Black American Women, Agency and New Definitions of Femininity in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The qualities of being male and female are socially constructed and vary between cultures and subcultures, as there are different opinions on what is typical or appropriate behaviour for men and women. How modern-day black American women define and express their womanhood has been an understudied topic in black feminist studies. I believe that feminist writers take little notice of femininities embodied by black women because most people are socialised into gender performance, and thus, on the surface, black women are not doing anything extraordinary. Feminist scholars criticise the concept of femininity and masculinity because they have been designed as gender binary in order to normalise heterosexual relationships and patriarchal rule. Gender performance is a controlling concept that oppresses men and women but given that black women are discriminated for being the race-sex opposite of white men who control American society, the black female body remains in a constant state of heightened visibility, which makes black women susceptible to more social scrutiny if they do not conform to hegemonic norms. Nevertheless, this dissertation will shed light on how black women are reconstructing femininity in a manner that makes them feel liberated, and the ways they use clothing and hair styling for self-expression. At the same time, I acknowledge that black women gatekeep black womanhood when they criticise other black women who do not model their perception of femininity. I demonstrate how this trend plays out on social media platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube.

I use the term “black American” in this observation as an inclusive term, referring to people born or living in America that are of African descent (African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin and African) but I will contextualise my analysis with African American history, as this dissertation is in American studies.

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Introduction

In 1993, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “the politics of respectability” to describe the process whereby southern black Baptist women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to challenge the white construction of black womanhood as ‘immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect and protection’, by assimilating to Victorian ideals of womanhood (Pitcan, Marwick and Boyd 2018, 164-65). Black church women embraced modest dress, displayed less emotion in worship and prioritised housework in order to come across as refined honourable women (Wuthnow 2017, 22). Higginbotham notes that black churches in the South were led by black elites who ran a variety of social service programs that were partly financed by white Baptists in the North (1993, 19-20). Therefore, college-educated black women alongside black male ministers, promoted white bourgeois ideology to the masses, with the hope of proving to white sponsors that black Americans had assimilated to American values and were worthy of their assistance (Higginbotham 1993, 20-21, chap.7). In essence, respectability politics is a performative resistance strategy utilised by social disadvantaged groups to improve their social status. Higginbotham’s study demonstrates that social respect is inextricably linked to social access, and sheds light on the history of black Baptist women as reformers, who used gender performance to achieve upwards social mobility for black people.

Since Higginbotham introduced the term “the politics of respectability” in 1993 and situated the historic intra-racial policing of black womanhood in the context of racial segregation and the black struggle for equal social opportunities, more feminist scholars have examined other periods in American history in which black women were given the burden of representing the black race in a dignifying manner for a specific racial objective. Feminist scholars emphasise that black women were the most negatively impacted by the black adoption

of respectability politics, but equally recognise that the degree to which black women were disciplined varied, as they were judged on the extent to which their physical appearance and mannerisms measured up to dominate cultural standards which privilege white heteropatriarchal bourgeois normativity.

Hazel Carby's observation on the behavioural policing of migrating, black working-class women by the black middle-class, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as a result of circulating social reports about the apparent rise of promiscuity and immorality in Harlem, addresses the influence of the black female middle-class gaze in the historic subjugation of black women (1992). Carby's analysis on the life of Jane Edna Hunter, a black middle-class woman and founder of the Phyllis Wheatley Association which accommodated and trained black women to become maids, reveals that the black middle-class used benign methods to change the supposedly unrighteous habits of black lower-class women (1992, 740-744). Thus, in the long run, a lot of black women during the Harlem Renaissance were unaware that they were being monitored (Carby 1992, 740-744). Maxine Craig has also made a valuable contribution to this field with her research on how black middle-class men used black women as cultural symbols during the Civil Rights era (2002). According to Craig, throughout the 1950s, black middle-class men confronted the white theoretical devaluation of blackness by using black women's beauty to rearticulate the black race as also beautiful (2002, chap. 2 and 3). Not only were black women celebrated in black-owned media publications, but the black middle-class also organised local black beauty pageants throughout America, to commemorate black women who were not allowed to participate in national beauty contests due to their race (Craig 2002, chap. 2 and 3). However, because the black middle class defined black beauty through Eurocentric standards of desirability, they essentially 'reinforced the interracial pigmentocracy that favoured light-complexioned blacks' and a hierarchy of class which elevated the black middle-class (Craig 2002, 46). So, in contrast to Carby's observation,

Craig's study underlines that the intra-racial policing of black femininity occurred through passive methods that involved the pedestalisation and exclusion of certain women.

When feminist writers examine the modern-day intra-racial policing of black women, they often use the same lens as feminist historians by exploring the ways black women are still policed through a politics of respectability. Many recent studies focus on how black adherence and resistance to hegemonic norms plays out in hip hop music. The prevailing view is that commercial black male hip-hop artists reinforce anti-black principles by only celebrating the beauty of fair skinned women in their music videos and disseminate conservative interpretations of gender and sexuality by demonising sexually liberated women through their lyrics (Sharpley-Whiting 2007; Conrad, Dixon and Zhang, 2009; Mathews and Johnson 2014; Collins 2004; Rose 2008). Some scholars also discuss the ways black female rappers confront the black male gaze by affirming their sexual agency through provocative lyrics, fashion and dance (Keyes 2000; White 2013). It seems that feminist scholars are reluctant to explore more broadly how black women of today are defining femininity for themselves, because those who embrace the concept of gender performance are essentially endorsing oppressive norms rather than interrogating them. Yet, the danger of not assessing the ways black women shape their own understanding of womanhood cements black women in a repetitive state of victimhood within black feminist studies. While black women are governed by ideas put in place by those with relatively more social power than them, they are conscientious beings that can decide norms for themselves.

In general, like other groups, black women argue with each other over social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube and this confirms their sense of agency in two ways. Firstly, black women are demonstrating that they are not homogenous in thought, though they share very similar social experiences. Secondly, the willingness of black women to confront one another on public digital platforms, reveals their shared disregard for how other

racial groups may perceive them. Black women, who have historically had the burden of modelling black identity "well", are liberating themselves by decentring non-black gazes from their lives. Nevertheless, as it pertains to gender performance, some black women gatekeep black womanhood when they criticise the feminine expressions of other black women.

This dissertation will fill a gap in black feminist studies by evaluating the ways black women's agency takes place through their own interpretation and expression of womanhood. Black women subscribe to a range of femininities (and some opt out of gender performance), however, I shall focus on how young black women in their 20s and 30s, use clothes and hairstyles to express their identities in manner that does not completely align with traditional ideals of femininity. As evidence, reference will be made to images from Instagram and Pinterest which illustrate black femininities. I will specifically consider how the concept of race-acting is mediated through the two most popular fashion styles among black women, commonly referred to as the "ghetto fabulous" - and "black women in luxury" (BWIL) aesthetics. In contrast to other contemporary feminist writers who only acknowledge the intra-racial policing of black womanhood through anti-black, classist and sexist values, I recognise the importance for black women to "act black" while behaving according to their gender. Currently, many black women are determined to showcase their racial pride because they are socialised to hate their blackness. Moreover, the manifestation of black excellence in education, politics and the sports and entertainment industry (to name a few), gives black Americans more incentives to publicly exhibit racial pride. However, black women have varied opinions on what it means to model "authentic blackness", which has led to the digital policing of black femininity. Therefore, in addition to discussing the ways black women define femininity for themselves, I will show how black women, from the same social class and of different social classes, monitor each other's performative femininities on TikTok and YouTube.

In chapter 1, I highlight the ways the feminine adaptation of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic challenges white middle-class respectability. In addition, I discuss a confrontation between two black female influencers over TikTok, to demonstrate that black women are made to feel that they are not black enough if they do not embody urban-ghetto femininity – and this is because urban-ghetto culture is promoted as "authentically black". Chapter 2 observes how a black femininity online community are pushing the boundaries of what it means to model "authentic blackness" with the BWIL aesthetic, which measures up to middle-class norms. However, I also assess how black female adherence to bourgeois standards results in the policing of black women who embrace urban-ghetto femininity. Interestingly, although the ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics reflect opposing class norms, both dress styles incorporate luxury designer fashion brands. Therefore, chapter 3 will be a short analysis where I contemplate why black women are obsessed with maintaining a rich appearance. To do so, I situate black conspicuous consumption in the context of systemic racism and intergenerational poverty, to highlight how this trend relates to black people's desire to appear respectable and display financial agency.

Chapter 1: Race-acting and the Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic

This chapter explores how modern-day black American women are defying middle-class respectable femininity by embracing feminine urban-ghetto fashion. I also acknowledge that the importance of the feminine adaptation of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic lies in the fact that it is promoted as the appropriate way to model racial pride as a black woman. This is because the black experience in America is characterised by systemic racism and poverty, and a lot of black people perceive urban-ghetto culture as the truest reflection of black identity. The term "ghetto black" was introduced by the white gaze to implicate the race-class inferiority of black Americans. The term "ghetto fabulous", however, highlights that black people have claimed and redefined this slur. In the final part of the chapter, I analyse an online confrontation between two black female influencers to demonstrate that black women who embody urban-ghetto femininity can gatekeep black womanhood by ridiculing black women whose gender performance does not appear "authentically black" to them.

The concept of gender and gendered behaviour are binary social constructs. Women are expected to behave in a feminine way, and men are expected to behave in a masculine manner. However, the parameters of femininity and masculinity are different. Women are policed by their physical appearance and moral behaviour, meanwhile men are expected to be self-sufficient, financially secure, and hold positions of authority in society. Ideas of "appropriate" expressions of femininity and masculinity were defined by European intellectuals of the eighteenth century, in the Western context. In the age of Enlightenment, scientists and philosophers studied mankind with the assumption that the European able-bodied male is the standard of normality, and thus the civility of a person was determined by the extent to which they measured up to European men: physically, morally, and intellectually (Schiebinger 1990, 404). European women were classed as "monstrous" because female reproductive organs and

skulls differed from European men, and intellectuals simultaneously interpreted these anatomical differences as a sign of the moral and intellectual inferiority of women (Schiebinger 1990, 395-99). Nevertheless, European bourgeois women became associated with "civilised" femininity due to their race and social status (Morgan 1997, 178-87). In contrast, as the white male gaze interpreted anything that deviated from whiteness as a sign of degeneracy, African women were depicted as the antithesis of normative femininity and African men were portrayed as the antithesis of normative masculinity (Curran 2011, 117-66). White Americans represented the "uncivilised" femininity of African American women through racial caricatures of black women as "Mammies", "Jezebels", and "Sapphires". These racial caricatures were created to reinforce the notion of black women as unfeminine and make them yearn for white femininity. However, when we think of the historical racial depictions of black women, we tend to immediately focus on their putatively unfeminine characteristics. For instance, the Mammy lacks beauty and has no husband, the Jezebel is unchaste, and the Sapphire is aggressive. What is also clear about the Mammy and Jezebel figures is the white effort to control black female sexuality by categorising black women as either inherently asexual or promiscuous (Hooks 1982, "Ain't I a Woman," chap. 2). But what traits do these caricatures embody that also makes them feminine? The Mammy's maternal qualities are communicated through her domestic service, the Jezebel only has sex with men, and on the surface, the Sapphire is depicted as "masculine" because aggression is associated with masculinity, yet she is also feminine because heightened emotions are associated with women. So, even though black women have been characterised as unfeminine due to their race, the white gaze has always expected them to participate in performative femininity because of their gender.

African Americans have a unique relationship with gendered performance due to institutional racism. The European classification of blackness as unfeminine in the eighteenth century led black women of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries to overcompensate for

their “lack” of femininity by imitating the beauty, fashion and etiquette practices of white bourgeois women, with the hope that assimilating would improve their social reputation (Ford 2015, 69-72). Craig makes an important observation which situates the devaluation of black womanhood in the context of Jim Crow laws. According to her, white women’s ‘exclusive right to the position of the lady’ was accomplished through the prohibition of black women from entering female public toilets and sitting alongside white women on public transport (Craig 2002, 8). Therefore, one could argue that gender performance had psychological benefits for black women, who could at least maintain a sense of dignity in their appearance in the midst of public humiliation (of which they had no control of). Stereotypical characteristics of masculinity include self-sufficiency, financial agency and leadership, yet black men were denied full access to these experiences because systemic racism placed limits on their social mobility. Some black men of the past attempted to affirm their masculinity by participating in criminal activity and seeking employment in the sports industry to financially support themselves and their families, while many engaged in community leadership roles, such as pastoral and activist leadership, to exercise authority (Hooks 2004, “We Real Cool,” 5-31).

During the civil rights era, African Americans endorsed middle-class respectability to confront racial injustice. By adopting nonviolent protest, of which upholds Christian teachings of pacificism, African Americans were able to demonstrate their assimilation to American values (Ford 2015, 71). Furthermore, nonviolent methods exposed the violent mistreatment of “well-behaved” African Americans by racist mobs and policemen, which raised white guilt and encouraged white Americans to support the civil rights movement (Ford 2015, 71). In addition, African American men and women used each other as sites to perform respectable femininity and masculinity. For example, although black women helped to organise many nonviolent protests, the portrayal of black men leading the fight for racial equality allowed African Americans to display their adherence to heteropatriarchy (Ford 2015, 71). Keeping up a neat

appearance was another way African Americans sought to gain respect from the white gaze. Leaders of middle-class-led civil rights organisations encouraged African Americans to dress like they were going to church because their "Sunday Best" outfits made them appear refined, and worthy of civil rights (Ford 2015, 69). Initially, young female activists approved of black women conforming to traditional ideals of femininity by wearing modest clothing and straight hairstyles, with the assumption that doing so would effectively challenge negative stereotypes of black women as promiscuous and undesirable (Ford 2015, 72). However, women of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) soon realised that presenting themselves as "refined ladies" did not stop them from being sexually assaulted by policemen whilst in jail (Ford 2015, 73-5). As a result, SNCC women rejected respectability politics and demonstrated this through their adoption of the "soul style" (Ford 2015, 84-8). Women who embraced the soul style wore their natural hair and African head wraps as a symbol of their racial pride, and wore denim clothes to show that they acknowledged poor and working-class African Americans in their fight for civil rights (Ford 2015, 80-4, 95-7). Moreover, wearing denim overalls allowed SNCC women to appear androgynous, and thus challenged the concept of gender (Ford 2015, 84).

The ghetto fabulous aesthetic worn by black women today can be compared to the soul style embraced by black women between the late 1960s and 1970s, as this aesthetic also confronts respectability politics. The ghetto fabulous aesthetic became popular in black urban-ghettos throughout the 1990s and the popularity of this dress style within the hip hop industry has been credited to black designers, Misa Hylton, Dapper Dan and April Walker, who replicated the fashion sense of lower-class black Americans through their designs, of which were then worn by black male and female rappers (Olu 2020). The ghetto fabulous aesthetic is flamboyant clothing style with distinctive features that often includes brightly coloured garments, varying amounts of luxury designer items and large-sized jewellery. The typical

feminine version of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic was best epitomised by black American rapper, Lil Kim, who is known for wearing colourful wigs and revealing clothes with animal prints and fur (Kwarteng, n.d.; Jackson 2020). Lil Kim's model of urban-ghetto fashion made her stand out from other female artists, such as Eve, Mary J Blige and Missy Elliot, who also embraced urban-ghetto fashion. Overall, black American women, irrespective of social class, who endorsed the ghetto fabulous aesthetic throughout the 1990s and early 2000s confronted middle-class respectability through clothing. Wealthy black women in particular, defied class norms by taking pride in a dress style that is associated with lower-class black people. Though as a collective, black women challenged traditional ideals of femininity by exploring their sexuality through fashion. Ultimately, the feminine urban-ghetto fashion proves that black women of this era created their own definition of femininity.

Black women of today who embody the ghetto fabulous aesthetic customise urban-ghetto fashion according to their own liking and taste. However, the key characteristics of the feminine urban-ghetto dress style includes colour coordinated outfits, clothing that is tight fitting or revealing, long brightly coloured hair and nail extensions, large-sized jewellery, and luxury designer branded shoes and handbags (see Appendix, figs. 1 - 8). One reason why many black women continue to dress in this manner is because they grew up in urban ghettos and are accustomed to wearing certain clothing and hairstyles. Black women who did not grow up in deprivation may also dress this way because they admire the aesthetic. Black women have a politicised identity due to their race and gender, and there is a history of black Americans using their outer appearance to make a political statement. Therefore, however black women of today choose to style their hair or clothes is interpreted as conformity or resistance, and women who choose to emulate urban-ghetto expressions of femininity, intentionally and unintentionally, make a political statement with their bodies. Although the parameters of femininity are heteronormative, lesbian women still engage in femininity because all women are socialised

into gender performance. Shannon Hamilton is an example of a black lesbian woman who embraces the ghetto fabulous aesthetic (see Appendix, fig. 7). It is likely that black lesbian women are attracted to urban-ghetto femininity because it offers more sartorial leeway for sexual exploration and individuality than typical middle-class feminine fashion where the objective is to appear modest and dainty.

Black women who embrace the ghetto aesthetic tend to wear wigs, weaves, or braided hairstyles, instead of wearing their hair in its natural state like SNCC women and the Black Panthers. It is often assumed that black American women who wear wigs and weaves are hiding their natural hair out of shame because black women of the past deliberately masked their blackness by straightening their hair, in order to fit into white ideals of beauty (Watkins 2016; Monaco 2021). Although black women are socialised into Eurocentric beauty standards, the reasons why black women wear wigs and weaves are more complex than the desire to look like a white woman or to appear racially ambiguous. The most common reasons why modern-day black women choose to wear hair extensions is because it gives them the freedom to wear numerous hairstyles in different colours while avoiding heat and chemical damage to their natural hair; in addition, wigs and weaves require less maintenance compared to natural hair, which can easily break from over-manipulation when styling (Edaferhoro 2019; Greaves 2020). Nonetheless, it is essential to consider that some black women who desire to wear their natural hair texture are hesitant to do so because black hair continues to be scrutinised by the white gaze. Black girls and women who embrace their natural hair still face discriminatory policies put in place by schools and workplaces (Dove 2019). Only in 2019, was the "Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair" (CROWN) Act created to outlaw hair discrimination by public institutions (Hancock 2022). This legislation has passed in twelve U.S states as of June 2021, and if approved in more states, the Act will substantially aid the

advancement of racial equality in America by protecting the legal rights of women who choose to wear their natural hair (Hancock 2022).

Black Americans from poor and working-class backgrounds tend to view black urban-ghetto culture as "authentically black" because the black experience has been shaped by systemic racism and poverty, and the consequences of racial oppression and deprivation are most apparent in the day-to-day struggles of black people living in urban ghettos. Hip hop music which grew out of the Bronx, New York in the late 1970s during economic decline, cemented urban-ghetto culture as "authentically black" as the art form called attention to the social inequalities experienced by black (and brown) Americans (Rebollo-Gil and Moras 2012, 119). It is understandable that despite being wealthy, hip-hop artists continue to identify with poor and working-class Americans through clothing and hairstyles, because their sound derives from urban-ghetto culture. However, given that the ghetto fabulous aesthetic is worn by a lot of affluent black Americans who are not part of the hip hop industry, it seems that embracing urban-ghetto fashion is their way of exhibiting their racial pride. Wealthy black Americans who embrace urban-ghetto fashion publicly show that they are not "selling out" of black culture now that they have acquired new money and are essentially part of the American bourgeoisie. At the same time, the portrayal of urban-ghetto culture as "authentically black" has created controlling narratives about what it means to be a black person and often results in the marginalisation of black people who do not model the typical aesthetic (and mannerisms) of poor and working-class black Americans, by other black Americans who do.

In November 2021, a heated online confrontation took place between social media influencer, Jayda Cheaves and luxury lifestyle blogger, Courtney Michelle. The significance of the online confrontation between these influencers lies in the fact that it was the first time two well-known black American women, who embody distinctive expressions of femininity,

have publicly disputed over the meaning of black female success. In a TikTok video, Michelle states,

> I don't relate to most of y'all because a lot of you look to Ari [Fletcher] and Jayda [Cheaves], and beautiful girls, but like that's your goals of what you want to be like. Goals for me is the mom who pulls up to Whole Foods in the brand-new Escalade with the Mima Xari stroller, her kids are decked out, Lululemon head to toe, and it's like 2pm on a Tuesday, you know she ain't got no job but she's living her best life (quoted in Strong 2021).

In response to Michelle's video, Cheaves commented, "I don't get it. I live way better than that with one kid & a 80k Birkin bag hopping out of one of my 4 cars. Nobody want to babe [be] white. Relax. Be you" (quoted in Strong 2021). She continued, "We're black. Let's be black. And act black. I'm not ghetto & I'm not in the club. I live a normal well taken care of life. And living my best life" (quoted in Bryant n.d.).

Michelle's reference to Fletcher and Cheaves (see Appendix, 2 - 4 and 9) while stating her preference for being a rich housewife is rooted in respectability politics and will be contextualised in chapter 2. However, regarding the concept of modelling "authentic blackness", this online incident confirms that black Americans who are invested in urban-ghetto culture see themselves as "authentically black", considering that Cheaves accuses Michelle of trying to be white due to the lifestyle that she aspires to attain, and tells her to "act black" because she is black. Michelle mentions her desire to wear Lululemon clothing, which is a luxury activewear brand. The importance of her citing this fashion company arises from the fact that, although Lululemon clothing is expensive, the clothing style of this brand is very simplistic, and the company logo of this brand is not as eye-catching other luxury designer fashion brands such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, which are often worn by black Americans

who embrace the ghetto fabulous aesthetic. Therefore, it seems that Courtney wants to make her social class apparent through expensive clothes (and cars) but also wants to set herself apart from other rich and lower-class black Americans who also purchase luxury items.

Current psychological studies on the concept of race-acting, which is the notion that people can come across as a particular race, primarily explore this theory in the relation to academia. In 1986, Fordham and Ogbu put forward the "acting-white" hypothesis following their research on the achievement values of African American students from a Washington DC metropolitan area high school (Burrell, Winston and Freeman 2013, 96). Their hypothesis indicates that black students perceive educational success as synonymous with whiteness rather than blackness, so when black students are high achievers at school, other black students tend to see them as "less" of a black person and as attempting to be a white person (Burrell, Winston and Freeman 2013, 96). Nevertheless, a different psychological study conducted in 2013 surveyed African American students at a predominately black public charter middle-school, in an urban city in the north-east of America, on the concept of "acting black" (Burrell, Winston and Freeman 2013, 102). The study reveals that black teens value education and achievement, and do not believe that academic intelligence makes a black student "less black" (Burrell, Winston and Freeman 2013, 107-8). Interestingly, the psychologists also observed that,

> the ways the meaning of ''acting Black'' is unique from what ''acting White'' means is evidenced by two additional themes, Ghetto and Superiority. The theme of Ghetto was related to what ''acting Black'' means (7.92%) but did not represent any responses describing the meaning of ''acting White,'' while the theme of Superiority was related to what ''acting White'' means (10.64%) but did not represent any responses describing the meaning of ''acting Black.'' (Burrell, Winston and Freeman 2013, 104-105).

Psychologists tend to study the concept of race-acting in the context of urban educational settings as black students who are well-spoken and high academic achievers, in spite of their low socio-economic background, are vocal about being called “nerds” and being accused of “acting white” by other black students. Some black students consider certain ways of speaking and interests as either reflective of white or black cultural norms, and thus believe that black people who do not embody the typical behaviour of black people living in inner cities are purposefully trying to detach themselves from their cultural heritage – as if they are ashamed of their blackness (Tyson, Darity and Castellino 2005, 583). It would be useful to extend the study of race-acting to physical appearance and lifestyle choices considering that Cheaves views herself as “acting black”. She does explain what is means to “act black”, but she disassociates “authentic blackness” from behaving “ghetto” and partying in clubs (quoted in Bryant, n.d.). Yet, her claim that Michelle is trying to be a white woman suggests her belief that Michelle regards herself as better than other black women who are invested in urban-ghetto culture and work (quoted in Bryant n.d). Evidently, Cheaves views “acting white” as having a sense of superiority, just as the black students of the 2013 study did.

Black Americans place limitations on themselves with the notion that they must “act black” because it ignores the personal identities of black people and treats black Americans as a monolithic group. At the same time, the concept of race itself is restricting. For racial classifications to exist, people’s physical appearances must be generalised in the first place. To fully understand the concept of race-acting and why black Americans are offended when they see a black person “acting white”, it is necessary to evaluate whether certain black Americans have a tendency to disassociate from lower-class black people once they are excelling in life. Hazel Carby's study of the behavioural policing of poor and working-class black women by the black middle-class during the Harlem Renaissance reveals that affluent black Americans have historically been embarrassed by lower-class black Americans and seen them as threats to racial

objectives (1992). Tanisha C. Ford's research on the aesthetic policing of black Americans by middle-class-led civil rights institutions also reveals this (2015). Therefore, it is possible to interpret Cheaves telling Michelle to "act black" as her telling Michelle to stop distancing herself from blackness to appear respectable to the white gaze.

Overall, the online confrontation between Michelle and Cheaves reveals that the overrepresentation of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic in the hip hop industry and on social media can have the reverse effect in encouraging black women to free themselves from respectability politics. This is because ultimately it works to gatekeep black femininity by only appreciating urban-ghetto expressions of femininity. Simultaneously, the fact that Michelle found it necessary to tell her TikTok viewers that she prefers a typical middle-class lifestyle over Cheaves' and Fletcher's lifestyle (even though both influencers are wealthy) roots her comments in classism and anti-blackness, since black lower-class femininity has historically been deemed inferior to white middle-class femininity. The problematic aspects of both influencers' comments divided opinion among black women online, and it is likely that women sympathised with one influencer over the other because they either, subscribe to the ghetto fabulous aesthetic themselves, or personally understand how insulting it feels to be accused of "acting white" as the result of not behaving like the quintessential lower-class black woman (Bryant, n.d.).

Chapter 2: The Relationship Between Luxury and Respectability Politics

All my life I've seen this certain type of woman and I've always been like I want to embody that. My goal is to be more like this woman and y'all keep putting words in my mouth saying that this is a white woman, but I've seen this type of woman in all colours and all shades my entire life. She is the woman that is so carefree right, she's so happy. She gets up in the morning, she has the most aesthetic day - like makes the cutest breakfast for her family, she packs everyone up, she takes her kids to school every single day … she comes home and cleans or probably doesn't clean because she has a maid. She does yoga, she does Pilates, she meets the girls for brunch … that woman, do you know what I'm saying? And if I was to give it a name, I would kind of say like old money aesthetic (Courtney Michelle, quoted in Courtney Michelle Vlogs 2021).

Throughout the 2020 global lockdown, as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, a growing number of young black women across the world began publicly voicing their desires to obtain an affluent lifestyle, over social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. This trend has now evolved into an international movement known as "black women in luxury" (BWIL), whereby black women motivate each other to strive for a lifestyle that revolves around opulence, leisure and ease (Divine Femininity Queen, "How to be a High Valued Woman," 2020; The Art of Femininity 2020). Currently, there is no evidence which suggests that the BWIL movement is the result of a political incident. However, it is clear that a lot of black women have been inspired by the teachings of femininity coaches on YouTube. There are a plethora of femininity content creators of different nationalities and races on YouTube, who promote the idea that single women can upgrade their living standards by performing "traditional" femininity to attract a rich alpha-male (also known as a "high value

man") who will ensure that they will live a stress-free life, by fulfilling his gender role as the provider and protector (SheraSeven 2018; Bey 2018; The Universe Guru 2020). I put the word "traditional" in air quotes because femininity coaches do not embrace Victorian ideals of womanhood in its entirety. For example, the femininity YouTube community believe that women of today are compromising their femininity when they work out of necessity and not choice. An orthodox womanly quality is submission to male authority. However, this online community does not glorify housewives over working women as the prevalent view is that a good quality men look after their girlfriends and wives, irrespective of the woman's employment status (Sheraseven 2018; Bey 2018; The Universe Guru 2020). Luxury lifestyle blogger, Courtney Michelle, is influenced by the BWIL movement and is unimpressed by the lifestyles of women like Ari Fletcher and Jayda Cheaves because she assumes that they need to work to maintain an extravagant standard of living, despite both being in relationships with famous American rappers. It is likely that in response to Michelle's Tik Tok commentary, Cheaves refers to the expensive items she owns as proof that she is living 'a normal and well taken care of life', financed by her partner, and validate why women aspire to be like her (quoted in Bryant, n.d.).

The new fascination with hypergamy among African American women in particular could be explained by the fact that female hypergamy is normalised in several other cultures but their own. Even though black elite men existed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lack of socio-economic opportunities for most black men significantly reduced opportunities for black women to marry above their socio-class, and instead, required black women and men to negotiate their gender roles by working together to financially support their families. The fact that black women worked for money also posited them further away from the status of lady in the minds of the white middle-class (Craig 2002, 7). Today, black women have better chances of marrying black men above their socio-economic class because there are

more black men entering well-paid professions in politics, finance, healthcare and entertainment. However, the chances for black women to marry rich men is still narrow. According to a recent study, which defines the middle-class individuals as those who earn between $26,400 and $96,700; black Americans represent 13% of the American population and make up 12% of the middle-class aged 25 to 54 (Pulliam, Reeves and Shiro 2020). Yet, this study does not specify the gender, sexual orientation and relationship status of black middle-class individuals. Another survey confirms that 2.5 million black men between the ages 18 and 64, are now upper-class, earning an annual average of over $100,000 (Wilcox, Mincy and Wang 2018). Again, the sexual orientation and relationship status of these men was not recorded. Nonetheless, these figures highlight that the black middle- and upper-class are a minority among the black American population. Therefore, black femininity coaches counsel single black women on how they can use femininity to stand out to wealthy black and non-black men, to increase their chances of obtaining a hypergamous relationship.

The BWIL movement involves low- and high-income women that are attempting to improve their quality of life by using gender performance to their own advantage. These women embrace a middle-class presenting aesthetic and bourgeois values to appeal to traditional affluent men. Nonetheless, the BWIL movement markets dark skin women and black hairstyles as also feminine, which means followers of this movement are not completely assimilating to traditional ideals of femininity (Divine Femininity Queen, “Femininity For Dark Skin,” 2020; see Appendix, figs. 9 - 13). By defying Eurocentric beauty ideals, black women are demonstrating that they do not need live up to urban-ghetto ideals of femininity to publicly exhibit racial pride. However, the ghetto fabulous aesthetic has been scrutinised within the black femininity online community whose values uphold a politics of respectability. The central theme of this chapter is to explore the ways in which urban-ghetto expressions of womanhood are ridiculed within the BWIL movement. My analysis will focus on the fashion

advice promoted by one of the most popular black American femininity coaches on YouTube, who goes by the name, “Miss Feminine”.

Femininity coach and YouTuber, Miss Feminine, has a subscriber count of over 120,000, and her videos often exceed her viewership. In her video “10 Ways To Dress More Feminine” which has over 290,000 views with 17,000 likes, Miss Feminine, stresses to her predominantly black female audience that,

> Keeping up a good appearance signifies value and standards … within 30 seconds of you entering a room, people are able to feel you out, we are able to quickly differentiate between a woman who is aggressive and rough around the edges, and a softer, well-kept, more approachable woman. Therefore, you should look nice wherever you are going, especially if you are looking to meet people (2020).

To emphasis her point, Miss Feminine embeds a picture of black American rappers, Nicki Minaj and Megan Thee Stallion, who are both wearing red wigs and neon zebra printed clothes (taken from the set of their music video for their song “Hot Girl Summer”) and contrasts this image with a photo of a black woman in a braided hairstyle, wearing a pink satin dress (“10 Ways,” 2020). Miss Feminine insinuates that women who subscribe to urban-ghetto fashion, such as Nicki Minaj and Megan Thee Stallion, personify the Sapphire caricature as they come across as “aggressive” and “rough”. Meanwhile, from her perspective, women who adopt the BWIL aesthetic look more approachable. Though, in another video, Miss Feminine explicitly associates the Sapphire and Jezebel stereotypes of black women with urban-ghetto femininity. She stresses that,

> My videos are not all-inclusive. My videos are for an exclusive group of women who are looking to level up completely. What we are not going to do is incorporate ratchetness into the level up. I mean, I understand a lot of us come from a lower socio-

> economic background where that may be the norm, and maybe you want to feel accepted, but the whole point of this channel is to evolve out of that – I mean the fashion nova dresses, the loud nails, the loud hair, the profanity is for the kids. And what you must understand is that after a certain age, in order to reach your full feminine potential, you have to let that stuff go … you cannot be a woman of substance, a woman of class, a woman of value, if you're following thot culture ("Feminine Privilege," 2020).

Miss Feminine's disclaimer note shows that she is aware that her videos attract critics, and I will review the condemnation she has received later on in the chapter. However, here, Miss Feminine suggests that women who subscribe to the ghetto fabulous aesthetic exude mannerisms which live up to racial stereotypes of black women. The word "ratchetness" is similar to the word "ghetto", as they are both derogatory slang terms used to refer to uncivilised people or uncivilised behaviour (Ortved 2013). However, "ratchet" is a term created by black Americans and has sexist implications as it is commonly used to describe uncivilised women (Ortved 2013). For example, women who cannot communicate well, which ostensibly indicates that they have a low-level of intellect, or women who have physical fights with other women, which supposedly implies that they lack "home-training". The term "thot" also has sexist connotations, as it is acronym which stands for "That Hoe Over There" and is used to refer to promiscuous women. In her YouTube video, Miss Feminine embeds an Instagram video of black American rapper Cardi B ranting, as an example of a woman who promotes "ghetto behaviour" and "promiscuous culture". Miss Feminine deliberately uses Cardi B as a representation of inappropriate black femininity because of her fashion style, her history of fighting in public and the fact that she is a former stripper who now makes sexually explicit music (VH1 2017).

What is fascinating about Miss Feminine's video disclaimer is that she acknowledges the feminine version of urban-ghetto fashion as a hyper-feminine dress style that revolves

around wearing ‘loud nails and loud hair’ – by which she means, long and vibrant coloured acrylic nails and hair extensions (“Feminine Privilege,” 2020). Yet, at the same time, Miss Feminine characterises the ghetto fabulous aesthetic as a hyper-masculine fashion style because of the manner in which wealth is exhibited. For example, she tells her followers to avoid wearing ‘large chunky gaudy jewellery’ because women who flaunt their money are less likely to be approached by “high value” men since they are portraying an alpha-male image (Miss Feminine, “10 Ways,” 2020). She insinuates that women can come across as submissive to men by wearing “soft” colours such as, ‘florals, nudes, pinks, baby blues and lavenders’ as well as ‘dainty jewellery’ such as, necklaces and bracelets (Miss Feminine, “10 Ways,” 2020). Other black femininity coaches offer similar advice as Miss Feminine but in a more subtle way, as they only encourage women to model wealth through clothes, shoes and handbags (Level Up Journey 2021; The Feminine Universe 2022). By positing the feminine adaption of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic as occupying extreme ends of femininity and masculinity, Miss Feminine is essentially telling black women that they become undeserving of fulfilling romantic relationships if they display too much sexual and financial agency. Ultimately, the necessity for women to find a perfect balance between exuding feminine qualities and wealth to attract a quality man makes the BWIL aesthetic more restrictive than the urban-ghetto fashion, since there are no set rules.

The academic study of clothing centres around the manufacturing process of fashion, its environmental impacts as well as its cultural significance. The most popular topic of enquiry among feminist scholars in regard to clothing is how it relates to the body. According to Volonté, the fashion industry as an agent of socialisation, enforces thinness as the body standard through a limited range of clothe sizes (2019, 253-259). Smears, however, contemplates how the fashion industry markets slimness as the ideal body type through models (Mears 2011, 91-95). Yet, how clothes become fashionable in the first place remains

unexplored. I believe that this topic is understudied as it may seem "obvious" that fashion designers and fashion publications dictate what clothes are in and out of trend. But what needs to be unpacked is where they draw their inspiration from, and the ways it relates to respectability.

In 2018, black designer, Nareasha Willis became a social media star for her sweatshirt "ghetto until proven fashionable" (Hargrove 2018; see Appendix, fig. 14). The fact that Willis designed this top and received an overwhelming amount of support for doing so, reveals that a growing number of black Americans feel that they are not being credited enough for their contributions to the mainstream US fashion industry. The fashion industry is an agent of socialisation that informs people how to dress. In many ways, the American fashion industry socialises lower-class women to view middle-class women's fashion in a superior way to their own. Firstly, fashion publications, of whom decide what it in and out of trend, frequently draw their inspiration from beautiful affluent women, particularly female celebrities, when deciding feminine fashion trends – even if their styles are taken from a particular culture or subculture. For example, many fashion magazines view Rihanna as a fashion icon, but her dress sense is in fact inspired by urban-ghetto and gothic fashion (Comroe 2020; Sutton 2021). In terms of beauty trends, black women have been mocked for having large bottoms and big lips as these features do not measure up to white beauty standards, yet these characteristics have become socially acceptable because of Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner (Wang 2021). Black fashion and black beauty, overall, are marginalised from the mainstream fashion and beauty industry until they are displayed on respectable bodies. In a 2021 interview with fashion magazine, *Harper's Bazaar*, Mary J Blige rightly paid tribute to lower-class black people when she was asked about her fashion style during the 1990s (Gracie 2021). It is crucial that black celebrities remind white media outlets of the origins of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic now that fashion publications are attempting to gentrify it. Though what is compelling is that black lower-class

people have yet to voice their concerns about black celebrities being celebrated as fashion icons rather than themselves. One could argue that black women appreciate that someone like Rihanna, as a black woman, performs blackness and validates urban-ghetto femininity by continuing to embody it as a rich woman in the public eye.

Luxury designer fashion companies cater to rich people who can afford their items and often focus on creating basic fashion pieces that are unlikely to go out of trend, as it more profitable to have both young and mature people as consumers. This explains why black women who follow the ghetto fabulous- or BWIL aesthetic, can shop at the same high-end retail stores but will style items differently. Occasionally, high-end fashion brands will endorse new aesthetics when they make clothing lines with celebrities. For instance, in 2019, Fendi embraced the ghetto fabulous aesthetic when they collaborated with the Trinidadian-born rapper, Nicki Minaj (Rogo 2020). In contrast, urban-ghetto fashion has been embraced in its entirety by fast fashion companies, such as Fashion Nova and Pretty Little Thing, whose target audience are young people (see Appendix, figs. 15 and 16). However, because fast fashion has a bad reputation for using low-quality material (which makes their products environmental unfriendly) and imitating the fashion designs of small designers and luxury fashion brands; their acceptance of urban-ghetto fashion has not helped to improve its reputation in the mainstream fashion industry (Mears 2011, 33; Battle 2019; DW Documentary 2022). Lower-class black people already lack social disrespect and given that their aesthetic is accepted by the fast fashion industry, of which is perceived as inferior "unethical" fashion compared to luxury "ethical" fashion, it has indirectly reinstated urban-ghetto fashion as a substandard style. When Miss Feminine says 'the fashion nova dresses, the loud nails, the loud hair, the profanity, is for the kids', she characterises urban-ghetto expressions of femininity as cheap-looking, attention-seeking and immature ("Feminine Privilege," 2020). The underrepresentation of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic (in its entirety) among reputable fashion brands, and the

overrepresentation of this fashion style among notorious fashion companies, has caused her to view urban-ghetto fashion as distasteful. Additionally, while studies show that conspicuous consumption is apparent among low- and high-income black Americans, black celebrities and social media influencers who embody the ghetto fabulous aesthetic can afford to wear more designer clothes than lower-class black people (Lamont and Molnár 2001; Hale 2021). Thus, by ridiculing women who wear clothes from an affordable company like Fashion Nova, Miss Feminine is subtly fuelling existing pressurises for black women to prove that they are worthy of social respect by maintaining a rich appearance.

Miss Feminine's subscribers also collaborate with her in the policing of black womanhood. In the comments section of the "10 Ways To Dress More Feminine" video, @AestheticallyManni writes,

"I love this channel and it's [its] overall content but I'd like to challenge you to not talk down about other women while uplifting yourself and your own choices. The non-feminine photos you use are still black queens and they didn't ask to be looked at in a negative light in front of thousands for not being up to your standard" (quoted in Miss Feminine 2020).

In response, @Ellie B writes, "Thanks Karen" (quoted in Miss Feminine "10 Ways," 2020).

"Karen" is a term used to refer to middle-aged and middle-class white women who use their white- and class privileges to monitor the behaviour of socially disadvantaged groups (Lang 2020). This term became popular on social media to shed light on the history of white American women actively supporting racism and classism (Lang 2020; Romano 2020). It appears that @Ellie B attempts to insult @AestheticallyManni by referring to her as "Karen" because she thinks that @AestheticallyManni is behaving like a white middle-class woman by policing a black woman for her own opinion. Yet, her statement is illogical and hypocritical, since in reality, @AestheticallyManni as a black woman herself, is reminding Miss Feminine to not

disrespect black women who do not model femininity according to her own liking. More examples of gaslighting commentary from Miss Feminine's supporters, towards those who challenge her content, can be found in the comment sections of her other videos. For instance, in relation to the video "7 Traits of a Highly Masculine Woman", @Josie Mukeli writes,

"Unpopular opinion. There's more to life than the opposite gender" (quoted in Miss Feminine 2020).

In response @Princess writes,

"Stop shaming other woman [women] who wants [want] the man to be the provider and to spoil her. If you have daddy issues just say that but you need to do your own healings [healing] before you start bashing other women and shaming other women for decisions that they want to make. This is the problem with you feminists, you scream about all women should have the right to do whatever they want, but then as soon as a woman disagrees with what you guys think is ideal, all of a sudden you start to attack her and labelling [label] her as insecure; no you're the insecure one and we can see that - we get it no guys is [are] attracted to you" (quoted in Miss Feminine, "7 Traits," 2021).

Evidently, women who consume Miss Feminine's content overlook the policing of urban-ghetto womanhood, because one of their goals for performing femininity is to access emotional and financial security from men. Therefore, from their perspective, the end justifies the means.

One could argue that main reason why black femininity YouTube channels continue to attract a lot of support from black women is because black femininity coaches market blackness as feminine and celebrate all forms of black beauty. There are femininity lifestyle mentors, Miss Feminine included, who dedicate entire videos to brown and dark-skinned black women to validate their femininity, and also attempt to "femininize" all features of blackness by embedding images of black women wearing a variety of hair styles (Miss Feminine,

"Femininity Privilege," 2020; Divine Femininity Queen, "Femininity for Dark Skin," 2020; The Luxe Feminine 2021). In this respect, the respectability politics endorsed by the BWIL YouTube community is different from the respectability politics adopted by black middle-class Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since they do not pressure black women to assimilate to Eurocentric standards of beauty by wearing straight hairstyles. Neither does the BWIL YouTube community idolise fair skinned black women as the best model of black womanhood. Nonetheless, the exclusion of black women who embrace urban-ghetto fashion, or even worse, the association made between racial caricatures of black women and lower-class expressions of femininity, ultimately means that the BWIL YouTube community promote contradictory messages which reflect black pride and anti-blackness, simultaneously.

Chapter 3: Financial Agency and Conspicuous Consumption

The ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics may follow different class norms, but the inclusion of luxury designer fashion brands in both dress styles underlines black women's intention of keeping up a rich appearance. In this short and final chapter, I shall explore the reasons why black women desire to look wealthy. I will also acknowledge black men within my analysis because research shows that conspicuous consumption is prevalent among black Americans, overall. To contextualise the significance of modelling wealth for black people, I will first engage with a 2001 sociological study conducted on black marketing experts for luxury brands in New York and Chicago, who specialise in the black market (Lamont and Molnár 2001). This observation is particularly useful, as the participants offer insightful information about how their black clientele use consumption to reconstruct their identities and attain social approval (Lamont and Molnár 2001, 31-32). Furthermore, I consider black exhibition of wealth as a performative technique that ordinary black Americans do to make themselves appear respectable while manoeuvring in affluent environments that are predominantly white, due to America's history of racial segregation and white Americans being suspicious of, and directly interrogating, black people in their spaces. In the final section of the chapter, I highlight that some black Americans take issue with the prevalence of conspicuous consumption among black people due to the lack of black generational wealth. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that black women who embrace the ghetto-fabulous aesthetic and BWIL aesthetics can be criticised by other black Americans who consider spending on luxury as wasteful.

In 1957, African American sociologist, Edward Franklin Fraizer was among the first to examine the cultural identity and mentality of the black middle class living in northern cities. In his book, *Black Bourgeoise*, Frazier put forward a controversial argument of his time by

stating, ‘Having abandoned their social heritage and being rejected by white world, the black bourgeoisie have an intense feeling of inferiority, constantly seeking out forms of recognition and place great value upon status symbols in order to compensate for their inferiority complex.’ (Young and Tsemo 2011, 4). Frazier insinuates that the black middle class have an atypical identity due to the racialisation of class in America, and blackness being affiliated with lower-class identity, and whiteness being inseparable from middle-class identity. Another layer to his argument is that the black middle class use consumption to make themselves feel better about having no sense of belonging in American society. Though interestingly, Frazier also suggests that the black middle class are gradually accepting their ambiguous social status (Young and Tsemo 2011, 4-5). This is because the black bourgeoisie are aware that they will always encounter racism but recognise that they can at least enjoy a good standard of living (Young and Tsemo 2011, 4-5). He argues further that the black middle-class are willing to accommodate white conservative policies, at the expense of progressive racial objectives that would be beneficial for most black people, who are of low socio-economic status (Young and Tsemo 2011, 5-6). Noticeably, Fraizer invokes the concept of race-acting, by classifying the black bourgeoisie as “black” in physicality and “white” in morals and values.

The inspiration to want to be super-duper fly—furs, chains and earrings—comes from the hood. It comes from living in the projects and seeing some of our heroes, which were drug dealers or women who had everything, who had full-length sables, the giant earrings, Gucci bags, and pink furs. So, when I got in the music business with Misa [black stylist] and Puffy [American rapper, P Diddy], when we had money to do it, we did it to death. We wore all the chains, and we still do it (Mary J Blige, quoted in Gracie 2021).

If black conspicuous consumption used to be an exclusive practice for the middle-class, one may ask how it also became a popular practice among lower-class black people. First it is worth noting that America is a capitalist nation which inevitably makes it a consumerist society.

Furthermore, the mantra of living "The American Dream" revolves around the concept of success as inherently financial and America as the "promise land" for those who want to improve their quality of life (Archer 2014, 7-8). Therefore, in essence, all Americans are socialised to have an obsession with acquiring and spending money. People living in deprivation have insufficient income, and so, they are unable to consistently spend money on luxury visible goods. The trafficking of illegal drugs in the US from the 1980s provided black and brown people an avenue to experience prosperity through drug distribution. Additionally, the industrialisation of hip hop music gave low-income ethnic minorities a chance to move up the social strata. That being said, it is likely that the popularity of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic in the 1990s was a by-product of black people having new access to money, as suggested above by Mary J Blige. However, it would be problematic to assume that low-income people can only afford expensive items as a result of partaking in crime, since there are many who have jobs and save up to afford lavish purchases.

In 2001, sociologists Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár conducted a series of interviews on black marketing specialists in New York and Chicago. The aim of their study was to understand why black Americans use consumption to shape their collective identity (Lamont and Molnár 2001, 31-2). Following their research both sociologists conclude that,

Blacks carry a stigmatized social identity on their body. This is why it is particularly important to them to display visible signals of high status (e.g. high-quality clothes), in order to counteract racism, to conspicuously distance themselves from the 'ghetto black' stereotype, and, as one respondent put it, to disconfirm the view that blacks are 'uninteresting', i.e. unlikely to bring benefits through networking. The need to signal worthiness through conspicuous consumption is potentially as powerful as the all-pervasive experience of racism that blacks face on a daily basis (Lamont and Molnár 2001, 37).

Lamont and Molnár note that, ‘a black top executive working for one of the largest black advertising agencies in the USA believes that consumption is a more important means of signaling and acquiring status for blacks than education or membership in the black church. In his view, branded consumer goods, often referred to as ‘portable status symbols’, are obtained more easily than employment, housing or membership in certain groups and organizations’ (Lamont and Molnár 2011, 38). This study suggests that showcasing financial mobility has both a psychological and social significance for black people as they can confront misconceptions about black identity. Although the statistics included in their study in regard to how much money black Americans spend on non-essential goods, are outdated, current figures indicate that conspicuous consumption is still prevalent among black Americans. For example, as of 2020, black Americans represents the highest racial group in poverty, with 19.5% of black Americans living below the poverty line, in addition, black Americans have the lowest median household income compared to white, Asian and Hispanic Americans (Statista Research Department, “Poverty Rate,” 2021; Statista Research Department, “Median Household Income,” 2021). However, in 2021 *Forbes* confirmed that black consumption was growing, reporting that, ‘With luxury items like watches Black people account for $60 million of the $385 million in overall spending. As for women’s fragrances they represent $151 million of a $679 million industry’ (Hale 2021).

Anthony O’Neal is an American author and presenter, with a YouTube channel where he offers career and financial advice to black Americans. In 2020, O’Neal invited a group of black Americans to his platform in honour of black history month, to understand their thoughts on the racial wealth disparities in America, and a key topic of this discussion was whether excessive consumption among black people is a contributing factor to the lack of black generational wealth (O’Neal 2020). In the video, one female panellist mentions that she receives different treatment depending on what she wears. She relates an incident whereby she

was suspected of shoplifting when she wore a baseball cap, a sweatsuit and trainers to a luxury department store (O'Neal 2020). What is striking about her story is that she felt it necessary to point out to the shop assistant that she was carrying a Tory Burch handbag, as if to prove that she could afford expensive items and was therefore unlikely to steal the items on display (O'Neal 2020). However, she also states that she is unbothered by shop assistants of the same retail store when she wears her work uniform, which is a suit (O'Neal 2020). Unfortunately, her experience is not unique as research shows that black people are more likely to be racially profiled in high-end retail settings, a trend what has become known as "shopping while black" (Repko 2020). Researchers blame this trend on systemic racism but have yet to contemplate that the clothes worn by black people may also be a contributing factor of their racial profiling in affluent retail settings (Repko 2020; Pittman 2020). The story of the female panellist on O'Neal's show underlines that informal wear is affiliated with lower-class people whom luxury retail workers are suspicious of, as they do not expect that they may be able to afford expensive items. In contrast, there is a link between black bodies in smart clothing and being perceived in a non-threatening way, which enables black people dressed in this manner to freely manoeuvre in retail spaces that are exclusively catered for the rich - who are predominately white. This woman's story also shows that black women are still racially profiled even though this experience is more common for black men.

The racial profiling of black American men who wear urban-ghetto streetwear has gathered substantial media attention since the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and the "Black Lives Matter" movement that was founded shortly after, as a result of the acquittal of George Zimmerman; a neighbourhood watchman from Sanford, Florida, who fatally shot the unarmed 17-year-old, on the night of February 26, 2012 (Munro 2022). Zimmerman reported to the Sanford Police Department that there had been a rise in burglaries in the neighbourhood and was suspicious of a teen boy (Martin) in a grey hooded jumper "walking around, looking

about" (Munro 2022). After being told by the police to leave Martin alone, Zimmerman nevertheless proceeded to approach Trayvon, convinced that he was a thief (Munro 2022). He claims that the confrontation escalated into a physical altercation between them, which led him to shoot Martin as an act of self-defence (Munro 2022). The 2001 sociological study, states that black Americans intentionally display financial agency in exchange for social approval, but ordinary black people may also desire to maintain a rich appearance to make themselves appear less threatening in white spaces. In other words, it is likely that some black people want to make their bodies less visible in affluent settings by modelling wealth to blend in with their environment, rather than showcase wealth to stand out and challenge stereotypes about black identity. It is fascinating that the white fear of blackness leads black people to feel apprehensive. The fact that black people's lives are put in jeopardy by white people brings to light the real racialised power imbalance and underscores that white fear is performative.

While black Americans model wealth to seem respectable, it does not guarantee that they will be accepted into white dominated spaces. Ordinary black people who display wealth are sometimes interrogated by the police because wealth is not affiliated with black identity, and how lower-class people access money has been politicised. When ordinary black Americans portray an opulent lifestyle, the police assume that they have engaged in illicit activities that are common among people of low social status, such as, drug trafficking, theft and welfare fraud. For example, in October 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on the disproportionate arrests of black people shopping along Rodeo Drive, a famous shopping district for luxury fashion (Ormseth 2021). As of October 2021, the Beverly Hills Police Department had arrested ninety people along Rodeo Drive, the article states, 'eighty of them were Black, four were Latino, three were white, two were Asian and one was classified as "other"' (Ormseth 2021). A police task force was initially despatched to patrol the area following complaints by residents and shop owners of 'loud music, gambling, double parking,

illegal street vending and “marijuana smoke drifting into stores”’ (Ormseth 2021). Shortly after, the police unit was given orders to arrest people who they ‘suspected to come to Rodeo Drive for spending sprees with money they received from an elaborate scheme to defraud the state’s unemployment system’ (Ormseth 2021). The head of the task force, Sergeant Billy Flair, was convinced that Los Angeles gang members were involved this fraud to purchase guns and drugs, and instructed officers remain vigilant because ‘it was not uncommon for fraudsters to drive high-end cars or wear expensive clothing and jewelry’ (Ormseth 2021). Famous black Americans are significantly less likely to be racial profiled compared to ordinary black Americans because most people in America are aware of their occupation. On the contrary, black celebrities can experience racial prejudice when they travel abroad if the native population is unaware of their high social status. For instance, Oprah Winfrey, who is the richest black American woman, encountered a shop assistant at a luxury store in Zurich who refused to sell her a handbag because she assumed that Winfrey could not afford it (Entertainment Tonight 2013). Essentially, the “shopping while black” trend reveals white efforts to stop black people from enjoying their financial freedom.

Another layer to the systemic policing of black wealth in America is that black people themselves monitor each other’s spending. In 2004, Bill Cosby criticised lower-class black parents for their lack of personal responsibility, arguing that they would rather buy $500 trainers for their children instead of making a long-term investment in their children’s education (Blackpast 2007). Though he was received backlash from numerous black intellectuals for his elitist commentary, after many years, black Americans are now condemning black conspicuous consumption over social media because of the wealth gap between black people and other races (O’Neal 2020; Loury and Hughes 2019). Rich black women who flaunt their extravagant purchases on social media are shamed for being too materialistic (Herndon 2021; Scott 2022; Singletary 2020). Hence, it is essential to

acknowledge that the ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics are in fact policed aesthetics, by black Americans who are frugal. It seems that black women are burdened with portraying black achievement in front of non-black gazes. However, black people clearly have different interpretations of success. For some black Americans, being able to display financial agency through consumption is symbolic of progress. Black Americans are socialised from young to see themselves as racially inferior and that they are undeserving of the "finer things in life". The popularity of ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics among young black women thus shows that they are rearticulating black womanhood, by affirming that black women are also worthy of experiencing luxury. On the contrary, other black people perceive black excellence as a communal experience that should entail long-term upwards social mobility for all black Americans. Contrary to what it may seem, conspicuous consumption within the black American community is gradually helping to build black generational wealth. More black Americans are starting to support black-owned luxury businesses, thereby allowing the black dollar to circulate and stay within the black community (DW Documentary 2022; Simon 2021). Furthermore, black Americans can still make a smart business move when they purchase non-black-owned luxury goods, like Rolex watches, which appreciates in value over time and means that they make a good profit if they wish to resell. It may be difficult for some black Americans to recognise the innovate steps taken by certain black people to improve the state of black wealth since saving and investing in stocks are currently the most endorsed methods of accumulating wealth.

Conclusion

To conclude, young black American women are performing femininity in a manner that suits them, and the modern reshaping of black womanhood by black women is an example of black female agency. Black femininities are complex, and those who follow the ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics negotiate between resisting and conforming to hegemonic norms. The fact that modelling black pride is a key feature of black female gender performance means that black women are rejecting white femininity as the acceptable expression of womanhood. If the concept of "authentic blackness" is essentially the reversal of white normativity, black women of today showcase their racial pride in different ways. The ghetto fabulous aesthetic originates from black urban-ghetto culture and therefore confronts white middle-class respectability, and although the BWIL aesthetic comes from an online movement that is heavily influenced by respectability politics, the uplifting of dark skin women and black hairstyles by this online community challenges the notion that black women must be close to whiteness in order to be beautiful. Nevertheless, it is clear that as black women redefine femininity for themselves, some attempt to disable the agency of other women with their own views on how black femininity should be performed. Women who do not want to partake in urban-ghetto femininity can be accused of "acting-white", as they are distancing themselves from black cultural norms. At the same time, those who embrace urban-ghetto womanhood are accused of living up to racial stereotypes of black women. It would be more liberating for black women to hold themselves accountable for how they monitor each other given that their agency is already restricted by systemic factors.

While I do not believe that the ghetto fabulous aesthetic should be pedestalled as the best expression of black identity, it is undoubtedly an expression of blackness due to its origins. Thus, more respect needs to be given to this fashion style. What is striking about Miss

Feminine, and her followers is that they do not ridicule African femininities. One could argue that this is because black American women subconsciously perceive African feminine attire as sacred given its long history and the fact that it was (and still is) worn by African royalty. In contrast, the feminine adaption of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic has a young history and comes from an "unrespectable" culture. Additionally, some black women's lack of respect for feminine urban-ghetto fashion may be because elements of this style are not exclusive to black people. In reality, anybody can wear brightly coloured hair, large gold jewellery and luxury fashion. However, African prints and jewellery were invented by Africans, and still belong to them. Nonetheless, the importance of feminine urban-ghetto fashion lies in the visual representation of black female agency and creativity. That being said, this style is just as valid as other black feminine aesthetics.

Finally, it appears that black women engage in conspicuous consumption because there is a psychological and social benefit in covering the black body in luxury in light of institutional racism. Interestingly, black Americans who enjoy spending money on fashion are policed by those who believe black people need to be careful with their spending habits, to improve the wealth gap between black Americans and other races. The term "black excellence" was coined to honour the achievements of black people in spite of structural racism. Now, it seems that black exceptionalism has evolved into an ideology which obscures the severity of systemic oppression and overestimates black agency. As the ghetto fabulous- and BWIL aesthetics remain popular among black women suggests that they are rejecting calls to remain frugal.

Appendix

Figure 1. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Jinsui 2021).

Figure 2. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Fletcher 2021).

Figure 3. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Ari Fletcher, from Good Things Are Coming, n.d.).

Figure 4. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Cheaves 2021).

Figure 5. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Drip Image, n.d.).

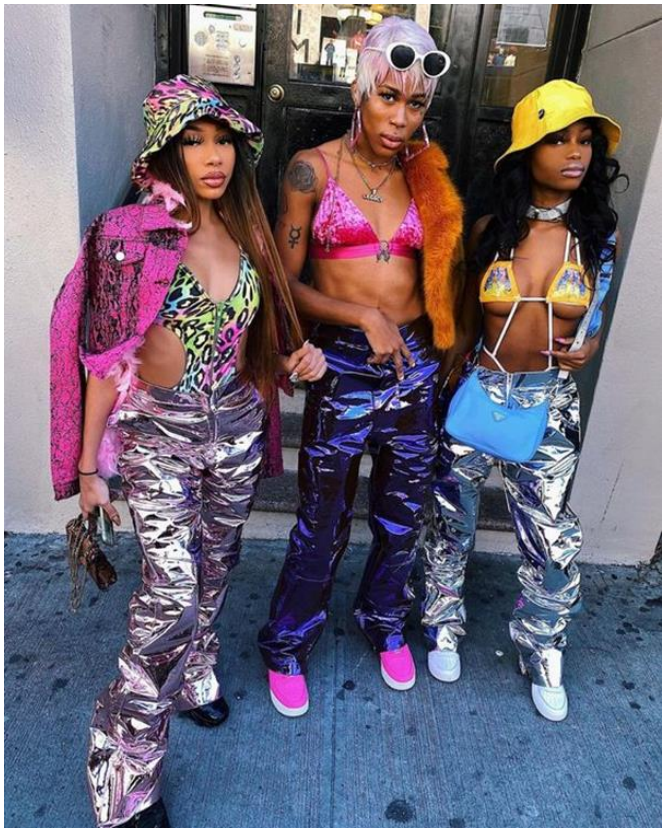

Figure 6. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Riflickz, n.d.).

Figure 7: Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Hamilton 2020).

Figure 8: Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (Sevy, n.d.).

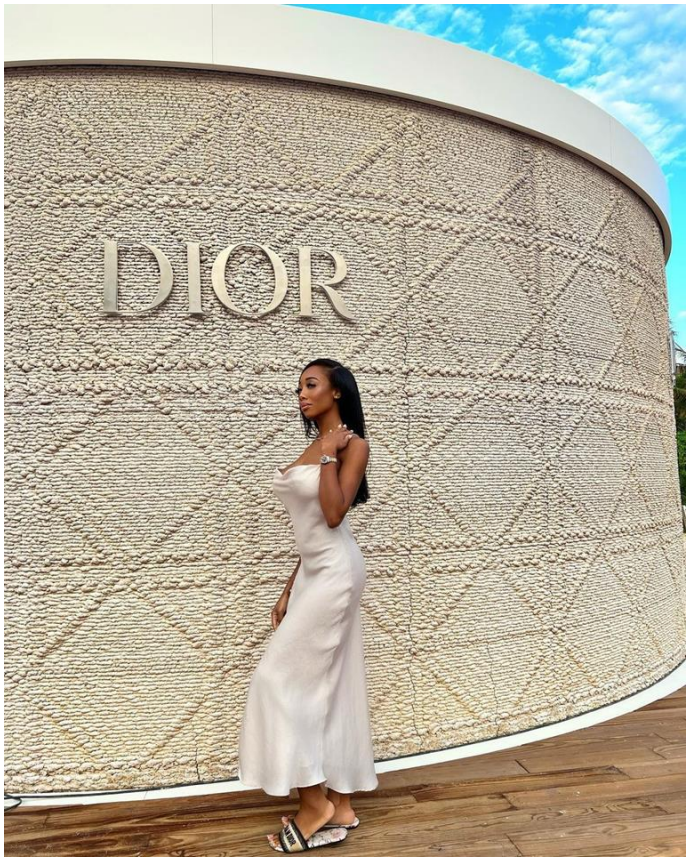

Figure 9. BWIL Aesthetic (Michelle 2022).

Figure 10. BWIL Aesthetic (Simone 2021).

Figure 11. BWIL Aesthetic, Woman with Braided Hairstyle (Divine Feminine, n.d.).

Figure 12. BWIL Aesthetic, Woman in Floral Dress (Divine Feminine 2022).

Figure 13. BWIL Aesthetic, Woman in Grey Coat (Divine Feminine, n.d.).

Figure 14. Black Woman at Paris Fashion Week Wearing “Ghetto Until Proven Fashionable” Jumper, created by Nareasha Willis (Trend 2018; Hargrove 2018).

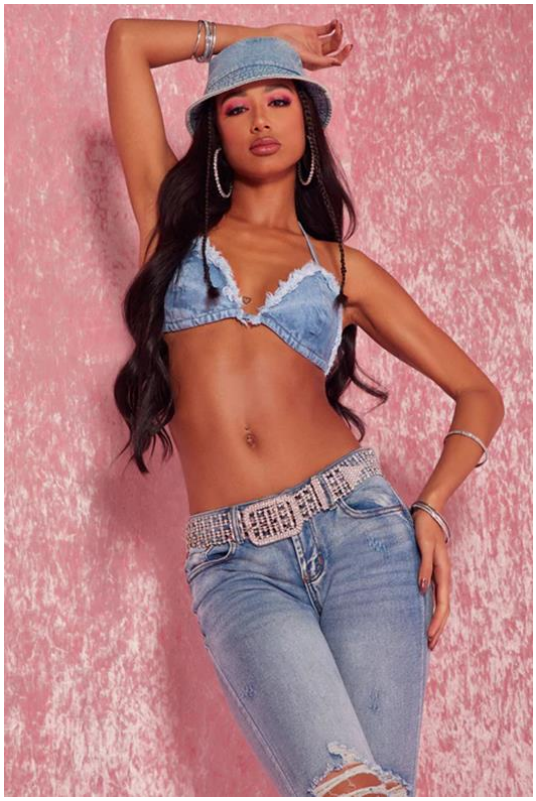

Figure 15. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (From Fashion Nova, n.d.).

Figure 16. Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic (From Pretty Little Thing, n.d.).

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