familiar.

Amateur actress Rose Shephard plays Cassiday, the neighbourhood teenage prostitute with Down's syndrome. She is a controversial and complex character: a character, if left to the wiles of today's incorporated entertainment conglomerates, may not have developed into a role that defied presumptions of exploitation, intimacy and teenage desire. In this scene we see that it is the adult brother who manages the pimping of his mentally-challenged sister. After one boy leaves the room, the main teen character, Solomon (played by amateur actor Jacob Reynold) goes in. Audience viewers are initially overcome with feelings of disgust as we await what we regret is going to happen, as we are rightfully focused and concerned

about witnessing what we expect to be exploitation in its most debased form. Yet as the scene continues, what develops is a very non-sexual, but intimate exchange between the two characters. Shyly flirting by caressing her hand, brushing aside her hair, ending with a gentle love tap to her nose, Solomon exposes his many vulnerabilities as he quietly asks Cassiday if he is in any way desirable to her:

Solomon: Do you love me?

Cassiday: Yes.

Solomon: Do you think I'm attractive?

Cassiday: No. You look fine just the way you are. (Reynold and Shephard)



PLATES 10 & 11: Stills of Cassiday (Rose Shephard) from the film *Gummo*, 1997
Harmony Korine
Fine Line Features and Independent Pictures

That Cassiday's desirability is never in question was quite an unexpected perspective in the scene. I was left with a sense of Solomon as being "just a boy," trying to make sense of himself within surroundings of abandonment and disarray. It was a short, slow-moving scene, which was strikingly beautiful. It left me to consider my own thoughts on teenage desire, and in particular how that same desire develops in a teenage girl who is mentally challenged. During the 2005 Kodak Lecture Series, held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Korine spoke of the response to this section of his film with local filmmaker Bruce LaBruce:

LaBruce: ...It pissed me off sometimes the way...certain people have called your films really cynical and exploitative, and I just watch that scene and I find it so heartbreaking...there's an amazing repoire [*sic*] between the actors. You obviously had a real repoire [*sic*] with the actors yourself. And then Janet Maslin wrote in *The New York Times* that this film is total exploitation, which really hurt the distribution of the film.

Korine: ...All the characters in my movie are beautiful, even the ones that I find disgusting. I don't see any one person as being any one way. I don't think things are as easy and as simple as they're said or shown to be in most films. For me, it wasn't hard or it wasn't complex showing the complexity of these characters, of a girl with Down's syndrome showing her beauty because her beauty is obvious and transcendent to me and the idea of exploitation means absolutely nothing to me because I show what I want to see...it's not an argument that I care to fight or to defend. (LaBruce and Korine)

Another scene that stands out clearly in my mind was one of grief. In it Solomon goes down to the basement of his house to workout. The makeshift dumbbells are two handfuls of cutlery taped together, the music, "Like a Prayer" by Madonna, plays in the background. The mother enters and puts on the father's tap shoes, while making a snide remark about Marlene Dietrich and how the actress had a rib removed to keep her figure; "Don't you know that stars are flawed?" she says, before tap dancing in her dead husband's shoes who, we are to assume, died in the tornado.

Yet it is within this chaotic mess — junk is absolutely everywhere — where we find a brief, but poignantly lush, tenderness in the grieving process (how does one feign closeness to someone who is gone?) and what I believe allows for a pause, a connection to a universal human experience, which in turn, enables a class of people to become personified outside of a misnomer with ill-informed and degrading baggage. For myself, it brought up memories of my grandmother's passing when I was five, and the years that followed in which my mother wore her dresses; it also brought to mind my neighbour and friend who, in the privacy of his apartment, will sit me down over coffee, wearing his deceased grandmother's tattered blonde

wig; and, more recently, it brings up memories of a former boyfriend who passed away, and how tucking his clothes in next to me at night allowed me to embrace him through his scent.

The dominant cultural machine deludes us with a regressive parade of talk show minstrelsy (leading the pack, *Jerry Springer*). Today's "white trash" caricature not only projects and affirms the negative stigma attached to poor whites, it also projects and affirms the negative stigma attached to those who supposedly share the same attributes: the immigrant, the "coloured," the mentally ill, the queer folk, etc. Talk shows like *Jerry Springer* represent a sensationalist portrayal of society's underbelly. Writer Kathleen Stewart explains that this form of hyperrepresentation of "white trash" speaks to the anxieties of the middle class: "...push out the losers, expel them from the national banal of strip malls and master-planned communities, and they only come back to haunt, spayed on the networks as news of the weird" (Stewart 409). It is a sentiment Korine plays with, alluding to the primitiveness — the barbarism — of the high-profile murder by the Menendez brothers of their parents, and how "white trash," if we are to embrace such a term for all its debasement, may be more of an issue of severe moral deficiency:

Solomon: These two kids I know, these two brothers, they murdered their parents. They both claim to be raised as Jehova Witnesses. They came to school in really nice shorts and polished tennis sneakers. And their shirts were always collared with buttons, and their hair was always slicked back. And their teeth were always brushed, and their shirts and pants were always ironed, and their shoes were never scuffed up or anything like that. They seemed to have a wonderful life. I don't know what went wrong. (Jacob Reynold)

Although Korine's narrative is loosely scripted, he casually finds ways of referencing the underbelly of the cultural mainstream in such a way that the "normal," the privileged class, has unwillingly become rhizome — connected to that which it feels no affiliation. As writer

Constance Penley rightfully summarizes in her essay “Crackers and Whackers,” the “work of distinction in white trash can be deployed downward, across, but also up, to challenge the assumed social and moral superiority of the middle and professional classes” (Penley 92). The white trash moniker not only elicits a hatred for the Euro-American working poor, but also inaccurately deflects the social realities of racial and sexual intolerance on the backs of those with no power or influence:

[T]he white trash stereotype serves as a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor. Moreover, it...helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority.... [W]hites in poverty make a perfect target for displaced white racist aggression, for one can denigrate them but avoid feeling like or even being called “racist.” Furthermore, the idea that poverty is “primitive” shores up many of the most cherished beliefs of a capitalist — and imperialist — culture.... And as the savagely humiliated [through films and movies], the upper classes are absolved of guilt...by consuming images of white self-punishment at the movies, on TV and radio, and in social criticism. (Gibbons)

Gummo is unapologetic, serving no explanations for the weird, the offensive or seemingly out-of-place, as one is forced to acknowledge and accept the normality of its location. And it's not up for discussion. It becomes a slice of life. We can see that he takes cues both from the Dada art movement (the art of disgust, distortion and anti-establishment) as he does from Walter Benjamin, who was committed to a graphic, concrete representation of truth. Benjamin also believed that in fragmentary images “truth” would appear concretely (Buck-Morss 65, 67). Korine develops a vehicle where snapshots — the still life — from a culture can emerge photographically untouched, leaving a residue on the senses:

I wanted to make a movie with images coming from all directions.... I wasn't so concerned with how it was photographed or where it came from, the source.... Basically I saw it like...when you go to someone's house and they show you...family photos, and there's a picture of like your mom on the toilet or your father (laughing) visiting a statue somewhere...but they're kind of random. So I was thinking there's like a narrative that develops through this,

a cohesion — that was the idea of the movie. I just wanted to set things up, just document it, and make sense of it later. (LaBruce and Korine)

Although many walked out of the film during its screening at the 22nd Toronto International Film Festival in 1997 (many were offended, and it is rumoured that Korine even attempted to stab one of the “walk-out” critics who “got in his face”), the sanitized packaging of “white-trash” culture (excluding perhaps television shows like *Roseanne*) in the Hollywood system may be *more* offensive due to its own inaccuracies; “...the[ir] ideal scene conflates a dreamy nostalgia with a resurgent modernist image-affect of the new and clean and up-to-date. But anxiety is the ground over which it marches” (Stewart 410). Film critic Cedric Stines follows this observation, using the Hollywood blockbuster *Erin Brockovich* to further illustrate this statement:

Virtually nobody considers *Erin Brockovich* or *Forrest Gump* or *Rain Man*...exploitation because their leads are photogenic and engage in “heroic” stuff — like being sassy to The Man. People love it when someone who isn’t in any position to be sassy to The Man...is in fact sassy to The Man. Brockovich also just brims with that Protestant work ethic and that sense of truth, justice, and the American Way movie audiences just eat up.... (Stines)

In *Gummo* there are interesting and what may seem to be conflicting nuances: pop, alternative, rap, metal and punk music play throughout, interspersed with shocking news report snippets serving as the movie’s score: the “soundtrack” of our lives; there is an ongoing juxtaposition of image and dialogue citing Hollywood actors and the “wish image” of high-end designer labels worn. On the surface, it serves as a montage of the familiar (mis)information we are accustomed to, but beneath it affirms an experience not dependent on or trying to align itself with — albeit, still influenced by — the cultural mainstream. The film dwells “in the space of the gap between signifier and signified...in the space of alterity

itself in which the names and meanings of things are never fully present but always still ahead and behind” (Stewart 88–89).

Not uncommon, Korine, from the same class and cultural background as reflected in the film, has spoken at length about being influenced by French New Wave artist, Jean-Luc Godard, who he notes “...looks at films in a different way, like a symphony, the way I think films should be made — in layers, with depth (Hays),” recalling Benjamin’s interest in the inconsequential, the marginal, the trash, the kitsch, the waste and unnoticed material. This appeal to Godard (highbrow) for Korine (lowbrow) reflects a condition many disenfranchised artists experience. In his book *Disidentifications*, José Esteban Muñoz discusses this integration by stigmatized artists, using the relationship between former street youth and *Figuration Libre*³ artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and Pop artist Andy Warhol as an example. Of the ways in which disabling forces of a dominant apparatus are used to give voice to a subculture, Muñoz sees them as:

...often mediated by a complicated network of incomplete...or crossed identifications. They are also forged by the pressures of everyday life, forces that shape a subject and call for different tactical responses.... Sometimes a subject needs something to identify with; sometimes a subject needs heroes to mimic and to invest all sorts of energies in. (Muñoz 38)

4. BECOMING BODIES OF WORK

But a filthy woman signifies something different.... Speaking in images...she's a gaping, leaking human body, an uncontrollable and engulfing female energy. (Carr 247)

THE PAINTINGS OF JENNY SAVILLE

PLATE 12: *Passage*, 2004–05
Oil on canvas, 4.3 x 3.7 feet
Jenny Saville
Gagosian Gallery
New York, USA

Deleuzean scholar Brian
Massumi writes that “a concept
is a brick. It can be used to
build the courthouse of reason.
Or it can be thrown through
the window” (Massumi 5). If
this is the case, let us visualize
Massumi’s “window” as the
meta-narrative from where this
paper first began: (i) conditions



of everyday life, the cultural influence of a given era, our attitudes toward media, and the influence of popular culture allows for the persistence and fluidity of primitivist discourse

and cultural conditioning (Torgovnick 13); (ii) “Western thinking frequently substitutes versions of the primitive for some of its deepest obsessions” (18) (particularly: gender, sexuality and the body); and, (iii) in contemporary primitivist projection, female fat/plumpness continues to carry the stigmata of the impoverished (lazy), the historically subjugated (promiscuous) and the disabled (stupid), as noted by Sander Gilman:

...perceived as the embodiment of sexuality...disease as well as passion....a “peculiar plumpness” owing to...their lassitude...[their] “leading [of] an animal life.” They are fat as prisoners are fat, from simple confinement.... [These women are of] the lowest and most disgusting classes.... All of these signs belong to the lower end of the scale of beauty.... All of the signs point to [their] “primitive” nature.... (Gilman 94–95)

Now, consider the billboard-size works of British painter Jenny Saville as Massumi’s “brick.” Her disfigured “self-portraits” touch on some of the ideas noted in Rosi Braidotti’s writings on the Guattarian/Deleuzian concept of the rhizome as the interconnectedness of all things. Figuratively (pun intended), they recall the paintings of Francis Bacon, which Deleuze explicated in “The Body, the Meat and the Spirit.” All are relevant to the multiplicity of contention within Saville’s work. And, as it is futile to waste time regurgitating fat feminist issues, I will use a Deleuzian approach to explore meaning in her practice. If Harmony Korine’s work attempts to centralize the personal voice, then Jenny Saville’s paintings show us how the body is culturally defined and how our stories, reality, are imprinted on the body.

To preface, I must note here: contrary to Deleuze, I believe that art trumps his ideas around “concept,” which celebrates a somewhat pretentious interiority to philosophy and academics, as writer Daniel W. Smith quotes Deleuze:

[A]rt itself is an equally creative enterprise of thought, but one whose object is to create sensible aggregates rather than concepts. [A]rtists think in terms of percepts and affects rather than concepts: painters think in terms of lines and colour.... (Smith)



PLATE 13: *Fulcrum*, 1998–99
Oil on canvas, 10 x 15 feet
Jenny Saville
The Saatchi Collection
London, UK



PLATE 14: *Suspension*, 2002–03
Oil on canvas, 9.5 x 15 feet
Jenny Saville
Gagosian Gallery
New York, USA

As a working artist, I must set a few things straight: attempting to decipher the visual language of art is an exercise in intellectual acrobatics, one’s understanding of the metaphysical, and of the self. It is more than the media in which one works. That said, I would challenge any academic to create with one image the trajectory of their reasoning (or lecture) in such a way that a viewer/student can “get it” without the supportive crutch of philosophical exposition. Although Deleuze has admitted that he has “often tried to talk about painting, but writing or talking about it is always an approximation, as painting is its own language and is not translatable into words” (Smith), I consider it a gross contradiction to ignore the intellectual, and *conceptual*, capacity of the artistic process: it is far beyond a primal/nature-based action, which continues to form the basis for much theoretical application.

Like Francis Bacon, Jenny Saville paints bodies as distortions, like slabs of meat, like exposed raw flesh. Both have created paintings that “constitute...a *zone of the indiscernible, of the undecidable*, between [wo]man and animal” (Deleuze). (The recurring animal for Saville is the



PLATE 15: *Propped*, 1992
Oil on canvas, 7 x 6 feet
Jenny Saville
The Saatchi Collection
London, UK



PLATE 16: *Nats*, 1992
Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 3.5 feet
Jenny Saville
The Saatchi Collection
London, UK

pig, which carries the weight of several connotations: woman, sex, capitalism, consumable flesh, etc.) Both are figurative painters whose works are sensation-based. “[F]iguration refers to a form that is related to an object it is supposed to represent, the ‘Figure’ is the form that is connected to a sensation, and that conveys the violence of this sensation directly to the nervous system” (Smith). Yet what sets the thirty-six-year-old Saville apart is the way in which she engages the paradoxical. Her premise: What is real? Of her work, she has said:

I want people to know what it is they’re looking at. But at the same time, the closer they get to the painting, it’s like going back into childhood. And it’s like an abstract piece...it becomes the landscape.... (Saville)

Her manipulation of flesh transcends the simplified feminist body issue rubric: the love/hate we have with our bodies. Instead, it broadens into the complex distortion of

media perceptions, of gender and sexuality (particularly transgender), of plastic surgery, of the impact of lived experience on the body: How do we digest what we consume? What are its affects on the body? And in particular: What does that body look like? Her visuality of the rhizome connects contradiction to anxiety, anxiety to dilemma — that delicate balance of power, force, desire and dignity — the wavering perception of the exterior to the interior: And there it is:

[In] the world of “lived experience”...[i]t is often difficult to separate sensation of our everyday experience from the world.... But the lived body, says Deleuze, is still a “paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable Power,” which is precisely the power of *rhythm* in its confrontation with chaos.... Sensations are given, but it is force that constitutes the condition of sensation. The artistic question then becomes: How to render sensible forces that are not themselves sensible? How to render the nonvisible in painting, or the nonsonorous sonorous in music?

How then does the painter pass through the catastrophe and destroy the cliché? (Smith)

With the aid of mirrors, reflecting a myriad of “real” perspectives — definitely a form of visual schizophrenia where she creates “somewhere else, beyond or behind or below these problems, rather than immersed in them, [breaking] into the unstable equilibrium of continuing self-invention” (Marks 97) — Saville renders her paintings from photographs she has taken of herself. Considered overweight by traditional Western standards, it is interesting to note that she is far from obese — nothing remotely like the large “nudescapes” she creates. Of these images, she tries to catch her subjects’ “identity, their skin, their hair, their heat, their leakiness” (Freeman).

Her magnification of reality speaks to the disillusionment with the fantasy — the lie — as female “ugliness” is used to signal a position of distinction, an underbelly of existence, a journey. These signals are contrary and uncontainable. “Deleuze and Guattari remind us that



PLATE 17: *Torso*, 2004–05
 Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 4 feet
 Jenny Saville
 Gagosian Gallery
 New York, USA



PLATE 18: *Untitled (Girl in the Bath)*, 1990
 Oil on canvas, 5 x 4 feet
 Jenny Saville
 Flowers East Gallery
 London, UK

capitalism thrives on its contradictions” (Marks 96), which is evident in Saville’s painting, *Nats*, where a pedestalized obese woman sits, encumbered by her placement, confined in the unglamorous. It questions what Deleuze would describe as the “fascism which is within us, that ‘causes us to love power’” (94). And it visualizes the effects of ironic mimesis — that attempt to consume the power that consumes you — which theorist Rosi Braidotti defines as a lack of “critique, it is the mentality of a slave” (Braidotti 81). Yet, *Propped*, with its warm sensuousness, appears unfettered when juxtaposed with the former, allowing for a relation to a body that has been left outside the boundaries of “attractiveness.” It is a contradiction to the meta-narrative. This body of flesh not idealized, possessed in the beautiful, the powerful, and the sensually lush, shows that:

the “other” is not the emblematic and invariably vampirized mark of alterity.... It is a moving horizon of exchanges and becomings.... It is this quest for overcoming dualism and reconnecting life and thought that constitutes the bottom line...it is...re-thinking subjectivity as an intensive, multiple and discontinuous process of relations. (69)

Saville’s fascination with plastic surgery and butchering speaks to the body as cartography, mapping out the physical residue of lived agony, suffering, violence (a physical rawness), the sensual tactility of blood (note *Suspension*), and the “pornography” of meat (note both *Suspension* and *Torso*). “Nietzsche reminds us that cruelty is more than a vague, ‘ill-defined’ drive...cruelty is movement of culture that is realized in bodies and is inscribed onto them, belaboring them” (Marks 95). Stories — our realities — Saville reminds us, imprint themselves on the body (Mathis). Hence, her paintings embody traditional figurative conventions that are *conceptually* driven:

The central perspective is...to promote human relations that do not automatically fall into roles or stereotypes but open onto fundamental relations of a metaphysical kind that *bring out* the most radical and basic alienations of madness or neurosis and channel them into revolutionary practice.... “Nomad thought” does not lodge itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference. (Massumi 2–5)

5. MYTHIC BEINGS

[They confront] the viewer with the hope of sending us to the quiet place in our own brain, to explore and examine ourselves, through [their acts] of personal exorcism. Even if it is sexy, or about sex, there is something dissimilar about it, an uncategorizable other which forces us to think in new and fresh way[s], instead of reflexively calling upon our stock photo images and ideas about taboo eroticism. (Bigge)

SHARY BOYLE AND TRACEY EMIN

PLATE 19: *Porcelain Fantasy* series, 2005
Watercolour and ink on paper, 21 x 30 centimetres
Shary Boyle
Jessica Bradley Art Projects
Courtesy of sharyboyle.com
Toronto, Canada

I end this study
with some
thoughts on how
art has been used



as a vehicle to disassociate from the psychology of the master narrative; literally, it is the most logical place to end this exploration. The psychology and the spirit are important as they are one's central core: we are, after all, what we imagine (Vizenor 419). Although approached in very different ways, the works of Toronto artist Shary Boyle and British artist

Tracey Emin are great examples of this. If Jenny Saville is concerned with the body becoming, as culturally defined, then Boyle's and Emin's art takes things that one step further. They explore the grand narrative's impression on the mind — it is our psychology (and our spirit) that is culturally defined. Boyle explores the infinite possibilities of the subconscious, referencing fairytales and mythology, while Emin straddles the relationship between actuality and the projected gendered narrative. Both are concerned with the female. Both are concerned with the fantasy. As Boyle so beautifully expresses:

Shameless girls, savage and mysterious women, cats and basements and forests. Ghosts and bedsheets and owls. High heels and knife blades. My dreams merge with a fantasy of what I want life to be: fiercely sensual magic.
(Bigge)

PLATE 20: *Ouroboros*, 2006
Porcelain, china paint, gilt, 16
centimetres tall
Shary Boyle
Jessica Bradley Art Projects
Courtesy of sharyboyle.com
Toronto, Canada



Unlike the performances of Coco Fusco and Rebecca Belmore, which are in many ways a form of “flight from the discourse of the logic of dominion [that] ends up in a place which is in fact the mirror image of that discourse” (Rella 40), Boyle concerns herself with placing her own fantastical logic into that dominion as a way of putting women back into the picture. Her work reminds women to not forget the wonder and ecstasy of our bodies, to create that which satisfies and embraces the self full-heartedly. Creating with a compounded clash of mythology, fairytales

and desire, in *Porcelain Fantasy* there is a sense of “passing on,” elaborating cultural forms, which are not static and inviolable but dynamically involved in the creation of culture itself (Muñoz 81). In an interview with *Broken Pencil* magazine, of her work Boyle says:

The psychological motifs remain, and are increasingly based in the realm of the fantastic. And while the erotic still plays a role in my imagery, desire becomes suggestive rather than insistent.... [E]veryone has some kind of space where they store their memories and their half-formed understandings of things and their emotional memories and dreams. I think we bury ourselves under the banality of day-to-day living, especially in the city...it actually takes time to be quiet, to disconnect yourself from the surface of living.... I think some people never consciously try and connect with that place — it’s too painful or unsettling a ritual. (Bigge)

Similar to the art of London’s Tracey Emin, in Boyle’s work the idea of sensation, desire and memory — with the underpinnings of a persistent spiritual voice — all become central to the subjective reflection. *Ouroboros* is perhaps her most mystical to date, as it plays with symbolic mythology to express female self-containment, as woman fully complete. Where Boyle journeys through the fantasy to woman’s spiritual core, Emin takes her cue from the body’s memory, exploring her own traumatic and sensual experiences, to situate adversity as its own journey of actualization and spiritual existence. “The moment is, in Tracey’s case, a note scribbled as it is being experienced” (Logan and Steiner 114).

Our experiences are nomadic — we take them with us through life. We see this in Emin’s installation *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With: 1963–1995*, where she appliquéd the names of those she has shared a bed with inside a glowing tent. Of the work, critic Renée Vara has written that:

Emin’s tent reflects a common belief within contemporary mystical thought that ascribes to sexual relations a meaning of cosmic proportions. Mystical thinkers...consider sex a perfect moment of unity.... The significance of the act lies outside the materiality of bodies and...physical pleasure.... (Vara 185)

dignifies secretive periods of our lives by placing those deeply personal, and sometimes painful, segments upfront and centre — they become part of the norm, neither the exception nor the anomaly:

Benjamin wrote that aura is the quality in an object that makes our relationship to it like a relationship with another human being. It seems to look back at us...showing that they gained their power from the human presences and material practices that constructed them. (80–81)

PLATE 23: *My Bed*, 1998
Mattress, bed, linens, pillows, suitcase,
ephemera,
79" x 211" x 234"
Tracey Emin
Tate Gallery (The Saatchi Collection)
London, UK
Photo: Tate Photography



Considering the approach by these two artists, their universality, their ability to connect with others through these pieces, lies in memory recollection triggered in

that of the audience. For Boyle, the immediate and most obvious ones are in fairytales and childhood stories in general; for Emin, it is her own autobiography that is significantly marked by girl-to-womanhood rites of passage and the stigma of having a bad reputation:

It didn't matter that I was young / thirteen, fourteen.
It didn't matter that they were men of / nineteen, twenty, twenty-five,
twenty-six.... / But there were no morals, rules / or judgements....
By the time I was fifteen, I'd had them all....
Sex for me had been an adventure / a learning, an innocence....
I stopped shagging / but I was still flesh
and I still thought with my body. (Emin 43–45)

Much can be reconsidered through her recollections, for they illustrate how sense memories are most fragile to transport, yet most evocative when they can be recovered. For many female viewers, to view a broader, realistic representation of our coming-of-age experiences, speaks to those stained by sexual rites of passage that are rarely acknowledged as normal or seen as part and parcel of blossoming womanhood. In both artists' work, what is left out of expression registers somatically, in pain, nausea, smells and caresses. It confirms that what does not register in the orders of the seeable and sayable may resonate in the order of the sensible (111).

It is for these very reasons, Boyle explains, that "I don't title my paintings or drawings unless they're specifically about something or someone. I don't want to lead people... [L]anguage defines things in a way that is not honest" (Bigge). She echoes Benjamin's, "I have nothing to say" — in essence: show me — the visual language can speak for itself. It is a language whose translation sifts through personal experience, childhood memories, the vulnerability of intimacy, and the individual expression of spirit.

PARADISE JACKED

We are all stained. More and more each day these stains configure into our personalities, become our character, make us recognize and search for one another. The artist's communion with already existing materials makes it possible to commandeer prior topographical meanings for a communion of psychological ones. We are then using the physical to get at an invisible communal, which is about the sameness of the viewer and the artist, not about differences. I want to be invisible. But I want to know I'm out there. (Schnabel 206)

SOME PARTING THOUGHTS

True disidentification starts as a self-centred form of regaining identity possession and has the ability to break down the constraints of primitivist projection. Though not all artists' work here can be successfully determined as practitioners of this theory (namely Fusco and Belmore), I do believe they have all created work that has the potential to resonate deeply — whether with displeasure, curiosity or the gut. At best, they prove that attributes, which stigmatize one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another. Stigma, therefore, is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself (Goffman 3). And for many, metaphorically speaking, it was simply a matter of picking up another's arrows and relaunching them for their own effect (Marks 25).

Artist Coco Fusco notes that “there is nothing radical for people like me about trying to be somebody else — our problem is how to get others to see who we are” (Fusco 117–18). Yet the true disidentifier may care less: Harmony Korine and Shirin Neshat have proven to

be great examples of this in relation to both Fusco's and Belmore's works. Korine and Neshat do not appear to be overly concerned as to whether the audience will "get it," but whether or not the audience can relate or question. And, although comedy has been one of the key strategies many artists have taken to disengage from their primitivist positioning, when the parody is too close to the original, it can reinstate the very thing that is being parodied: the irony is lost. Both Fusco's and Belmore's parodies suffer from stigmatic reinforcement via their own theoretical application. And, if one doesn't already have specific historical critique, what the artist is trying to do is undermined. Their work is still in opposition to, in relation to, "the other." Disidentification is about a subject's position to a self. Period.

What we see, especially in Fusco's work, is the artist as stigma symbol. Unlike the comedic performances of someone like Margaret Cho, where there is a slow destabilization of that symbol when she takes on her immigrant mother's persona, one slowly begins to engage with the comedian, to her real stories, and it's as if her mother herself is on stage, is a relative we all have, for whom we have affection. And it works. One gets over the broken English, the heavy Korean accent, and her quirky mannerisms, as we begin to remember that we have seen this all before (with members of our own family, particularly in the elderly). Cho's ability to make that universal connection from a specific, culturally-defined space enables her work to disidentify and become absolutely rhizomatic.

Yet Fusco's and Belmore's works remind me of my disdain for post-colonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak. I had never understood how a theory, so focused on the marginalized and disenfranchised, was discussed in a format that was only understood by the educated and the intellectual. My own reaction to it was that if my own mother — about whom this

was supposedly speaking for — couldn't understand or relate to the work, then that work was seriously flawed. For one doesn't have to "get it" as a whole, but one should be able to get *something*, to be able to relate — or to what end?

In addition to comedy, another strategy that enabled the destabilization of the meta-narrative was that of taking no position — of taking on the role of documentarian, of putting forth questions — when dealing with the collective identity artistically. We see evidence of this in Neshat's, Korine's and my work *Annab, Get Your Gun*, as this thesis looked at the ways in which submerged histories and submerged stories are used to centralize stigmatized subjects. In Neshat's case, she takes a documentarian approach to the body that is culturally defined by religion and tradition, which later connects to Saville's work that documents the body as impacted by "stories." Recalling Benjamin's theories around fragmentation, Neshat utilizes a layering of disparate perspectives from the women themselves through the use of Arabic text, in addition to stigma signifiers that are montaged in such a way as to force us to examine her photograph, and our initial beliefs, further. My art piece, *Lil' Hot'* also takes up the challenge of creating a work that presents itself as a question. *Annab, Get Your Gun*, my parody of Gauguin's original work allows for what was once a stifled story in art history to break through the master narrative of the "master artist."

With Harmony Korine, the filmmaker has become ethnographer, allowing for poor, disenfranchised Euro-Americans — the "white trash" and underbelly of society — to affirm the lesser-known.⁴ If "outside is that which is refused access" (Stewart 411), then Korine reminds us through his snapshot-like narrative, that one should question whose trajectory and for what purpose:

Part of the critique of totalizing views requires that we also keep alive not only transgressive desires but also emotional attachments, pleasures, fascinations, and curiosities that do not necessarily reproduce, reflect, or line up neatly with political ideologies or oppositional movements. (Cvetkovich 48)

The beauty and genius in his work is the way in which the everyday, the “still life,” is represented without the filter of the majoritarian culture or of the political position.

Jenny Saville chooses to express how stories are experienced on the body, as the meta-culture of capitalism is figuratively expressed on stigmatized bodies of fleshy women. Shary Boyle and Tracey Emin show us how these same stories are imprinted on the mind and how they come back through our own personal mythologies and psychology, a truly disidentifying treatment since true disassociation takes place in the mind.

Paradise Jacked, my accompanying video, is an experimental short that, along with my own mixed-media works, features several local Toronto women artists. A complement to this thesis, it opens with an excerpt from *Egalitarian*, an intervention by South African-born artist Louise Ethel Liliefeldt, as she paints the word “animal” on her studio wall. Playing with ideas around primitive identities, Liliefeldt’s work uses metaphors and symbols to explore psychological states and physical experience. Comedian Martha E. Chaves is originally from Guatamala. A voice of the Latina and LGBT communities, she often parodies stigma symbols in her monologue. With this excerpt, she pokes fun at the media-managed, World Visionized-view of “Third World” people by North Americans. Fluxus performer Sook-Yin Lee is featured in two collaborations: a Laydeez Quire, which consists of various poets and singers who create an ad hoc Noise opera, as well as a solo performance combining Noise music, African rhythms and electronica. The link connecting each artist is the sound poetry

of Canadian-born writer Sandra Alland, whose poem “Able” — constructed as an aural life survey — speaks to the meta-narrative itself. In taking a “found” video approach — of using random sections of footage from radically different artists — I was able to layer voices, perspectives, images, and sounds in ways that allowed for one artist’s work to engage with another’s.

I end off from where I began with this question: How does the stigmatized artist address an audience that comes already equipped with a huge repository of representations? For the artists covered here, their tools consist of comedy, of visual and narrative fragmentation, of taking an ethnographer’s approach to autobiography, of taking a more centrist/non-judgmental stance when dealing with their collective identity, of recalling memory and spiritual exploration, of showing rather than telling in order to allow their issues to relate to ours, in order to become authentically rhizome.

ENDNOTES

1. In her book *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, Coco Fusco discusses at length on the variety of ways that “primitives” are used as “performance” during the early years of European conquest as forms of human exhibitions and spectacles. She writes:

Australian Aborigines, Tahitians, Aztecs, Iroquois, Cherokee, Ojibways, Iowas, Mohawks, Botocudos, Guianese, Hottentots, Kaffirs, Nubians, Somalians, Singhalese, Patagonians, Tierra del Fuegians, Kahucks, Anapondans, Zulus, Bushmen, Japanese, East Indians, and Laplanders have been exhibited in the taverns, theaters, gardens, museums, zoos, circuses, and world’s fairs of Europe, and the freak shows of the United States. Some examples are:

- 1493: An Arawak brought back from the Caribbean by Columbus is left on display in the Spanish Court for two years until he dies of sadness.
- 1501: ‘Eskimos’ are exhibited in Bristol, England.
- 1550s: Native Americans are brought to France to build a Brazilian village in Rouen. The King of France orders his soldiers to burn the village as a performance. He likes the spectacle so much that he orders it restaged the next day.
- 1562: Michel de Montaigne is inspired to write his essay *The Cannibals* (sic) after seeing Native Americans brought to France as a gift to the king.
- 1613: In writing *The Tempest* (sic) Shakespeare models his character Caliban on an ‘Indian’ he has seen in an exhibition in London.
- 1617: Pocahontas, the Indian wife of John Rolfe, arrives in London to advertise Virginia tobacco. She dies of an English disease shortly thereafter.
- 1676: Wampanoag Chief Metacom is executed for fomenting indigenous rebellion against the Puritans, and his head is publicly displayed for 25 years in Massachusetts.... (Fusco 41–42)

2. I’d like to make it clear, that although I mention that some sex-positive feminists have embraced Lil’ Kim for her unabashed sexual lyrical content, I have purposely not positioned the rap artist as personally having a feminist agenda in her work per se as she has never claimed such a persuasion. And for myself, it is irrelevant. bell hooks has denounced the rapper, probably more so for her physical transformation since her

sophomoric release of *Hard Core* in the mid-1990s: “Donning blond wigs and getting a boob job so that she can resemble a cheap version of the white womanhood she adores wins her monetary success in the world of white supremacist, patriarchal capitalism and helps her cover up the fact that she has no self-worth” (hooks 49). My feelings are that hooks may be a little harsh: she is an academic who is disengaged from the rap scene; I myself was an “urban music” DJ for eleven years, and am only six years older than the rapper (hooks is older by over twenty years, and came from a stable, two-parent, working-class family, which the rap artist in question is not) — one’s relation to and *participation* in a culture makes a huge difference.

I will say that from the late 1990s until the present day, what has complicated and skewed the resonance of Lil’ Kim’s music, for young Black women in particular, has been her preoccupation with plastic surgeries: several breasts and nose augmentations, with the most recent development being skin lightening. Although I have been greatly saddened by her transition, I do recall responses to her when she first emerged on the rap scene: she was considered “unattractive” and I remember her speaking of that at length. Like Michael Jackson, those with money and with huge personal traumas don’t become cutters, instead they go under the knife. The problem is greatly exacerbated for *all* women who participate in an entertainment industry that is image-focused, but for Black women, to an even larger degree. For all intents and purposes, in music videos, films, the news, *Oprah*, and on the streets of Toronto, your average Black female still looks like a walking wig stand.

3. Many critics have categorized Jean-Michel Basquiat’s artwork as “graffiti,” yet the description is inaccurate and is one he fought against during his career. His work fits more within the aesthetics of expressionism — more pointedly, with that of *Figuration Libre*, a movement dating back to 1940. Art from this movement shares the following characteristics: the work shows an overt consciousness of mass culture and media; it is spontaneous; it references comic strips, rock music, punk, etc., and is also characterized by a form of individualism and a revulsion for contemporary society. Along with Basquiat, other artists whose work fits into this category include Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, to name a few.
4. That lesser-known, coincidentally, ties in to the title of the film *Gummo*. Gummo was the lesser-known sibling of the famous comedic troupe the Marx Brothers.

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