Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

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27. Controlled Images and Cultural Reassembly: Material Black Girls Living in an Avatar World

Joan Morgan

As a Black feminist cultural critic, I've identified a methodological sluggishness in Black feminist theory (BFT) when it comes to theorizing our sexuality. As theorists, we've become overly reliant on the field's most trenchant theories — the politics of respectability or its remix: respectability politics, cultural dissemblance and controlling images.¹ We've failed to re-interrogate these venerated interventions with the temporal, cultural specificity reflected in contemporary US Black women's ethnic heterogeneity, queerness and the advent of digital technologies and social media. To put it another way: *some of us out here still talking 'bout these theories like it's 1999.*

1 See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1990* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Patricia Hill Collins, 'Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images,' in her *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 76–106 for more on the politics of respectability, the theory of cultural dissemblance and, controlling images respectively.

My current project, 'Pleasure Politics', interrogates Black feminist theory's historical scripting of Black female sexuality as a site of ongoing racial and sexual trauma. It picks up the gauntlet Evelyn M. Hammonds threw down more than two decades ago, when she famously charged BFT with moving from a 'politics of silence' about Black women's sexuality to a 'politics of articulation' and in doing so, made a decisive demand for a Black feminist sexuality theory that is inclusive of pleasure and the erotic.² Pleasure politics subjects the canonical theories of Black female sexuality to a rigorous re-periodization — one that accounts for the significant impacts of the digital age, mass mid-twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black diasporic immigration and the new subjectivities created by these distinct phenomena. In particular it takes into account the impact of the internet and the dramatic restructuring of social space as one of the most significant and yet under-theorized factors impacting scholarly understandings of contemporary young Black women's identities in the digital age — specifically their engagements with pleasure and erotic expressions of their sexuality. For Black feminists, in particular, the digital age challenges previously held understandings about sexual agency and private vs. public life as expressed in the theories of cultural dissemblance and controlling images. Instead, I position contemporary Black female identity as existing in an avatar world where *fragmenting*, exhibited by both Black female cultural producers and consumers, is often deliberate, strategic and generative to pleasure and self-authored erotics.

In his brilliant book, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan describes avatars used by Black feminist artists as '[...] alternate beings given human-like agency [that] are akin to the second selves that Black women create, inhabit and perform.' 'Through avatar production' he continues, 'black women engage in spectacular, shocking, even unlawful role-plays [...] these avatars are a means of highlighting (and stretching) the subordinate roles available to black women. [...] Their efficacy is their agile ability to comment back

2 Evelyn M. Hammonds, 'Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality and the Problematic of Silence,' in Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (eds.), *Futures Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies and Democratic* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 179–80.

on identity itself, to subvert the taken-for-granted rules for properly embodying a black female body.’³

McMillan’s theorization of avatar-play troubles the unchallenged assumption in Black feminism that ‘real’ is always tethered to the ‘private self’. Within the logics of the canonical theories of Black female sexuality, fragmentation means broken and broken means damaged. In fact, an abiding part of Black feminism’s mission as a justice project has been to restore wholeness to broken narratives and bodies. As a result, wholeness and re-integration has emerged as a widely accepted end goal. The privileging of ‘wholeness’ has conversely meant a deep skepticism, if not outright rejection, of anything perceived to fragment Black female subjectivity, even if that fragmenting is self-imposed.

While McMillan’s work focuses primarily on cultural production, I argue that when it comes to Black female identity in 2017, there is a bit of the avatar in all of us. The preponderance of time Black women now spend in the digital realm — the composite of photos, memes, statuses, email signatures, Facebook profiles, the images we post on Instagram and Tumblr, the 140-character thought excerpts we tweet, the dating/sex profiles we monitor, are our avatars. They are part of what Beth Coleman provocatively theorizes as ‘x-reality’.⁴ Collectively they produce new modes of knowing that exist largely through fragmentation. The line between what is considered ‘the real’ self and what exists in digital space is at best blurred and more likely illusory. Instead each platform functions as another mode of expression that exposes various fragmented aspects of one’s subjectivity. We are now becoming socialized to read all those fragments against each other to produce our understanding of who someone is, and we do it with the implicit understanding that the conclusion is meant to be incomplete but no *less real*.

William Shirky (who wrote the foreword for Coleman’s book) refers to a generational shift that isn’t dictated by age or other demographics but by the ‘emergent age of mobile, pervasive networked connectivity.’⁵ The introduction offers a critical piece of periodization: in 1994,

3 Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), p. 12.

4 B. Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Boston: MIT Press, 2011).

5 Coleman, *Hello Avatar*, p. 3.

for example, the 'notion of cyberspace was supported by a "social separation" — where our real lives contained the real friends we saw in person and our online friends were people we only knew online, in chat rooms or online communities making them "less real". The "...digital world was seen as an alternative to the real world, conceptualized as a place where we went online." But by the early 2000s', the book argues, '[...] the real and virtual worlds had begun to anneal.' For the cohort of under-thirty-somethings in America in the early years of the new millennium, 'digital networks were increasingly an augmentation of the real world, rather than an alternative to it.'⁶

What does this periodization mean for Black Feminist Theory? It means that in 1999 when Patricia Hill Collins published her seminal book, *Black Feminist Thought*,⁷ and, gave to the world the inarguably beneficial analytic of controlling images, the rapid growth of the digital universe was already poised to undo it as a viable model for pop-culture analysis. Hill Collins has to be credited for her early understanding that pop culture would become the subject and playground of much feminist critique (arguably too much), however the internet was already beginning to position controlling images as obsolete. The unidirectional, linear flows Hill Collins claims between Black female performances, the omniscient white gaze and long-standing structures of racism, patriarchy, viewers and consumers are now splintered by multiple domains and complicated by the self-authorship deeply evident in Black women's digital play. In 2019 it's complicated.

So, what does avatar play look like? Let's consider the final show of Beyoncé's 'Formation Tour'. Throughout the performance, I was having the very 'Where's Waldo' experience of trying to find 'the real' Beyoncé' on the stage. Of course Beyoncé was everywhere. Sometimes in ways that were expected and straightforward, traditionally in keeping with what audiences have come to expect of mega-wattage pop and rock deities in big stadium venues. Her flesh and blood form was particularly easy to spot when it made its way downstage and center on any one of the three mini-platforms constructed with the obvious intent on putting her closer to floor-seat audiences. Equally predictable were the two giant screens performing sentry duty, stage right and stage left,

6 Ibid.

7 Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

deployed by pop artists everywhere to compensate for the fact that even the larger-than-life appear ant-sized on stage. The illusion/confusion set in whenever she entered the deceptively simple but complexly utilitarian eighty-foot cube that comprised most of her set design. The device sometimes served as a canvas to project her petite 5'7"-plus-heels frame and amplify it to Goliath-esque dimensions. Then it alternately reorganized itself into multiple, tiered, open-faced 'rooms' that housed Beyoncé and her dancers — sometimes real, sometimes digital, often indistinguishable. At other times, the cube projected another image of Beyoncé, entirely separate and apart from whatever was happening on stage. Coupled with the large screens flanking the right and left sides of the stage, they provided a meta-narrative meant to enhance (and complicate) whatever 'live Beyoncé' was doing.

Audience members had a smorgasbord of 'Beyoncsés' to choose from during every moment of the night, most of them sensual and erotically charged, all of them enthralling and arguably equally if not more compelling than the IRL version herself. Markedly, no matter where one sat, no one could claim a visual access to the 'real' Beyoncé the entire time, except perhaps the 'nosebleed seats', which provided the areal views necessary to procure that coveted access. Her staging and set design conveyed an uncanny understanding of how images and experiences are transmitted and disseminated through digital space. It acknowledged and accommodated the seemingly insatiable need of contemporary audiences to claim both the authenticity of 'being there' by recording in real time to post, tweet and share on digital platforms — despite the fact that the act inserts both a distance and a lens between them and the live subject.

I'm interested in the possibilities avatar play has for pleasure politics. What potential does x-reality have for Black women's pleasure engagements — erotic and otherwise — if indeed, through a process of ongoing visual migration, our digital engagements now give us the ability to confuse, blur, and dislocate, enabling Black women to express a group of selves integral to the needs of our individual subjectivities?

Performances of gender, Blackness or identity always exist in opposition to authenticity and reveal something greater than realness or wholeness. These deliberate fragmentations enable expressions of pleasure that do not crumble easily under the weight of representation

politics, in part because they allow for 'grey space' and messy contradictions. In fact, they revel in such freedom. How would an avatar have helped Lady Saw to avoid the choice between the dancehall and salvation, if she had been performing sexuality? In that vein, what work do our curated selfie selves do? Are these avatars also the things we send out to thwart common narratives about the scripts of respectability, or our exclusion from mainstream beauty narratives?

As a continuous, fragmented state of being, the avatar's power lies in its ability to deploy multiple, interchangeable, ongoing expressions of self. Avatars are then, by definition, uncontrolled images. They enable a politics of pleasure in part because they demand distance. They are informed simultaneously by both the performative imperative in 'I made you look' and the implicit demand to 'back up off me'. Their silences, if any, are not a by-product of racialized sexual trauma or the gaze, nor are they about retreat. Rather, they are driven by the deliberateness of self-selection and authoring. Most important, the avatar is not limited to binary understandings of real vs. fake or performance. Rather, as Beth Coleman, writes, it's about the 'x-media' we increasingly swim in. '[It] doesn't just cross from one kind of medium to another,' she says. 'It crosses from the real to the mediated world and back all the time. Despite the idea of the avatar as a kind of alternate self, identity isn't something we put on and take off, like it or not — our roles online are all informed by our non-persistent identities.'⁸

All of this poses important questions for BFT master narratives on sexuality and its logics of violence and trauma. In fact, it troubles the hell out of it. How does it challenge the question of agency, already a hotly contested point in discourses that examine the erotic subjectivity of Black women? If avatars engender expressions of agency in ways that extend far beyond 'the animated figures moving across the screen but also the gestalt of images and multimedia that make up our identities as networked subjects' as Coleman suggests, what does that mean for pleasure politics and the politics of articulation so critical to it?⁹

The push I am making here is for Black Feminist Theory to begin to understand contemporary Black female subjectivity itself as avatar-esque. In this digital liminal space, we exercise the agency

8 Coleman, *Hello Avatar*, p. xiii.

9 Ibid.

of avatars, curating and sharing pleasure engagements through visual expressions of multiple erotics — sex and the sensual, yes, but also travel, resistive bad-assery in #BadBitch, #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackGirlJoy #ProfessionalBlackGirl, #CarefreeBlackGirl and even activism: #SayHerName, #PrettyPeriod, #BeyondClassicallyBeautiful often through sophisticated navigations of selfie and hashtag play. The inclination of a preceding generation of Black feminists has been to look at all this ‘play’ as frivolous, or at the very least, ultimately ineffective. How, they ask, can selfies and ‘all this hashtagging’ possibly eradicate structural racism and a historically noxious system of patriarchy? There are two truths to be told here:

1. It doesn’t.
2. We are not playing.

In fact, I argue that this ‘play’ is not frivolous at all. The multiple strands of pleasure it produces speak directly to another brand of erotics we too-often minimize in BFT — namely, the erotics of visibility. Specifically, making oneself visible and self-scripted in a society that repeatedly traffics in the negation of Black women from popular beauty and desirability discourses, in actions that range from the unapologetic ‘we like it we steal it’ of cultural appropriation to the erasure inherent in ‘we just don’t see you at all’. Rather than bemoan the frivolity of digital play, pleasure politics, in the parlance of Black-girl speak, positions *the regular* as a site of consistent innovation that can include the erotics of resistance and the fierceness of survival.

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