

**Performing the erotic:
(Re)presenting the body in popular culture**

by

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I, Dionne van Reenen, declare that the research dissertation that I herewith submit for the doctoral degree qualification Doctor of Philosophy with specialisation in English (ENG9100) at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

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Abstract

In 1995, Mitchell suggested that spheres of public culture, and the academies that study them, are in the midst of a 'pictorial turn' which entails thinking about images in digital communication and mass multimedia as forms of life. In the study reported in this thesis, a critical semiotic analysis of mainstream, moving images that are designed, performed, mediated, and repeatable was conducted. The study focuses on the role of social constructs of gender, race, and class (along with size, age, and ability) in the ordering processes of society which are, in turn, sustained and reproduced by the (re)presentation of eroticised bodies in visual media in the twenty-first century. The study is informed by the premise that rapid technological advancements, the deregulation of media industries, and ongoing convergence possibilities have made the availability and accessibility of mass media on numerous (personal) devices commonplace in modern life but not in the form of traditional media that deliver data or content to an audience. Rather, media now take the form of interactive communication and participatory culture. A critical semiotic analysis of the images used in the study, as well as an analysis of the relevant literature, confirmed this hypothesis with further insights that, in the contemporary era, the cultural constructions and political materialities of bodies, as well as normative understandings of beauty, desirability, and value, all congregate around questions of representation and global homologies. By way of synthesis, the study argues that the dynamics of 'virtuality' in the digital age are altering traditional demarcations of space, place, time, and community and have paved the way for formations of global cultures that are, at the same time, informative, expedient, empowering, homogenising, prescriptive, and imperialising. Global cultures are recognised as discursive formations that people can only reason about from within. With that

limitation in mind, the study sketches the contours of a critical tool that the emergent imaginary critical consumer might be able to utilise. As one positions oneself within this imaginary, it becomes possible to treat the relation between consumer and commodity as dialectical. As a consequence of these analyses, the study expands the theory and application range of linguistic and cognitive metaphors by applying them specifically to modes of aestheticisation and performance of the erotic in contemporary visual media. The study uses metaphor theory to identify discursive markers on bodies at the surface (or representational level) that produce performative frames which sustain orderings of body prototypes (at the ideological level). These framings and orderings are critiqued as trading in ideologies and stereotypes that have long been in sociocultural production and circulation. The analyses of images and scripts show them to be sensationalist; however, they are not new, despite being presented as such in the expanding inundation of visual entertainment worldwide. The study argues that such orderings engage in a reiterable exchange of already circulating social and cultural capital in which not everyone may participate with equal opportunity and agency and some, not at all. Such forms of capital are primarily distributed as a means to generate more economic capital in an age where commodification and consumption, not the public good, are of central importance in human activity and action.

Keywords: aesthetic; ballroom and Latin American dance; (the) body; capital; (the) erotic; frames; hip-hop; ideology; metaphor theory; representation; repeatability; performance; performativity; prototype; popular culture; pornographic film; sexual scripts; semiotics; stereotype; translatability; (the) visual.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

And the culture never failed to remind me how I was perceived ... women with bodies like mine were unwanted, unlovable, and *definitely* unfuckable. I was utterly, unwaveringly convinced of this ... that's exactly what we're trained to believe: 'Hot' is an objective assessment, based on a collection of easily identifiable characteristics. Thin is hot. White is hot. Able-bodied and quasi-athletic is hot. Blond is hot. Clear skin is hot. Big boobs (so long as there's no corresponding big ass) are hot. Little waists are hot. Miniskirts and high heels and smoky eyes are hot. There's a proven formula, and if you follow it, you will be hot. Of course, very few people can follow that formula to the letter. (Harding 2008: 71–73)

This study centres its focus on the politics of eroticised performance and its aesthetic construction on mediated bodies on twenty-first century popular screens. Although written in the first person, the above quote by Harding broadly captures what the current era, at the level of the popular, has constructed as the dominant discourse on (re)presentations of *the body*, generally, and marginalised bodies, in particular. At this level, discursive markers of what might be recognised as parts of a beautiful body are correlated, if not conflated, with what might be (erotically) desirable. As Orbach (2009: 3) claims: 'We have become so implicated in variants of body preoccupation ourselves, and girls and women in particular are so colonised by it, that the preoccupation has become second nature – almost invisible.' This obscured discourse lies beneath a highly visible, global media-saturated culture. It is a

discourse that is, at once, bigoted and simplistic in its adventurist portrayals of what are deemed to be *acceptable* bodies, *desirable* bodies, *consumable* bodies, or even *idealised* bodies (cf. Stratton 2001). The net result of this adventure has been a tragic convergence of gendered, sexist, racist, ableist, ageist, classist, and, to some extent, body-shaming subtexts in the characterisation of the vast majority of actual bodies in the twenty-first century.

Although it may not seem apparent at first, this dominant discourse, which is based on an unmistakably exclusionary politic, has played a fundamental role in the conceptualisation and actualisation of the place of eroticised bodies in human behaviour to the present, with implications for virtually all aspects of life. The intersection of eroticised bodies and aestheticised bodies (as prototypes) is a rich location in which to think through coinciding constructions of the body's presence, performance, influence, and cultural visibility. It is a site that provides an interesting perspective on what Johnson (2007: 36) terms 'body-based meaning' which is metaphorical, not referential. In explaining the importance of body-based meaning, Johnson (2007: 15) states that 'our bodies are the very condition of our meaning-making and creativity', and analysts would benefit from learning 'how it allows us to have meaning'. I would concur with Johnson (2007) that these efforts are worthwhile endeavours.

Chapter One provides a broad outline of the entire study. Specifically, the chapter places the study in the field of critical visual studies while providing some critique of problematics that have accompanied the consolidation of visual culture studies as an interdisciplinary area of research. The discussion addresses contestations in imaging

effects with reference to the *representation* and *translatability* of stylised, eroticised bodies within this broad discourse. *Representation* is a contested term. Butler (1990: 1), addressing gender performativity, explains:

On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said to either reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women.¹

Regarding the *translatability* of images, I do not use the term in any specialised, technical way as formal studies in language and linguistics might do. I understand visual objects as non-static, occurring at the interface between dual attributes of *continuity* of form or structure and *discontinuity* of sign or content (similarly to Visagie 2006). The relevance for this discussion concerns the possibility and potential of the eroticised body and embodiment of the erotic as being relational elements that could provide translatability across situationality. As a way of contextualising the discussion of my thesis, which centres on (re)presenting the eroticised body, the conversation also confronts the centrality of *the body* in various hegemonic forms of (re)presentations on popular screens² and consequent translational mobility or repeatability of these (re)presentations in global popular culture. *Translatability*, then, also relates to Latour's (1986: 6) understanding of invented, or constructed, objects that he terms 'immutable mobiles' which 'have the properties of being mobile but

¹ I acknowledge that scholarship addressing representation is plentiful and rich, and many researchers involved with the political aspects of the term are cited throughout this study. I particularly use Butler's (1990) delineation here because her work on performativity finds many points of contact with my uses of framing and semiology in video imaging. This delineation then extends beyond 'women' or 'gender' as critically assessed by Butler (1990).

² This would include 'film, television, music videos, the internet, advertisements and video games', which are accessible on numerous devices (Borelli 2014: 5).

also immutable, presentable, readable and combinable with one another'. They dominate culture by way of mobilising ideas.³ The discussion in the first chapter broadly outlines the central research problem addressed in the study, which is given further attention below.

Logically flowing from this broad outline, the chapter offers a background to the study in which the notions of sexuality, the erotic, and their (re)presentation and translatability in popular culture are further elaborated upon and the use of terminology is delineated. The main thrust of the discussion is to indicate that, inasmuch as notions of sexuality and the erotic have been major preoccupations in, and of, modern civilisations in their different permeations, it is odd, if not striking, that these two notions, as intimately as they are connected to the body, have not quite received commensurate attention in the research literature. When sexuality and the erotic have received attention, it has usually been at the level of stereotype, such as that illustrated by Harding (2008: 71–73) at the beginning of this chapter. The problematics elucidated in this section set up a scaffolding for the statement of the research problem and research question, as well as the aim, objectives, and significance of the study.

Just as Rubin (1984: 152) claimed that there exists an ordering of sexuality and sexual practice in culture that authorises 'good, natural, normal sex' as 'heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial', so Harding (2008: 72) claims that culture orders the *desirability* of bodies, with 'purveyors of the beauty standard' providing an ideal grading of what is construed to be 'objectively

³ Similarly, one may draw lines to Derrida's (1976) notion of 'iteration' and 'iterability' or Butler's (1993) terminology 'citation' and 'citationality'. The possibility of the translation and the repetition is the ability of 'translatability' and 'repeatability' mentioned throughout this study.

attractive'. In fact, beauty standards may have little to do with what people actually *feel* might be desirable, acceptable, or ideal in erotic relationality (cf. Berlant and Edelman 2014; Jolly, Cornwall, and Hawkins 2013). Phenomenologically speaking, in popular culture performance, image production seems to involve a subtle 'politics of appearance' (Davis 1995: 52–53) while a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1963: 307) may be the affective result at the level of the popular. This study seeks to understand some of the multi-layered meanings of eroticised bodies in popular culture as desirable, acceptable, and ideal embodiments (Blood 2005). The study does not present a history of the body in popular culture per se but, instead, does engage some significant historical moments to posit questions regarding the significance of normative (eroticised) bodies as objects of study.⁴ It demonstrates how the erotic, as it appears on popular screens, seems to be caught in tensions between the politics of desirability and respectability, the politics of sexual freedom and sexual excess, and the politics of sexual subjectivity and sexual objectification or exploitation. Mediated bodies, with their repeated stylisations (Butler 1990, 1993) and arbitrary value attachments (Bourdieu 2001), regulate how people see themselves and their personal experiences by means of aestheticisation. Indeed, as stated by Dworkin (1976):

I believe we are all products of the culture in which we live; and that in order to understand what we think of as our personal experiences, we must understand *first* how the culture informs what we see and how we understand. In other words, the culture in which we live determines for us to an astonishing degree how we perceive, what we perceive, how

4 The critique of culture studies not adequately engaging with history (Lough 2002) is taken into account in this study, and I have attempted to provide some historical context where relevant to imaging in the analysis chapters.

we name and value our experiences, how and why we act at all. (1976: 51, emphasis in original)

As an interdisciplinary field, visual culture studies has emerged from various histories and traditions but has recently established itself as a vibrant, diverse domain of inquiry in many academic institutions. One does not have to search beyond everyday lifeworlds in order to observe the predominance of the visual and processes of visualisation or the omnipresence of visual material. However, analysis and critique of these phenomena, and the way they connect to broader systems of meaning, may be complex and conflicting (Dines and Humez 2015; Gill 2007; Kearney 2012). Visual culture may be understood as elements of culture that are expressed in a variety of visual media in which data, values, meanings, or forms of gratification are sought and consumed at a crossing point with media technology (Jones 2010).

Technology has necessarily become an integral part of visual culture studies (Mirzoeff 1995). Indeed, performance can no longer be said to 'continually disappear' (Phelan 1993: 146) within conventional understandings of time, space, place, and community. Phelan (1993: 174) further suggests that it could be useful 'to demonstrate how new relations continually emerge by making the sources of power evaporate and re-emerge, elsewhere'. Technology's rapid advancement and ready availability not only make these reframings possible, but they become difficult to track in this age of *virtuality*. In the twenty-first century, there has been a definitive turn from the centrality of the word and textuality (which have traditionally been privileged in intellectual life and academia) towards the visual and symbolic that has become so characteristic of modern life. At the same time, the symbolic allows for a progression that goes beyond the analysis of the image (content) itself towards how

its discursive markers can be determined and how they could function. The broad democratisation and globalisation of the visual has made it an effective means to study and comment on mediations and extensions of contemporary everyday life via an ever-expanding current of eroticised (re)presentation and illustration (Stratton 2001). This could be viewed in a way similar to the earlier nineteenth century, prior to advances in visual technology, in which eroticised content was typically denoted or narrated in oration and text. The difference in textual focus (as opposed to visual) is well demonstrated in the work of Gordon (1996) on British fiction of that era. In my study, the focus moves from written or verbal text to performative frames and effects in imaging. The concept of performativity addresses the *doing* in the image as presented by Butler (1990, 1993), who analyses gender performativity. Butler (2004) opines that there is no reason why elements of performativity cannot be transposed to other areas of identity or subjectivity studies. Indeed, theorists such as Tate (2005), who probes race performativity, and Rottenberg (2008) or Monroe (2014), who explore class performativity, have taken up such challenges. Importantly, though, critical race studies are particularly instructive when considering the possibility and potential of intersectionality between discursive markers of race, gender, class, age, size, and ability and the way these hang together in the service of theoretical and material inequality (Collins 2004, 2006; Crenshaw 1991; Gray 1995; Holland 2012; hooks 1994, 1996, 2004; hooks in *The New School* 2014). Connected to the concept of performativities, Jay (2002: 88) states that:

Insofar as we live in a culture whose technological advances abet the production and dissemination of such images at a hitherto unimagined level, it is necessary to focus on how they work and what they do,

rather than move past them too quickly to the ideas they represent or the reality they purport to depict.

(Re)presentations are rarely held by critical theorists to be literal depictions of reality (Hall 1997).⁵ Even if they are accepted as mirrors of the world, (re)presentations are typically studied with some intent to interpret and problematise the interactive relationship between (re)productions and consumptions, as well as between steering hegemonies of the ruling classes and consenting, subordinate classes (Gramsci 1999). Where Williams (1961, 1981, 1983) focuses more on 'shared meaning' and 'common practice' in 'signifying systems', theorists such as Hall (1997, 2005), Laclau (2011), and Storey (2006, 2009, 2010) move more directly towards addressing complex relations of power in what they term 'the politics of signification'. Accompanying this shifting accent to a 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1995: 11), the 'picture theory', suggested by Mitchell (1995), holds the view that structuralist and post-structuralist models, which were based in language and linguistic traditions, are important in critical visual work but may not be wholly adequate models from which to view (re)presentations of everyday life now. He states:

It is the realisation that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or 'visual literacy' might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality. Most important, it is the realisation that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most

⁵ Plato held that people do not have to have knowledge of something to represent it; they need only have knowledge of the appearance of that which they seek to represent.

refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of the mass media. Traditional models of containment no longer seem adequate, and the need for a global critique of visual culture seems inescapable. (Mitchell 1995: 16, emphasis in original)⁶

Similarly, Visagie (1994) argues that discursive analysis needs to be complimented by a critical semiotics in order to understand the full meaning and process of ideological discourse. Berger (2008: 1) comments: 'Seeing comes before words.'⁷ Berger (2008: 9) argues that images are 'man-made'; that is, they are produced and they provide a particular perspective from which to see. However, with the invention of the camera, the uniqueness of the (painted) image was removed and made way for it to multiply and fragment into many meanings; in Berger's (2008: 7) words, 'the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'. Not only has the visual enjoyed a certain dominance among cultures that privilege it, but the visual has often become conflated with knowledge and cognition in constructions of reality or in processes of how people may make sense of reality. Spivak (cited in Redhead 1995: 1) argues, in an interview with Geoffrey Hawthorn, that these images and narratives 'take on their own impetus as it were, so that one begins to see "reality" as non-narrated and real'.⁸

6 I do note that the context within which Mitchell (1995) developed his reading of the pictorial turn in the 1990s has shifted considerably with the rise of digital and social media and the attendant acceleration in the production and circulation of the visual image.

7 I acknowledge that scholars in the prolific, diverse fields of disability (in which I have no training) and visual culture studies would dispute these kinds of dated statements, but these nuances go beyond the scope of this discussion as I am particularly dealing with mainstream culture which largely produces for, and assumes, a sighted consumer base. Disability studies, in particular, contribute a valuable body of scholarship and do considerable work in discussing the spectrum of differentiated ability and its diverse materialities. These studies successfully disrupt the disabled/abled binary and allow visually impaired individuals, or even people who have no experience of visual perception, to exist within the same visual culture that the world shares, and their experience of it contributes to the language and experience of these aesthetics (see, for example, Kleege [2018] for interesting perspectives on visual impairment and visual culture).

8 The metaphorical connection between 'knowing is seeing' or 'understanding is seeing' is also repeatedly discussed in the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003), whose theoretical framework of Metaphor Theory is used in my study – as elucidated in the second part of Chapter Two.

Within these developments, the privileging of the visual might be understood in the context of contemporary media imaging as a deliberately engineered reality, an appropriation of unattainable ideals, and, more extremely, 'an eroticisation of attention' (hooks 1996: 13). More recently, visual and film theorists have begun to interrogate the ocular-centric approach to the study of visual culture, advocating, instead, for an approach that encompasses the full spectrum of human sensory modalities and sees these as 'inseparable from struggles in cultural politics and political culture' (Mitchell 1995: 3). This more nuanced questioning can be picked up in the work of critical media theorists such as Sobchack (1992, 2004), Shaviro (2010), or affect theorists addressing the visual such as Sedgwick (2003). In these contours of critique, the relationship between the visual, aestheticisation, and the erotic is especially problematic if sexual activity is taken to encompass the entire affective range of desire and desirability. Edelman (in Berlant and Edelman 2014) opines:

Among the things to which sex refers is the prospect of an encounter with something much closer to the sublime than the beautiful – which doesn't as most of us know to our sorrow, mean that sex is always sublime, nor that it can't be conceptualised as beautiful, but rather that it trenches on an economy of danger where shifts of scale can at any moment recognise value or empty it out, articulate new meanings or dislocate the subject of meaning altogether. Sex, then, may be inseparable from the question of the aesthetic, but primarily because the aesthetic (that is, the *ideology* of the aesthetic as opposed to the specificity of the work performed by aesthetic objects) can shield us against what threatens to undo and displace us in sexual encounters. (2014: 15, emphasis in original)

Edelman (ibid: 17–18) further discusses notions of ‘cute’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘adorable’ bodies as being over (re)presented as aestheticised objects in visual commodity culture that pledge an ‘optimism’ which is located in the ‘normativity of happiness’, with the promise of an ongoing pleasure in the desire of, and access to, these objects. However, Berlant (ibid: 13) makes the important observation that such commercialised images of mass culture can work to ‘neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject sex can be’. Visagie (1994: 31) calls these ideological constructions ‘pastoral havens’ and, by processes of consumerism, he claims that ‘the haven of eroticism is enabled to “continuously flow” into our personal lifeworld’. These theorists are pointing out a disconnect between affects of desire and effects of (re)presentations of desire. However, if people are bombarded with prototypical images of desiring subjects/objects and are regulated or coerced by those images, however gently, they may ‘anaesthetise feeling’, which is an essential component of the erotic (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 17; cf. Bataille 1986; Lorde 2007a). The grasping of ideas is inextricably linked to issues of (re)presentation and imaging as ‘cultural performances’ that might be understood as vehicles for modes of knowing, intent, and consent (Bell 2007: 147).

What new developments in visual research would perhaps engender, is moving beyond received ‘analytical models of structuralist and post-structuralist thought’ (Rogoff 1998: 16) in pursuit of a more critical, reflexive consumership. I suggest that critical consumership fosters better questioning and awareness in consumers themselves and does not simply repeat insistence on product transformation. I deliberately select the term ‘consumership’ here because, as the analyses in

Chapters Four, Five, and Six show, the logics of cultural performance are formed within the logics of commodification. I would agree with Fiske (1989: 10), though, that the 'relationship between popular culture and the forces of commerce and profit is highly problematic'. The 'immutable mobiles' (Latour 1986: 12) that occur in the form of the normative bodies described by Harding (2008) are what have largely driven the translatability of narrowly formed prototypes (gender, race, class, age, size, and ability) of eroticised bodies into various global markets by means of 'consumerist havens' (Visagie 1994: 31) promising desirability and happiness by way of object acquisition. From this perspective, the eroticised body in mainstream distribution of (reality) television, commercial music videos, and erotic film has become what Scott (2010: 1) explains as

a consistent, endlessly reproducible, transportable object [which] assists the creators of the object in dominating, colonizing and subjugating the users of the object in a way that no economic, religious or social knowledge system in and of itself could. The immutable mobile acts as the vehicle for producing and reproducing domination of the ideological system.

At the core of the Latourian 'immutable mobile' is the notion of translatability that transcends (cultural) distinctiveness. In terms of image translatability into various market contexts, often far removed from product origins, visual media content functions as a kind of *lingua franca* in that its message is linguistic in nature but it is not dependent on specialised language, discipline, or skill for access. These importable/exportable images could be examples of what is now commonly cited from Barthes as 'a new object that belongs to no one' (Barthes cited in Bachman-Medick 2016: 9; Clifford 1986: 1; Mirzoeff 1999: 4). In this regard, it would be prudent

to recognise that privilege (whether gender, race, class, age, size, or ability privilege) often works as it does precisely because it can operate without qualification or justification. The privileged group rarely needs to explain, qualify, or justify itself (Bourdieu 2001; Storey 2015). If global cultures of the erotic are forming as objects that belong to no one, their origins and intents or purposes of formation will go largely unnoticed, especially if they do receive privileged status. In terms of metaphorical visual analysis, given the ongoing fluctuation in meaning production, an attitudinal adjustment of 'speaking to' rather than 'speaking about' – as Rogoff (1998: 17) suggests – seems useful in critical work of this nature. In this way, the visual object is a dialectical object which involves an element of subjectivity.

The body has been a central subject in various forms of (re)presentation throughout modern history. Storey (2014) and Richardson (2010) claim an 'obsession' with bodies of late. Habitually, the body is contextualised, manipulated, framed, and stylised in order to convey meanings and norms; at the same time, it functions as a metaphor for 'understanding and exploring political change' as well as providing a site for idealisation to 'overcome the weaknesses of the physical body' (Mirzoeff 1995: 2–3). Mirzoeff (1995: 8) also notes that there is no established 'history of representations of the body' that critics may follow. Mirzoeff (ibid) further comments on the shifts that have effected changes in the way the academy studies the body with particular reference to 'metaphorical meaning' and 'political struggle'. Mirzoeff (1995: 9–10) comments on 'surveillance societies' that are disciplined under various forms of institutionalised, external power over the individual as proposed by Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) in his work on biopolitics and biopower. Mirzoeff also comments on 'control societies', as proposed by Deleuze (1992; Deleuze and

Guattari 1987) in his work on 'haecceity', who are coerced into internal control of their own bodies and their place within the larger group (Mirzoeff 1995: 10; cf. Hardt 1988; Stratton 2001). Noting these distinctions in body politics, Mirzoeff (1995: 12) fittingly raises new concerns of 'framing, of discursivity, and of causality' and also highlights notions of resistance, possibility, and freedom from restraint against such backdrops. Inevitably then, the emphasis moves from structure and linearity to interactions and productions that cannot 'be limited to formal, historical or theoretical methodologies' but is extended to 'fluid and diverse' approaches to interpretations of bodies (Mirzoeff 1995: 13).

It is the inter-relationship between producers, images (their content), and consumers that produces a form of aestheticisation as regulation, and it is this component of visual culture which forms the primary interest in this study. However, to get at a more explicit and detailed understanding of how this kind of aestheticisation might work, it proved useful to apply a theory of metaphor from Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003) buttressed by relevant explanatory elements from performativity (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004) and sexual scripting (Gagnon 1977, 1990; Gagnon and Simon 1967, 1973, 2011; Simon and Gagnon 2007) to chosen types of imaging which, in this case, were selected as (re)presentations of performing, eroticised bodies in popular culture. This triangulation is discussed in more depth in the theoretical framework of Chapter Two and the analysis section in Chapter Three. It proves necessary to determine whether these performances may be understood in terms of a proposed notion of performative frames derived from more familiar concepts of 'physical frames', 'social frames', 'linguistic frames', 'cultural frames', 'media frames' (cf. Fillmore 1975, 1985; Geertz 1983; Gitlin 1980; Goffman 1974; Lakoff 2002, 2004,

2008; Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Minsky 1975), and so on. Indeed, reading and viewing the eroticised body in performance poses an interesting problematic as it could be presumed to be always, already directed towards relation or potential interaction with an 'Other', implying that there is some intersubjective connection between readability and visibility which (re)produces (re)presentations that are, at once, both familiar enough to identify and unique enough to enthrall, all the while operating within what Jay (1998: 66) calls a 'scopic regime' and Storey (2015: 138) calls a 'panoptic machine'. Of course, such scopic regimes are never simple – either in their operation or in their maintenance. They are legitimised within complex matrices and sustained by multiple mechanisms, so that they may operate at the level of regulation with comparatively little effort and exposure. As Brown (2008: 15) states: 'the body is a fundamental location to look for forms of response to regimes that are, in the first instance, based on very fleshly practices of violence and physical coercion'.

1.2 Performance and Erotic Relationality: Desiring Subjects and Objects of Desire

Preoccupation with all aspects of sexuality and the erotic are nothing new in the intricate medley that is the human experience (cf. Bancroft 2009; Buffington, Luibhéid, and Guy 2014; Frayser and Whitby 1995; Kauth 2013). In *Sex and Reason*, Posner (1992: 351) proposes a definition of the erotic as being 'presentations and representations that are, or at least taken by some viewers to be, in some sense "about" sexual activity'. (Re)presentations are what Hall (1997: 9) called 'forms of signification' that stand in for entities other than themselves and, therefore, may shape meaning. As a matter of conceptual clarity on what the erotic

might encompass in this study, Berlant and Edelman (2014: viii) elucidate a useful concept of 'an encounter' or moments in which

negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of 'an encounter,' specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation. Sex is exemplary in the way it powerfully induces such encounters, but such encounters exceed those experiences we recognise as sex.

Bataille (1986: 29) qualifies the concept similarly: 'Human sexual activity is not necessarily erotic but erotic it is whenever it is not rudimentary and particularly animal.' In concurrence with these views, this study takes the erotic to include, but mean more than, sexual activity. It broadly encompasses the physical, behavioural, affective, intellectual, sociocultural, and associated aspects of sexual activity, sexuality, and sexual practice, focusing particularly on the relational aspects occurring between desiring subjects and objects of desire.⁹ The reason I make an explicit distinction between sexualisation and eroticisation is because the research shows that when desire/love as opposed to just sex is depicted in sexualised images, it makes a massive difference as to *who* gets (re)presented and *how* they are (re)presented. Bodies of the ilk that Harding (2008) and Rubin (1984) describe, are the ones chosen to (re)present love and desirability. 'Others', when they do appear in the mainstream, are treated differently in the imaging, as the sample sets will show in analysis.

9 Important work in explicating the erotic has emerged in cultural and political critiques from writers in many different disciplines, with many of those addressing matters of sexuality and gender. These critiques include those of Audre Lorde (2007a, 2007b) and multiple entries in Abelove, Barale, and Halperin's anthology (2012). I have delineated my use of the erotic using terminology aligned with those of Berlant and Edelman (2014), as well as Bataille (1986), as I am more interested in the erotic as relational embodiment.

In his second volume of *The history of sexuality: The use of pleasure*, Foucault (1990b: 4) analyses the experience of sexuality noting three blocs that constitute it: '(1) the formation of the sciences (*savoirs*) that refer to it, (2) the systems of power that regulate its practice, [and] (3) the forms within which individuals are able, are obliged, to recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality'. Foucault is well noted for work in (1) medicine and psychiatry and (2) penalising power and disciplinary practice but expresses that he had some difficulty in finding tools for studying the third (1990b: 5). He concedes, in the introduction to this work, that he had to make a theoretical shift from those stances premised on constituting forces of *knowledge* and *power* to one focusing on personhood or 'the hermeneutics of the self', posing the question: 'What were the games of truth [and error] by which human beings came to see themselves as desiring individuals?' (Foucault 1990b: 6–7). In this study, tools are sought in addressing (re)presentations of desiring subjects in relation to objects of desire to include the question of who is seen as desirable and how erotic relationalities are performed. This approach broadens the scope of subjective investment to include forms of social, cultural, economic, and political currency through which the micro-repetitions of the erotic may be consumed and mimicked in actual/virtual global communities. 'Mimicry', in this sense, follows Taussig's (1993: 77–78) usage of the term in which subjects physically imitate their milieus, rendering the boundary between image and contact permeable and able to 'interpenetrate' one another. In these examples of what Taussig (1993: 57) terms 'magical realism', observing subjects integrate themselves into the objective world rather than personifying it in their own image. As the formation of a more erotic public culture is well underway in the twenty-first century global context due to relaxing censorship and publicisation of erotic themes (Stearns 2009), this indiscernibility of performance

and reality seems to be a reasonable extension with which to think discursively about popular culture. Indeed, the advent of the moving image in multimodal media bears a realism that invites imitation. One aim of the study, then, would be to assume a *critical consumer attitude*, which simply asks: what exactly are readers/consumers supposed to be looking for when they consume a visual product and are tempted to emulate its contents? The hope would be to foster a multi-levelled, critical semiotic analysis that could conceivably be applied to a range of human activities in both their actual and mediated forms.

Seeing that the erotic involves far more than sexual subjects and how they see themselves, the focus of this study is on relationality which involves various actors – both inside and outside of the erotic relation itself. Often, in critical work on sexualised image content, the focus is on representations of femininity (or women) and masculinity (or men) and not the relational performance. Not only are these representations shaping the normative formation of relationalities between desiring subjects and objects of desire, but there seems to be a burgeoning popular culture exchange which provides consumers with imaging that is largely imported, imitated, and not necessarily linked to their materiality at all. With choices becoming varied and more accessible, ever-changing options to stylise and transform the body for the purpose of attaining attractiveness or erotic appeal densely populate everyday culture and, for many, these practices become ‘emotional survival’ (Orbach 2009: 110). With the rise and growing accessibility of cosmetic and beauty products, cosmetic procedures (invasive and non-invasive), and a huge market for accessories, enhancement, and augmentation aids, one may transform (parts of) one’s body to be more ‘desirable’ or ‘attractive’ in a relatively short time and at a

relatively low cost. I refer to these 'rituals of modification' (Wegenstein 2010: 20) in the everyday context – not as a special consequence of body dysmorphia or related disorders, but what could be termed 'normal variation in appearance' (Davis 1995: 69; McCabe 1988: 97). The stylisation of bodies has influence on viewing and reading of the erotic but needs relatively detailed interpretations of different framings to make explicit different ideologies and hegemonies. Bodies as parts, bodies as wholes, or bodies in framings are not simply viewed – they are imitated and (re)produced to a large extent and conceptually connected to what might be perceived as *natural*, *normal*, *normative*, and *ideal* in the regulating sense that Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) work addresses. Popular culture markets are prime sites for disseminating these conflicting characterisations which seem to be easily internalised and idealised (cf. Orbach 2009; Stekelenburg 2018; Stratton 2001).

Relationality is understood as necessarily co-constitutive – not only between erotic subjects and objects, but their relations to social and cultural systems or structures as well. While *culture* may be taken to mean many things, Wuthnow's (1987: 348) broad definition of culture as 'the symbolic-expressive dimension of social life, generally, as an aspect of behaviour that communicates implicitly as well as explicitly', is what I have in mind, covering 'forms of life' (Habermas 2001a: 190) that may include material, psychic, and affective aspects. There are narrower definitions of culture in some of the literature. For example, Berenson (1984: 43) conceptualises culture in the 'modern sense' of 'the whole way of life, material, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, of a people'. Seeing that this study is not located in the geographical or locational sense to 'a people' (ibid), a term which has become conceptually problematic for any anthropological/social referent due to more explicit

recognitions of diversification in societies, I refer to the more generalisable notion of 'forms of life', borrowed from Habermas (2001a: 190), which may move and cohere across contexts. Habermas (1987) has commented extensively in numerous works about the global spread and predominance of Western culture and tradition¹⁰, referring to 'a colonization of the lifeworld' (1987: 331).

In the opening citation of this chapter, Harding (2008: 71–74) addresses a part of modern culture, referring particularly to (re)presentations of desirable bodies in popular culture (also referred to in the literature as *everyday* culture or the abbreviated *pop* culture), which form the subject of this study. Despite there being considerable differences between freedom of discussion on, and freedom in, actual erotic practice, Harding's (ibid) statement shows a common correlation, if not conflation, between the two, connecting cultural effects with the perception of the eroticised self as well as its relation to the eroticised other. In referring to 'popular culture' as a possible site for locating mediated eroticised bodies, I proceed with a relatively standard definition of popular culture offered by Shields (2015: 402):

The entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture of the early to mid-20th century and the emerging global mainstream of the late 20th and early 21st century ... understood as a) broadly comprehensive; b) popular or 'mainstream'; c) originating in the modern West but increasingly 'universalized' due to globalisation; d) reinforced by mass media and practices of consumption.

¹⁰ To be clear, I do not wish to conflate Western popular culture and all popular culture. I merely recognise the predominance of North American visual product in the cultural and entertainment global markets that disseminate and consume television, film, radio, reality television, and the performing arts (UNESCO 2015).

A report on a study commissioned by The International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) entitled *Cultural times: The first global map of cultural and creative industries* (2015: 16)¹¹ confirms the dominance of North American consuming power in media, entertainment, and digital industries globally as well as the fact that it has enjoyed 'supremacy' in international media and entertainment industries 'for generations'. That dominance has been challenged by international media and entertainment product since 2010 (ibid: 57). While local media and entertainment is proliferating worldwide (ibid: 84), especially with newer forms of entertainment product such as gaming, the US still dominates production and consumption in television, films, music, radio, and the performing arts (ibid: 91–92).

Rubin (1984: 143) claims that the realm of the erotic has its own 'internal politics, inequities and modes of oppression' but there are broader sociocultural and (identity) political issues that render the field worthy of serious, ongoing critical analysis in these 'times of great social stress'. Weeks (1989, 2002, 2003), Stearns (2009, 2015), and Buffington et al. (2014) offer thought-provoking studies on histories of sexuality and gender from global perspectives, consistently remarking that changes in mass-media industries and the cultures they convey are extremely influential historical constitutors in the course of modern erotic praxes. Stearns (2009: 139), particularly, notes the recent, striking advent of an 'erotic public culture'. This culture has drawn out sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual practice from private boudoirs, clandestine locales, and protected consultation rooms into everyday life, with the

¹¹ The document contains detailed statistical information on culture and creative industries worldwide and shows how new global trends in digital technologies are shifting the US dominance in various areas of production, distribution, and consumption.

indelible presence of the digital age dramatically increasing 'global opportunities for cultural dissemination and behavioral imitation' (Stearns 2009: 133). With erotic public culture, this would not refer to actual, or overtly conducted, sex acts but in mediated forms of sex(ualised) activity that anyone can view anytime, anywhere, by means of commonly possessed devices and amalgamating 'convergence' (Herman and McChesney 2004: 107) possibilities. According to Hermann and McChesney (2004), these developments occurred mostly after 1994 due to the advent of colossal telecommunications-media firms with explicitly global ambitions.

Performance is different from mere events in that this type of event may be understood as 'staged', thereby possessing a uniqueness attachment as specifically created and being perhaps more closely associated with 'high art' (Ringmar 2014). Performance is intentional; it is made to happen and it is directed at a viewing object. It often possesses a decidedly communicative element. Most importantly, I will add that performance is aware of itself as performance. *Performativity*, on the other hand, is a matter of discursive practice which Butler (1990: 33), heavily influenced by Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c), describes as 'the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulated frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'. Related to performativity, Bourdieu (1990) similarly proposes the notion of 'habitus', which is a social group's cultured set of gestures, postures, attitudes, and dispositions, also regulated, normatising, and solidified over time. Conceivably, this notion would be applicable to the (re)production of eroticised bodies as well. That said, there are significant crossovers between the two concepts of performance and performativity that are pertinent for material that is (re)produced on popular screens – that is,

material that is not immediate. This material is mediated, iterative, and citational, which relates to questions of performativity. Additionally, ambiguous embodiments and the blurring of boundaries, surfaces, and borders affect processes of identity and dis-identity, and continuity and discontinuity, which both cement and trouble the mainstream.

Technological advancements involving the enormous expansion of mass-media industries are taken to have significantly altered the scope of communication cultures in the contemporary era. Castells (2011: xxvi–xxviii) argues that traditional mass media are now transformed into ‘interactive communication’ and ‘mass self-communication’. In this context, with multimodal communication continually expanding, I would argue that performance, which is often overemphasised as unique and immediate, has become an extremely powerful assimilator of potentially global homologues (translatable and transportable across contexts) in the contemporary (digital) era due to the unprecedented *repeatability* it now enjoys. What Foucault (1990b: 11) terms ‘arts of existence’ and ‘techniques of the self’ have become performative to the extent that they may be successfully reproduced for ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu 1990: 35) and many other forms of capital. ‘Technologies of the self’ do not detract from earlier notions of power and ‘subjection’ (Foucault 1990b: 27) but there is a shift in later work to preoccupations with what may be considered to be highly individualised framings of subjective freedom and agency, familiar in the modern era, towards personal transformations into states of ‘happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality’ (Foucault 1988: 18). Of course, social capital augments itself and its usefulness with increasing presence and usage, which is relevant for repeatability (Bourdieu 1990). These concepts would seem

particularly significant for the erotic for 'all its potential mobility' and 'attachment' (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 63). Much work in cultural studies and media studies literature points out that producers of mass media and countless related products are well aware that eroticised bodies in performance (re)present what Bourdieu (1996: 17) calls 'attention-grabbers', and visual media, in particular, give the consumer the 'sensual immediacy' or access to more than the ordinary or 'the sublime' that Mirzoeff (1998: 9) describes.

The erotic has significant commercial value. Eroticised bodies sell, erotic cultures sell, and both are used to sell other goods very effectively towards normative ends of what Foucault mentions above (1988: 18). Scholars in media, particularly journalism, have remarked on the public's fascination with the dual themes of sex and violence in media culture (Bourdieu 1996; Craft and Davis 2016; Eysenck and Nias 1978; Russo 1998). Williams and others have quipped: 'sex sells' and 'if it bleeds, it leads' (cited in Bruce 2013: 209; Craft and Davis 2016: 73; Musa and Yartey 2014: 97). The focus here is on sex, not violence, but public and mass-media fascination with both is noted. Fiske (1989: 134) has commented: 'Represented violence is popular in a way that social violence is not', and one could conceivably allow the same for sexual (re)presentations, albeit for different reasons. Consequently, it seems that eroticised bodies continue to be assigned, somewhat arbitrarily, values of desirability and power while they significantly influence people's interests and tastes (Parker 2014).

While bodies and sexuality are often classified as a 'natural' fact of life, there is comparatively little attention directed towards the problematisation of exactly what

mediated bodies are doing or how these representative units are posturing or set, yet they exert substantial sway in terms of how people (inter)act – humans being the mimetic creatures they are, they learn by imitation and (re)production.¹² Both critics and consumers seem to have participated in the discursive, if not experiential, formation of a binary between (re)presentations of pleasure in, or fear of, what Jolly et al. (2013: 2) have termed ‘sexualisation’ or ‘pornification’ in popular culture or ‘raunch culture’. Sharma (2013: 56) discourages the temptation to be caught on either side of a ‘false pleasure-danger binary’, instead arguing for a strongly non-normative approach to sexuality and sexual practice.

An approach suggested by Haraway (1998: 191) is considered instructive in this study: ‘Vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions.’ Therefore, from a critical semiotic perspective, ongoing examination is required regarding how many more social, cultural, and political economies might be conveyed upon eroticised embodiment (admittedly, in a more implicit framing) and why they might be saying what they say, in the way they say it. In concurrence with multiple readings offered in Dines and Humez (2015), I accept the following assumptions: that society is largely stratified along lines of gender (and categories of sexuality), race (and categories of ethnicity), and class (and its connection to economic status); that people existing in societies ‘possess’ gender, sexuality, race, and class as well as other identity markers (age, size, ability) which are largely ascribed and necessarily structure

12 The term, ‘mimetic’, is borrowed from René Girard (Girard, Oughourlian, and Lefort 1978), whose theory elucidated the conflictual nature of mimesis but has undergone many expansions. Mimetic theory is not the focus of this study but Girard is acknowledged for the use of this term since many contemporary researchers in a variety of fields, including the neurosciences, stress the importance of imitation and repetition in ‘acquisitive behaviour’ of humans (Palaver 2013: xiii). Girard avoided the term imitation as he wished to include, along with mimicking or aping behaviour, the acquisition of beliefs, postures, ethics, aesthetics, and other ways of being. That extended view is supported in this work and is explicated in the theoretical framework in Chapter Two.

experience, often in intersectional ways as Harding's (2008) quote above suggests; and that resources and capital are acquired and utilised in inequitable ways because of 'power dynamics involving these categories of experience' and many others (Dines and Humez 2015: x; cf. Bell and Jackson 2014; Harper 2009; Rose 2001). Gender and sexuality; race and ethnicity; and class and affluence, in this context, are powerful aesthetic regulators – in both positive and negative senses – not only in application to erotic performance, but also to many other human activities.

While Stearns (2009) makes the valid point that people's actual sexual practice is far more reserved than eroticised media (re)presentations suggest, Harding's (2008) experience insinuates that the way in which culture reminds, (re)presents, and (re)produces strongly impinges on subjectivity and identity. Rose (2001) claims that it is at this micro-level where ideology really takes hold. I would argue that this occurs not only by the repetition of so-called 'identifiable characteristics' (Harding 2008: 73) but by their ritualised, aestheticised sculpting or what Dines and Humez (2015: xi) call their 'artful constructions'. I understand this terminology to mean specifically choreographed performances of movements, actions, posturing, and positioning which result in detectable (re)productions of body homologies (cf. Butler 1990, 1993; DiMello 2014; Schilder 1950). Rogoff (1998: 15) notes the associated importance of 'who is privileged in the regime of specularity'. Of course, the homologies or caprices in which these codes circulate may be viewed as having a decidedly political element in terms of inclusions and exclusions of which kinds of bodies may participate in which kinds of eroticised activity and how they may, or should, do so. The drivers of power differentials, then, would not fully reside in either systems or subjects/objects but in overlapping concepts of relationality, broadly understood. As the analysis will

show, these relationalities cannot be disconnected from the social – either in terms of reproduction or resistance.

Following Dyer's (1982) work on meaning in advertisements, what images might mean depend on how they operate – how signs and their reproductive ideological effects are 'organised *internally* (within the text) and *externally* (in relation to [their] production, circulation and consumption and in relation to technological, economic, legal and social relations)' (1982: 115, emphasis in original). Many theorists connect societal shifts with both public and private spheres. Giddens (1992: 3), for example, noting the revolutionary, democratised nature of modern intimacy, suggests: 'The transformation of intimacy might be a subversive influence upon modern institutions as a whole.' An understanding that relationality can be a negotiation, an exchange, or a transaction between equals changes people's understanding of the conditions under which such interchanges might or might not be undertaken and regulated. Consequently, in the contemporary era, eroticised body imaging has established its presence as a powerful force of assimilation, order, *and* resistance in the democratisation of personal life.

1.3 The Question of Artful Constructions of Eroticised Bodies as Dialectical Objects

The mediated body can be viewed as a design unit on which multiple meanings may be crafted but, in the crafting, each part is often meticulously devised by a producer/director/choreographer/artist and scrupulously prepared for performance. Mirzoeff (1995: 3) explains in his discussion of the 'bodyscape' that 'each physical body forms an individual whole but it may represent many bodies and have a role in

many different technologies'. In the public eroticisation process, much attention has been directed at the most observable meaning inscribed on these mediated bodies – sex. In this way, the erotic is foregrounded while attendant, often paradoxical, encodings which may be identified in the same unit are obscured, subordinated, Othered, or muted. Due to technological innovation, (re)presentations of eroticised bodies have been established as everyday facts in popular culture but the finer elements of aestheticisation as regulation require further examination. Referring to the opening citation of this chapter and echoes in Orbach (2009), if popular culture continually (re)produces narrow ideals of desirability but people themselves are largely unable either to be, or have, the ideal, it follows that most sexual subjects and those with whom they interact are alienated in various ways from such idealised appropriations. Despite widespread advances in the political and legal enfranchisement of people and their attendant (sexual) rights in many contexts across the globe, as well as insightful research and development into areas of sexuality and sexual practice and general trends towards sexual liberty in populations, individuals in societies are always, at once, positioned between conformity and opposition, empowerment and disempowerment, rootedness and the global, freedom and constraint, fixity and fluidity. These anomalies warrant some means to 'decode' (Hall 1997, 2005) what exactly is being (re)produced on normative bodies besides the obvious – the erotic – and make explicit connections between the eroticised bodies under examination and broader ideological complexes they sustain. This leads to the central research question:

When eroticised performance is aesthetically constructed on bodies for popular screens, why do performative frames of gender, sexuality, race, class, size, age, and ability alter (re)presentations of desire or desirability?

The following sub-questions serve to clarify the investigative strategies underlying the research question:

- i. In erotic performance, what are the discursive markers that constitute stereotypes and ideologies of desire?
- ii. How does othering, marginalising, and invisibilising certain body prototypes in popular (re)presentations of the erotic maintain social ordering?

1.4 The Eroticised Body as a Viable Object for Critical Study: The Role of Social Constructs of Gender, Race, Class, Size, Ability, and Age in Performance

Despite bodies in popular culture enjoying powerful, widespread presence and influence, conventional, academic disciplines and departments have until relatively recently leaned more towards studies that articulate aesthetic categorisations, describe and explain evanescent art forms, or provide extensive historical contexts (all of which have been valuable approaches) than towards those that address operations of sociocultural power (Desmond 2003). However, since the late 1980s, prejudices in the academy that doubt the value of studying the popular are waning, thanks to the extensive, relevant work done by scholars from a variety of milieus and associations around the world, with bodies becoming 'a central topic in much recent thought' (Wegenstein 2010: 19). The pioneering work of Stuart Hall (1997) and his

colleagues in cultural studies emerging in Britain (specifically, The Birmingham School) in the latter half of the twentieth century placed gender, race, and class centrally on the critical agenda of the field (Casey 2008; Kellner 2015). The school's influence on, and engagement with, international intellectual trends cannot be overestimated. Browne (2002) also notes persistent misunderstandings and misplaced criticisms of lowering academic standards for scholarly achievement and involvement in cultural studies. In an overview of the field, Browne (2002) offers a comprehensive history of the Popular Culture Association, American Culture Association, and Popular Culture Movement which extends beyond the United States of America to various international developments that have contributed extensively to alleviating these biases against many areas of research within the field.¹³ Hartman (2015: 225), in a historical study of 'the culture wars', contextualises the challenge for the academy and its relation to various politics as a struggle for (re)presentation among 'contending factions' for 'the right to be represented in the picture [that culture] draws of itself'. I should like to think that critical cross-disciplinary work, at the level of the popular, would provide important avenues for academia to have added import into everyday spaces. Perhaps this would also occur in the traversing of disciplinary spaces – falling between theory and practice – in openings for some much needed intellectual resistance to the ideological, mediated passions currently directing publics.

In an overwhelmingly large and varied field, then, it would seem reasonable that, to investigate the problematic of ideological complexes, one could begin by returning to concrete, visual examples – to forms of signification that sexualise heterosexism,

13 The term 'American' implies a kind of United States of America imperialism. In reality, there are other 'Americas' but, because of a United States of America dominance in popular culture, 'American' is often taken to refer to the United States of America only in the literature.

racialisation, and the degradation of Othered classes and what this has to do with erotic (re)presentation and erotic performance. In order to foreground the ways in which gender, race, and class might be so performed in such mainstream (re)presentations, one might have to accept that traditional (feminist, race, or class) critiques do not gel easily into what is often considered a 'post' era – an era in which the politics of (re)presentation has become contested, ambiguous, pluralistic, and paradoxical. It is difficult to find a balance between being critical and constructive when one may accept, on the one hand, that there are plausible explanations for the ways in which harmful discourses proliferate and perpetuate in an image genre and, on the other hand, that there might be a palpable presence of resistance, power, and ownership exercised in the same image genre as a means to liberating ends. Indeed, popular culture may be entering an era which routinely (re)presents a global demand to have one's cake and eat it, so to speak (Faludi 1992; Gill 2007; Greer 1999). This tension would materialise in the way that consuming audiences might want to enact old-fashioned gender roles without being criticised for supporting heterosexism or buying into ethics of active masculinity and passive femininity (Chapter Four); where one might want to enact erotic performances as racialised subjects without being criticised for perpetuating racist stereotypes of black masculine belligerence or feminine hyper-sexualisation (Chapter Five); where consuming queer sexual performance material does not make one an anti-feminist who supports an oppressive pornography industrial complex that exploits desperate women (Chapter Six).¹⁴ Indeed, the field of media (re)presentation is full of

14 I will use the word women/feminine throughout this text but would like to state that the use of the term here includes all people identifying as women/feminine, including trans women and people of differentiated sex or gender who may identify as such, even if that identification is occasional or fragmentary. Alternative terms are used by many feminist writers to disrupt male/heterosexualised normativity – for example, womxn, womyn, womban, wommon (singular)/wimmin (plural), and womyn-born womyn are found in the literature. The same may apply to the use of 'men'. This

contradiction, which makes it a difficult area of study (Gill 2007). Added to this, Gagnon and Simon (1967: xii) note that ‘violators of major social norms’ are no longer ‘strangers either in the literal sense or strangers in the sense that they are products of highly exceptional processes’. Fragmented symbols (ibid) of subversive sexual practice and differentiated bodies in eroticised performance are beginning to populate mainstream culture but old discursive markers are still the best sellers.

The analyses undertaken in Chapters Four, Five, and Six show the mechanisms by which these fragmented symbols form and are formed by sociocultural norms in a meaning feedback loop. The symbols are *semiotic* (convey meaning) in the *figurative* (metaphorical) sense. They are *performative* in the sense that they are stylised, repeated, and repeatable, or reiterable and citational, to the extent that they appear natural over time. They are aesthetically regulating by the powerful framing of already existing sociocultural scripts which, in turn, normalise and normalise modes of human thought, action, and interaction. These inter- and intra-conveyances rely on a number of *leaps* in their processes of becoming long-standing, prominent features of mainstream modern culture. The images are never raw or neutral data. By virtue of their framing structures and sheer numbers, they quickly morph into socially accepted discourse, determining what is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’, and are often used to constrain and produce social phenomena. However, what is common or repeated may not necessarily be ‘natural’ or ‘normal’, and none of these concepts necessarily implies notions of normativity or what *should* be. Logically speaking, these entailments might be as arbitrary as the value assignments attached to them, and those assignments are decidedly *attached*. Indeed, what is at stake is that these

acknowledgement is in the interests of gender inclusivity and in recognition of, if not apology to, many non-binary/queer people who may not wish to be boxed into such categorisations.

leaps lead many subjects to believe that it is natural for privilege to be concentrated into narrowly (re)presented bodies. Therefore, frameworks for interpreting these bodies would have to be complex and multifaceted. As Gagnon (1977: Preface) asserted, 'there are many ways to become, to be, to act, to feel sexual'.

The erotic, then, like any other part of human life, is (re)produced, organised, sustained, and transmuted through many institutions (Sullivan 2003). In essence, this study addresses Rogoff's (1998: 21) parallel discussion in visual culture by asking how eroticised performance on popular screens might function 'in the service of a particular politics or ideology and populate it with a select set of images, viewed through specific apparatuses and serving the needs of distinct subjectivities', which have very little to do with the obvious – sexualisation and the erotic.

1.5 Outline of the Rest of the Thesis

Chapter Two presents a detailed literature review and theoretical framework. The literature review provides the contextual scaffolding for the entire thesis. This broad survey seeks to acknowledge and link important work on social constructs of gender, race, class, age, size, and ability and their ideological imports into matters concerning the erotisation of bodies. The theoretical part of the chapter, in line with the observation by Gee (2011: 11) that 'any method always goes with a theory [and that] method and theory cannot be separated', provides the background for the specification of the methodology and methods discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four analyses, presents, and discusses performative frames in ballroom and Latin American dance competitions as 'effects through reiteration' (Butler 1993:

xxviii). Specifically, the chapter seeks to examine a very particular aesthetics of desire as exemplified in various male-female eroticised (re)presentations in the form of partner dancing, which has become relatively mainstream in Western popular culture. The analysis shows that the orientational metaphors for which this art form has become world famous serve to reinforce a heteronormative hegemony by way of imaging couples' relationalities in a manner that enjoys significant status and strong appeal in modern societies. While this imaging is substantially otherwise in same-sex partner imaging, both normative and non-normative imaging are recognised as sites that (re)produce categorisations, asymmetries, and hierarchies related to gender and sexual practice; these are, in turn, deeply rooted in a culturally fixed motif of a heterosexual couple – leading gentleman and following lady. The resultant (re)presentational milieu of the aesthetics of desire has become so deeply ingrained that imagining alternatives such as LGBTQ+ couples, older couples, and couples of varying size and ability becomes dissonant, as per societal norms and traditions.

Chapter Five explores performative framings of the eroticised body in commercial hip-hop and rap videos as 'performative subversions' that carry massive market value (Butler cited in Butler and Salih 2004: 99). Specifically, the chapter unpacks the restraining, subjective, and dichotomous (re)presentation of women as either 'virgins' or 'whores' in popular culture literature and sexual politics critiques that are played out in commercial hip-hop. The pervasiveness of binaries of (re)presentation of the female body in popular culture notwithstanding, the analysis in the chapter uncovers a notable absence of the good 'virgin' trope and a pronounced exhibition of what is known as 'raunch culture' and questions why this may be. Through a deliberate application of gendered, racialised, cultural, and historical lenses in the

analysis (in line with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two), the discussion shows that commercial hip-hop and rap videos both reflect and promote some awkward stereotypes which may – by and large – be linked to problematic conditionings of what is often referred to as ‘black sexuality’ (Collins 2004: 43) within a highly contested notion of authenticity.

Chapter Six is a journey into the mainstreaming of pornography in performative framings of the ‘erotic romance’ film genre as a ‘resignification’ of classy pornography – ‘a return to the “ever old” in relations of social power’ (Butler 1993: 170). The *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b; 2015; 2017; 2018) and its runaway, record-shattering literary sales and box office success form the object of study. Critics from around the world have ironically wondered whether *Fifty Shades of Grey* offers a sobering response to Freud’s unanswered question – that is, what does a woman want? – especially in the contexts of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe being the birthplaces of modern (twentieth-century) feminism in the Global North.¹⁵ The analysis in the chapter shows that the imaging in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which is characterised by a large set of markers signifying (white) affluence, has had the net effect of mainstreaming the ‘theatrics of transgression’ into the very societies that demarcated acceptable and respectable sexual practice. The chapter proceeds to demonstrate that this normative ambivalence would not have come into play were the setting of *Fifty Shades of Grey* outside the proselytising contexts of white imaginaries originating in the Global North with its apparent contested sexual politics – if economic prowess

¹⁵ This delineation by no means includes the many forms of, and developments in, feminisms and post-feminisms discussed in the literature. I am simply pointing out the tension, and perhaps irony, related to the success of the *Fifty Shades* novels (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) in these particular contexts.

pushing literary and box office sales of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is any reliable measure of success. In sum, the discussion in Chapter Six demonstrates an assumption that, if pornographic cultural content is to be transgressive, it is better conducted by white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, thin, able-bodied, affluent, young (married) people who will not disrupt a broader social order, even if they choose to liberate their personal, private sexual choices. When conceptualised as such, erotic transgression is formed out of already circulating capital, that is, that Othered classes are unruly and dangerous to the social order. This form of cultural capital is always subservient to the imperceptible borders that demarcate inclusions and exclusions, and it also operates at the fluctuating whims of industries that shape dominant discourses globally.

Finally, Chapter Seven presents the conclusions of the study and suggests possible future research directions.

1.6 Conclusion

Popular screens are often celebrated for (re)presenting what Iversen (1986: 84) has termed 'the smooth surface of the beautiful'. Critics have expressed disapproval of social praxes or structures that support deeply personal exclusions which often emerge as resistance to an ever-transforming identity politics in the voices of individuals and collectives who, partially or wholly, operate outside of societal structures and norms that do not include them as full members or beneficiaries of cultural capital circulating in a globalising world. My study serves to make explicit the metaphorical building blocks of performative frames whose powerful influences render the imagining of alternatives extremely difficult, if not unreadable or virtually

impossible to express on popular screens. What becomes pertinent in the application of the theory and associated critique, is that people in highly differentiated circumstances might be becoming increasingly absorbent of predominant, yet narrowing, 'ideal case prototypes' (Lakoff 2002: 9) of body imaging that most real people are simply unable to attain. These appropriations of the ideal may be forming overriding ways of being in the world as well as a steering politics associated with those modes of being. Sonia Kruks (2001: 85) suggests a resistant or resilient politics with regards to this phenomenon:

What makes [current] identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has been previously denied; it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of 'universal humankind' on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.

Orbach (2009: 20) also notes such a development in modern micro-politics: 'Even at the most basic level, choice is the mantra'. With people and collectives now, more than ever, wanting to realise goals on their own terms, convention has created the expectation that a life will be permeated with forms of meaninglessness, suffering, and alienation should one persistently fail to assume traditionally accepted, if not hegemonic, characteristics, postures, and practices as alluded to in Harding's (2008: 71–73) claim in the opening citation. Freedoms of variability and empowerment are what newfound modes of public eroticisation seem to offer but, at the level of the

popular, mediation, repeatability, and citationality prove to considerably complicate matters of erotic performance as a site for genuine empowerment. Due to rapid advancements in technology, concepts, ideologies, and visual imaging are translating far beyond originating contexts. With the print media era now waning and visual media becoming ineradicable in modern life, it seems that nobody is inoculated against the allure of the image. The literature reviewed during the research process indicates that there are a number of conflicting and complementary politics operating on eroticised bodies and through their performance.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the literature review and theoretical framework in which my study is anchored. With regards to the literature review, the chapter critically appraises existing scholarship on discourses concerning eroticised bodies, their performance of the erotic, and associated sub-discourses. These sub-discourses form the different sections that are discussed under the Literature Review section of the chapter. By way of introducing this discussion, however, it is important to acknowledge that I understand the erotic to be like any other element of human experience, that is, subject to what Lyotard (1984: 37) termed 'grand narratives', ideologies, or metanarratives. These sweeping thematics may act as both drivers and supporters of discourse, and the decision to address them broadly in this chapter is in line with Visagie's (1996; 2006) approach. Visagie (ibid) terms such phenomena 'macro-motives', which he explicitly designates to be 'nature', 'knowledge', 'power' (including 'culture' and 'history'), and 'personhood' (including the collectives 'society' and 'humanity'). Visagie notes that theorists and lay people alike become enchanted with macro-motives and, accordingly, these become very powerful discursive controllers. While one may pick up macro-motives along various transformations in public erotic cultures and 'intimacies' (Frank, Clough, and Seidman 2013; Giddens 1992), it would be prudent to concede that macro-motives do not necessarily function in a mutually exclusive way. It is possible for the same macro-motive (say, 'knowledge') to be expressed differently in different ideologies of, for example, Empiricist thought, Rationalist thought, and Marxist thought (Visagie

1994, 1996, 2006). Allowing for links between macro-motives of culture and politics entails acknowledging, as Hall (1985) suggests, dominance *and* subordination in societal relations structured by power. Popular culture has been described as a 'breeding ground for perpetuation of hegemony' (Sellnow 2010: 82). Hegemony may be understood as a negotiated consensus between oppositional parties who settle on structured materialities in order to acquire and retain power (cf. Gramsci 1999; Sellnow 2010; Storey 2009). Technological developments, globalisation, and internationalisation in the twenty-first century have significantly complicated these dominations and subordinations with economics (the macro-motive of classic Marxists), now often having to make room for ideology and identity politics as prominent elements in exercising power. Globally, this phenomenon is becoming more evident in recent resurgences of national(ist) and protectionist politics and dramatically contested socio-political struggles in several countries.

In terms of the body and the erotic, accepting gender, race, class, age, size, and ability as social constructs, as many of the theorists mentioned throughout this study do, often explicitly serves to 'reduce the explanatory role of biology or [the macro-motive of] "nature" in all social arrangements and power imbalances' (Dines and Humez 2015: 99). When theories are premised on a power imbalance, difference within social arrangements may become a verticalised concept. In this way, difference does not simply entail different prototypes, equally valued, existing alongside one another. Rather, some prototypes become subordinated to, or ranked lower than, other prototypes that are classed as acceptable, naturalised norms or ideals. Furthermore, prototypes usually have 'arbitrary value' indicators attached to them which may imply they are inferior or superior, more or less worthwhile, more or

less desirable. Less desirable prototypes are often subordinated to a normative or idealised prototype which possesses opposite, positive values (Bourdieu 2001). Various institutions, not just natural or social ones who enjoy prominence in the literature, work in tandem to discursively form hegemonic arrangements of eroticised bodies, in this case. Consequently, institutions produce the effect of concentrating privilege into a small set of bodies that are constructed as 'desirable' but are not necessarily so – either as a matter of fact or logical entailment. This chapter considers how such 'dominant ideological streams' (Lull 2015: 34) might be (re)produced in lifeworld contexts and activities through which people move every day. The literature review is presented in the first part of the chapter.

The second part of the chapter presents the theoretical framework in which the study is anchored. The core theory used in the study is a theory of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003), with particular reference to the notion of *framing power* and *framing effects*. After outlining the fundamental elements that constitute the core theory, the discussion delves into outlining the theoretical underpinnings of different kinds of metaphorical structures subsumed under 'metaphor theory', with a specific focus on structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, ontological metaphors, and prototypes. Examples are used to explain each of these theoretical notions. The presentation of the theoretical framework concludes with a discussion of metaphors as they function in performative frames. Without pre-empting the theoretical framework layout, Way (2013: 103) explains a *frame* as being a block of knowledge, embedded in an 'interconnected retrieval network' that is activated by an appropriate context which helps people to organise and interpret experiential information and apply it to, or make predictions in, new situations. The notion of

frames is critical in elucidating semiotic readings of discourses on the body and the erotic and their (re)presentations thereof, especially in light of the fact that these areas of scholarly endeavour remain nascent as of writing this thesis.

2.2 Literature Review

The literature review follows a ‘thematic analysis’ – that is, the various themes are divided into groups that display similar aspectual lenses that could affect readings of selected data sets. Themes encircling eroticised performance that emerged from the literature do not depart much from the macro-motives designated by Visagie (1996, 2006) but their semantic formations or technical uses of terminology do. For the sake of clarity and consolidation of where the patterns of ideology formation seem to solidify at a grounding level across disciplinary foundations, I will present the themes in sub-sections as: Eroticised body imaginaries and popular culture studies; Scientific foundations: The ‘natural’ body doing sex; The formation of public erotic cultures and the institution of global mass media; Social and political disruptions in moments of sexual liberation; Scripting and performativity as constructionist alternatives to essentialism; Inter-textuality and possibilities for multiplicity and ambiguity; and Aspectual shifts in popular culture and the body. Each of these themes is discussed in detail in the sub-sections (2.2.1 to 2.2.7) that follow.

2.2.1 Eroticised body imaginaries and popular culture studies

Bodies have always been present and prominent in cultural (re)presentation and (re)production (Wegenstein 2010). However, the study of eroticised bodies and the relationalities that form between them, has had what Janus and Janus (1993: 9) refer to as a more ‘checkered past’ in academia – weaving in and out of biomedical,

behavioural, social, political, historical, and cultural studies. Cultural studies, particularly, has developed a rich critical milieu in which to explore theoretical and conceptual matters of the body in a rigorous way. As a consequence, bodies are now occupying a more explicit, less taken-for-granted presence in mainstream academic studies but it should be recognised that this trend is recent (Cregan 2012; Davis 1995; DeMello 2014; Fahs 2011). In effect, body studies may involve fundamental connections to various aspects of the human condition and be as wide-ranging as: age, race, ethnicity, colonialisation, alterity, religion, (re)production, sport, technology, violence, work, childhood, differentiated abilities, beliefs, behaviours, appearance, (re)presentation, communication, aesthetics, the state, regulation, discipline, ethics, morality, law, tradition, transgression, transformation, transcendence, health, class, appearance, adornment, fashion, consumption, commercialisation, queer, pleasure, cyber issues, death, difference, affect, social or political effects, historical embeddedness, medicine, psychology, science, biology, identity, objectification, performativity, performance, subjectivity, relationality, sexuality, sex, gender, and desire (Cregan 2012; DeMello 2014; Turner 2012). From Cregan's (2012) introductory overview of the field of body-centred studies and society, and the recent expansion of critical variability, as well as trans-, cross- and interdisciplinary work in academia, the possibilities for such analyses have opened up significantly in recent times, perhaps due to the ability of these analyses to challenge institutions yet not be absorbed within them (Mirzoeff 1998; Storey 2015).

Studies on eroticised bodies in popular culture and mass markets are somewhat in the minority as they are not unanimously conceived of as appropriate material for serious academia and, at times, even referenced as an 'antidiscipline' (Casey 2008;

cf. Fahs 2011; Lennon 2014). While the presence of mediated (especially eroticised and sexualised) bodies seems to be everywhere, Fedorak (2009: xii), like many of the theorists cited in this chapter, remarks that popular culture studies have frequently been known to struggle against dismissals in academia as 'frivolous and shallow'. In spite of popular culture enjoying powerful and widespread influence, it seems that academic departments remain hesitant to include popular culture or matters of 'everyday life' (Storey 2014: 1) in curricula as a 'relevant field of study' (Fedorak 2009: xi–xii). Historically, it has been mostly biomedical and behavioural studies that have taken up the body as a serious object for study, with Ellis and Freud, for example, becoming 'openly influential' in their time (Weeks 1989: 142). The body, especially at the level of the popular in its gendered, raced, classed, aged, sized, and abled imaginaries, received comparatively little academic attention during early establishments of sexology studies.

According to Brown (2008: 14), the academy's 'aversion to the material body' as well as the 'fictive separation of mental and physical production' has rendered scholarship exploring matters of the body 'almost invisible'. Lennon (2014) remarks that many critical feminists address this problem as a failing of the academy. The academic world is moving away from such ideological constrictions as the influence of public (erotic) cultures continues to grow and spread in a modernising world with 'ever more explicit circulations of sexuality' (Richardson 2010: 9) becoming more and more commonplace. The lines between morally acceptable and unacceptable conduct continue to blur as contacts with diversity increase globally. Migration, urbanisation, and diverse societies are on the increase, and globalising cultures form, having particular influence on youth consumership (Fedorak 2009; Giddens

1990; Tomlinson 1991). Within such mobility, local popular culture often gives way to mass-produced images and product, the dissemination of which is provided by mass media and the internet or vast network societies and their ever-dispersing consumption patterns (Castells 2011; Fedorak 2009). I would argue that this results in some 'hybridity' and 'resistance' (Brooks 2014; Burke 2009; Darling-Wolf 2015) but it mostly results in plain import and homogenisation which, in turn, has (culturally) imperialising effects on a mounting scale (cf. Fedorak 2009; Orbach 2009; Said 1994; Tomlinson 1991). The accessibility and consumption of such media is on the increase.¹⁶ So-called 'alternative' (non-mainstream) product draws attention periodically and may sell well but is often appropriated quickly and is used to (economically) re-stabilise the corporate giants they may seek to undermine and overthrow (Storey 2014).

Modes of embodiment and mediation have multiple effects on the human condition, and, as a researcher, one is expected to be adaptive and responsive not only to one's field but also to one's environment, which has become exceedingly body conscious (Machotka and Spiegel 1982; Mirzoeff 1995; Richardson 2010; Storey 2014). The (re)presented body contained in, and generated by, popular culture imaging is highly influential (and influenced) in terms of driving social discourse. The demand for, and consumption of, such media content is on the rise, and industries must augment variety and accessibility to keep up.¹⁷ Furthermore, traditional analyses originating from art history and aesthetics, which make sharp distinctions between (re)presentation and expression (Machotka and Spiegel 1982), have also

¹⁶ See commentary on popular culture and globalisation issues on the SUNY Levin Institute website (The Levin Institute 2017) for interesting commentary on this phenomenon.

¹⁷ See SUNY Levin Institute website (The Levin Institute 2017) for continually updated, interesting analyses.

allowed a binary distinction between popular content and high art which is quite adamantly disputed in current writing on popular culture (Ormsbee 2008). Since the 'culture wars', the distinction has become rather obsolete as 'a fabricated scale of hierarchies' (Batchelor 2012: 114) between cultures and products becomes less distinct in contemporary global markets. Williams (2002) argues against those partitions in an analysis that successfully disrupts the artificial connections between class distinctions and quality in cultural production. Additionally, as Artaud (cited in Jones 1998: 1) argued in 1938, the 'radicalization of cultural expression' would most dramatically take place in the last century through a direct interaction of subjects rather than the distinct separating and ranking of actors and spectators with which the world had been familiar previously. Performed engagements and participatory cultures between everyday subjects and objects have arguably crumbled the proscenium arch of the stage (and separation of the screen) which, traditionally, sharply demarcated performer from spectator. As Storey (2015: 136) argues:

The norms and standards that are used to criticize and ridicule [people] are the same norms and standards that can be used to discipline us ...
The fact that we are on the other side of the screen does not mean that we are safe from the demand to conform, or safely outside of the panoptic machine.

Mass media, in general, and social media, in particular, now have a means to both politicise and publicise social and private life, leaving non-discursive, abstract, and descriptive approaches to analysis somewhat wanting (Machotka and Spiegel 1982). Whether analyses of erotic performance are rich in description or historical placing, there is an already assumed, albeit hidden, presence of the political or power aspect and, as Barthes (1998), Hall (1997), and Storey (2014) suggest: one should

challenge the taken-for-granted obviousness of things and rigorously probe that which 'goes without saying'. In her summarisation of the argument from 'abstraction of embodiment', Cregan (2006: 5–6) designates differences in society, culture, and environment to be constitutors of embodiment and distinguishes an intensification of rationalisation (body as individualised and divisible) and commodification (body as property) as key to these shifts. None of these macro-motives, or various forms of them, should be unfamiliar to readers of the body in popular culture.

Significant research developments in the area of performativity and eroticisation, specifically, are as recent as the late-twentieth century (Buffington et al. 2014; Parker and Aggleton 2007; Stearns 2009). However, as far back as 1967, Gagnon and Simon (1967) remark that sexual expression has the dubious distinction, more than any other aspect of the human condition, of being proscribed, regulated, and sanctioned in all of its manifestations. Social apprehension, along with censorship in research, may be partly responsible for the obscuring of research that investigates the performance and performativity of eroticisation. It would stand to reason that academic studies on such phenomena are likely to run into similar difficulties but those seem to be diminishing of late. Consequently, it no longer seems strange in academic studies to problematise bodies in popular culture discourses relating to, for example, a 'politics of the everyday' (Browne 2002; Fiske 1989; Shotter 1993), the 'politics of the popular' (Grossberg 1997), a 'politics of respectability' (Lee 2010; Lewis-Thornton 2012; White 2010), a 'politics of transgression' (Jenks 2003; Richardson 2010; Sargisson 2000), and a 'politics of signification' (Hall 1997, 2005; Laclau 2011; Storey 2006, 2009, 2010). All of these approaches continue to receive interesting critical attention in ongoing debates in both academic and lay contexts

regarding mass media as convergent, communicative sites through which people gain knowledge and access meaning about their world and themselves (Casey 2008). This everydayness and everywhere-ness is tremendously, yet deceptively, powerful and normalising, precisely because ubiquity tends to obscure impact. Since many socially and culturally grounded discussions on erotic (re)presentation stress their objection to the overemphasis of nature-based theories, this macro-motive needs further attention.

2.2.2 Scientific foundations: The 'natural' body doing sex

One may acknowledge that notions of sex, sexuality, or sexual practice have a particularly physical distinction, having to do with sexual arousal, sensation, response, and function, so this may be an obvious place to begin an interrogation on the erotic. The discussion in this study refers to sex as a matter of sexual activity, practice, or expression, not the male/female prototypes or 'biological categorization based primarily on reproductive function ... anatomical, endocrinal and chromosomal features' (Eckert and McConnel-Ginet 2013: 2). Additionally, it would be prudent to keep in mind that many individuals in the contemporary era do not fit into sex/gender prototypes/categorisations. Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) and those who support his views remain cognisant that sexualities are constantly being (re)produced (cf. Sullivan 2003). Fausto-Sterling (2000: 30), for example, rejects all kinds of sexed and gendered dualisms and makes an excellent case (in an instructive study on intersexuality) for a 'sexual continuum'. This would necessitate a rethinking of long received assumptions about sex, sexuality, sexual practice, and socio-political organisations of these that are currently pleading for theoretical and analytical

adjustments containing much needed measures of ‘multiplicity and ambiguity’ (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 114).

The erotic may include sex, sexual expression, or sexual practice but also involves more intricate, or discrete, notions such as sensuality, desire, attraction, and affect – as argued in Chapter One (Bataille 1986; Berlant and Edelman 2014). This extension makes way for the erotic to come out from underneath essentialist stances contained in biomedical and behavioural views that more or less proceed from an assumption that casts sex as an ‘overpowering ... driving, instinctual force’ (Weeks 1989: 2) that shapes all aspects of human activity and must be overcome by various activities akin to surveillance and policing. Seminal works on this kind of disruption appear in the form of interactionist work associated with Gagnon and Simon (2011) and Plummer (1975); the critical work in psychoanalysis taken up by feminist writers such as Friedan (1963), Millett (1970), Mitchell (1975), and Irigaray (1985); and the discursive, usually attributed to Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c).

Early sexologists were seemingly aware of sociocultural and political influences on sexual practice but did not directly address them (see Masters and Johnson 1966). Since those early texts, there has been significant growth in the number of theorists attending to these concerns with regards to the body and categories of gender, race, and class – as suggested by Dines and Humez (2015)¹⁸. However, not very many studies identify discursive markers on bodies or show how these might add or detract value or capital in terms of prototypical embodiments of erotic desire and desirability, specifically. In my study, it is argued that such embodiments are closely

18 Additional categories such as sexuality, differentiated ability, ethnicity, age, size, and so on refer as necessary throughout the study. Often, these discursive markers work in tandem to form patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

connected to more ‘hidden’, culturally embedded ideologies which have persisted over time in societies rather than ‘highlighted’ elements of sexuality or the erotic (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). In other words, viewers’ attention is very much drawn to the sexual elements of performance, especially bodies and body parts (Ogas and Gaddam 2011; Sellnow 2010). However, what is not explicitly said about gender, race, class, age, size, or ability – that is, what is hidden, obscured, or muted on those bodies – says something significant about the instrumentalisation of eroticised performance in cultural effects and discursive formations.

Masters and Johnson (1966: vii) offer an observation in the preface to *Human Sexual Response* that is relevant to this study: ‘There is no man or woman who does not face in his or her lifetime the concerns of sexual tensions.’¹⁹ Physical attributes, immediately accessible though they may be, are far from adequate in explaining the many ways in which the erotic might be embodied, mediated, presented, experienced, internalised, or discursively established. That said, how do people know what to be or what to do with bodies when they *do* sex? An easier place to start might be: where do people learn *about* sex? Presumably, parents or mentors give ‘the talk’ to their younger charges explaining the nature of romantic relationships and the basics of sexual activity; friends or peer groups contribute further with varying levels of accuracy or reasonability and perhaps some experimentation; biology classes usually cover the mechanics of reproduction; religion and other value systems often take care of providing moral or ethical prescriptions; sex education classes usually take a more diffident stance, possibly focusing on the emotional side of ‘healthy’ relationships and prevention of problems such as unwanted pregnancy

¹⁹ These gender designations of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ would be better replaced by ‘person’ or ‘human’ in contemporary studies. However, Masters and Johnson are researchers like any other – constrained by the conventions of the era in which they wrote.

and disease, as well as on regulations, rights, and responsibilities of sex (Kendall 2013). Unfortunately, as Kendall (2013: 145) claims, even such educations have been 'ripe with age, class, race, gender and sexual-identity assumptions that remain unspoken and unexamined'. Topics such as a sex-positive detailing of (adolescent) bodily pleasure (Kendall 2013), sexual and gender politics, affects of enjoyment or discomfort, self- or other-stimulation, sexual practice between differentiated genders or abilities, and the 'meaningful internal rehearsal' (Simon 1996: 41) of externally sourced sexual scripts, and so on, are rarely discussed in these contexts. Critical feminist scholars have long been concerned about the lack of conversation on sex, 'gender ideologies', and their (re)presentations (Kendall 2013: 151). Brown (2008: 168) elaborates further: 'Historically, female bodies bear great symbolic utility, for they yield completely to outside meaning.'

Armed with relatively inadequate information, and scripts that possibly have little to do with actual people and more to do with ideas which are heavily mediated, further education about what to *do* sexually would presumably come from different (probably lay) sources that convey sexual behaviour and practice – the most likely of these being print and digital media, in general, and eroticised material, specifically. A simple definition of *pornography*, as one form of eroticised material, entails 'any material (either pictures or words) that is *sexually explicit*' (West 2013: Online, emphasis in original). Add-ons suggest that pornographic material is specifically for 'sexual arousal' (Jensen 1998: 3) and often classify the material as 'harmful' in some way (to women, usually) but this depends on context – as Pilcher (1999) claims in discussing scripting femininities in popular media culture. Examples exhibiting more *acceptable* eroticised material, such as television talk shows, women's magazines,

and medical and psychology websites, might be sexually explicit but are not generally referred to as *pornographic*; rather, they are categorised as informative or even scientifically informed (Kendall 2013). Indeed, in these contexts, 'sex and sexuality are marketed as health products' (Merryman 2008: 405). Golden (cited in Masters and Johnson 1966: v) claims: 'The lure of pornography serves to emphasize the tremendous need for sexual details of the most basic type.' Prior to the digital revolution, print material and various art effects (when able to get past censorship and become available) would have formed the bulk of the record of what people might 'think and do sexually' (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948: 22). It is not typical that critical approaches to any of these resources – including earlier, influential biomedical or behavioural texts such as those of Von Krafft-Ebing (1892), Freud (1905); Ellis (1915); Kinsey et al. (1948); Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953), or Masters and Johnson (1966) – would form part of one's formative, or later, sexual education.²⁰ Perhaps as an antidote, then, to missing discourses on eroticised bodies and interactions between them, digital (re)sources have become an integral part of learning how to perform human erotic relationality in modern society and are frequently, even routinely, used in a self-instructional or prescriptive manner, heavily influencing how people think about and *do* sex from a young age (Gagnon in Gagnon and Simon 1967; Janus and Janus 1993; Parker 2014). As De Certeau (1984: 30) argues, such stylisations are similar to 'ways of operating' and 'instructions for use' which render them neither neutral nor natural; they 'multiply with the extension of acculturation phenomena' and 'often designate stereotyped procedures accepted and reproduced by a group'. Darling-Wolf (2015: 22), however, argues that local/national/global abilities to normalise and normalise in 'privileged

20 Discussion in more informal settings between persons and groups involving the tensions, feelings, and politics of pleasure are recognised and they are important, but more formal settings such as academia and public politics can perhaps be seen as exercising undue caution (Fahs 2011).

cultural spaces' are constantly reconstituting themselves against one another in the wake of internationalising and globalising cultures.

To be fair, when early empirical or scientifically-oriented studies on the complexities of sexual behaviour and sexual response were undertaken, they were initially undertaken within an explicitly biomedical framework and medical-situational context, the result of which is presumably useful data on sexual and reproductive health. However, even these earlier texts show the effects of social ideologies and moral panics, albeit that they lurked mainly in the background. My study will not address pornography studies and their histories, as that is a vast and complex field of study, often connected to the rich field of sexual ethics and politics. I am critically assessing erotic body performance in mainstream visual entertainment and media, which is often critiqued by writers in those fields as having little to do with actual sexual practice and people's sexual livelihood (cf. Fahs 2011). Pioneering researchers such as Masters and Johnson (1966: vii) acknowledged this glaring difficulty with a question:

Why then must science and scientists continue to be governed by fear
– fear of public opinion, fear of social consequence, fear of political
pressure, and, above all, fear of bigotry and prejudice – as much within
as without the professional world?

In acknowledging various forms of cultural, social, and political tensions, which are often assumed to lie beyond the concerns of science, biology, and psychiatry in terms of essence, theory, and practice, Masters and Johnson (1966: 9) also acknowledge that these issues significantly affected their research in human sexual

response because they have a major impact on the subjects themselves: 'Cultural attitudes and residual sexual taboos always have inhibited statistically ideal population sampling. This study proves no exception to the general rule.'

Although my study is not directly focused on the biomedical or behavioural aspects of actual research subjects as they would be studied in the field of sexology, it must be clearly stated that many themes mentioned by noted pioneers in those fields have given impetus to the lines of inquiry and analysis here. The importance of such studies, and the successes of the sciences in general, cannot be discounted. These studies formed the basis for establishing sexuality and sexual practice as a legitimate object of study and, no doubt, paved the way for a more 'multidimensional' understanding of sexual lives and practice even though this has been somewhat stilted in its development (Parker and Aggleton 2007: 2). Parker and Aggleton (*ibid*) also highlight the importance of these earlier contributions but comment on the problematic legacy of what they term the 'biomedical gaze' (or way of seeing), stating that, 'research on sexual behaviour has almost never been driven by a theory of human sexuality or sexual desire'. Gender-, sexuality-, sexology-, psychology-, and psychiatry-centred studies often address (eroticised) body matters. However, more commonly, these investigations are presumed to inhabit environments which exist outside of culture such as the sciences of human physiology and/or human behaviour. Such studies may possibly speak to cultural meaning but are expressly scientific in terms of their scholarly orientation.

Both biomedical and behavioural studies on 'body image' are built on a rich history of scholarly work and certainly informed my stances in this study (Fisher and Cleveland

1958; Schilder 1950; Shontz 1969). This work is important and often concerns complications arising from subjects' (negative) body image and its effects on the relation to self or other (Blood 2005; Orbach 2009; Sellnow 2010). Specific studies emphasise, for example, diagnostic and treatment concerns in sexual response and sexual health, reproductive health, eating disorders resulting in obesity, anorexia, and bulimia, body dysmorphic and other disorders, the dangers of surgical alteration, and so on, with many now focusing on younger subjects (cf. Cash and Smolak 2012; Grogan 2016; Kindes 2006; Moe 1999; Ojeda 2003). This study is not about 'body image' in that sense, although I do acknowledge that some of the discursive formations discussed here may well function in similar ways. I am concerned with what Masters and Johnson (1966: vi) acknowledge, but do not address in detail, as 'a culturally induced sexual instability', or what Gregg (1948: vii) more explicitly describes as

the current confusion of ignorance and sophistication, denial and indulgence, suppression and stimulation, punishment and exploitation, secrecy and display, it [sex] will be associated with a duplicity and indecency that lead neither to intellectual honesty nor human dignity.

In the interests of intellectual honesty or human dignity, then, researchers cannot plausibly deny the massive influence that everyday culture has on human thought, action, and interaction. Researchers, and the studies they conduct, do not escape this sociocultural influence and its political implications – either in terms of how it informs the macro- and meso-levels in public life or the micro-levels of individual lives and interactions between them. In terms of Harding's (2008: 71–73) opening statement at the beginning of the first chapter, if there were formulaic elements to

what is considered 'hot' or 'sexy' in the vernacular, one might question what ends could the means of erotic attention and desirability be serving, and might these be ends-in-themselves or are they for the purpose of gaining access to advantages in other areas of life? This kind of social transaction complex goes significantly beyond the Marxist idea of conveying dominant ideologies to the receiving masses and echoes Bourdieu's (1990: 132) conceptions of 'social capital' and 'social goods', but in a more generalised way. Conceivably, one may use any number of different types of (social or other) capital to procure different (social or other) goods in an ideology of consumption (cf. Bourdieu 1990; Dines 1998; Lyotard 1984). Indeed, for Simon and Gagnon (2007: 34), 'desire, including the desire for desire, becomes one of the most pervasive currencies for negotiating exchanges across domains'. It would seem that people's initial erotic encounters, and possibly many thereafter, are somewhat more externally determined and pre-rehearsed than they realise or care to admit. These rehearsals are probably not moulded from an in-depth physiological knowledge of people's body processes and diagnosed behaviours and, more than likely, lean towards essentialism and lack affective explanation (Lennon 2014). Fausto-Sterling (2000: 255) reminds readers that 'our debates about biology are always simultaneously moral, ethical, and political debates about social and political equality and the possibility for change. Nothing less is at stake.' I will now consider the ways in which mass-media developments have altered public erotic cultures in the twenty-first century.

2.2.3 The formation of public erotic cultures and the institution of global mass media

The growing presence of public erotic cultures, together with ‘innovations in media’, ‘huge alterations in regulation’, and ‘the global element itself’ have opened possibilities for many varied (re)presentations of eroticisation to come into public view (Stearns 2009: 139–140; cf. Weeks 2003). However, Bernstein (2002: 261) notes ‘that by mediating for their audiences the “real world”, the media create a version of reality for them. (In fact, in every respect – not only when it comes to media representations – “reality” can only be “known” through ideology).’ With cultural developments, the media still determines very much of what will be seen and what will be excluded from visibility. Improvements in birth control and (sexually transmitted) disease treatments; changing legislation or regulation; the expansion of ‘innovative’ ideas about the erotic; and more open discussion or information about ‘sexual themes, revelations and advice’ emerging in many contexts have all facilitated some freedom regarding public conversations on, and visibility of, sexual practice and expression in the contemporary era (Stearns 2009: 142).

In popular culture, the traditional enfolding of sexuality in narratives of secrecy and transgression is becoming less prominent and, indeed, less necessary in light of relaxing social attitudes towards sexual practice occurring outside of heterosexual marriages or love relationships and perhaps simply for recreational pleasure. Such narratives arguably fit better with a bygone assumption that ‘human sex behaviour was primarily a question of the emotions’ (Kinsey et al. 1948: 12). Erotic material in new visual media, especially on personal devices, has made sex-for-pleasure highly accessible, giving users new forms of consumption and sharing, and new forms of

privacy and anonymity, so there is less risk and more freedom with regards to buying, viewing, or distributing erotic content for enjoyment and, indeed, the age of participants in erotic cultures has been lowered (Merryman 2008). In effect, the digital age, or the 'network society', has altered people's conceptions of time and space (Castells 2011). Added to this, there is a move away from the family, home, and marriage as the predominant, healthy, or legitimate expression of intimacy (cf. Giddens 1992; Janus and Janus 1993; Laumann et al. 1994). Reproductive sex is just one facet of many forms of (erotic) life in the contemporary era. Stearns (2009: 133) states:

The dominant theme of sexuality in the last 60 years of world history involves an increasing commitment to sex for recreation and pleasure, with reproductive sex, though hardly disappearing, becoming a subordinate theme ... and innovative sexuality becoming a central feature of globalization itself.

The eroticised bodies on which culture is symbolically written and (re)presented are, quite literally, more exposed than ever; yet, they convey far more than an assumed-to-be-progressive or fun-oriented erotic culture, be that wittingly or unwittingly. In this way, the erotic is conspicuously foregrounded while attendant meanings are often subordinated, obscured, Othered, or even muted with different prototypes of body (re)presentation, rendering perceptions that some bodies are not suitable for conceptions of those 'kinds of pleasures' (Jolly et al. 2013: 1). Scholars have noted that a fully expressed sexuality may not necessarily be equated with one that, 'like modern, white sexuality', is 'publicly expressed or performed and depended on scantily clothed bodies, ritualized body movements and facial expressions' (Juàrez, Kerl-McClain, and Gallardo 2016: 118).

By popular culture imaging, one may allude to the myriad of (re)presentations and forms of individual or collective expression that are continually presented in everyday framings. They are often encountered, may be commonly accepted as convention, can easily elicit attention, can entertain, are frequently valued or desired, and are habitually assumed to be characteristic of a society (or sector of society) at a given time. In this context, popular culture takes on the specific connotation of commercial culture which is mass produced for mass consumption via mass media – a key site at which hegemony is established and contested (Storey 2009: 51). The media, then, becomes another ‘discursive domain’ of sexuality (Foucault 1990a, 1990b, 1990c). Popular culture is also ensconced in the nucleus of the contemporary era of internationalisation and globalisation (Altman 2001; Crothers 2012; Turow 2016). In today’s information-technology age, it appears that anyone can commercialise most anything and, with some good fortune and business savvy, can constitute a corporation-like enterprise and compete for market share using a variety of media to sell mass product and accumulate vast amounts of money (Lee and Sinitière 2009). Corporations have become extremely skilled at production, the motive of which is profit (Laclau 2011). Analysts such as Lee (2005, 2010, 2015) argue that large corporates have made consumers across the globe relatively passive receptors/consumers of advertising imaging for any number of material or social goods from food to cars to phones to sex. Popular celebrities, trends, and products seem to flood the market and rise to iconic status much quicker than scholars are able to keep up with their investigations into what these phenomena tell people about the everyday politics of contemporary life. From material culture studies, analysts may now accept that capitalist-driven media systems (partly) inform almost

every dimension of modern life (Lee 2005; Lee and Sinitière 2009; Ormsbee 2008). While the intellectual critique of hegemonies formed in popular culture milieus is on the rise, so are the sales and popularity of those industries. Successful popular culture industries generate vast amounts of fans and opponents (all of whom generate publicity and money) because they offer real or perceived access to ideas that resonate across a diversity of human needs and preferences. As Ormsbee (2008: 115) states: 'The circulation of commodities, then, functions in a dialectic of production and consumption.'

Mass media are the primary means by which each of the sample sets analysed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six are distributed. Mass media as an institution has the power to reflect societal norms and invites people to re-enact those norms. Media content, popular cultures, and the ideologies they convey have rapidly attained global status in recent history – in the earlier part of the twentieth century by means of print media, film, and music; in the latter part of the twentieth century through television; and in the twenty-first century via the 'digital revolution' whereby individuals could conceivably have 'instantaneous and global access to all forms of data and communicate with almost anyone' (Herman and McChesney 2004: 106). The social effects of this 'egalitarian and democratic communication' are yet to be grasped (ibid). In more and more people's everyday lives, media images are pervasive, difficult to avoid, and mostly taken for granted. Dyer (2002) notes that even those who do not actively seek out such material, who might not choose to read print media, watch film and television, or occupy urban environments (which are full of such image displays), engage with these images. In the digital age, one may view one's personal material of choice in shared spaces such as social media. All

anyone needs is a cellular phone or similar device (and connectivity) to open, click, search, view, share, comment, like, and so on. Those media practices are, in turn, used to track and determine users' interests and determine possible buying potential. While the media spreads ideas and influences values, it is also of pivotal importance in economic exchange.

The public erotic landscape has expanded dramatically since the 1990s due to significant deregulations of the media industry, particularly in the United States of America (Herman and McChesney 2004: 50). Media innovations and concurrent changes in social attitudes to eroticism met the free-market demand, and online communities are not constrained by conventional space and regulation. Now, the 'digital revolution' has been decisively consolidated, and mass media has become the primary medium through which popular culture, particularly American popular culture, and the multiple messages contained therein, is distributed across the globe, facilitating the 'emergence of some kind of global culture' (Herman and McChesney 2004: 8). New media such as websites, email, blogs, apps, social media sites, and instant messaging have emerged as popular communication sites and are constantly subject to a variety of influences from the ideas and agendas of producers and consumers alike, all of which/whom are embedded in a variety of social and cultural complexes (Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Grossberg et al. 2006; Turow 2016). More notably, since the 1990s, many people in modern societies are in possession of at least one internet-connected device and, due to syncing and convergence possibilities, are able to connect to, consume, and produce content at any time of the day in more and more places, which has brought about a significant shift from spectator culture to 'participatory culture' (Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Dines and

Humez 2015; Jenkins 2006). At more or less the same time, there was a concomitant rise of third-wave feminism which asserted a 'sex-positive' attitude, reclaiming 'two aspects of society long ignored by earlier feminists: sexuality and popular culture' (Kearney 2012: 7).²¹ Russo (1998: 11) confirms: 'Feminists have long looked to pornography along with mass culture, fairy tales, music, literature and other cultural forms for help with the answers to these and other questions.' However, in spite of many political advances towards freedom and equality, personal efforts to define and practice sexuality on one's own terms remain inhibited by prevailing social and cultural constraints. The image material selected will demonstrate how incongruities in erotic body cultures, as portrayed in selected forms of popular culture, continue to reflect broader societal tensions and political contradictions. This study focuses not only on women²², as many feminists studies justifiably do, but on erotic relationality between various subjects. In relationality, identities are never constructed in isolation. Writers such as Fahs have recognised this tension in her work on the erotic lives of women, stating that:

Again and again, symptoms appear to suggest that, regardless of age, race, class, body or cohort, women experience their sexuality as not fully a product of the personal and sexual agency they purportedly gained following the women's movement. Women find themselves in new quandaries, puzzled by the difficulties of feeling simultaneously free and trapped. (Fahs 2011: 5)

21 Third-wave feminism decisively rejects forms of sex negativity that were present in the second wave, especially with regards to the regulation of pornography and anti-pornography campaigns.

22 I will use the word 'women' throughout this text but would like to state that the use of the term here includes all people identifying as women, including trans women and people of differentiated sex or gender. Alternative terms are used by many feminist writers to disrupt male normativity – for example, womxn, womyn, womban, wommon (singular)/wimmin (plural), womyn-born womyn are found in the literature. This acknowledgement is in the interests of gender inclusivity.

This contradiction is perhaps more plainly demonstrable in two non-academic texts from former hip-hop dancer and actress turned best-selling author, Karrine Steffans. The first text, entitled *Confessions of a Video Vixen* (2005), is an autobiographical account of her experiences exposing the degrading and exploitative treatment of women in the commercial hip-hop industry.²³ Steffans (2005) describes how she endured a difficult childhood, left home at an early age, and used sex for material gain and status. She recounts tales of substance abuse and harmful relationships and, finally, how she emerged a better person from all of it. Predictably, her story is cast as a 'cautionary tale' to help 'young, impressionable women who lack guidance and self-confidence' and who might find themselves in similar, precarious circumstances (Steffans 2005: 208). In contrast, the second text, by the same author, is *The Vixen Manual: How to Find, Seduce and Keep the Man You Want* (2009). In this book, Steffans gives tips on how to be a vixen and get your man. Amazon's website comments the following about the book:

With chapters like 'Never let him see you sweat', 'Flirting', 'Encouraging his manhood', and 'Give him what he wants', this hot and sexy manual is a must have for every woman's bookshelf. (Amazon n.d.: Online)

Similar contradictions appear in Jameson and Strauss (2004), who celebrate making love like a porn star, yet regale tales of horrific abuses that Jameson witnessed in that industry. Fahs (2011: 271) addresses these 'adaptive functions' as 'dual performances' which simultaneously and directly contradict women's interests.

23 Steffans has written and edited similar popular, well-selling texts – for example, *The Vixen Diaries* (Steffans 2007); *Drink, Fuck, Sleep* (Steffans and Wissel 2012); and *Vindicated: Confessions of a Video Vixen, Ten Years Later* (Steffans 2015).

Popular culture usually implies what has been called ‘common culture’, ‘public culture’, ‘mass (mediated) culture’, and, in much contemporary literature, ‘commercial culture’, usually associated with films, television, radio, advertising, gaming, the internet, and so on (White and Walker 2008: 69). In this study, the focus will be specifically on imaging in such cultures. Production and consumption of popular culture imaging does not occur in raw form. It is not mere (re)presentation but a ‘social fact’, a ‘practice’ (Hall 1997: 34). It is interactive communication of an idea, a way of life, by someone to someone else (Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Habermas 1987). In this instance, one is reminded of Barthes’ (1998: 70) assertion that ‘the image is the message’ – in the sense that the moving image is intentional, not natural and not accidental (cf. Evans and Hall 1999; Newbold 2002). Because the images in popular culture are created, like (high or elite) art and artefacts are created, they should bear similar elements of aesthetic value, sociocultural value, and political value, and so, the images may be analysed from multiple theoretical perspectives. In this study, the focus is explicitly on some semiotic aspects of imaging, which has to do with those elements of meaning that are seen as reiterable, repeatable, or citational. However, I remain sceptical of such structuring elements’ connection to the Real while acknowledging their presence and power – a stance that may resonate with various ‘post’ approaches in which ‘signs are stripped from their phenomenological depth’ – that is, they are not seen as representative of ‘phenomena in the “real” world’ (Shifman and Lamish 2014: 101). Many postmodern and cultural theorists have done away with the notion that there is any significant or essential difference between elite or high art/culture and low or popular art/culture and that either requires different sets of competencies to read (Bennett and Woollacott 1987; Berger 2008; Bourdieu 1984, 1996). Given the digital revolution

and internationalising or globalising trends in the contemporary era, the distinction seems to have lost theoretical weight, especially in terms of sharply delineating and separating ‘types’ or ‘groups’ of producers, consumers, products, and media as almost anyone wanting access to popular culture image material can procure it with relative ease.²⁴ The same can be applied to commentary thereon; it is not only academic texts that offer useful perspectives from which to view the material critically.

Erotic performativities reveal much about the strength of, and resistance to, globalising homologies. Mediated bodies, often cast as appropriations of an ideal, remain powerful sites of aesthetic hegemony (and resistance thereto) ensuring the (re)production of a variety of norms with regards to gender, race, and class – explored as forms of aesthetic privileging and regulating in this study.²⁵ Such norms are not easily undone since they are strongly connected to powerful technologies of social ‘positioning’ and individual ‘status’ which function as products of institutions (Bordo 1993: 187). Added to this, both social and cultural theorists have noted the various roles institutions play in fostering control over nature, drives, and desires – often through instructional mechanisms of (self) restraint – not for people’s protection and wellbeing but, rather, for the management of people in order to service or maintain social and cultural norms (cf. Barnes in Bellamy 1993; Butler in Kearney 2012; Connell 2005; Elias 1978; Kinsey et al. 1948; Ren 2014; Siedler 2010; Surkis 2006). Popular culture has long been a source for imitating socialisation and

24 I would concur and make no argument for revisiting the distinction as it serves no useful purpose in the analyses to follow. In transnational contexts, which all the imaging in question has successfully navigated, the term ‘popular’ would extend beyond such boundaries.

25 I make no assumption that these are the only areas to consider; they are simply how I have delineated the content of Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Other areas could include (dis)ability, aesthetics, beauty, size, age, enhancement, modification, and so on. Intersections across analyses are referenced where applicable.

relationality scripts, often filling gaps left by missing discourses explicitly addressing erotic or performative frames, and the erotic capital and hierarchy they reinforce, in so-called 'polite conversation' (Wajda 2008b: 336). Many sexualised (re)presentations now appear in a variety of fragmentary, figurative images that are more open, accessible, and acceptable than ever.²⁶ Sociologically grounded theories provide useful alternative ways in which to think about eroticisation.

2.2.4 Social and political disruptions in moments of sexual liberation

The 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s is, by now, a well-known, transformational element of (American) life, culture, and politics which was supposedly rooted in a revolt against 'capitalist expansionism' as well as the constraints of traditional marriage/family, industrialised moralism, strict religious conventions, and state regulation (Visagie 1994: 104).²⁷ This anti-establishment movement or counter-culture thrust arguably embodies the emancipation aspect of the personhood macro-motive which fosters a kind of 'truth-telling' and new freedom of practice in matters of sexuality and sexual histories (Allyn 2016: x). The newfound 'candor' that Allyn (2016: 5) discusses, as well as the 'permissive moment' that Weeks (1989: 322) mentions, had profound effects on public erotic culture, 'especially the sudden acceptance of nudity in film and on stage' (ibid). This changed the politics of public eroticisation as theatres showcasing hard-core adult erotic films²⁸ opened, along with sex clubs.²⁹ Furthermore, many 'free love' practices such

26 The visual/pictorial/iconic turn transformed the visual dramatically during the later twentieth century due to technological developments that enabled mass production of images and allowed for quick, easy distribution thereof.

27 Some refer to the first sexual revolution as being during the 'Roaring Twenties'. Sexual revolutions and their influences expanded well beyond the United States of America.

28 In the form of varying pornographic content, often referred to as 'blue movies' (Heidenry 1997: 50, 315).

29 Such as what became the 'Playboy' franchise (Allyn 2016; Heidenry 1997).

as extra-marital sex, communal sex, swinging, swapping, open marriages, and so on that emerged, along with the open embrace of drug use, are attached to counter-establishment stereotyping, usually serving to further entrench a political shift towards personal or individual freedom and choice which has become commonplace in contemporary demands for body liberation. Much has been written on sexual revolutions and their irrevocable permutations in late modern life which go infinitely beyond its Western origins (Buffington et al. 2014; Grant 1993; Stearns 2009; Weeks 1989). Predictably, with such 'projects of liberation' (Visagie 1994: 104) comes fierce debate, significant backlash, and, of course, moral panicking and policing, especially of the youth. Rubin (1984: 151) similarly notes the fallacy of 'misplaced scale' where 'sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance' in a sex-negative culture that connects some acts and imaging to 'extreme and punitive stigma'. Gunter (2002: 2) further notes the very familiar 'anxiety among parents' and society when 'graphic and gratuitous' sexual imaging is accessible to the youth. Mediated bodies and expanded accessibility to them in public erotic cultures had a significant impact on social norms of public taste, youth culture, family values, marriage, female pleasure, shifting boundaries of sexual offences and deviation, and sexual consumerism and commercialisation, with attendant conversations on (mental and physical) health risks playing to various public agendas (Gunter 2002).

While the problematics between religious attitudes and sexual freedom have been well documented (Posner 1992; Strossen 2000; Sullivan 2003), a more interesting challenge to pornography, specifically, emerged in the 'Sex Wars' of the late 1970s which was rooted in objections to received sex and gender roles and is most often associated in the United States of America with radical feminist writers Dworkin

(1976, 1981, 1988) and MacKinnon (2005). These two authors are well-recognised anti-pornography activists who inspired much debate and discussion on the matter, often associating rape with pornography (McKinnon 2005: 30) and connecting pornography to exploitation of, and harm towards, women (MacKinnon 2005: 306). Dines (2010) is associated with more current research on pornography and its connections to social inequality.³⁰ Critical feminist scholars have persistently addressed the ongoing functioning of patriarchy in popular culture, and one cannot ignore the contributions second-wave critics have made as well as the backlash that arises from third- and fourth-wave feminist critiques. Some of the online inter-feminist and intra-feminist battles one reads are quite aggressive. Gill (2007: 1) states that 'feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated', which is to be expected in an era of global connections and conflicts where more diverse representation is growing in visual markets (CISAC 2015), and some of these developments are not well received.

As a response to hegemonic praxes of patriarchy in societies, feminists have been forced to confront matters of the body as it has habitually been laid open to the gaze of the consuming male. Fiske asserts: 'in our patriarchal society, women have been trained more than men to invest in their social identity, self-esteem and sexuality in the appearance of their bodies' (1989: 10). The 'body as text' (Brown 2008: 14; cf. Bordo 1993, 2000; Jones and Stephenson 2005) can be read as follows: the male body has power that the female does not and the female body is compliant, resulting in a cultural norm that the female body is not completely her own in the same way

30 The graphic descriptions of pornographic (specifically, 'gonzo porn') web content offered by Dines (2010) are difficult to read – not because of 'female fragility' (Strossen 2000: xxxiv), but because of their aggressive and violent content. They do not induce the responses of freedom of sexual expression or women's rights alluded to in Strossen's (2000) defence of pornography.

that the male's is his. Where this normalising force often becomes more noticeable, is in imaging that subverts the norms – minimal though such imaging may be. These images force the viewer to look at (re)presentations in a different way, especially in terms of sexual relationality. Although, when one deals with relationality, keeping in mind the fluctuating representative schema of all bodies, not just those of women, seems appropriate.

Feminist theorists have brought significant awareness to such issues in debates on the objectification of women and human sexuality, and they do form some of the most important critiques of popular culture in recent times (Jolly et al. 2013; Jones 2010; Lennon 2014). Critics of anti-pornography writings have questioned the relationship between (re)presentation and social reality, variously basing their arguments in sex positivity – demanding the freedom to enhance pleasure and affirm satisfaction and sexual difference – that is often embedded in free speech and rights-based discourse (Kipnis 2006; Nagle 1997; Strossen 2000). Contested argumentation on the uses of pornography ranges from supporting liberty and denying censorship to acknowledging sexual expression and viewing pornography as instructional and helpful in demystifying matters of sexual practice (Fahs 2011). Some pro-sex advocates argue that pornography, even when disparaging in its treatment of women, is a small part of much broader sexism or that having unfettered access to it acts as a release valve which helps to lower crime and similar dysfunctions and may enhance sexual pleasure for some (Kipnis 2006; Strossen 2000). Since Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975), important concerns about the facilitation and sustenance of what became known as 'rape culture' or 'rape-supportive culture' have been raised, especially among feminist scholars, and are

very prominent in the current #MeToo era. With extensive research and documentation of endemic social problems such as violence against women and girls, gender-based violence, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence that cut across gender, race, and class categorisations, few would deny the seriousness of these matters. However, I would concur with the contributors in Jolly et al. (2013) that this concentration on harm, together with negative prescriptions emerging from moral, religious, and social traditions, has overshadowed the politics of pleasure and engagement in sexuality in positive ways (Sharma 2013). Taking a contrary view, supporters of sex-positive attitudes and practices are primarily against repression and restrictive moral standards (Rubin 1984). Such feminist critics do not see sex positivity as begetting actual harm to women and girls' bodies or lives but as supporting female sexual agency and pleasure (Jolly et al. 2013). These tensions converge at the site of public representation. The debates in eroticised (re)presentation rage on across this divide, and there seems to be no solution forthcoming (Hines 2014). Notwithstanding ongoing interference against sexuality affirmation, the deregulation, convergence, and corporatisation of mass-media industries from the 80s and 90s (Herman and McChesney 2004) make expansion of sex industries, in whatever form, inevitable in the future (Buffington et al. 2014; Dines 2010; Stearns 2015). As an aside, Heidenry (1997: 214) remarks on an important development in this regard:

In fact, hard-core quickly provided a model for global manufacture and distribution later emulated by multi-national companies in the eighties and nineties, with the photo shoots for a hard-core magazine taken in one country, designed in another, printed in a third, and distributed in multilingual editions.

In this context, one would find it difficult to deny the globalising tendencies of mass imaging in current realities of 'mainstreaming of pornography' (Strossen 2000: xxv) or any other element of popular culture, for that matter. Content adjustment seems impossible against economic gain, so raising the awareness of consumers might be a more useful exercise.

2.2.5 Scripting and performativity as constructionist alternatives to essentialism

Since Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c), more scholars are breaking away from views that posit sexuality as a biological drive or natural fact which must disentangle itself from social constraints. Of course, once one considers the erotic against social structures of race, gender, and class uncoupled from assumptions about biological, essential, or given characteristics that (re)produce a certain kind of being, the complexities associated with socio-political aspects of the erotic emerge rather prominently. When theorising about the body in any form, it becomes clear that the idea of bodies being universalisable, decontextualised entities must give way, at least in large part, to more contingent understandings of sexual (re)presentation and their relation to actual sexual practice. Acknowledging the possibility of people's sexual lives being 'molded by factors outside of the body, and then internalised into the physical being itself' (DeMello 2014: 5) is a noted concern in my study.

Brown (2008: 60) makes an interesting observation about bodies in motion:

Thinking about bodies in motion, and about bodies in relation to each other helps us to unthink this rigid version of the individual body as

produced discursively. Discursive claims compete, conflict, and are never complete.

Rubin (1984: 149) claims: 'The new scholarship on sexual behaviour has given sex a history and created a constructivist alternative to sexual essentialism.' Currently, there seem to be two predominant ways of regarding the performative body with regards to studies that concern bodies, in general. One arises from biology and employs a more mechanistic approach, while the other emerges from the social sciences, often likening the body to a 'canvas' upon which multiple societal and cultural meanings may be inscribed and communicated (Connell 2005; Valdivia 1995). In the public eroticisation process, the latter has taken an interesting turn, receiving more attention in recent social and cultural research. Theories of sexual scripting and performativity are examples and prove fruitful in this regard.

Sexual script theory, as developed by Simon and Gagnon (2007), termed these symbolic bits 'intrapsychic scripts' (Simon and Gagnon 2007; Gagnon and Simon 1967, 1973, 2011). Accordingly, what occupies this landscape alters how people might view or value sexuality and erotic practice for themselves and others, with traditional identifications and categorisations continually evolving, declassifying, and becoming more fluid or ambiguous. According to Simon and Gagnon (2007: 31), sexual scripting implies a 'rejection of the idea that the sexual represents a very special, if not unique, quality of motivation'. Accordingly, this perspective would entail that the sexual is not treated as an essentially substantial facet of human behaviour. The sexual is viewed as *becoming* remarkable

either when it is defined as such by collective life – sociogenic significance; or when individual experiences or development assign it a special significance – ontogenic significance. The significance of some aspect of behaviour does not determine the frequency with which that behaviour occurs, but only the amount and intensity of attention paid to it. (Simon and Gagnon 2007: 31)

The content of popular culture imaging would suggest both – that is, that a significant amount and intensity of attention is paid to the erotic and that this is enforced by the frequency with which it populates product and material. This kind of non-specificity that Simon and Gagnon (2007) discuss may provide room for mechanisms that allow for images as ‘fragmentary symbolic materials’ to be (re)produced on the micro-level of an eroticised body. At the same time, images symbolically (re)produce cultural and political tensions contained in the macro-level of the social body (Kohn 1992: 113; Bordo 1993: 186; Giblett 2008: 159; Harrison and Hood-Williams 2002: 59).³¹

Simon and Gagnon’s (2007: 31) account of ‘sexual scripts’ functions as ‘a metaphor for conceptualising the production of behaviour within social life’. If behaviour is to occur, Simon and Gagnon (ibid) claim that something like scripting must occur, and they distinguish three forms or levels of scripts: cultural scripts, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts. ‘Cultural scripts’ (ibid) are the scenarios in which instructional directives are driven through collective forms of life such as institutional arrangements, generally informing people what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. These scripts are usually too abstract to predict actual behaviour and, when inconsistency occurs between conceptual scenarios and

31 Many theorists derive similar views to those cited here from the British social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, who worked on human culture and symbolism.

material circumstances, interpersonal scripts are invoked to resolve the impasse. As Simon and Gagnon (2007: 31) argue: 'Interpersonal scripting is the mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations.' The third level, 'intrapsychic scripts' (ibid: 32), becomes of particular interest in this study, as intrapsychic scripts prompt the 'internal rehearsals' which become significant when alternative outcomes are a possibility. Simon and Gagnon (ibid: 32) elaborate as follows:

This intrapsychic scripting creates fantasy in a rich sense of that word: the symbolic reorganisation of reality in ways to more fully realise the actor's many-layered and sometimes multivoiced wishes. Intrapsychic scripting becomes a historical necessity, as a private world of wishes and desires that are experienced as originating in the deepest recesses of the self must be bound to social life: individual desires are linked to social meanings. Desire is not reducible to an appetite, a drive, an instinct; it does not create the self, rather it is part of the process of the creation of the self.

Gagnon (1990: 7), particularly, defines intrapsychic scripts as follows:

[A] more complex set of layered meanings which has much more to do with non-narrative tradition in literary representation and imagery. What is arousing may not be the plan to have sex, but fragmentary symbolic materials taken from mass media or from local experience.

Gagnon and Simon (2011) challenge oversimplified theories of sexuality that pit naturalised, essential, sexual impulses against constraints of social repression. The authors (2011: 198) state that

human sexuality – however closely it appears to be tied to biological processes – is subject to sociocultural molding to a degree surpassed by few other forms of human behaviour. While the number of forms that sexual activity may take on a physical level is restricted by the fixed limitations of human body ... the objects that may be defined as desirable, the social locations within which such activity may take place, and the specific activities to be defined as pleasurable vary over social life to a profound degree – indeed, to a degree that dwarfs the uniformities of biology. And, of course, on the level of imagination – that is, on the level of the purely symbolic – the restrictions or limitations of biology prove to be at best temporary barriers.

Simon and Gagnon's (2007) scepticism of the biomedical view of the erotic (and acknowledgement of sociocultural moulding in the form of scripting) does not dismiss the biomedical approach entirely; it rejects its absolutism. As Gagnon (1990: 231) iterates with regards to their contribution to sexualities studies: 'The novelty of what we did then was to lay a sociological claim to an aspect of social life that seemed determined by biology or psychology.' Plummer (2011: xii) notes their insistence that there is no independent sexuality; it is always embedded in 'economic, religious, political, familial and social' aspects and 'grounded in wider material and cultural forces'. As Cregan's (2012), DeMello's (2014), and Turner's (2012) work on more recent, diverse concentrations in body studies (see list on page 43) shows, it would appear to be sound judgement that Gagnon and Simon (2011) were on the right track with their early differentiations of influential aspects in sexualities. Gagnon and Simon (2011), in their joint as well as individual writings, were strongly influenced by Burke (1966), whose notion of *dramatism* held that people are 'symbol-using animals' who 'have bodies that learn language' (Plummer 2011: xiii). Burke's view of the pentad utilises the following forms to describe and explain a situation: the *act*

determines what took place; the *scene* describes context; the *agent* describes who performed the act; the *agency* explains how it was executed; and *purpose* elucidates why it was done. Goffman (1974) also influenced Gagnon and Simon (2011) heavily with his idea of *dramaturgical analysis* and references to the 'theatre of everyday life' in which selves form against others in interaction. From these influences, sexual scripting developed as dramatic, performed, improvised, and created in terms of symbolic interpretation and presentation (Plummer 2011). With that said, Plummer (ibid: xiii) then makes the following claim:

Now, language, symbol, and metaphor become constitutive of human sexualities. Human beings are seen to have devised a myriad of metaphors to talk about, think about, write about and perform sexualities.

This study builds on Plummer's statement, focusing more specifically on the metaphors implored in performing the erotic. Linked to this idea, the performativity at issue in this study focuses on 'doing' gender, as exemplified in the work of Butler (1990, 1993) or West and Zimmerman (1987), who envisage gender as a 'routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment' (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126). These theories focus on gender and sex (not sexual practice per se); however, major tenets of Butler's theory, in particular, have been a significant influence in this study, especially considering theoretical and methodological developments in the twenty-first century that have occurred after the 'cultural turn' of the late-twentieth century (Wajda 2008a: 139). These developments placed the notion of culture and its accompanying concepts of meaning, cognition, affect, and symbolism at the centre of societies and much academic inquiry (Rose 1999: 229). One of the most valuable

consequences of cultural studies that reject absolute essentialism in favour of constructivist approaches is the undoing of received labelling or categorisation which not only disrupts accepted, fixed notions of the self and its experiences but, also, questions the social, cultural, and political implications thereof. These disruptions seem particularly evident when considering the matter of sexual identities and their (re)presentations, which are by no means received with 'universal acceptance' (Gunter 2002: 2). I concur with Lovaas and Jenkins (2007: 3), who state that sexual identities and subjectivities may be 'more productively regarded ... as "necessary fictions" we live by, made up of sets of ritualised behaviours we are compelled to repeat, that is, a kind of performativity that inscribes who we are on our bodies'. Added to this, one may consider erotic (re)presentation as performative but, within that consideration, erotic performativities exhibit significant differences when they are gendered, raced, or classed. As the normative framing within which they are performed homogenises and crystallises, alternatives become more and more difficult to accommodate, especially within the mainstream space. It is in this space that the ideological complex is formed in a structuring, governing manner against constructivist or resistant creations, and this (re)producing or (re)presenting process is relatively difficult to break.

In effect, Butler (1990, 1993) conflates the traditional discrepancy between the naturally constituted concept of sex and the socially constituted concept of gender in order to argue that there is no sexed body that is not always already gendered – that is, the body is always already culturally inscribed and socially existent. Butler (1990: 25) states:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender onto its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.

Gender, based on this understanding, is a *process* that does not correspond to either the scientific understanding of process as a natural development or the subject-centred understanding of process as an individually advanced life project. It is a kind of intersubjective, discursively constructed process that is repeated in a particular way, within particular boundaries. For Butler (1990, 1993), performativity strongly contests the actuality or efficacy of agential and subjective independence, as Salih (2007: 56) further explains:

‘The script’, if you like, is always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of ‘costumes’ from which to make a constrained choice of gender style.

Following Butler’s (1990, 1993) tenets on performativity, what can be uniformly defined or formulated as sexy, or ‘hot’, ‘wantable’, ‘lovable’ and ‘fuckable’ (to use Harding’s [2008: 71–73] referents in the opening citation of Chapter One) cannot reside in interior space, or in an invisible core, or in some transcendent subject. These characteristics would occur in the material ‘practice’ or ‘performance’ or ‘doing’ of everyday acts and gestures expressed as repeated stylisations on the surfaces of bodies. Performativities constitute the identities in question. The themes in the body of literature reviewed thus far reveal that mediated bodies in popular

culture content become imprinted, albeit inadvertently, into people's subjectivities, because they are able to pervade the ordinariness of everyday existence via a process that Bourdieu (2001: vii) called 'eternalizing the arbitrary' through institutions. Ontologically speaking, performativities simply become part of people's worldview. In order to become a critical consumer, one would at least assume some healthy circumspection with regards to ever-arising trends so that one's consciousness is not made feeble by dominant discourses.

Performing art, while classed as an art – a creative, innovative mode of expression – is as much subject to the governmentality and hierarchy that Butler and Salih discuss within the art and entertainment industries themselves. Brown (2008: 13) rightly states:

Dance as a topical field has been theoretically underdeveloped until fairly recently because vernacular dance has been dismissed as subordinated to music, or at best an accompaniment to it, although many musicians have acknowledged dance as co-constitutive. As well as being elided from studies of music, dance gets lost from those analyses of cultural production that are based in semiotic models. Studies that prioritize aural vocabularies or literature miss what is important about 'bodies in motion'.

In my study, I have taken note of Brown's (2008) objections and have related her critique to my selections of moving body images, specifically. Contemporary critical work on the body, especially in popular cultural studies, has focused more on (re)presentations of the body than on its actions, movements, and affects as text themselves. In popular culture, there is a noticeable emphasis on sex and sexuality

when it comes to body imaging, (re)presentation, and text. For whatever reasons, the erotic in popular culture and visual culture is somewhat overlooked in traditional philosophical studies, which tend to focus strongly on the moral and political areas of sex (Soble and Power 2008), if they focus on sex at all. And yet, sexualisation and eroticisation is plainly visible in imaging which pervades the modern (Western) human experience. Both theoretical and empirical studies along these lines are less abundant in academia but are coming more to the fore with the establishment and development of popular culture studies now being formally studied in universities and able to overcome the dismissals of Adorno's followers, Marxist scholars, and conservatives alike (Mirzoeff 1998: 10). There is a lot of content analysis work in media studies. Aubrey and Frisby (2011: 5) state that some of this work has 'supported the idea that permissive sexual attitudes, exploitation, objectification, and degradation are prominent in music videos', citing useful sources such as: Gow (1996); Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, and Davis (1993); and more recent content analyses of rap music in Conrad, Dixon, and Zhang (2009); Baxter et al. (1985); King, Laake, and Bernard (2006); and Seidman (1999). Content analyses of ballroom and Latin dance are appreciably more difficult to find; however, there are cultural analyses (Marion 2008) and ethnographic/feminist studies such as by Davis (2015). Analyses on romance novels of the *Harlequin* and the *Mills and Boon* type are numerous (Frantz and Selinger 2012; Markert 2016; Wirtén 1998), with erotic film analyses significantly less than those of pornography (Dines 2010; Dines, Jensen, and Russo 1998; Strossen 2000). Many of these studies focus more on female bodies and less on relationality. bell hooks (2004: xii) raises similar concerns with feminisms: 'Nowadays, I am amazed that women who advocate feminist politics have had so little to say about men and masculinity.' Seeing that images of femininity

are so often positioned against masculinity in media analyses or are read as presented for a masculine gaze, it would seem useful to consider these prototypes relationally.

People's absorption of relational stereotypes and acceptance of the dominance of central case prototypes would form the basis of what *Nielsen* refers to as 'consumer neuroscience' and 'neuromarketing insights' (*Nielsen* 2019). Damasio (1994, 2004, 2010)³², a noted neuroscientist whose work proposes integrating modern neurobiology with the traditional fabric of the social sciences, takes cognisance of the science of emotions, social cognition, and decision making, remarking that

we *think* we are in control, but we often are not ... Our biological makeup inclines us to consume what we should not, but so do the cultural traditions that have drawn on that biological makeup and been shaped by it. (Damasio 2010: 281)

Popular culture industries are notorious for exploiting and capitalising on this phenomenon. Damasio (ibid) credibly argues against the idea of a cultural conspiracy – claiming this is all just part of the complexity of human existence. It would seem prudent, then, to work with a framework that provides critical analysts with a structure general enough to make explicit various aspects of performativities and their attendant ideologies. Media make claims about how the world is and how people should be within it, so they are 'powerful ideological institutions' (Grossberg et al. 2006: 182). I further concur with Weeks (1989: 328), who notes: 'Widespread anxieties, aroused by the nature of social changes ... were being *displaced* onto the

32 Lakoff, whose metaphor theory is utilised in my study, frequently refers to Damasio's work.

terrain of sexuality' [emphasis added]. This view supports my earlier claim that what is being highlighted on eroticised bodies is not necessarily, or only, about sex and the erotic. A number of interstices arise, then, and space must be made for these in order to tease out what Laclau (2011: 8) calls 'misleading necessities'.

2.2.6 Inter-textuality and possibilities for multiplicity and ambiguity

Following some core ideas of the Frankfurt School that had a 'great deal of impact on critical and non-empirical sociology and on the long-term impact of mass culture' (Dyer 1982: 81), this study would concur that, while popular culture offers an array of securities, data, and fulfilments, there exists therein, at the same time, a certain level of 'alienation' or failures of mental and physical connection between people and their lifeworlds. Herbert Marcuse (2013: 98), in particular, argued that the conventions of mass communication (as seen in mass media) make use of a particularly concretising meaning that 'constantly imposes images' and can be described as a 'functionalized, abridged and unified' grammar which, in effect, shuts down conceptual thinking or 'impedes thinking', generally. Marcuse (2013: 95) further argues that this kind of grammar relates material to consumers with a kind of immediacy, eliminating distance and operating in a more informal, personalised way, stating: 'Predication becomes prescription; the whole communication has a hypnotic character. At the same time it is tinged with a false familiarity – the result of constant repetition and, of skilfully managed popular directness.'

It would be useful to demonstrate the possibility of a grammar or language of (re)presentation in a particularly dialogical manner, not so much as a set of rules for use, but as a set of resources for meaning making. This approach would entail

conscious engagement with 'disruptive alternatives' (Marcuse 2013: 104) and the many aspects and analogies through which erotic relationality emerges and appears in an ever-present popular culture. This form of ritualisation, or hypnotic 'decision, dictum, command' (Marcuse 2013: 105), would benefit from ongoing critical treatment as, apart from being socially dependent, the erotic is particularly personalised in terms of subjective and relational import and identification, I would argue. The idea, then, would be to foster a *critical consumer attitude* in order to avoid the kind of 'social or political apathy' (Dyer 1982: 81) that the Frankfurt School warned commodity culture would engender.

The point of analysing mediated bodies in popular culture imaging is not simply to initiate discussions or direct focus as to how prescient media producers might have produced a consumer base for its product by releasing delivery vehicles for prominent characterisations, credos, and mind-sets to the masses. In their extensive analysis of the James Bond novels/films, Bennett and Woollacott's (1987) work on inter-textuality has been particularly instructional in this regard. They claim that the very condition for these characters' existence is 'inter-textual', which refers to 'the social organisation of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading' and the figuration that 'furnishes the operative principle of textual classification' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 44–45).³³ This view becomes of critical, theoretical, and methodological importance when contemplating the co-constitutive manners in which popular culture imaging, together with their consumers, might aid in shaping and biasing readers by 'privileging some of their aspects at the expense of others' and what these might be (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 43). This thesis is

³³ This is not to be confused with Kristeva's work on 'intertextuality' (unhyphenated) (see Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 44).

informed by the decision to select correlated sets or *genres* of eroticised imaging and the performativities they absorb as viable sites for analysis.³⁴ In order to determine the relationality, contracts, and exchanges between (re)presented bodies and, accepting that each sub-grouping of the textual set (of eroticised bodies) occupies a favoured position in relation to 'Others', the premise is that each performative frame is already 'culturally activated' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 49–53) in different ways depending on the part it plays in the distribution and (re)production of the figurations. Accordingly, I would go along with Bennett and Woollacott's rejection of either text or reader as exclusive meaning producer. Images, like texts, do not wholly have meaning within themselves or essential properties and, conversely, readers do not wholly determine meaning; meaning is co-produced at the moment of reading or, I would argue, at the moment of recall (cf. Berger 2008). From this view, 'their reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those texts themselves as entities separate from [social and cultural] relations' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987: 64), which renders none superior in terms of offering true or normative ways of being. Bennet and Woollacott (1987: 249) also assert:

Much previous debate on the question of reading has deadlocked on the opposition between the view of the text as dictating its readings and the view that readers are able to mobilise cultural resources which enable them to read against the grain of the text or to negotiate its meanings in particular ways. Our purpose has been to displace the terms of this dispute by suggesting that neither approach takes sufficient account of the cultural and ideological forces which organise

34 I acknowledge that contemporary mainstream television programming may have undergone some transformation. The moving image repetition analysed in this study may not correspond to the content of those programmes. For example, I am thinking of Shonda Rhimes' productions, whose casts and characters are far more inclusive and representative than a lot of older mainstream television programming.

and reorganise the network of inter-textual relations within which texts are inserted as texts-to-be-read in certain ways by reading subjects organised to read in certain ways. The relations between texts and readers, we have suggested, are always profoundly mediated by the discursive and inter-textual determinations which, operating on both, structure the domain of their encounter so as to produce, always in specific and variable forms, texts and readers as the mutual supports of one another.

Seeing that the erotic involves far more than sexual subjects and how they see themselves, the focus would have to include relationality which involves various actors, both inside and outside of the erotic relation itself. Not only are these affecting the normative formation of relationalities between desiring subjects and objects of desire, but there seems to be a burgeoning popular culture exchange which provides consumers with imaging that is externally formed but impinges on the internalised constitution of desirability in various forms. Many theorists are concerned about the gap between media beauty standards and the bodies of actual people (Darling-Wolf 2015; Davis 1995; Harding 2008; Orbach 2009; Wolf 1990). These ever-changing options to stylise and transform the body for the purpose of attaining attractiveness or erotic appeal densely populate everyday and media culture in what Harris-Moore (2016: 27) calls a 'perfection market'. With the rise and growing accessibility of cosmetic and beauty markets, cosmetic procedures (invasive and non-invasive), and a huge market for accessories, enhancement, and augmentation aids, one may transform (parts of) one's body to be more 'desirable' or 'attractive' in a relatively short time and at a relatively low cost. It is important to note contemporary research that acknowledges obsessions with, and addictions to, body perfection/modification and cosmetic surgeries (Davis 1995; Harris-Moore 2016;

Levy 2015). However, I am referring to these 'rituals of modification' (Wegenstein 2010: 20) in the performance context – not as a special consequence of body dysmorphia or related disorders, but as what could be termed 'normal variations in appearance' (Davis 1995: 69; McCabe 1988: 97) or perhaps seeing the body as an 'object for designing' (Schechner 2015: 145–146). In the context of performative elements, these are determined to have the appearance of naturalness (Butler 1990), which connects to notions of everydayness (Lovaas and Jenkins 2007) and unconsciousness (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). The stylisation of body parts has influence on performance, performativity, as well as viewing and reading of the erotic but needs relatively detailed interpretations of different framings to make explicit larger complexes of ideology and hegemony. In reading the 'body as text' (Brown 2008: 14) or 'body as medium' (Kelly 1996: 102), one may make shifts in understanding and analysis which allow that the pictorial body is a 'discursive image' (De Certeau 1984: 145). Bodies as parts, bodies as wholes, or bodies in framings are then not simply viewed – they are mimicked and (re)produced to a large extent, conceptually connected to what might be perceived as *natural*, *normal*, *normative*, and *ideal* in the regulating sense that Butler's (1990, 1993) work addresses. Popular screens are prime conduits for such conflicting beliefs and characterisations which seem to be easily 'internalised' and 'idealised' by consumers (hooks 1996; Stice 1994, 2002; Stice and Shaw 1994). Concerning more subtle operations of power, both Dworkin (1976) and Blood (2005) have asserted that a sure way to control people is to control what they think about themselves or how they should be. I would suggest that popular culture is a good site for studying such tacit coercions.

2.2.7 Aspectual shifts in popular culture and the body

Williams (2002: 92) wrote: 'Culture is ordinary. That is where we must start.' While culture is produced and consumed everywhere, all the time, it is neither natural nor neutral and possesses an element of intentionality.³⁵ Popular culture forms a significant part of culture, and most culture theorists would agree that, while culture makes meaning, it is also made by meaning. In terms of the erotic, this feedback loop vacillates between notions of the commodification of the erotic and the eroticisation of commodity, which are not easy to tell apart. Stratton (2001) writes in the same way about fetishisation and commodification. Williams (2002) also recognises this bilateral relationship between culture and production. Many cultural studies incorporate the idea that what is (re)produced, (re)presented, and (re)consumed in popular media significantly influences human thought and action (Storey 2006, 2009, 2010, 2014). One might be assured that this is the presupposition behind the entire advertising industry – that advertising can direct consuming behaviours. Many studies also acknowledge that what humans want or need influences to some extent that which is produced – it is not simply mindless entertainment or visual consumption but an ongoing interaction based on shifting power relations (Batchelor 2012; Berger 2008; Fedorak 2009; Fiske 1989; Habermas 2001b). However, there are discrepancies in approaches as to how a power differential might favour either producers or consumers. In other words, how much influence is top-down (emphasising *structure*), how much is bottom-up (emphasising *agency*), and how might changing media affect popular culture (Storey 2014: 12)?

Scholars in the vein of the Frankfurt School, political economy, and structuralism

35 To clarify: 'Intentional' (which has different technical connotations depending on how it is being used), in this sense, implies that culture is created and can be about objects, properties, or states of affairs; it is also directed at a consuming object who is recognised as a volitional consumer. The volitional consumer, who chooses to consume product, is not assumed to be all-knowing with regards to metaphors or framing.

prefer the top-down approach which assumes culture industries to be drivers that produce for profit, manipulate ideologies, influence subject positions, and impose meanings. On the other hand, scholars like Fiske (1989) favour a more bottom-up approach – usually in the form of culturalism or ‘from below’ traditions that emphasise cultural expression and an authentic ‘voice of the people’ (Storey 2014: 12). Critical work broaches the issue of the growing potential of popular culture icons and artefacts to render more and more passive consumers and citizens in contemporary societies where media technology has made a difference (Lee 2005; White and Walker 2008). Storey (2006: x) views the contention as follows: ‘Representation constructs the reality it appears only to describe.’ It would seem fitting, then, that any study involving popular culture would have to make mention of, at least, consumption, (re)production, (re)presentation, meaning, and the possibility of complex (not necessarily equal or unequal but interactive and changing) power relations in, or between, any of these.

During the last few decades in social research, there has been a lens shift towards culture as a means of understanding social life. This refocusing has often been referred to as the ‘cultural turn’ (Wajda 2008a: 139) – examining culture, as Hall (1997: 2) suggested, not as ‘a set of things’ but processes and practices of meaning exchange. Rose (2001: 6) contends that these meanings may be ‘explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious’, felt as ‘truth or fantasy, science or common sense’ or conveyed via ‘everyday speech, elaborate rhetoric’ or art, television, film, music, blogs, social media, and so on. Mass media are powerful and extremely effective in conveying culture and setting social norms; yet, at the same time, they might act as sites of cultural diversification, allowing for some considerable interpretation,

contestation, negotiation, and resistance against those norms, albeit in smaller numbers.

Popular culture content in various modes is, as Mulvey (2012: 61) claims, often explicitly 'focused on the human form'. Interesting critical inquiries on the human form have been instructive in this study. My elucidation of the primary theoretical framework derived from cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1990, 2002, 2004, 2008; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff and Turner 1989) is influenced by elements of performativity (Butler 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2004, 2005; Butler and Salih 2004), which highlight the unconscious element of repeatability; and scripting (Gagnon 1977, 1990; Gagnon and Simon 1967, 1973, 2011; Simon 1996; Simon and Gagnon 2007), which acts as symbols for an activity. The framework is applied to selected genres in Chapters Four, Five and Six in order to investigate the framing effects of mediated bodies. Art history scholars have been particularly instructive in the area of image interpretation and methodological shifts that may be required for video-type imaging (Bal and Bryson 1991; Berger 2008; Dyer 2002; Jones 1998; Mirzoeff 1995; Rees and Borzello 1986; Rose 2001). Feminist studies that address tensions in feminine and female (re)presentation and its connection to oppression, repression, and inequality are particularly useful when considering female/feminine bodies and how they relate to male/masculine bodies on screen (cf. Bordo 1993, 2000; Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Frieden 1963; Jones 2010). LGBTQ+ studies highlight the need for differentiated representation in imaging of sexual minorities and their place in conversations about prescribed eroticism (Abelove et al. 2012; Ahmed 2006; Calafell 2015; Sullivan 2003). Sexuality studies that question the erotic and social orderings of (re)presentations of desire are central to understanding the relation

between imaging and societal acceptability (Altman 2001; Bataille 1986; Berlant and Edelman 2014; Fahs 2011; Fahs, Dudy, and Stage 2013; Faludi 1992; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Lorde 2007a, 2007b; Rubin 1984). While many influences inform my study, it could perhaps be located in performance culture studies (Borelli 2014; Desmond 2003; Grossberg 1997) as I look particularly at *performed* material. Related frameworks that influenced my thinking on the body as interwoven within varying ideological matrices are often located in other research neighbourhoods – for example, social theory (Bourdieu 1990, 1996, 2001; Blaikie and Priest 2017; Cregan 2006, 2012; Giddens 1992), philosophy (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Soble and Power 2008), and cultural studies that focus on the body (DeMello 2014; Orbach 2009; Tate 2009, 2015). ‘Sex and violence’ are consistently noted in the literature as two predominant framings of the human form and are often discussed in conjunction with one another (Crothers 2012; Dines et al. 1998; Eysenck and Nias 1978; Gunter 2002; Lakoff 1990).

The traditionally demarcated geographies of what might constitute performance and performativity, high art and popular product, private and public, are blurring the borders between their former exclusivities. Jones (1998: 1) appropriately references Artaud in her introduction to *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, who argued as early as 1938 that, ‘the radicalisation of cultural expression’ would most vividly take place through a direct interaction of subjects rather than the distinct separating and ranking of actors and spectators with which the world had been familiar previously. This performed engagement between subjects has found a site in mass media (primarily the internet) with a previously unmatched speed and size of distribution and accessibility. Mass media has provided popular culture with a means to both

politicise and publicise social and private life so that it has profound effects on subjects, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity; but, as expressed by Mitchell (1995), this phenomenon is not viewed as either 'good' or 'evil'. In this regard, exploring the crossover between performance and performativity of eroticised bodies in popular culture, particularly as they appear in mainstream media, poses interesting questions about the nature of normative relationality and the bodies that relate as well as the responsibility of consumers to make themselves aware of what they are consuming by accessing forms of 'visual literacy' that are not purely verbal (Mitchell 1995: 6).

Critical feminist theorists have also been concerned about freedom, knowledge (re)production, and social inequality, albeit from a strongly critical standpoint of questioning the role of patriarchy in processes of *oppression* (not repression). As Kelly (2010: 87) astutely notes: 'Discourses of the body and of sexuality do not necessarily coincide' and often these have been overridden by the political and material struggles of women. Feminist theorists developed important approaches for navigating the problematic of difference in sex, gender, and desire by providing 'accounts of the relationship between subjectivity, corporeality and identity' (Lennon 2014: Online).³⁶ Lennon (2014) argues that modern feminist theories on the body commanded more prominence, with De Beauvoir (1953) acknowledged as a particularly influential text, and recognises not only the materiality of the female body, but the point of view it provided. De Beauvoir's (1953) text provides a significant platform from which contemporary feminist theorists on embodiment and identity have developed (cf. Gatens 1991).

36 Critical feminist theory is an important lens through which to analyse body (re)presentation. Many criticisms against the hyper-sexualisation of particularly female representation in popular culture have been caricatured as succumbing to 'respectability politics' (cf. Lee 2010). However, given the social problematic of female gender and sexual inequality, which is well documented, I find this characterisation disingenuous at times – as do Dines et al. (1998) and Lomax (2011).

The work of authors such as Irigaray (1985) had particular importance in developing the concept of sexual difference and forms an important background to thinking through the data sets examined in this study. Whitford (1991) notes how Irigaray (1985)³⁷ is concerned with bodies as they feature in the interconnected symbolic and imaginary of Western culture. By 'symbolic' is meant a public system of meaning and language that allows for people to become subjects; 'it assigns our social personality and tells us what is proper for male and female bodies' (Lennon 2014: Online). Acknowledging Irigaray's (1985) contributions and many like her who request the reconstruction of this symbolic in order that what might be created is not only a positive, viable female body as subject, but also a relationality between sexual subjects that truly assumes freedom of form and equality in existential and political potentiality. I accept that, in the absence of such reconstruction, fostering an attitude of critical consumership is paramount for consumers to really make relatively free choices and exercise agency. What would advocating for a politics of the body that *anticipates* difference³⁸ mean in this age of digital distribution and uncontrollable repeatability or citationality? In terms of identity and subjectivity formations, I would agree that over-representation of prototypical imaging must and should be disrupted by the presence of numerous 'Others', but potential consumers must be encouraged to deconstruct hegemonic signifiers as well. Mass media imaging is continually rewritten by social conventions and ideologies that blur personal and political distinctions in an effort to maintain a hegemonic status quo. However, it seems unlikely that, with rapid technological advances combined with a young, uncritical

37 Heavily influenced by Lacan.

38 Irigaray argues for an affirmation of difference as an alternative basis for equality (see Deutscher 2002).

consumer base, such conventions and ideologies would be adequately unsettled on the level of popular visual product.

Popular cultural product across the globe originates largely in the United States of America³⁹. Terms such as 'Americanness', 'Americanisation', and 'Americanism' have entered debate on popular culture frequently, and many have commented on the large amount of global cultural product that is American⁴⁰ in origin but distributed all over the world (Crothers 2012; Fedorak 2009; Fiske 1989; Stephen 2006). These theorists have shown American dominance in various world markets as a result of globalising processes, particularly referencing films and television – especially reality television. I have also selected material distributed on popular screens as my objects of study. However, Bachmann-Medick (2016: 5) maintains that the spread of American cultural (re)presentations has fostered a sense of 'entangled histories' with multiple realities, not just Western 'cultural processes and forms of expression'. With such dominance in the global market, though, it seems reasonable to argue that the rest of the world (outside the United States of America) is becoming increasingly absorbent of predominant kinds of bodies that are exported/imported (Sheumaker and Wajda 2008)⁴¹. Overriding ways of being translate well across borders, and associated norms are assimilated quickly into differentiated cultural contexts (Hall

³⁹ For detailed quantitative evidence of this claim, see Crothers (2012), who shows American screen content dominating markets in various countries on several different continents, with local programming content occupying less than half of the markets and screen time and very little local content being exhibited, even when the local language is not English. Crothers (2012) shows how Hollywood films now sell more tickets globally than within their home base. More screen hours are being occupied by American content in Europe than by European programming. These figures have been steadily increasing over the last few decades.

⁴⁰ This term, then, implies a kind of United States of America imperialism. There are other 'Americas' but, because of a United States of America dominance, 'American' is often taken in the literature to refer to the United States of America only.

⁴¹ For example, in 2006, 64% of all films shown in the European Union were American in origin. In contrast, only 3% of the films shown in the USA originated in Europe (cf. Crothers 2012; Stephen 2006).

1997: 3). This kind of cultural transport happens with the speed and facility of a click, a like, a share – previously unknown in the current era. That internationalising and globalising drive can be associated with a postmodern turn particularly allied with American culture, which Lee (2005: 4) contextualises as follows:

This cultural turn is characterised by our nation's growing obsession with image and style, along with a far-reaching pattern of changes in architecture, aesthetics, science, literature, law, entertainment and other important social and cultural spheres. Our postmodern age is also distinguished by a relentless penetration of advertising, television and other media into people's lives as well as the fragmented identities and new values that derive from continuous exposure to a saturation of ideas and images.

The 'cultural turn' that Lee (2005) and Evans and Hall (1999) refer to was coined during the rise of postmodernism and the development of cultural studies and ordinary language philosophy (Rorty 1992). It is also referred to in the literature in conjunction with, and sometimes arising from, the 'linguistic turn', a term coined by Bergman in the 1950s (Bachman-Medick 2016: 21; Evans 1999: 12; Wajda 2008c: 421). These turns led to a specific change in focus from determining the nature of a pre-semiotic rationality/reality and elucidating abstractions from structure towards 'social practices and relations as signifying practices – practices which organise and constitute social actions and involve/assume meaning-making persons' (Evans 1999: 12). Sociocultural inequalities led to what are similarly referred to as post-colonial and anti-colonial turns (Sheumaker and Wajda 2008).

From the paradigm shifts through the literature emphasising macro-motives of nature, knowledge, power, and personhood of eroticised bodies, the inevitable question, then, is how one might think through the aesthetic construction of desirability (in terms of image content); what ideas are being (re)presented or consumed, and what does this imaging say about the broader, globally forming cultures in which discourse is produced?

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This second part of the chapter presents an introduction to the theoretical framework in which the thesis is anchored – namely, metaphor theory. After the ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell 1995), from the work of Lakoff and Johnson (2003), metaphor can now be understood not only as a matter of language in text but as a matter of cognition which considerably expands its translatable import in matters of visual representation. Various kinds of metaphor such as structural metaphors, orientation metaphors, ontological metaphors, and prototypes are also presented in detail and are discussed as possible ways in which to interpret semiotic content. The theoretical framework serves to make explicit the building blocks or discursive markers of performative frames. The function of various metaphorical formations is framing, which, in this case, takes place within a performance context.

2.3.1 Introduction

In this study, the primary focus is on *eroticised* (and sexualised) *body imaging* – specifically, what these bodies are saying, how they are saying it, and what kinds of (re)productive performative frames might be inescapably, yet somewhat imperceptibly, informing matters of human sexual subjectivity, identity, or

relationality. In all instances, performing bodies carry meaning – not necessarily in themselves, but beyond themselves, with an added element of the spectacular and the aesthetic that allows for strong influencing of social function and norms which may deviate substantially from the intent, identity, or materiality of the producer or performer once mediated and delivered to an actively interpreting, affected, or engaged reader. One does not have much control over how imaging may be co-opted once released into the public domain. In many instances, the body images themselves appear to be the product (such as in television programming, films, photography, internet videos, and streaming); or, they might be used to sell associated, tangible products or services (as contained in advertisements or endorsements); or, they might be used to promote actual people, their careers, or their personal brands (such as celebrities, sports stars, and reality stars). It may not be material, or brand, or product *per se*, although these form large parts of popular culture markets (such as clothing and food) and could be mentioned in the study alongside the main subject of inquiry. Whatever the aim of the imaging in question, I am particularly concentrating attention on performing bodies as having significant influence on the construction of erotic frames as they are feed into everyday simulations and interactions. From this perspective, one may analyse popular culture imaging as ‘the politics of the everyday’, but this ‘everydayness’ is strongly mediated, stylised, and created for particular ends which may, in many ways, be used to interrogate the notion of what might be assumed to be ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ – often blithely attached to what ‘the people’ produce, express, want, need, or consume.

Although there are many critical lenses that could be applied to erotic imaging, a theory of *performative frames* is suggested as a means to illustrate and analyse the

intrapsychic scripts represented in certain modes of contemporary popular culture and explore possible mechanisms of how meanings are preserved, encoded, and disseminated in these image schemas. Most of these images will focus on the bodies represented, and some may be *non-narrative*. Non-narrative means an image, or set of images, of a performed (erotic) act that does not present an extended narrative or tell a story in either written or spoken text, although it communicates a myriad of details to viewers – many of which are presented and inferred unconsciously. *Performative* means a repeated and repeatable action that becomes so familiar in human perception, cognition, behaviour, and interaction that it eventually appears natural, becoming normative in the sense that it produces difficulty in imagining alternatives or holding alternatives in similar esteem to the norm. *Frames* are coherent conceptual structures based on recurring experiences that constrain and enable how people understand and reproduce relational behaviour – both in terms of how they think they should perform and what behaviour to expect from others in relevantly similar contexts (Sellnow 2010: 154).

While social theorists have demarcated differences between positivist, interpretive, and critical theoretical frameworks, I would agree that these categories do not function as mutually exclusive from one another and some studies, while not explicitly utilising all three approaches, may require some triangulation of some elements contained in either to proceed (Blaikie and Priest 2017; Carr and Kemmis 2004; Merriam 2009; Neuman 2014). From the outset of this section, readers may infer that this study is not suited to positivistic or scientific orientations and makes no claim to an independent reality but would accept the probability of multiple existent realities which include multiple (re)presentations and multiple readings thereof – of

which one is offered here. Merriam (2009: 8) describes a positivist research orientation as one which 'assumes that reality exists "out there" and it is observable, stable and measurable. Knowledge gained through the study of this reality has been labelled "scientific" and included the establishment of "laws"'. Interpretive research would follow the typology of that offered by Cresswell (2007: 20–21) as encompassing 'subjective meanings' of experiences which are 'multiple and varied' and complex; they are 'often negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives.'

A critical research perspective would go beyond both positivist and interpretive approaches and, as Visagie (1994) explicitly claims, attempts to detect and make explicit the regulatory structures, mechanisms, patterns, paradigms, factors, and frameworks that marshal people, without absolving them from responsibility, to think, interact, and conduct themselves in particular ways. There is a whole 'spectrum of assertions' as to the exact nature of this kind of power, how to define it, and how it operates in society. Critical theories can be broadly designated as an explanatory, practical, and normative approach that involves freeing 'human beings from the circumstances that enslave them' (Horkheimer 1982: 244). For all the freedoms that an open flow of information has brought to humanity, people are still subject to the predominant imaging and discourse made available by those media. In order to become aware of these dominations and subordinations, I suggest a critical semiotic approach of combining philosophical and social inquiry in terms of 'explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity' (Bohman 2019:

Online) to be useful in describing what constitutes meaning in mass media as well as the imbalances created therein and the possible effects thereof. While much of popular culture imaging is seemingly innocuous, I contend that it is not so. These images are indelibly a part of everyday existence, yet they are instrumental in establishing norms for identities and subjectivities – both in terms of knowledge and practice. It seems that some ‘consciousness raising’, to appropriate a feminist term, would be prudent for consumers as well as producers without resorting to irrational conspiracy theory reasoning or sectarian moralisation. As with any form of social influence, practical steps to transformation must be explored if actors are to assume agency in writing their own life histories, groups are to retain any practical commitment to freedom or social justice applications, and both are to foster some actualisation of consensual forms of life. Broadly speaking, I work with a strong commitment to the view that social differentiation and pluralisation are not unfortunate consequences of modernity that need to be managed but may be seen as positive and beneficial features of societies and, consequently, of public life in the current era. With a clear scepticism of homogeneity in mind, it would seem that a fruitful approach to examining framing in terms of image content and its link to social meaning, is to triangulate several components of *metaphors and prototypes* (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 5) and links to *ideology*, which is described by Kelly (1996: 2) as ‘a nonunitary complex of social practices and systems of representation which have political consequences’. For these purposes, I am interested in what eroticised bodies, or even body parts, might be saying by way of their *doing*. The theoretical framework gives a comprehensive means by which to access plausible interpretations of performative imaging; therefore, the focus moves from the linguistic aspect to the action, movement, and relating of bodies. However, in order to make

ideological connections, performative bodies are stylised in ways that analogously connect to many other aspects of the performance itself. The theoretical framework, then, is systematic in approach, recognising that specialised aspects carry 'entailment relationships' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 9) between metaphors that are expressed in patterns. Specialised aspects are assumed to be unique but they 'cohere' in sets of meaning (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 87). This uniqueness and coherence can be seen in the different data sets analysed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

2.3.2 Performative frames

Framing, in the social sciences, refers to a schema of interpretation – what is communicated, how it is communicated, and the way in which these communicative stylisations relate to stereotypes that people are exposed to via various media in order to comprehend and respond to the world (Goffman 1974). These may be understood as cognitive filters which are constrained and enabled by embodiment and sociocultural influences (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). For example, when people explain an event such as a person closing and opening an eye, an observer would react differently if the action were interpreted in a physical frame (blinking) as opposed to a social frame (winking). The blinking may be an involuntary response to an irritation or allergy and not convey much meaning, while the winking may be read as a joking or flirting gesture. People shift frames if there is some incongruity or confusion, but most frames are unconsciously applied (Geertz 1983; Goffman 1974; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Within the above context of the literature review, framing may appear in a variety of aspects – be they numerical, spatial, kinetic, physical, biotic, sensory/affective, analytical, historical, lingual, social, economic, aesthetic,

juridical, ethical, or belief driven (Visagie 2006). In the literature, not much attention has been given to the substance or building blocks of performative framing. Regarding moving image analyses, much more attention is given to 'camera (movement and shot), lighting ... arrangement of characters ... editing, sound and music' (Newbold 2002: 102).

What kinds of performative frames⁴² are being simultaneously produced and reproduced by the manner in which recurring posturing, positioning, performance, and relationality is presented to, and read by, consumers? Although the idea of knowledge structures imposing coherence on human experience can be attributed to Kant (1855), the idea of 'frames' is explained by Minsky (1975: 212) as follows:

Here is the essence of the theory: When one encounters a new situation (or makes a substantial change in one's view of the present problem) one selects from memory a structure called a *Frame*. This is a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary.

A *frame* is a data structure for representing a stereotyped situation, like being in a certain kind of living room or going to a child's birthday party. Attached to each frame are several kinds of information. Some of this information is about how to use the frame. Some is about what one can expect to happen next. Some is about what to do if these expectations are not confirmed.

Several scholars have used different terminology to denote similar structuring canons (cf. Geertz 1983; Gitlin 1980; Goffman 1974). Hall (1997: 4) similarly

⁴² Frames may be associated in different disciplines with concepts of (intrapsychic) scripts, interpretive frames, schema, prototypes, codes, or memory organisation packets.

proposes the idea of cultural and linguistic ‘codes’, while sociological theories have utilised the notion of ‘scripts’ or ‘scripting theory’ to explain behavioural structuring across variable contexts (Gagnon 1990; Lee 2010; Simon 1996; Simon and Gagnon 2007). Drawing from these perspectives, I would distinguish structured repetitions as providing a mutually defined system of frames for how the erotic is recognised and performed in (re)presentation (and, perhaps, imitated in reality, albeit in a more limited way as embodiment on the popular screen is far more openly eroticised than everyday acts). In this way, coherence may be imposed on human erotic activities by (re)producing familiar patterns or codes as desiring subjects, objects of desire, or modes of relationality between them. To clarify, what I mean by the ‘body as text’ is to allow for an interpretation that recognises a co-constitutive relationship between (re)presentation and reader similar to the view of Adolph (2009: 105–106), who explains as follows:

Reading the body as text is one of the most fundamental literacies in which we engage ... As with the material body – which is textual but also certainly exists for purposes other than interpretation – the represented body *within* a text, that which we might more easily understand as a ‘textual’ body – can be understood via the body of a reader.

In reading the ‘body as text’ within different sets of image data, one may further extend conventional understandings of body imaging towards what Habermas (2001a: 3) terms ‘symbolic forms’ which extend from ‘pictorial representation, via verbal expression, to forms of orientating knowledge, which in turn pave the way for practice’. I worked from the premise that popular culture is a highly complex topic which navigates connections between the dynamisms of wants and needs,

commerce and profit, meaning and value, public and private, knowledge and practice. According to Fiske (1989), popular culture easily vacillates between differentiated driving forces that may be distinguished as material functions (needs and profits) and sociocultural functions (meanings and values) and, as such, requires a differentiated, multi-levelled approach to the study thereof. While Lakoff (2002, 2004, 2008) has done much work on political framing, his linguistic approach to political content has relevance for my study in that frames can delineate the interpretation of images by limiting the metaphors, prototypes, and performance grammar that is used.

As stated in Chapter One, a theoretical distinction between performance and performativity is useful for this study. Performance is often framed as something new, something spectacular, and performers are generally aware of themselves as performers doing performance. The notion of performativity, in Butlerian terms, carries the connotation of the normal and the natural – a sense of the unremarkable. While Butler (1990, 1993) was addressing gender performativity, specifically, Tate (2005) has shown similar observations with regards to raced performativity, and Monroe (2014) has addressed classed performativity in an analysis of dance on popular screens.

It is important to emphasise from the outset that there is no single or correct answer to what signs and texts as discursive markers contained in an image, or sets of images, might mean, and I claim no such authority. For these purposes, descriptions were interpretive in nature with no intent and little interest in prescribing some sort of caution or wellbeing to readers regarding the ethics of 'right' or 'wrong'. In the pursuit

of some analytical precision, the theory of metaphor employed in this study offers a refined set of concepts with which to 'produce detailed accounts of the exact ways in which meanings of an image are produced through that image' (Rose 2001: 70), which is expected in semiotic analyses. These detailed accounts serve to further make explicit an 'ideological complex' which is simultaneously (re)productive and oppositional in the way that Hodge and Kress (1988: 3) elucidate as 'a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interests or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests'. I now turn my attention to how one might deconstruct the content of frames.

2.3.3 Metaphor theory

Lakoff and Johnson (2003), influenced heavily by multidisciplinary research from the established field of cognitive science, propose a theory of metaphor which has become particularly useful for semiological analyses of symbols, embodiments, and the meaning they produce. In this view, metaphor is *not* simply a specialised category of language; it is pervasive in the ordinary language, thought, and action of everyday life. One of its most powerful functions is framing. Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 5) assert that 'the concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured'. In applying the theory, there is a presumption that analysts are not using *metaphor* in the narrowly defined, aesthetic sense of a literary device for swaying meaning. This understanding shifts possibilities for interpretation beyond comparative identification in imaging towards partial identifications that highlight and hide different aspects of (complex) concepts. Arrangements of figuration that draw

attention here are neither arbitrary nor novel. Such constructs may include basic or complex metaphors and prototypes; larger constructs such as frames and categories; or alternatives such as symbols, signs, icons, metonymy, personification, synecdoche, and so on. In this chapter, I am dealing with visuals and not language per se. Therefore, I might take one step back in the theory to address the performative elements or 'repeated stylisations' contained in images, situating them within a broader category of body rhetoric not necessarily signified by lyrics or words. Because (re)presentation functions similarly to language, though, the 'doing' or 'sequence of acts' (Butler 1990: 33) may be understood as both culturally embedded and physically grounded.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) claim that people's conceptual systems are fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and these largely unconscious systems structure how people use some concepts to think of other concepts. This implies that most thoughts, actions, and language are not referential and are, for the most part, not singular concepts. Concepts create co-related systems of varying complexity with meaning grounded in, and through, people's bodies. For these purposes, I concentrate on the 'orientational' and 'ontological' metaphors which are so intriguingly constructed in the performance images selected (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 14–21). I do acknowledge that orientational and ontological metaphors form a relatively small part of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) detailed analyses, and their bodies of work extend significantly across disciplines and traditions. Orientational metaphors concern spatial orientation, perhaps naturally correlated with imaging: 'up-down, in-out, deep-shallow, central-peripheral', 'over-under'; 'forward-backward';

‘front-back’; and so on.⁴³ Visual constructions of ‘top-bottom’, ‘high-low’ may be equated with ‘up-down’, for example, and may not always need distinguishing in the performance as they might in linguistic expression since, as the analysis shows, they can be very close in meaning. These metaphors usually organise a whole system of concepts resting on physical bases (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). Seeing that, in this context, spatial orientation is key, it would be considered reasonable to make the extension to look at metaphors as visual patterns in imaging. However, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 25) acknowledge, ‘one can only do so much with orientation’. They explain further:

Just as the basic experience of human spatial orientations gives rise to orientational metaphors, so our experiences with physical objects (especially our own bodies) provide the basis for an extraordinarily wide variety of ontological metaphors, that is, ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances. (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 25)

In my thesis, this helps to further explain, as highlighted by the research question, why certain eroticised bodies are designated as the bearers of desire and others are not. The erotic as performed on popular screens can be rigidly gendered, as shown in the analysis of ballroom and Latin dance competitions; it can be rigidly raced, as performed in mainstream commercial hip-hop videos; and it can be classed, as demonstrated in the mainstreaming of pornographic fiction film. I will now further detail the explanations of Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) metaphors used in my study.

43 Note, the linguistic approach of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and various others may make finer distinctions in the actual words used in spoken or written language. These approaches may not be exactly correlative to imaging, which is more interpretative.

2.3.3.1 Structural metaphors

According to Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) theory, it would seem that these conceptualisations are based on embodied experience and will cohere with fundamental cultural values. It is important to note that Lakoff and Johnson make no claim that 'all cultural values coherent with a metaphorical system actually exist, only that those that do exist and are deeply entrenched are consistent with the metaphorical system' (ibid: 22–23). Beyond values that are accepted and shared generally in a mainstream culture, differing subcultures or personal ideals within that culture may prioritise different values. The sample imaging will show instances of both general values contained in the mainstream culture and different values demonstrated in imaging from subcultures that may seek to disrupt or redesign those received values. The theory is not designed to give a definitive set of results but is effective in yielding plausible and suggestive interpretations and explanations for why these bodies are presented in these ways. Further, I do note that the specific method that Lakoff and Johnson (2003) use is to gather a variety of everyday linguistic expressions and form general metaphors from those. Instead of linguistic expressions, I gathered a variety of images and noted repetitions across these which may be seen to be general metaphors in (re)presentation.

The study of the body has recently boomed in cognitive (neuro)science. George Lakoff (linguist) and Mark Johnson (philosopher) have drawn extensively on research from the interdisciplinary field of cognitive science and proposed a theory of metaphor which has become particularly useful regarding the question of cultural practice and symbols and the meaning they produce (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). In their work, metaphor is *not* a specialised category of language; it is pervasive in the

ordinary language, thought, and action of everyday life. Lakoff and Johnson contend that people's conceptual systems are fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and these largely unconscious systems structure how people use some concepts to think of other concepts. In this view, most thought, action, and language are not simply referential and are not singular concepts. Concepts form coherent systems of varying complexity. Moreover, these concepts are inherently embodied. Therefore, it follows that meaning is grounded in, and through, people's bodies. Johnson (2007) argues that philosophy must further people's quest for meaning in order to retain relevance. To achieve this end, philosophy must build on humans' visceral connection to the world. Current trends in analytical philosophy have marginalised aesthetics and phenomenology in favour of a narrow view of meaning which is primarily conceptual and propositional in character. This mainstream, dominant approach lacks the depth and visceral dimensions needed to understand the human capacity to make and experience meaning. Johnson (2007) contends that an affective approach to meaning takes notions of quality, affect, and feeling seriously, implying that many philosophers are mistaken in dismissing these notions as simply subjective mental states. Imaging is not some distinct, specialised skill but provides 'heightened, intensified and highly integrated experiences of meaning, using all of our ordinary resources for meaning-making' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: xiii). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) use linguistic expressions as examples of some of the above metaphors and explain the physical origin of their examples.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 7) use 'metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and gain understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities'. Following their theory, people formulate a partial relationship of

identification between two separate concepts – i.e., *A is B*. The two concepts are different from each other but people use certain selected parts of each in their structuring of the metaphor, which results in hiding or highlighting certain features. People are not born with (innate) metaphors in their brain, but they form quickly, develop over time, and are ‘grounded in our embodied structures of meaning’ (Johnson 1994: 1). Lakoff and Johnson comment that the ‘essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing’ (2003: 5). A metaphorical concept structures what one does and how one understands what one is doing in one’s daily performances. The focusing effect of metaphorical entailments can be considered in terms of ‘highlighting’ and ‘hiding’, which can point to a whole set of (re)presentations and expressions that cohere in a system.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) demonstrate that this may be quite obscure in language. Consider one of Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003: 19) many examples: *more is up*. From the time a baby sees the level of milk rising in the bottle, the circuitry of this metaphor is activated – connected in the brain. Due to repeated recurrence over time these circuits become more permanent, and hundreds and hundreds of such metaphors are similarly formed in our brains. Most of people’s conceptual structuring is not literal. People do not actually think that ‘more’ literally means ‘up’, but one mentally maps the abstract concept of ‘more’ onto the material concept of ‘verticality’ in order that one may better understand and express the more abstract concept. Through the constant and repeated mapping of such concepts, they assume an unconscious status in people’s minds and people take them for granted in political and moral discourse without even being aware of them the majority of the time.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003) frequently assemble commonly used (linguistic) examples as well as less typical examples employed by those with more flair, and they form general metaphors with which one can identify quite easily. Indeed, once one becomes aware of the concepts that Lakoff and Johnson (ibid) discuss, one may locate them everywhere.

2.3.3.2 *Oriental metaphors*

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2003), orientational metaphors do not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organise a whole system of concepts around one another, mostly in terms of spatiality – i.e., up-down, in-out, front-back, deep-shallow, central-peripheral, near-far. Coherence determines choices of some metaphors and not others, as will be shown in the bodily (re)presentations discussed in Chapters Four, Five, And Six. These metaphors are based in cultural and physical experience and, while deeply embedded, should be discernible and explicable using the image selections as exemplars. Variations may occur across cultural difference. As these are elucidated, it will become apparent that these kinds of (re)presentations are oftentimes repeated and naturalised in such ‘static ways’ that it becomes difficult to engage with them dialectically or imagine alternatives (Holland 2012: 52).

2.3.3.3 *Ontological metaphors*

These metaphorical mappings may take the form of identifying experiences like events, activities, actions, emotions, ideas, etc. in terms of entities and substances (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). So, viewing, say, *love*, as an *entity* would allow one to reference it, quantify it, identify particular aspects of it, identify causes and consequences of it, and maybe allow people to think that they understand it or the

reasons for it. Ontological metaphors allow people to deal relationally with their experiences and are often taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of abstract phenomena. Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 33) further note special cases of ontological metaphors of *personification* which identify a physical object as a person. However, in terms of performance, I will differentiate between *personification* as qualified by Lakoff and Johnson (ibid) and *personation*, which is a term I use denoting the portrayal of a character by a performer. The actual person and the character are often conflated in interpretations and writings on performance. *Metonymy* has a primarily referential function and is when a term for one entity is used to refer to another entity that is related to it; *synecdoche* refers to a part standing for a whole (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 35–36).

2.3.3.4 Prototypes

Lakoff's (2002) discussion of prototypes provides a suitable explanation of what people identify as central members of radial categories; in other words, people have a reductive tendency in their thought processes to use single prototypes to identify a whole group that may actually consist of numerous differentiated members (which are consequently overlooked). '*All prototypes are cognitive constructions used to perform a certain kind of reasoning; they are not objective features of the world*' (Lakoff 2002: 9, emphasis in original). Lakoff offers a brief explanation of different prototypes which is useful and insightful and should sound familiar.

- i. The *central subcategory* of a radial category, according to Lakoff, 'provides the basis for extending the category in new ways and for defining variations' (2002: 9). Examples may include, for the purposes of this study, central types

of bodies (lean, able-bodied, quasi-athletic, young), central types of relationality (masculine-feminine, heterosexualised, partnered), and central types of performance (stylised, classed, confident, agile).

- ii. Lakoff defines a *typical case prototype* as one which 'is used to draw inferences about category members as a whole, unless it is made clear that we are operating with a non-typical case' (2002: 9). For example, if I had to picture a typical ballroom couple, what comes to mind would be types corresponding to those one sees in televised competitions – an adult, white, athletic but elegant pair with sculpted hair, meticulous grooming, male in a suit, female in a dress and heels.
- iii. An *ideal case prototype* would be what, say, ballroom and Latin American audiences and judges consider to be an ideal 'gentleman' and 'lady' pair who have all credentials and everything needed to win the competition or be the consummate professional dance couple.
- iv. The *anti-ideal prototype* defines the negative standard of the subcategory – i.e., the worst possible idea of a performer in a given category. This type of performer would be what Lakoff would term a 'demon' subcategory. In body (re)presentation, for example, one might notice that larger or older people are seldom overtly eroticised in popular culture images. Often, they are not demonised per se but they are seldom present as sexual subjects in the imaging.⁴⁴

44 Romantic subjects may occupy comedic roles such as those in the films *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and *Shallow Hal* (2001) or the television show *Mike and Molly* (2010). Sexualisation of the (obese) lead performer is almost absent, though. The Obesity Action Coalition has highlighted the problem, calling it 'Fattertainment' (Heuer n.d.), and more critical work on size discrimination in media industries is forthcoming.

- v. *Social stereotypes* are pervasive in all cultures and underlie the snap judgements people resort to without much deliberation. For example, consuming audiences might expect that mainstream hip-hop should consist of black alpha males performing in front of a group of stereotypical, dark, golden, scantily clad hip-hop honeys.
- vi. A *salient exemplar* is when one takes a single isolated example and uses it to make probability judgements or form conclusions about what is typical of category members. For instance, with the release of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b), many fans assumed the novels to be a precise representation of *the* BDSM⁴⁵ lifestyle, which is not necessarily the case.
- vii. Lastly, an *essential prototype* is a 'hypothesized collection of properties that, according to commonplace folk theory' (Lakoff 2002: 10) serve to determine what makes a thing the kind of thing it is, or what makes a person the kind of person they are. For example, a desirable/desiring woman might be assumed to be someone who presents essential properties of being feminine-gendered and female-born with feminised characteristics conforming with Harding's (2008: 71–73) description.

The most pressing problem here is that a prototype is the central element of a category that is used to identify the whole category, and one should be made acutely aware of the difference in possible prototypes enclosed in categories as one could easily make inaccurate assumptions, which the above examples show. Inaccurate value attachments and assumptions could have problematic results for members that

45 This is an acronym for sexual practice involving bondage-discipline/dominance-submission/sadism-masochism.

are different to the normative prototype. A little rational reflection will reveal that no single selected prototype represents a balanced, precise account of all elements of the set, and one should aim to allow generations of as many variations in a set as needed to secure an accurate (re)presentation as well as constraint in what may not be included in the category, thereby bringing to our conscious understanding that, for example, the 'white, blonde heterosexual woman' is not necessarily the *best* porn star or the *worst* porn star; however, she is a prototype – possibly a central case prototype in a radial category – and, therefore, the variants are defined with reference to her. In plain language, Lakoff (2009) argues that there is nothing abnormal about these prototypes forming in our minds, but one does need to become aware of how they are used. It is critical that one does not confuse, say, a typical case (male-female ballroom partnership) with an ideal case (excellent ballroom partnership).

These formations give a substantial explanation and framework of what analysts could look for in images.

2.4 Summary and Illustration of the Theoretical Grounding of the Thesis

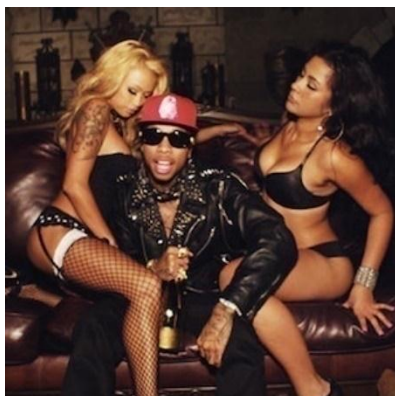
With a clearer picture of conceptual metaphors spelled out, analyses can detail the content of performative frames more explicitly. By making explicit what is highlighted and bringing out what may be hidden, the influential effect of framing becomes evident, and this paves the way for a broader critical discussion on cultural production as a powerful driver of discourse. To illustrate what is at stake in the

inquiry, I will use graphic illustrations which may be more helpful than words.⁴⁶ With selected genres that demonstrate performative frames that are artfully set in erotic performance and (re)presentations of desirability, I query why prototypes such as those in frames placed on the left below (pages 115 and 116) are accepted, highly visible, idealised (re)presentations of eroticised desirability on popular screens, while those on the right are peculiarised, barely visible, and marginalised in mainstream spaces.⁴⁷



Images 1 & 2: Representation of gendered performance of the erotic (ballroom)

(Sources – Image 1: All Star Dance Studio 2011; Image 2: Herrera 2014)



Images 3 & 4: Representation of raced performance of the erotic (music videos)

(Sources – Image 3: Raschke 2013; Image 4: Sundstrom 2011)

46 In presenting this material in various international contexts, it has helped in classes or presentations to encourage viewers to physically mimic or 'do' the positions in the pictures before discussing what the posturing may mean. Readers may find it helpful to do the same.

47 These images, along with millions of others, are freely available by means of internet search engines. They are not password protected and do not require payment for access.



Images 5 & 6: Representations of classed performance of the erotic (erotic film)

(Sources – Image 5: Tartaglione 2018; Image 6: Black XXX Galleries n.d.)

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology and methods for the study. The research design selected is a critical semiotic analysis (using visual images as data) presented in detail in Section 3.2 (Research Methodology, page 119). The idea of a social semiotics was put forward by Halliday (1978) in a theory of fundamental functions of language which he considers to be embedded within a cultural matrix, not in the image per se. Halliday (1978) contends that signs operate in tandem as follows: they articulate something about the world in a representational way ('ideational metafunction'), they articulate the relationality between people in the form of exchanges ('interpersonal metafunction'), and they conjoin with other signs to manufacture textual schemata that hang together and form messages of meaning ('textual metafunction'). Thinking through meaning in a social and political manner moves beyond the concerns of language and linguistics, though. Perhaps, with such repeatable imaging, socio-political struggles are augmented. As Hall (2006) argues:

The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is *not* inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. This year's radical symbol or slogan will be neutralised into next year's fashion; the year after, it will be the object of a profound cultural nostalgia ... The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate. (2006: 484, emphasis in original).

Those practices of articulation and resonance are what this study seeks to make explicit. The procedures adopted for the study include: firstly, the image genres selected (ballroom and Latin dance competitions on television; commercial hip-hop and rap videos; mainstream pornographic film) had to be established and known as such on popular screens (not simply 'fads') to demonstrate conceptually interesting performative frames that may be connected by commonly identifiable patterns. Secondly, the images selected are highly rated in global markets, which shows their translatability across societies. The images have widespread commercial sales across media industries and, therefore, can be termed 'mainstream'. These seemed to be reasonable indicators of what consumers might want, what they might like or value, and what they might idealise (Fiske 1989). Thirdly, each set clearly showed repeated and repeatable elements of race, gender, and class on different kinds of bodies which are baked into eroticised performance with prototypical and stereotypical (re)presentations being evident in the performance construction.

Sets of eroticised body imaging, as they appear in mainstream media, had to be large enough to refer to a broadly recognisable *genre* (or textual classification) in order to demonstrate prototypical stylisations of gendered, raced, and classed performativities. Collins (1993: 246) refers to the notion of a 'genre' of narratives or visuals as 'a recognisable configuration of features corresponding to a stable set of audience expectations' which, once stabilised, may go through a number of 'elaborate variations and permutations' and, finally, 'played out conventions may dissolve either into self-parody or self-reflexivity'. Within genres, it became possible to identify 'circulations and recirculations of signs' (ibid) within the performance imaging that plausibly could be deemed to generate performative frames which

already circulate as social and cultural capital in broader society. This left me with the task of elucidating a methodology and methods with which to interpret the content of the performative frames under analysis.

3.2 Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study is a critical semiotic analysis of visual images premised on the theory as elucidated in Chapter Two. The methodology was derived from two approaches suggested by Van Leeuwen (2005: 1)⁴⁸, who distinguishes a *structural* semiotic approach from a *social* semiotic approach as follows:

Social semiotics is not a pure theory, not a self-contained field. It only comes into its own when applied to specific instances and specific problems, and it always requires immersing itself not just in semiotic concepts and methods but also in some other field.

In this case, I have chosen three genres (ballroom and Latin dance competitions on television, commercial hip-hop and rap videos, and mainstream pornographic film) of what can be described as specific instances of erotic performativity in popular culture. Van Leeuwen (ibid) adds: 'Social semiotics is a form of enquiry. It does not offer ready-made answers.' The enquiry in this study examined possible ideological links between social practice, systems of (re)presentation, and identity political consequences within the shifts in the field of social semiotics that Van Leeuwen (2005: xi) describes as having moved from an emphasis on the sign to the usage thereof as 'semiotic resources'. Semiotic resources, then, function as

48 This approach is indebted to Paris School semiotics, often associated with the work of Barthes (see van Leeuwen 2005: xi).

(re)presentation, (re)production, and interpretation of social situations and practices. This approach afforded me the opening to move beyond mere description of content and modes of semiotic expression and show how a movement, a look, a gesture, a position connects to a deeply exclusionary politics in constructed (re)presentations of desire. Importantly, semiotic modes were not construed as having inherent characteristics and laws in the governed or systematic sense; rather, there was a concentration on how people use and regulate semiotic resources, perhaps understood in smaller blocs, which are constantly evolving and being appropriated in different ways in different contexts. It is on acceptance of these shifts that data collection and analysis proceeded as follows: first, the task was to collect, document, and catalogue images and select which were to be utilised in the study; second, was to determine possible historical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which such images were and are (re)produced; third, was to determine a way in which to deconstruct the images; and fourth, to find specific tools for the detection and development of new semiotic resources and new uses of existing resources (Van Leeuwen 2005).

Accepting Gagnon and Simon's (1967, 1973, 2011) critique of over-emphasising the biomedical gaze in explanations of the erotic and acknowledging the possibility of sociocultural moulding in the form of metaphors, scripting, and framing, my study begins by asking what exactly are readers/consumers supposed to be looking for when traversing this representative world of social roles, values, norms, and structures that allegedly direct behaviour? Before I could address the research question of how constructions of the erotic and desire are regulated, I wanted to be clear about what micro-repetitions could be identified in erotic imaging as patterns.

Iversen's (1986) work in art history has proven fruitful and may be understood as offering a somewhat different view of such imaging which is no longer seen as bridging a divide between the rational and the material by (re)presentational or expressive means but

laden as it is with all the ideological baggage of history, be it bourgeois, racist or patriarchal. The new critical procedure, accordingly, involves a thorough-going critique of visual imagery past and present, from paintings to pop videos. Semiotics is one tool among others which can be used to lay bare the contradictions and prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful. (1986: 84)

'Beautiful', in this study, is contextualised as the construction of what makes people in erotic relation appear to be 'desirable', as qualified by Harding (2008: 71–73) in the opening citation of Chapter One, by virtue of certain practices (cf. Davis 1995; Rose 2001; Tate 2016). For the performance contexts addressed in this study, Tate's (2016: 12) observation on the aesthetics of skin bleaching is particularly relevant:

Rather, it is its very obvious fakeness which is significant, as it shows that its wearer has the money and the leisure time – that is, economic and social capital – to make the change happen. It can also be a change that is as permanent as one's money or stylisation preferences will allow, which in turn imparts cultural capital.

A critical semiotic analysis of imaging would allow for what Williamson (1978: 11–12) noted in her discussion of advertisements – that they have one purpose of selling goods to us but they also have another purpose, which is to create 'structures of

meaning' that invite us to partake in ideological ways of seeing (and not seeing) ourselves, others, and the world. This seemed to be an effective starting point from which to approach the problematic of understanding erotic performance and performativity. A semiotic analysis would proceed from the premise that the performance under examination is partially, or wholly, representing something other than itself. The (moving) images selected for this study make use of 'signs, codes and social myths which are already in circulation, and ask us to recognise them and often to enjoy them ... perpetuating particular mythic meanings which reinforce a dominant ideology' (Bignell 2002: 31). Some, but very few, in mainstream performance contest stereotypical arrangements. Often, when they do, they (re)present an aesthetic of desire that is different to those (re)presented by heterosexual, white, cis-gendered, affluent, thin, quasi-athletic, able, young bodies. When performativity of gender, race, and class are baked into eroticised performance, constructions of desire change.

In *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, Rose (2001) provides useful discussions on the many ways in which visual images can be analysed. While paying close attention to both the composition of and recurring signs within images, a critical semiotic analysis can be regarded as a detailed examination of discursive markers. The examination focuses specifically on the question of how 'images make meaning head on' with the added aim of 'taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning' (Rose 2001: 69). Bignell (2002: 49) outlines a critical semiotic analysis using the example of a 'Wonderbra' advertisement: the advertisement is directed at women; it presents readers with a sign representing 'sexual attractiveness and power (the

woman wearing the bra)' which women can attain if they buy the product, thereby buying into the myth that 'women should present themselves for men's sexual gratification'. This kind of critical analysis addresses the advertisement as 'a mechanism for perpetuating an oppressive ideology' (ibid). Such an analysis does not provide a definitive or true reading of the advertisement given that fluctuating elements such as subject positions, alternative contexts or constructs, and ambiguous embodiments render the signs in the frames polysemic and, at times, ironic. In the case of the 'bra advertisement', Bignell (2002: 50) comments how women may take on the identity of a desired object and, at the same time, choose to maintain their power as a sexual subject 'by adopting an ironic attitude towards this status as a desired object ... for she is perceived as both desirable and in control of the social meaning of her desirability'.

Bal and Bryson (1991: 174) offer a defence of semiology claiming that signs, which make up human culture, always stand for something other than themselves, and people who inhabit culture spend a good deal of time negotiating the meaning of those signs. In this study, signs are not understood as fixed, but as smaller, moving elements of performative frames in which different metaphorical meanings vacillate between one another. The emphasis here is explicitly on performativity, in the Butlerian sense – that is, the *doing* of the erotic, identifying and examining the framing in 'stylised repetition of acts through time' (Butler 1988: 520). What forms points of interest here, is the possible connection between elements of performance (often taken to be innocuous) and orders of discourse or effects of meaning contained in the performative frames selected.

As is probably the case with most everyday phenomena, in general, and popular culture imaging, specifically, it would seem that consumers do not readily identify eroticised bodies as embedded within an ideological complex. The selected intrapsychic scripts form small parts of a seemingly limitless range of image data that people all over the world may desire, select, consume, and idealise. Consumers probably do not concentrate their attention on eroticised bodies as (re)producing *and* contesting societal structures such as gender, race, and class, which form central concerns here.⁴⁹ While each genre might possess its own particular anomalies, 'intersectional' (Crenshaw 1991: 248) links (between gender, race, class, size, age, and ability) across the three groups have been noted throughout the research process and will be elucidated in the content chapters hereafter. Finally, the image sets offer excellent examples of how repeated stylisation (Butler 1990, 1993) and ritualisation (Weeks 2002) do not contain meaning in and of themselves in the sense that they, like language, are never neutral but always framed (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003) This framing (re)produces and challenges an exclusionary politics which can then be problematised and critiqued.

Rose (2001: 69) states that a semiotic analysis confronts the question of how 'images make meanings head on'. While I take note of the importance of historical and biomedical approaches to studies on the body, in general, or eroticised bodies, in particular, my aim was to analyse the sociocultural ideas through which these bodies are (re)presented in popular culture imaging in the twenty-first century. Cognisant of thematics and problematisations raised in Foucault's work on sexuality and biopolitics (1990a, 1990b, 1990c), I wanted to gain some understanding on how

49 Dyer (1982) lists other possibilities for symbolisation of bodies besides gender, race, and class, and these are considered in the 'Analysis' section (Section 3.3.3, page 137).

current (re)presentations of the erotic, as performed by mediated bodies, might convey how normative and ideological elements as structuring forces are rapidly constituting potential global cultures through 'media conglomeration, corporate concentration and hyper-commercialism' (Herman and McChesney 2004: 63). Possibilities for global homologies are further materialising as a result of widespread technological advancement and media industry deregulation (ibid: 110).

I further note that some researchers reject altogether the view that the 'meaning[s] of a text can be accessed merely through detailed analysis of the text itself' as Boyd-Barrett (2002: 16) remarks. Audience studies, for example, would hold that audiences make meaning, while content analysts would use repetition of content in terms of numbers and statistics (Boyd-Barrett 2002). One may argue that, even in its most rudimentary form, some sort of evaluation seems to be taking place at the consumption site, and an image analyst could describe and interpret these; therefore, I would argue that interpretation of text should not be discounted on this basis. This is evidenced in the variety of ways in which images are performed, consumed, repeated, and easily transported into practice ,and it is possible that one viewer/analyst may possess several views of the same image. Admittedly, due to recent developments in computer programmes for analysts, quantitative analyses can be done regularly and over large numbers of data, so I in no way discount them. However, I would suggest that a certain amount of nuance is lost to a computer programme, especially regarding the complexities and contestations contained in visual cultures.⁵⁰ As Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 29) suggest:

⁵⁰ Numbers cannot be regarded as an absolute. If one considers recent expectations in political 'polling' (for example, surprises in the predictions and results of United States of America national and mid-term elections and 'Brexit' in the United Kingdom), numbers may not be as reliable as quantitative

Reducing large amounts of text to quantitative data, however, does not provide a complete picture of meaning and contextual codes, since texts may contain many other forms of emphasis besides sheer repetition.

Van den Bulck (2002: 84) notes that quantitative analysis 'has not been able to capture the context within which media content becomes meaningful'. I further note that critical analyses in the Marxist tradition have, at times, not been highly respected by many positivist researchers for its apparent lack of scientific and objective method (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). However, even the most positivistic researchers and their supporters would have to acknowledge that quantitative approaches are not especially effective at disseminating the complexity of semiotics and, if they stand alone, are limited in this regard. Researchers often advocate for a combined quantitative-qualitative or mixed-method approach, while 'feminist researchers and others adopting more critical and interpretive approaches' favour qualitative studies, particularly (Neuman 2014: 273). This study forms part of the latter. I do no quantitative data handling myself but I acknowledge that I have regularly relied on such information to check my assumptions about content, as well as inform my observations and awareness of mass-media trends and preoccupations with elements of (hyper)sexualisation, particularly.

Bodies enacting erotic performativities pervade the 'unprivate' landscapes of popular culture industries globally (Sobchack 1992: 3). Popular culture forms part of broad culture, which Hall (1997: 1) defined as 'shared meaning' and, along with many other

analysis absolutists may claim. Wording, sampling, context, as well as responder honesty and bias are some of the aspects that may be missed in such approaches (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

prominent figures in cultural studies, he recognised that ‘language is the privileged medium in which we “make sense” of these things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged’. I concur with Hall here and have focused specifically on imaging as a form of mediated communication. Hall (ibid: 4) allows that imaging⁵¹ ‘works like languages’ because it acts as a place holder for what people want to say. It reasonably follows from Hall’s premise that imaging can similarly produce and circulate meaning without possessing clear meaning in itself; can organise and regulate social praxes; can influence, conduct and, therefore, form a system that has material and practical effects in everyday life (ibid). I intended to explore a treatment of the normatively eroticised body as any other sign that may produce meaning. On the one hand, the sign is partially structured in terms of using the same tools of thought that people may access generally and, on the other hand, the sign is partially constructed in terms of how it is extended and composed in novel ways (Lakoff and Turner 1989). Because I am concerned with forms of meaning in this century, I chose to address mediation in terms of figurativity (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff and Turner 1989) and performativity (Butler 1990, 1993; Monroe 2014; Tate 2015) and to analyse the mechanisms by which these image bits or intrapsychic scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1967, 1973, 2011) may be forming globalising homologues across contexts. Homologisation was considerably less mobile before the presence of the internet and the deregulation of media markets. I analyse eroticised bodies as text, providing: a) examples of visual (re)presentations or observable phenomena; b) descriptions and explanations of repeated stylisations, referencing the cultural histories in which they are embedded; c) plausible interpretations of the metaphors and frames of imaging; and d) links to some

51 As well as ‘music, photography, exhibition’, and other forms of ‘symbolic practice’ (Hall 1997: 5).

ideological perspectives which, at times, seem disjunctive (in terms of what Bourdieu (1984: 14) called 'symbolic competition').

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Sampling

A verifying activity which was frequently utilised within the sampling process of the study was determining highly rated genres or types of shows that may count as *popular* in terms of what people might like and want to pay money to see or have. Ratings in visual media are essentially (quantitative) audience-measuring systems that seek to determine the size, composition, preferences, and expectations of the viewing/consuming audience. They are used to determine what audiences want, what they will watch, and when they will watch it. Popular culture trends and high levels of consumption were established and confirmed by means of internet resources such as *Nielsen*, *World Survey*, *The Media and Communication Studies Site*, *Intellect*, *Pop Matters*, *Cultural Studies Central*, *CineMedia*, *E! Online*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *MTV*, *Theory.org*, *Trace*, *Billboard*, *Vogue Digital*, and *The Representation Project*. Where I could, I subscribed to newsletters and email notifications from these sites since 2014 to remain somewhat current with regards to notifications and trends in the media industries, which fluctuate quickly. The internet (including television or streaming sites) was settled on as the primary medium for distribution of, access to, and engagement with popular cultural images contained in familiar communicative vehicles such as popular music, film, television, advertising, fashion, magazines, books, video games, sports, etc., in which erotic imaging may be present, however implicitly. I decided to delineate imaging that occurs in the twenty-first century because that is when the internet was really established as the

major distributor of popular culture. I resolved to determine commercial visual products that sell well and continue to increase in popularity across borders in order to make some claim to potential globality in terms of being identified as *popular*, *mainstream*, and *translatable* or *saleable* across geographical or national situationalities. These complexities may indicate that the digital age is taking the world towards a virtual domain of 'scapes', which Gregory (2003: 18) describes as follows:

In these structures, dynamism prevails over a static nature, metamorphosis over stability, dialogic relations with the observer and the environment over self-reflexiveness: in other words, the offer of an indeterminate future where subject and environment interactively react; the invention of new spatial-temporal experiences beyond any determined configuration. These promote and reveal a world of multiple relations and communications where everything is connected, bolstered by the transformation of the work in a continual process of manifestations that recomposes, undoes and interweaves the mutable conditionings and finds its own possibilities for existence in the tie that unifies the single parts by differentiating them; a tie with a logic that is no longer one of identity and non-contradiction but one of relations, of connection or disconnection, of interconnections – the inter-being or extra-being – for which [land]scape as a 'paradigm of complexity' makes up an obvious metaphor.

Hall (2006: 484) argues similarly for the treatment of the 'domain of cultural forms and activities as a constantly changing field' – i.e., more as a process. In conjunction with Hall's (ibid) dialectic conception of global cultures in which 'some things are actively preferred so that others can be dethroned', the tension resides between

popular culture and questions of hegemony which is not stable. I reiterate the definition of popular culture I work with, which emanates from Shields (2015: 402):

The entirety of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, memes, images, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture of the early to mid-20th century and the emerging global mainstream of the late 20th and early 21st century ... understood as a) broadly comprehensive; b) popular or 'mainstream'; c) originating in the modern West but increasingly 'universalized' due to globalization; d) reinforced by mass media and practices of consumption.

The three genres (ballroom and Latin dance competitions on television, commercial hip-hop and rap videos, and mainstream pornographic film) were recognised as *currently* dominant signs or forms, and I concur with Hall (2006), who shows that forms continually shift and may not always be so popular. Once an idea of the sales and popularity of the imaging had been established, I accessed the episodes of shows and films online and on television (seasons and videos are often repeatedly aired on television and streaming options). Sample imaging (in the form of still or moving non-narrative frames) was also accessed online by means of key word searches in order to establish a repeated pattern of how the bodies are stylised and presented. Exemplary body positions and frames, and how they are represented in the public domain, are illustrated in the following chapters to aid with descriptive and metaphorical analyses of body or body part positioning, posturing, and relationality (with appropriate referencing and credit as per standard academic practice – not for profit or distribution purposes). This procedure involved collecting and sourcing data from the public domain, which can be regarded as an incomplete public record in the

sense that Merriam (2009: 140) refers to public records being 'ongoing records of a society's activities'. I accessed the following as what Merriam (2009: 146) might describe as 'the tools, implements, utensils, and instruments of everyday living':

- i) Websites estimating sales and distribution of mainstream imaging in mass media;
- ii) Popular culture visual materials in the form of images, films, videos, shows, websites, and media articles that showcase or discuss highly saleable eroticised body imaging; and
- iii) Performer and producer accounts which complement everyday imaging.

Context or data, in this understanding, brings no meaning in and of itself. The act of framing, however, is understood as (re)producing an event 'performed by an agent who is responsible, accountable, for his or her acts. Furthermore, in a regress that might, in principle at least, be infinite, the agent of the framing is framed in return' (Merriam 2009: 146) in a kind of double loop. As clarified above, the focus of the study, then, is on eroticised body (re)presentations and their performativities in publicly accessible sites. Mass-media technologies are the most prevalent sites for popular culture (re)production, acting as effective, credible catalysts for possible formations of globalising cultures and attendant homologies, so it was from these media zones that data were lifted. What I needed, in order to demonstrate plausible, not definitive readings, were images in which I could credibly detect repeated stylisations as *gendered* (ballroom and Latin American dance competitions that typically reject any other kinds of relationality except for heterosexualised, masculine-feminine ones), *raced* (commercial hip-hop and rap videos are overtly dominated by black, male artists and black, female 'video vixens', save for a few

exceptions), and *classed* (pornographic literature and film has utilised stereotypical Westernised (re)presentations of affluence and success in mainstreaming itself and successfully overcoming the regulating tendencies of respectability politics). Incidentally, the moralistic musings which frequently populate (my home discipline) philosophy texts on the rights and wrongs of sex and sexuality (Soble and Power 2008) are often lurking at the foundations of many a critical study.

It has been rather telling that many researchers who touch on the media industry have sensed the need to revise and rework material habitually in order to keep abreast with technological advancements and ever-shifting records of popular and everyday cultures. The editors of many recent works declare this difficulty. In *Gender, Race, and Class in the Media: A Critical Reader*, Dines and Humez (2015: xiii), state that they have had to add and replace sections in following editions of the work 'that better reflect the shifts in media content, production, distribution and consumption' that have been seen over the first decade of the twenty-first century. They recognise the massive impact of the internet and new media technologies, how these have significantly affected the formation of global cultures, and how vast numbers of people across borders now 'communicate, do business, buy products, entertain themselves, form and sustain virtual communities, link with like-minded people, and potentially organise politically' (ibid). The continuous (re)constitution of performative frames and their ideological import gives some indication as to how, 'through the use of certain codes and conventions, [texts] create or transmit meanings that generally support the economic, social and political status quo' (Dines and Humez 2015: xi). Accordingly, because of the sheer size of mass media and rapidly multiplying content (Gunter 2002: 22), I acknowledge that not all available

material is referenced and more material may be produced in these image sets during the writing of this text.

3.3.2 Data gathering

Throughout this study, I was the instrument of data collection and analysis. Seeing that the study is particularly focused on public erotic cultures, all data, primary (imaging, videos, and films) and secondary (books, media articles, websites, and academic publications) were collected from the public domain, analysed by myself alone, stored on my personal computer in locked files, and reproduced as found. None have been altered in, or disseminated beyond, this research document.

One of the first tasks that Dyer (1982) suggests in visual studies of this nature is to 'devise a system whereby a large amount of apparently unordered [popular culture] material can be broken down into more manageable size and *classified*' (1982: 88, emphasis in original). Due to the massive size of the popular culture market and numbers of eroticised images being (re)produced and disseminated via that market daily, it seemed useful to delineate three different image genres which could be used as sample sets for analyses. These were selected to demonstrate how constructs of gender, race, class, size, age, and ability connect to broader social meaning. The term *genre* is inherited from literary studies and has been extended in various interdisciplinary approaches to describe and analyse relatively consistent patterns of semiotic stylisations that occur across different images that could conceivably belong to a *type* of (re)presentation (Collins 2009). Mediated, eroticised bodies can be found in almost every mode and genre of visual media, with many demonstrating contextual usages signifying quite narrow, relational homologies mentioned above.

The literature is populated with many applied studies. For example, Mooney (2012) takes on normalising pornographic representation in men's magazines; Sgroi (2012) looks at class and women's positionalities in a reality television dating programme; Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2012) address representations of hegemonic manhood in televised sports. A similar applied approach has been taken in my study.

Three identifiable genres or image sets have been selected as they are seen to demonstrate aestheticisation or stylisation as a regulatory force. They utilise metaphorical constructions and performative framing of gender, race, class, age, ability, and size to alter (re)presentations of desire in erotic performance. Some of these discursive markers are more obvious than others. In the mainstream, ballroom and Latin American dance competitions (re)present a heteronormative, white, affluent, quasi-athletic performance of desire; commercial hip-hop videos represent a raced, heteronormative, quasi-athletic erotic performance; and erotic romance films represent a classed, white, heteronormative, quasi-athletic erotic performativity that has been very successful in mainstreaming pornographic content. Each of these might have found their initial popularity in specifically Western contexts but each has acquired a broader translatability and extended (or franchised) into global markets and cultures.

This demarcation serves to form a manageable set of images in which I could detect predominant or recurring patterns that could discursively form the 'natural', 'normal' or 'normative' framing of erotic imaging for consuming publics (Rose 2001: 73). Cultural studies researchers seem to be in agreement that the bulk of popular culture and related product is now marketed and distributed by mass-media industries

(Browne 2002; Kidd 2014; Lehtonen 2000). In order to address the matter of a 'public erotic culture' from a globalising perspective (Stearns 2009: 139), the genres I selected have made a significant mark in mass media in the twenty-first century and continue to grow in popularity across borders, sustaining a place in what could be termed the *mainstream*. 'Mainstream' is understood as commercially successful and, by way of distribution and translatability, being able to influence social norms (Batchelor 2012; Hulsether 2015; Viljoen 2002). These three performative framings (natural, normal, and normative) occupy prime viewing time, high rankings, notable ratings, as well as sales and ongoing public/media attention. I did note some alternatives to regular patterns in the mainstream space but these were comparatively few and existed more in 'fringe' or 'alternative' spaces or 'at the margins' (Rose in Cornell University Library 2009: Online). It remained important to understand that 'salient exemplars' are not typical cases; they are not to be taken as representative of a norm, (re)presented in 'central subcategories' of 'radial categories' (Lakoff 2009: 10).

3.3.2.1 Ballroom and Latin American dance competitions

With reality television taking the world by storm, the global market was re-introduced to ballroom and Latin American dance contests in the form of a British competition series entitled *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004)⁵². The format showcases celebrity contestants and their professional dance partners who are scored by a panel of judges on their weekly performances, after which the viewing audience votes whether to keep them in or out of the competition. The format has been exported to

⁵² Note: The first season of *Strictly Come Dancing* aired in 2004. The most recent season (at the time of finalising this thesis) was Season 16, which aired in 2018. For the sake of consistency, all references will use 2004 as year of production.

over 40 countries around the world, with the British version having completed its 16th season, and has run various specials and live tours. The American version, *Dancing with the Stars* (2005)⁵³, has been running since 2005, and winners around the world total almost 400. Notable spinoffs in similar formats, including *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005)⁵⁴ and many others, have cemented their place in twenty-first century global popular culture. All forms are readily accessible on the internet, streaming sites, as well as in repeated screenings and re-runs on television.

3.3.2.2 Commercial hip-hop videos

In the twenty-first century, hip-hop sales, cultures, and industries experienced a global boom and, in 2017, R&B/hip-hop was designated by both *Nielsen* and *Billboard* to be the biggest genre in the music industry in the world, taking over from rock (Caulfield 2018; McIntyre 2017; *Nielsen* 2018). These figures were calculated in terms of total consumption, which includes album sales and album-equivalent streaming figures which, on their own, increased by 43% to over 400 billion in 2017 (Caulfield 2018; Lynch 2018; Ryan 2018). For this study, videos were accessed on popular satellite channels such as Trace and MTV and via the internet or streaming services such as Netflix. Reality television series and fictional series were also accessed by means of television and the internet.

53 The first season of *Dancing with the Stars* aired in 2005. The most recent season (at the time of finalising this thesis) was Season 27, which aired in 2018. For the sake of consistency, all references will use 2005 as year of production.

54 Note: The first season of *So You Think You Can Dance* aired in 2005. The show is currently (at the time of finalising this thesis) in Season 16, which began airing in 2019. For the sake of consistency, all references will use 2005 as year of production.

3.3.2.3 Erotic fiction as mainstream pornographic content

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* film (2015), which premiered at the 65th Berlin International Film Festival in 2015, is based on the book trilogy – *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012a), and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012b) – by E.L. James. James also wrote *Grey* (2014) as a follow-up to the original series, which covers the same story but from the male protagonist's perspective. Like the first book, the first film broke international (box office) sales records, in spite of widespread criticism and unfavourable reviews, earning more than \$571 million worldwide. I have published an article on the book trilogy (Van Reenen 2014) but will concentrate on the films (with the same titles) in this study. Some press articles were used as references seeing that an increasing amount of academic commentary is expressed in op-ed pieces on popular culture and useful (albeit shorter) arguments are frequently contained in online newspapers, posts, blogs, magazines, websites, and so on. Academic publications (in the form of books, dissertations, and journal papers) were the main source of critical perspectives.

3.3.3 Analysis

In the analyses undertaken, image content is not analysed in and of itself but is connected to social orderings, historical contexts, and cultural productions. In *Advertising as Communication*, Dyer (1982) distinguishes between non-textual and textual analysis. Non-textual analysis involves soliciting the meaning of an image from the intent of the producer or author of the image or the consumer's experience or understanding of the image.⁵⁵ Some of these may be inaccessible or unreliable in

⁵⁵ In literary studies and aesthetics, this is referred to as the 'intentional fallacy', which critiques the notion that the intent of an author/producer/creator is encoded in the work and should constrain the way in which it is read or interpreted. As a philosophy-trained student, 'author-intentional' approaches

the ways that methodologies involving research on live subjects have highlighted (ibid). This cautioning was noted when accessing producer/performer/consumer accounts; consulting such sources was largely a means to check my reading and analysis against possible alternatives, realising that these texts, in and among themselves, are also contested and complex. Early on in my research on eroticised (re)presentations of bodies, Brown's (2008) work in *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* mentioned the following point that resonated strongly with me: 'Studies that prioritize aural vocabularies or literature miss what is important about "bodies in motion"' (Brown 2008: 13). Furthermore, Brown's analyses of bodies in motion shaped my thinking about how to undertake a semiotic analysis of bodies in expressive forms and connect those to cultural production and categories of identity formation. Dance theorist, Jane Desmond (2003: 30), also provided some clarity for a starting point: 'Critical work on the body is focused more on (re)presentations of the body and/or discursive policing than with its actions/movements as a "text" themselves.' Consequently, I narrowed down my focus in this study to be on the moving body as text itself – that is, attempting to identify the meaning of the body as it performs eroticised actions and movements in continuous postural exchange. The possible extensions of those repeated and repeatable patterns to cultural production and categories of identification is examined within the framework of semiotics and ideology (outlined in Chapter Two) as having to do with the maintenance and legitimation of unequal power and resource distribution that works at the level of subjectivity (Rose 2001: 70).

are beyond my terrain of study and are mostly inaccessible, except where explicitly stated (for example, in the *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* in 2007). In this vein, even if one could access author intent, one would want to guard against experiencing mediated images and cultures as 'once-off effects' or singular interpretations by singular identities or single selves (Boyd-Barrett 2002).

Dyer's (1982) work on non-verbal communication and para-linguistic meaning in advertisements, as well as Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) work on orientational metaphors helped assemble a system for the analysis of performative frames. The aim of a producer of popular cultural product is to present material in a desirable framing in order to capture the attention of consumers, rating agencies, and distributors so that they will want more of the same and be willing to pay for it. One of the quickest and most effective ways of drawing the consumer in is the use of stereotypical identifications. Although these appear to be natural and fit rather comfortably into traditional cultural expectations, the genres chosen here are good examples of what Erving Goffman (1979: 84) called 'hyper-ritualisation', which 'standardise', 'exaggerate', and 'simplify' everyday life, albeit for seemingly different reasons and emerging from different contexts, yet are able to translate beyond their home market. Although bodily movements and actions are central in understanding the meaning of performative frames, I note Dyer's (1982) additions of overall appearance and styling as well as props and settings and will refer to those in the analyses where applicable.

I propose the following non-verbal (re)presentations:

- i. *Positioning*: This factor may include movement quality (and music correspondence), patterning, direction, and locating; as well as relational orientations of up-down (over-under; high-low), centre-periphery (stable-movable; in-out), and front-back (forward-backward).
- ii. *Posturing*: This factor may include facial expression and eye contact; positioning and presentation of the head, neck, and chest; movements and gesturing of hands and arms; the back and posture, pelvic movement and

presentation of hips and bottom; manners of touching and being touched; legs and feet movements; displays of strength, ascendancy, and flexibility; as well as posing, freezing, and emphasis.

- iii. *Presentation*: These elements are more prominently discussed in the literature and may include various elements of physical appearance such as dress, shoes, hair, make-up, adornment, other forms of grooming, skin colour and tone, shaping and contouring, background, sets, setting. and staging.
- iv. *Personation*: These elements are performed elements for narrative and affective effect, characterisations, roles, and projection.

Bal (2016), in addressing how to ‘do’ cultural analysis, makes a useful distinction between context and framing. Context is a static concept consisting of ‘the self-evident non-conceptual kind of data’ which is often entreated for the kind of reading of culture in order to unearth its meaning; this results in ‘a confusion between *explaining* with *interpreting*, or *origin* with *articulation*’ (ibid: 54, emphasis in original). All image data and related content was located as observable phenomena in the public domain and treated as *origin* or source data with the ability to confirm patterns of (re)presentation via reiteration and repetition. Bal (2016) cautions against confusing the metaphysical notion of *origin*, which she claims is largely irrelevant, with the logical notion of *cause*, which she claims is unattainable, or the psychological notion of *intention*, which she claims is unknowable. I am not sure that I completely agree with Bal here, if I understand her correctly with regards to the making of (re)presentations. There may be some reprieve for the unknowing analyst in accessing producer and performer accounts, which has been a valuable resource

to me in this study, *not* to form ‘a point of view on a point of view’ (Bal 2016: 51) but to gain some comprehension of (re)productive processes that is not wholly reliant on one’s own explanation or reading of images. In effect, this approach is used as a tool to check researcher bias. For example, Davis’ (2015) ethnographic account of social dancers in *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalising World*; Steffans’s (2005) account of performing in the commercial hip-hop industry in *Confessions of a Video Vixen*; and Jameson’s (Jameson and Strauss 2004) autobiographical account of performing in the pornography industry in *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, as well as growing numbers of documentaries and reality shows on television and streaming sites, were beneficial in providing some insight into the inner workings of these industries of which many lay people, professionals, and academics or student critics like myself, may not be aware.

As an ex-performer, with an admitted affinity for performing bodies in every capacity, I would argue that eroticised performance and performativities are all around us all the time. They ‘hide in plain sight’, as it were, in ever-present popular culture imaging and people’s imitations of it in public and in private, ‘where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm’ (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 7). This would raise the question of discernment and judiciousness when reproducing and presenting samples of visual data. I had to rely rather strongly on my own awareness of context, taking note of Banks (2007: 88), who suggests that ‘the researcher should know enough about the society or community through her research’. My academic training in philosophy and logic included nothing about the

body at all (save for Descartes' mind-body dualism, which was the first thing I was taught in my first year of study). In philosophy (analytical philosophy in particular), there has been considerable neglect of the body and its implications for meaning, with the exception of phenomenologists.⁵⁶ The phenomenological subject, though, who can know mind and experience through introspection, is also not adequately suited to this study which engages with (re)presentations that contain some conscious elements and a large amount of unconscious ones as well. I accepted that my training had left me somewhat ill-equipped to deal with body cultures and politics as I seemed to be trapped in abstractions, which is typical of pure approaches to philosophy usually conducted in South African universities. From general undertones in much of the literature I perused, it seems that this problem is not unique to my home discipline. The biomedical and behavioural sciences as well as religious, political, legal, and other areas have enjoyed a certain preoccupation with what is considered 'normal' and 'natural' as against what may be considered 'abnormal' or 'deviant' or 'wrong' (Lovaas and Jenkins 2007: 2). Bal (2016: 54) offers the following worthwhile suggestion for an approach to cultural analysis:

I contend that if the passion and confusion are cleared away, the humanities scholar with interdisciplinary interests can pursue a much more exciting project, an analytical interpretation that avoids paraphrasis, projection and paradigmatic confinement, and that opens up a practice of cultural analysis that endorses its function as cultural mediation.

56 Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Husserl (1913), among others, are well-known theorists who have studied structures of consciousness from the first-person perspective addressing intentionality, consciousness, qualia, and so on. While (applied) work done in this study may indirectly make use background ideas contained in phenomenology, phenomenology per se is not the object of this inquiry.

3.3.4 Some noted limitations

Many critics have expressed their reservations that metaphorical analysis and related theories of language may be unsuited or inapplicable in analysis of other fields of research (Iverson 1986). Lakoff has, however, applied cognitive linguistic principles with success to mathematics (Lakoff and Núñez 2000), politics (Lakoff 2004, 2008), philosophy (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), and poetry (Lakoff and Turner 1989), while Johnson has addressed aesthetics (Johnson 2007), ethics and morality (Johnson 1994), mind (Johnson 1987), and philosophy (Johnson 1981) in similar ways. These analyses are fruitful and have been useful in providing interpretations that go well beyond the content of the data at hand. For this reason, I applied their metaphor theory to eroticised body imaging.

I note that I am not part of the home markets that produced the original cultural effects of ballroom and Latin dance, commercial hip-hop imaging, or erotic film. I have also never lived in one of the so-called 'developed' countries (the United Kingdom or the United States of America) that are the original sites of production of the data at hand. Thus, I may be insufficiently acquainted with the intimacy of forms of life from which the genres under examination emerge. However, the spread and expansion of American cultural products, as well as possible encroachments of American cultural imperialism, via mass media have been well noted and critically analysed by scholars (Crothers 2012; Fedorak 2009; Fiske 1989; Lee 2005; Tomlinson 1991). I form part of the global consumer base and have done so for as long as I can remember, as would many readers who are not from the originating market themselves but do participate regularly in the consumption of its offerings.

Any study concerning cultural meaning and (re)presentation would acknowledge from the outset that this area is a labyrinth filled with multiplicity and complexity. Possible ways of explaining and evaluating observable phenomena are designed to be plausible; they cannot claim to be definitive, in that they cannot supply readers with a new fact or direct them towards some as-yet-uncovered truism. I am simply offering readers one way in which to view and think through their everyday landscapes by means of some critical tools utilised here. Because environments and subjects are evolving all the time, critical and philosophical analyses should be 'revised and corrected again and again' (Foucault 1990b: 9). In this spirit, I would welcome alternatives and critiques with open arms, so to speak, and, in actuality, anyone undertaking critical work would probably expect that.

3.3.5 Researcher reflexivity

I wish to be careful not to insert myself into the larger text in what Bal (2016: 55) terms an act of 'naïve self-reflexivity' which, in my opinion, happens more and more in academia nowadays, sometimes with very little relevance to the issue at hand. However, in the interests of what Gregg (1948: vii) terms 'intellectual honesty' and 'human dignity' and, as a matter of transparency, I should openly declare that I know the privileges of having the 'identifiable characteristics' that Harding (2008: 71–73) mentioned in the opening citation of the first chapter. In terms of life historical experience, I know first-hand the sociocultural economies of, and what it means to be able to utilise, the embodiments of thinness, whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, quasi-athleticism, youth, as well as a certain kind of hair, skin, breasts, hips, waist, legs, feet, and so on. I also know that having access and means to adorn

all of these in a particular (feminised, in my case) framing, opens options for both intent and purpose. I also know when *not* to feminise. I, like Harding (2008), am taught and reminded by culture. The temptation to identify and imitate characteristics and stylisations in the imaging of popular culture did not escape my juvenile socialisations and I was certainly not as critical a consumer then as I might be now. I am patently aware that people have treated me differently as these easily identifiable characteristics have changed or when I alter them.

As an ex-performer (ballet and contemporary dance), I was trained in the performing arts field from four years of age until early adulthood. I performed professionally, qualified as a teacher, and taught for years. As any other regular consumer of popular culture, I am exposed to and shaped by the biases of my circumstances. Years of formal training might have acted as a sensitising factor in terms of my engagement with the material because I have some first-hand knowledge of how one trains one's body over many years for performance and 'aesthetic labour' (Elias et al. 2017) which, at the professional level, is extremely exclusionary. The stratification of body typologies, body markers, and body capacities was so often implicit in these environments, if not explicitly designated, especially in professional settings. *Different* was not just different; it was hierarchised and the undesirable was excluded – essentially, not instrumentalisable as performance capital.

Throughout the study, it proved impossible to disentangle myself from my own gendered, raced, classed, affiliated, embodied self, save for an empathetic reading of alternative or critical responses to what I observed to be cultural predominance patterns. However, making those personal positions conscious and explicit and

treating them as any other ‘objects of framing’ – as materialities which themselves are troubled – helped somewhat in attempting to maintain some self-conscious reflexivity (Bal 2016: 55). Throughout the research process, it remained important, as a matter of ethics, to keep mindful notes reflecting on my position, attitude, and stance relative to my research orientation. In communicating the key points of those reflections, my intent is to be transparent with regards to my research stance, recognising that absolute ‘objectivity’ is impossible (Bloor and Bloor 2013: 3).

Acknowledging the limits of my framings and considering how those might shape my relationship to the object, context, and process of examination has kept me mindful of the self-other relationality, the mechanisms at work in system-maintenance, and the arbitrariness of value attachments ascribed to both. That said, I proceed with caution from these declarations, taking the points from Markham (2017: Online) that reflexivity is both ‘necessary and elusive’ and, while it may be an effective strategy for ‘building rigor into one’s research’, it is also ‘always limited’. Indeed, no matter on which side of screen or stage one may find oneself, no subject is precluded from the ‘demand to conform’ to ‘the panoptic machine’ (Storey 2015: 136).

3.3.6 Ethical considerations

No formal ethical clearance was sought from the University of the Free State ethics committees for this research project as there were no live (human or animal) subjects or (living) environmental entities included as objects of study.⁵⁷ However, public visual material is mostly taken for granted and usually regarded as stable,

⁵⁷ My research proposal went through the following institutional processes: the Title Registration Committee of the Humanities Faculty, the Faculty Board of the Humanities Faculty, as well as the English Department and Postgraduate School monitoring processes at the University of the Free State.

accessible, and widely recognisable. That said, some measures had to be put in place to ensure academic rigor while exercising some conscious, ethical, and moral sensitivity in the interest of good research practice and professionalism. I concur with Prosser, Clark, and Wiles (2008: 3), who state that 'visual researchers need to act reflexively and critically in their ethical decision making in order to protect and enhance the reputation and integrity of visual research and protect respondents'. I accepted that this attitude applies to actual images as well, especially with regards to eroticised imaging, which could easily be misappropriated for misplaced gain or purpose. I took care not to show images in a 'belittling or deprecating way' (Prosser et al. 2008: 7). The image reference standards utilised here were aligned with the conventions of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of the Free State. I do not retain copyright control of any images and will/have not distribute/d them for either personal or financial gain.

Regarding the samples selected for (re)presentation, I took care not to show images from any private individual's social media pages or personal websites. Where images of performers were used, none were selected which may possibly have displayed vulnerable subjects (especially underage subjects) or those who might not have been able to give consent (that is, if I was not sure about the origin of the image) in order to avoid all possible violations of a performer's rights, privacy, wellbeing, and dignity (Prosser et al. 2008). Where images are used, care has been taken to reproduce the image as I found it, or as a 'stable' (Merriam 2009: 155) entity, without altering it in any way. Additionally, producers and performers are probably well aware that imaging of themselves and their performance product is disseminated into the public domain for public consumption with great facility and

speed. They would probably also accept that one may have little or no control over how such material may undergo various distortions. I was careful not to collect or utilise any such distorted imaging. To be clear, I have treated the images used throughout this study as strictly and authentically as I would treat any other citation or reference in an academic context.

Trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative research are established primarily for the purpose of rigor and reliability. Brink (1993: 35) describes possible sources of error in qualitative research as: 'the researcher; the subjects participating in the project; the situation or social context; the methods of data collection and analysis'. Regarding researcher bias, Field and Morse (1985) recommend that researchers need to be trained to form an objective outlook towards the phenomena under investigation. While I accepted that researcher bias can be reduced by spending a significant amount of time in the research field (Leininger 1991), I maintain that objectivity, as such, is an inapplicable concept with regards to interpretative work of this nature. As Ross (2014: 1) correctly claims, 'to be human is to be biased'. Consequently, it would bode well for any qualitative researcher of visual material to spend significant time in the field of research, in different roles or modes of operation; to approach image reproduction with integrity to the image so as to avoid (purposeful) misrepresentation, manipulation, or irresponsible reading; and to declare subjective contexts and framings, as well as present a brief discussion of the researcher's reflexivity relevant to the researcher's relationship with the material. In my opinion, though, the far bigger risk of crossing ethical boundaries throughout the entire research process, even unwittingly, lay in the danger of possible confirmation bias and in the *reading* of the content of these moving images which, I must

acknowledge, are 'emotionally charged objects' (Stratton 2001: 35). Images are multiple, possibly countless, as are readings, and cannot be covered in entirety by myself or any single study. I aimed to look for reiterable elements in mainstream imaging which may not occur with such frequency in fringe art forms. Therefore, I have offered critical perspectives as per my own readings which aim for plausibility and cannot, in any way, pretend to be definitive.

As an ex-performer, I have an insider understanding of training my body over many years for performing with a specific vocabulary and express intents or purposes of the producer in whichever milieu I found myself working, but this experience may not be entirely dependable or transferable among different performance genres or production processes. Predictably, then, an ethical concern for myself, as the researcher, is how my formal training in dance and educational training in philosophy and logic are all bound by my situated rationalities. At no point of my performance studies training in dance, music, or drama at university was I encouraged to examine performance in a critical or political manner. I was simply taught the technical requirements of how to perform and produce and the history of the discipline.

Further, from a subject position, I must acknowledge that different viewing subjects may not see the recurring thematics that I identified as valid or conceptually interesting at all. However, this is how these images impacted me in what I understand to be a subject-object co-dependency as ex-performer, (re)producer, and consumer of popular culture. As a participator in the import and imitation of global popular culture, concerns about balancing globalising homologies with localised cultures, shifting time frames, and paradigms have formed a point of awareness

throughout this study. Being South African and, therefore, not situated in the geographies of the 'home markets' that originally produced the material under analysis has persistently alerted me to the phenomenon of Western popular culture dominating global consumer markets and how quickly these metaphors, frames, and scripts get co-opted into everyday life in this country; this speaks to the translatability of the data at hand. In order to check the plausibility and reliability of my critical perspectives and findings, I found that one of the most dependable practices was to present and publish my content chapters in constituted events, conferences, and classes – both locally and internationally – before diverse academic audiences. Feedback and reactions in these contexts were indispensable in my study.

3.3.7 Conclusion

My sampling selections were informed by insights from Shimizu (2005: 248), who questions whether our analyses could 'move beyond a one-dimensional understanding of sexual representation as always already injurious, dangerous, and damaging'. Sexual representation is a particularly interesting instance of that which is socially obscure yet symbolically conspicuous. The identification of prototypical themes and elements in selected image sets for my thesis does not serve to promote a 'single story' but, rather, to problematise these 'single stories' (Adichie 2009: Online). As a way of problematising these 'single stories', as represented in the images analysed in this study, the research design and methodology followed the overall logic that disclosing what may be 'highlighted' (on the surface structure) and what may be 'hidden' (in the deep structure) in the actual *doing* shows that micro-performances of bodies in the sample sets of ballroom and Latin dance competitions, commercial hip-hop videos, and erotic film (re)presented on popular screens rest on

an all-too-familiar exclusionary politics which is both reproduced and legitimised in popular culture and exchanged as economic, cultural, and 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1990) in society at large. However, it is important to point out and caution that, in popular culture, a majority of the images exemplified in the selected genres exist at the level of stereotype and, consequently, play into broader ideologies. At the same time, these stereotypes (related to gender, race, class, size, age, ability) are somewhat contested and even rejected in different ways, though less so in mainstream settings. I now turn to the first sample set – that is, ballroom and Latin dance competitions. Interestingly, ballroom and Latin American dancing was extremely visible on popular screens during the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers era (1930s) but decreased significantly in the mid- to late-twentieth century. The dance form has more recently reappeared on popular screens, notably in the form of reality TV competitions, which resemble amateur competitions. As Hall (2006: 485) suggests, the reiteration or citationality of the dance form made me 'think again about that tricky term in popular culture, "tradition"'.

CHAPTER FOUR⁵⁸

‘One Gentleman and One Lady’

Relating Gendered Performative Frames of the Erotic in Ballroom and Latin Dance Competitions⁵⁹

Dance and sex come from the body, they are the deep body. They are wordless – filled with passion, tension, pleasure. They are not what they seem. Dance may appear to stand in for sex when sex is not allowed, or when making love is premature, or as a prelude to intercourse. Sex might be the only circumstance in which a person distrustful of dance might allow themselves a brief experience of moving with abandon. Both dance and sex stand in for something else so fundamental and potent it eludes our fumbling grasp, even our ability to name it. (Garisch 2013: 25)

4.1 Introduction

In her memoir, Garisch (2013:15) presents a personal reflection on dance that highlights some elements which may be pivotal in the translatability of ballroom and Latin American dance imaging (hereafter, I will use ‘ballroom and Latin’ to refer to the myriad of dance types that make up the genre): the erotic, the body, the sublime, and the wordless. George Bernard Shaw is famously credited in the *New Statesman* for having stated: ‘[Dancing is] a perpendicular expression of a horizontal desire’

58 I write this chapter from the perspective of an ex-performer and consumer that resides in the global market. As a younger performer, I uncritically accepted the gendered role performance until a colleague, Cape Town-based choreographer, Sean Bovim, disrupted and often reconstituted these roles in his work (in which I performed). Such disruptions brought out many of the questions about repeatability raised in the chapter.

59 As per the rules in the UFS Policy on Master’s and Doctoral Studies (after Brill Rodopi’s process of double blind peer review), a version of this chapter is published under: van Reenen, D. 2018. One gentleman and one lady: Relating bodies in the ballroom. In Grider, J.T. and van Reenen, D. (Eds). *Exploring erotic encounters: The inescapable entanglement of tradition, transcendence and transgression*. Boston and Leiden: Brill Rodopi, pp. 124–151.

(Melly 1962: 426), which echoes Garisch's insinuations. So much in dance imaging is dependent on metaphors of perpendicularity. This chapter seeks to examine an aesthetics of desire exemplified in various masculine-feminine eroticised (re)presentations in ballroom and Latin which has become mainstream in contemporary popular culture in the form of reality television competitions. Dance and dance imaging celebrate the human body in the most stylised and powerful ways. Metaphorical orientations and framings depict impassioned connections between partners for a growing market. In performance, the overtly displayed, physical strength of the man set against the more subtle, submissive woman typically configures the couple in more exaggerated forms of positioning, posturing, presentation, and portrayals that are not as obviously demonstrated in social forms of dancing. Whatever the origin of individual dances, ballroom and Latin demonstrate a rigidly gendered performance space, as Herbison-Evans (2006) confirms: they all 'have one thing in common: they are danced by a couple (usually a man and a lady⁶⁰) in "closed hold", maintaining five areas of contact between the partners while performing all the figures of the dances'. The 'experiential gestalt' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70) of the couple is indispensable to this dance form.

The premise for analysis follows Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) and Lakoff and Turner's (1989) theory of metaphor that these orientations are unconsciously structured but not arbitrary in artistic construction. As indicated in Chapter One, these orientations have their bases in unconsciously formed, already circulating performative elements (Butler 1990, 1993) which are intentionally extended or stylised for performance. This chapter looks at orientational placings of dancing

60 This is the terminology that Herbison-Evans (2006) uses and can be found in many texts on partner dancing.

subjects and offers accounts of how they are informed by physical, cultural, and social experiences of masculine-feminine relationality, especially when demonstrated in closed position (see Image 7, p. 153). The analysis will show that these discursive markers enforce an extremely heteronormative hegemony by way of movement and imaging of an idealised relationality which still has significant status and strong appeal in modern societies. This imaging is less frequent in same-sex or queer partner imaging, which is not shown in mainstream competition unless gendered heteronormatively. Both normative and non-normative images are recognised as sites that (re)produce categorisations, asymmetries, and hierarchies related to gender and sexual practice, embedded in many forms of social ordering. This particular (re)presentation of heterosexualised desire is suggested to be rooted in a cultural fixity of dominant males and submissive females. Metaphorical analysis is used to examine the internal systematicity of such illustrations which have become so engrained in this aesthetic of desire that imagining alternatives becomes almost disruptive to producers, performers, and consumers alike. Indeed, in ballroom and Latin competitive spaces (Image 7, p. 153), alternatives are absent, but they are occasionally present in the mainstream entertainment space.



Image 7: Dancers in closed hold

(Source – Flashner 2017)

4.2 From the Ballroom, to the Stage, to the Popular Screen

While the elitist and regal (English) origins of ballroom are noted, ballroom and Latin dancing⁶¹, in its current form, has been in our midst for over a century, and it has made an impressive comeback in recent times (Herbison-Evans 2006). Ballroom and Latin may be social or competitive and now occupies a familiar part of the popular culture landscape but it remains extremely classist in its (re)presentations with all the airs and pretention of privilege. Furthermore, if one wishes to compete at amateur or professional levels, it is an expensive pastime and ‘wealth’ is potently insinuated in the (re)presentations with ‘class and gender propriety’ tenaciously synchronised on white bodies (Brown 2008: 131–133). The genre is now regularly seen in informal life and amateur lessons, on film, on stage, in competitions, and in television shows, with the development of standardised testing, formalised training, and international competition cementing global distribution of all forms (largely regulated by the World Dance Council and the World DanceSport Federation).⁶² The dance community recognises a ‘Ten Dance’ model which consists of five International Standard

61 Also referred to as an ‘indoor sport’ and ‘mental and physical recreation’ (Moore 2002: vi).

62 Internationally, the most prestigious championship is The Blackpool Dance Festival, held annually in Blackpool, England.

Ballroom dance styles – waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow foxtrot, and quickstep – and five International Standard Latin dance styles – cha cha cha, samba, rumba, paso doble, and jive (World Dance Council 2016). Different countries do vary their standard models.⁶³ Beyond these, there are, of course, many other types of dance styles which are exhibited in numerous countries and settings around the globe in formal competition, dance clubs, studios, and on social occasions.

Mainstream ballroom and Latin dancing takes place within a rigidly fixed, gender performance in which competitors are judged by a number of criteria such as technique; poise and deportment; rise and fall; the hold or frame; musicality, timing and expression; body alignment, movement, sway and shape; floor craft; foot and leg action, and presentation (Moore 2002; Silvester 1936). Competitive ballroom and Latin developed from a social activity, so initially the standardisation was for consistency in teaching – people would be able to dance with different people, or strangers, in different contexts, and know ‘the steps’ (Malnig 1992:13–14). With the rise of what Picart (2006: 2) terms ‘studio systems’, this standardisation further developed into codes for steps and figures as well as a stylisation of movement required for competition, which advanced further in order to gain favour with judges and spectators as well as to expand the movements for larger ballrooms being used as competition spaces. This encoded homogeny took place in an era when Western societies were still strongly patriarchal, and this social context is crucial in determining the ‘amplitude’ and quality of couple movement currently (ibid: 22). Powers (2012a: Online) explains: ‘In 1929, all of the Associations gathered for the

63 For example, the American Smooth and American Rhythm varieties are incorporated into the United States of America model.

first time, in the Great Conference, to gain consensus on what ballroom dance in England should be, both in steps and attitude.’

While Western societies have taken some significant strides away from patriarchy since 1929, thanks to the tireless, ongoing efforts of gender equality activists, the standardisation and regulation of ballroom and Latin was decided during a time when male dominance was the norm and heteronormativity was unquestioned as the most appropriate, if not only, way in which to conduct oneself publicly. Weeks (2002), Stearns (2009), and Buffington et al. (2014) offer good explanations of the Victorian context out of which such gender politics emerged. In many contexts around the globe, this would be the custom still. As public displays of affection increased, a strong discourse was formed regarding which ‘forms of touching were to be possible between certain peoples’ (Brown 2008: 174). In the case of ballroom and Latin amateur and professional dancing, like most other forms of dance on popular screens, these normative bodies are largely white, heterosexualised, thin, athletically able, young, and affluent. Arguably, not much has changed in current popular screen imaging of dance, where there is a notable emphasis on ‘the double role of technical prowess and sexual desirability’ (Albright 2017: 65). These ideals are still stalwartly present in dance shows and competitions. Albright (ibid) further states that, ‘the ultimate illusion, of course is that of a perfect dancing body – one completely unhampered by sweat, pain or the evidence of any physical negotiation with gravity’. Moore (2002) and Silvester (1936) go to great lengths in prescribing the obscuring of labour in performance. Albright (2017: 16) goes on to argue that many dance teachers today would ‘deny any such allegiance to an ideal body’. I would agree, but alternatives are rarely seen on popular screens, even if diverse bodies of all

descriptions are populating studios everywhere and some professional companies.⁶⁴ Anti-ideal prototypes of older bodies and body sizes deemed too big or too small are rarely seen in mainstream competitions or shows beyond the try-out or audition rounds. Marginalised bodies are often parodied or ‘carnivalized’ (Fiske 1989) in reality television competitions with their size, age, or (dis)ability often becoming part of familiar refrains on screen. For example, marginalised body features are often linguistically framed by judges’ and narrators’ comments as ‘problems’ that performers have ‘overcome’, and they are congratulated for being so entertaining and ‘light on their feet’ or being so ‘brave’ to represent ‘people like them’. As a viewer, one can almost predict such refrains before one actually hears them being uttered (for example, when Lisa Riley⁶⁵ or Leslie Joseph⁶⁶ were featured on *Strictly Come Dancing* [2004] and Chas Bono⁶⁷ or Heather Mills⁶⁸ on *Dancing with the Stars* [2005]. Similar exhortations, sometimes along with emotional responses and introductory stories, accompany dancers with disabilities on *So You Think You Can Dance* [2005]). In recent reports, professionals, Neil Jones and Ekatarina Sokolow, were strongly criticised for their ‘Fat Cha Cha’ routine which they performed in fat suits at the Professional Latin World Show-Dance Championships in the Netherlands in 2014. This is a most uncomfortable performance to watch⁶⁹, complete with over-the-top, clumsy movements, feigned exhaustion, and fumbling lifts and tricks. All of

64 See the websites of AXIS Dance Company, Candoco Dance Company, Dancing Wheels, DV8 Physical Theatre, Full Radius Dance, The Gimp Project, Independence, Remix Dance Project, Restless Dance Theatre, and Amici Dance Theatre Company. These companies all combine ability and disability. Able-bodied professional companies are now less raced, classed, or gendered in membership and performance, with companies like Ballez explicitly undoing conventional gender performativity in performance. However, aged and sized (either too big or too small) bodies are not typically incorporated into the world of professional dance displays. Perhaps competitions or divisions for seniors or veterans could be seen as an exception, but they are rarely showcased as serious competitors on popular screens and, I would argue, never as ideal prototypes.

65 Lisa Reilly was a plus-sized contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing* (Season 10).

66 Leslie Joseph was an older contestant, at 71 years old, on *Strictly Come Dancing* (Season 14).

67 Chas Bono was a trans contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* (Season 13).

68 Heather Mills was a disabled contestant on *Dancing with the Stars* (Season 4).

69 See Neil Jones & Ekaterina Sokolova-Jones – *Mr. and Mrs. LATIN* (2016).

these movements emphasise the undesirability of larger bodies as legitimate dance performers (see Image 8 below). The performance, shown in Image 8, is validly criticised as ‘insensitive’, ‘tasteless’, ‘inappropriate’, and ‘shocking’ (Farmer 2018: Online).



Image 8: ‘Fat Cha Cha’; Image 9: John Lindo
(Sources – Image 8: Buitenhuis n.d.; Image 9: Glanville 2015)

Contrast Image 8 with Image 9 that depicts the dancing pair of John Lindo and Alyssa Glansville, performing in the Capital Swing Champions Jack and Jill. While Lindo is obviously a larger man, he is well known and celebrated for his dance talent, expertise, and proficiency and has won many championships, not parodying or carnivalising his size in any way. In numerous video accounts, while Lindo does not fit the stereotypical male lead, he simply performs the steps and figures as does any other excellent dancer in the competition, within the usual gender fixity expected from the role.

4.3 'One Gentleman and One Lady': Gender Fixity Remains in the Mainstream Performance Space

The foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire are represented in most interesting ways in traditional, mainstream, modern ballroom and Latin dance performances or images. One may argue that this dance form, especially in closed position, as it is frequently executed, is the very embodiment of the masculine-feminine gender binary within a heteronormative configuration. Closed position is when partners hold each other in a kind of embrace with varying degrees of body contact while dancing. In ballroom and Latin, the basic hold usually consists of partners facing each other with the masculine lead's right hand on the woman's back, her left hand on his right shoulder, and her other hand clasped in his left hand to the side of the couple at around shoulder height. Many variations in holds occur as the choreography becomes more complicated and innovative. (For detailed technical descriptions and illustrations that have not evolved much over the years, see Moore 2002 and Silvester 1936). However, most people of any gender or sexual modality⁷⁰ could take part in ballroom and Latin competitions, so long as they are able to gender themselves into fixed signifiers of one masculine dancer and one feminine dancer in an ideal, heteronormative, cis-gendered 'one gentleman and one lady' partnership (Farmer 2018).⁷¹

70 In this use of 'modality', I am borrowing from philosophy. The notion of 'tendencies' or ways of being are neither 'possible' (unknowable) nor 'necessary' (knowable) but a third kind. I contend that for sex and gender, this allows for fixity, unknowability, and fluidity, especially in the transitional or questioning sense and, also, includes ways of being that may fluctuate within a single individual or subject on a continuum. Even in a day, someone may switch or not want or need to express/identify in a fixed way, but they know who they are. The point is that, in performance, the complexity of erotic modalities makes them unknowable. (For more recent work on 'dispositional modality' see Anjun and Mumford [2018]).

71 Alex Moore (2002) uses these terms, as do many writers on partner dancing.

Modern ballroom and Latin dancing has gained sizeable coverage in contemporary Western popular culture, both socially and competitively, and has made a successful comeback of late (Malnig 1992).⁷² Long-running shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004), *Dancing with the Stars* (2005), and *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005) are highly rated in the television industry and have been franchised or repeated in many countries, revealing something about what the viewing public likes, wants, and will buy (Fiske 2005). The original format⁷³, *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004), has been exported to over 40 countries. This original version, having completed its sixteenth season in 2018, is often broadcast alongside the country's own version, as well as *Dancing with the Stars* (2005), to millions of viewers via mass media. Popular media content is very telling in identifying (re)productive patterns in society. Gender is one of those patterns, and it is entangled with popular culture in pervasive, complex ways, as these popular shows demonstrate. The commercial success of these models is immense and forms part of the reality television juggernaut as 'a global staple of domestic and prime time television' within a 'Fordist system' that establishes 'commodity appeal to as many consumers as possible for as long as possible' (Jordan 2015: 517).⁷⁴

72 Competitive dancing can also be 'dance sport' or DanceSport' (McMains 2009) and takes place at both amateur and professional levels in different countries and numerous contexts (extending to, for example, ice dancing and similar competitions). Competitive dancing is regulated by various bodies, such as the World Dance Council or World DanceSport Federation, who determine rules for participation, competition, performance, and teaching/learning. (See also Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing or United Kingdom Alliance and similar bodies around the world).

73 The formula is one celebrity (chosen out of diverse participants) pairs with one professional dancer (almost all are white) and audiences vote to keep their favourites in the competition until the final elimination when the winning pair is announced. *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005) is not with professionals but pairs of relatively diverse amateurs who audition in any individual speciality or style from which a pool of finalists are chosen. They are paired off, one male and one female, and follow elimination rounds as per audience vote as well (See BBC One, ABC, and Fox websites for further explanations, casts, and seasons).

74 Davis (2015) does extensive analysis on the transnational and global success of tango dance.

For the present purposes, I will focus primarily on choreographed (not social) mainstream ballroom and Latin performance which is highly stylised, formal, and codified and is meticulously arranged and rehearsed for competition, screen, or stage. Some of the closed position imaging I will discuss can be found in many dance forms (and dance-related imaging), and I am not addressing separate, solo, or sequenced group dance forms here which may not be particularly gendered in the same way as ballroom and Latin partnering or relationality. Moreover, the *meaning* of the body discussed here looks to moving imaging and performance, rather than words and language, which have enjoyed some undue prominence in the meaning debate in philosophy of art (cf. Johnson 2007) or music (and lyrics) which also dominates in performance studies (cf. Brown 2008).⁷⁵ However, in terms of translatability, I would suggest it is the wordlessness of motion and emotion that makes them so accessible and mobile across geographies, along with an implied commonality that is the human body. I further suggest that images communicate an immediate meaning to viewers, and the swift identifications reinforced in viewers' subjectivities, belief systems, and cultural practices are, in turn, generated by images in a continuous meaning loop. Fiske (1989: 159) elucidates the contradictory nature of popular culture and draws attention to the 'submerged consciousness' that lurks below the surface of social action. I am interested in what such consciousness reveals in terms of images produced by, and for, people. Societal attitudes both determine, and are determined by, imaging.

75 This privileging of language (or words) as properly having meaning leaves imaging somewhat semantically destitute in analysis beyond description. I concur with Johnson's (2007) argument that (performing) art can be either referential or not and most definitely can transmit meaning, albeit in different modes than that of language.

Ballroom and Latin partnering relies less on narrative/drama and more on a connected, but codified, partner communication as well as a strongly visual exchange with an audience. The performance is further enclosed in time with music, the rhythm and quality of which determines the style and type of movement and possibly contributes to the infinity of ways in which artistic expression can be 'fashioned from the same small set of basic [orientational and ontological] metaphors' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 26). This kind of partner dancing typically symbolises a love/sex relationship/courtship between the two dancers and is strongly romantic or erotic in nature without necessarily being overtly sexualised. The aim of this discussion is to problematise the instrumentalisation and reception of the idealised dancing body. These visuals seem to endorse a socially instituted gender asymmetry, so much so in ballroom and Latin that alternatives seem to cause some sort of cognitive dissonance among performers, choreographers, and viewers alike. I contextualise this concern using Butler's (1993: xii) statement regarding the relationship between the materiality of sex and gender performativity:

[P]erformativity must be understood, not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names ... the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materialities of bodies, and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.

The performance, regarded as the freely created 'singular or deliberate act' (ibid), is filled with performative elements that not only reiterate norms, 'govern their materialisation and signification' (ibid), but aestheticise bodies normatively as an

ideal of desirability. In order to explain what I see as a connection to metaphor theory, in terms of reiterability and translatability, I draw on Lakoff and Turner (1989: 8), who explain in terms of poetry:

Dickinson extended and composed these metaphors in novel ways. But, though she created the poem, she did not create the basic metaphors on which the poem is based. They were already there for her, widespread throughout Western culture, in the everyday thought of the least literate of people as well as in the greatest poetry in her traditions.

What metaphor theory does not address directly (as may be expected from linguistically based analyses) is the exclusive politic at play for those who may be perceived as outsiders or those who reject the norm or the ideal. Butler (1993: xiii) also mentions the exclusion and abjection of those who 'do not enjoy the status of the subject' and are relegated to 'unthinkable' and 'uninhabitable zones' of otherness. When Othered bodies are included in the subject zone, they often are not represented as legitimate and impassioned desire – very often the difference marker becomes the main feature. For example: larger sized people are often characterised as comical or the 'losing weight element' takes over the narrative; trans relationalities are often postured as fraught, complicated, and tragic with the transition itself featuring strongly; disabled people in romances are often reduced to the disability itself, and the relationality is often framed as part of the struggle to overcome it. The gendered asymmetry that one sees in mainstream ballroom and Latin dance results in a materialisation of a conventional heterosexualised body rhetoric which has congealed over time: firstly, masculine roles are presented as necessarily dominant (or forceful) and, secondly, men are expected to be, and do, a type of gentlemanly

masculinity. Ingram and Waller (2014: 14) argue that hierarchical and linear formulations of masculinity, with *alpha* being understood as the highest ideal of these, are still strongly present in society. In opposition to the more gentlemanly masculine roles, the feminine roles are presented as melodramatically passive, following or 'tracking' (Powers 2012b), sometimes coquettish and flirtatious, and rarely dominating. This codified, gendered relationality is registered in degrees of strength and dominance. Let us turn for a moment to the question of how this is repeated and repeatable.



Image 10: Masculine-feminine partnering

(Source – Dance Informa 2013)

4.4 Orientational Metaphors: Verticality, Leading, and Centrality of Movement

Orientational metaphors concern spatial orientation: 'up-down, in-out, deep-shallow, central-peripheral', as well as front-back, forward-backward (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 14–21).

4.4.1 Verticality: The up-down orientation

Up-down spatialisation metaphors are particularly applicable in dance partnering as highlighted by the Shaw (Melly 1962) quote and suggested by Garisch's (2013) more subtle mapping between dance and sex. Albright (2017: 64) goes a little further in her intersectional analysis of dance and disability, claiming that the 'hegemony of the vertical' is so imposing in dance, specifically, and culture, generally, that the resultant presumption of 'what is up is good and what is down is bad' has become pervasive. Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 14–21) work with 'more is up; less is down'. Associated orientational metaphors, where the 'up' may be interpreted as desirable and the 'down' not so much so, can be stated as follows and should be familiar to readers: Conscious is up; unconscious is down. Life is up; death is down. Having control is up; being controlled is down. Forcing is up; being forced is down. High status is up; low status is down. Good is up; bad is down. Virtue is up; depravity is down. Rational is up; emotional is down⁷⁶. Mental is up; physical is down. Strength is up; weakness is down. Winning is up; losing is down, and so on. Lakoff and Johnson use numerous everyday linguistic expressions as examples of some of the above basic metaphors and explain the material origin of their examples (2003).⁷⁷ I will focus on images (not language) here and explain how such images could reasonably include an orientational *and* an ontological metaphor of: *Masculine is up; feminine is down*.

76 'Reason and rationality are linked to white, Anglo-European masculinity, while passion is the domain of women, people of colour, and non-European "others"' (Davis 2015: 15).

77 Throughout their work, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) give an example of a basic metaphorical concept, such as 'Happy is up. Sad is down' (2003: 15), followed by linguistic examples to illustrate, such as, 'I'm feeling *up*. That *boosted* my spirits. My spirits *rose*. You're in *high* spirits. Thinking about her always gives me a *lift*. I'm feeling *down*. I'm *depressed*. He's really *low* these days. I *fell* into a deep depression. My spirits *sank*' (2003: 15, emphasis in original). Then, they go on to explain the physical origin of the metaphors, which would be, for example, 'Drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression, erect posture with a positive emotional state' (2003: 15). They take numerous linguistic expressions, explain the physical and cultural experiences that inform them, and propose structural or generalisable metaphors from these.

This observation is echoed in Dworkin's (1976: 55) discussion on gendering in fairy tales in which she notes:

The heroic prince can never be confused with Cinderella or Snow White or Sleeping Beauty ... where he is erect, she is supine. Where he is awake, she is asleep. Where he is active, she is passive. Where she is erect, awake or active, she is evil and must be destroyed.

Pervasively, in masculine-feminine ballroom and Latin imaging, one comes across abundant posed images of a masculine partner 'dipping' his feminine counterpart, habitually showcased at high points in the performance or music. In other words, this robust placing of the woman into a position of recognisable subordination, or surrender, occurs at a particularly dramatic point in the dance performance. She is typically expected to trust her partner and, quite literally, let herself go (backward) into the movement which is usually stopped or held in order that the audience has a few moments in which to absorb the beautiful, poignant image. This (and similar) posturing is vastly familiar in ballroom and Latin imaging and may be illustrated as follows:



Image 11: Tango dip
(Source – Grünberg 2017)

The above list of spatial metaphors is neither complete nor exhaustive and may be worded differently. However, one may see instantaneously how the masculine-feminine embodiment is mapped onto the up-down metaphorical orientation: He is conscious, looking over her, while she unconsciously lies back with her eyes closed, undone by her desire for him. He appears strong and virile while she appears weaker, supported, held, saved, or even subdued or conquered by her masculine partner. He controls the force of the movement while she capitulates to his command. He appears to be the rational decider while she is portrayed as vulnerable and trusting, often with eyes closed in these poses (Image 9, p. 157). In the more conflictual performance (as in a tango or paso doble), he conquers while she surrenders.

In terms of technical proficiency, both partners are required to have considerable physical strength, flexibility, and control to do these kinds of movements (Moore 2002). However, the strength of the man is significantly located in the core and upper body, while the woman's is in the core, hips, and lower body (ibid). Accomplished dancers are expected to perform these movements with skill and expertise – that is, appearing to do so seamlessly and easily. As Roach (2011: 82) states: 'Precisely through the excellence of the performance is created the illusion that there is no performance at all.' Every performing dancer will be familiar with this accent which is the reason for hours and weeks of training, rehearsal, and repetition. The movement must appear natural. The performed product should not appear constructed, exerted, or awkward in any way. The labour of the performance must be hidden so the strength, or physical dominance, of the man is highlighted but effortless, and the

woman's strength is hidden or disguised, much like in the Real. She is characterised as displaying a contained sensuality or understated elegance in ballroom dances and a sexier flamboyance exhibited in the Latin dances. It is interesting to note how the Latin dances are categorically separated from ballroom and are performed with a different 'flavour' (contrast Image 7, p. 153 and Image 12, p. 180). McMains (2009: 305) claims 'the ballroom dance industry has capitalized on stereotypes of Latin as hot, passionate and sexy in order to market and sell Latin dance'. And, it is very telling how Silvester (1936: Introduction), a world champion, describes 'athleticism' in ballroom dance as aiming for 'the best result with the minimum of effort' such that 'the body ... must be controlled and relaxed so as to avoid all undue exertion'. He further states that it is attention to detail and technical precision that has made the English version of ballroom and Latin the best in the world and the aspiration of other nations (ibid). Ironically, the modesty of performance is not demonstrated in this hoity-toity attitude, it seems.

The systematicity of the masculine (up) and feminine (down) metaphorical construct coheres in different ways and is unlikely to be classed as an accidental, isolated, or random case, given the frequency of appearance in the material. This pairing is not an arbitrary correlation; it is ranked, with the first (masculine association) being superior and the second (feminine association) being inferior. Furthermore, if one peruses these metaphors, one will notice the historical, societal mapping of 'up' concepts to masculinity or manliness. One may extend this 'up' concept to a discernible and recurrent celebration of the verticality, power, and size of the (erect) male phallus in what Gilby (2014: 1) terms a 'pervasive phallocracy' across many cultures which is often linked with familiar cultural iconographies of 'fertility,

parenthood, creativity', as well as prowess and power (Keuls cited in Gilby 2014: 7). Much has been made of phallic obsessions and imagery in 'all the collective fantasies of fecundating [male] potency' (Bourdieu 2001: 12) and needs no more expansion from me, except to note the striking erotic linkage to male 'up'-ness. Although elucidated in different terms, Bourdieu (2001: 7) also comments on the social construction of (biological) sex and gender:

The division of (sexual and other) things and activities according to the opposition between the male and the female, while arbitrary when taken in isolation, receives its objective and subjective necessity from its insertion into a system of homologous oppositions – up/down, above/below, in front/behind, right/left, straight/curved (and twisted), dry/wet, spicy/bland, light/dark, outside (public)/inside (private), etc. – which in some cases corresponds to movements of the body.

Upness has also long been associated with the meaning and language of status and success – both of which are recognised as sought-after social goods. For example, one may often read and hear references to individuals as being 'members of the *upper* classes', 'higher-ups', '*upwardly* mobile', '*high* ranking', '*top* level'; or having '*lofty* ambitions' and '*elevated* status'; or wanting to be '*top* of the food chain', '*above* average', 'the *head* of something' and '*over* and *above* the usual'.⁷⁸ Masculinity has traditionally entailed a pursuit of such elevated status and its associated successes in Western culture, with women and every 'Other' relegated to the *lower* classes. These social norms have mapped themselves onto imaging of physical, erotic (re)presentation as well as performance and performativity with the sex act having a

⁷⁸ I also note the connection of upness to the divine, or god-head, assuming a 'metaphysical stance' in the 'transcendent sense' (Visagie 2006: 160–162) but will not address it in this context as this metaphorical extension may go too far for these purposes.

lower, physical connotation and the spiritual or the sublime being elevated above the flesh. Davis (2015: 15), in her work on tango, notes the entrapment of gender and race within the up-down binary:

Critical feminist and postcolonial scholars have devoted considerable attention to the problematic ways in which passion is mobilized as part of a binary with reason in constructing gender and race. Reason and rationality are linked to white, Anglo-European masculinity, while passion is the domain of women, people of colour and non-European 'others'.

4.4.2 Leading and anchoring: The forward-backward and centre-peripheral orientations

The asymmetry Butler (1990, 1993) mentions is perhaps most tellingly expressed in the traditional masculine-*lead* and feminine-*follow* roles. The fact that these roles can actually be performed by anyone of any sex/gender/sexuality is of little consequence to the fixity of the role, which is always masculine lead and feminine follow in mainstream ballroom and Latin. So, these parts take on a gendered binary meaning. The implication of this strictly-adhered-to gendering is clearly evidenced in some controversial statements made by the judges during the highly popular American television show *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005) when a same-sex couple danced ballroom and Latin for the 2009 auditions. An exchange between Nigel Lythgoe and fellow judge, Mary Murphy, went as follows:

Said Lythgoe: 'I think you'd probably alienate a lot of our audience. I mean, we've always had the guys dance together on this show but they've never really done it in each other's arms before. I'm certainly

one of those people that like to see guys be guys and girls be girls on the stage. I don't think I liked it.'

Later, said Murphy: 'It would have been easier for me, in other words, if one person was playing a female role and one was playing a male role. Added Lythgoe: 'I don't think you want to see two guys there and think male-female.' (Queerty 2009: Online)

Performativity is described by Butler as the 'forced reiteration of norms' (1993: 94). The normative regulation and reproduction of compulsory heterosexuality results in the configuration appearing utterly natural, and going against it is problematic, especially in popular, widely accessed spaces. The irony, though, as dance teachers would attest to, is that doing the lead does not come naturally to men. It is much harder to teach a good lead than it is to teach a follow. Dancers generally have great difficulty in becoming skilled leads (cf. Davis 2015; Picart 2006); yet, according to dance discourse, it is required that a man be an excellent (strong) lead if the couple is to perform well, primarily because the woman cannot initiate or control the movement of the pair.

So You Think You Can Dance (2005) features many different dance forms in addition to ballroom and Latin; yet, when same sexes dance together, it occurs only within the other genres of dance featured in the competition such as hip-hop, jazz, contemporary, or tap, not in ballroom and Latin and never exhibiting same-sex desire. When desire is concretised into the performance such as it is in mainstream ballroom and Latin dance, it seems that there is producer *and* public insistence on heteronormative imaging and choreographers/dancers are willing to oblige for the sake of popularity and ratings.

Powers (2012b) has offered interesting thoughts on the lead-follow asymmetry and tries to alleviate the problem by explaining the roles in different terms such as 'tracking'. However, in mainstream competition, role change is not allowed, and dance steps or movements are clearly regulated. Powers (2012b) includes some quotes from what he terms the 'dark ages of ballroom dance', which was during the 1920's to 1950's, and possibly formed as reactions to feminine activism, feminist politics, and the success of the suffrage movements. I include some examples of these below to show the problem of asymmetry and hegemonic gender formations (Powers 2012b):

Never should the so-called gentler sex be quite so gentle and acquiescent as when dancing. No matter what her views on suffrage and feminism may be, it is a woman's duty to let the man lead on the ballroom floor. His is the guiding spirit; hers, the following. He is the pace-maker; she is his shadow. (Ray cited in Powers 2012b: Online)

Now, men, in these days of sex equality you can take heart from the fact that, on the dance floor at any rate, the man is still the boss. It is he that decides when and where any particular step is danced. He designs the pattern of the dance. The man will do most of the work while his partner just makes a pretty picture. Now for the ladies, you don't have much to say in the matter at all. (Castle cited in Powers 2012b: Online)

Submit yourself entirely to your partner. (Sylvester [*sic*] cited in Powers 2012b: Online)

The dance floor is the one place where the weaker sex prefers to remain submissive. (Murray cited in Powers 2012b: Online)

The lady's part is to follow, whether the man is dancing a figure correctly or not. *She must not have a mind of her own.* She must just follow whatever the man does and not attempt to correct him. (Moore cited in Powers 2012b: Online, emphasis in original)

These views serve to show the socio-historical context from which modern partner dancing has emerged. Physically, the masculine lead is always more upright in his deportment, and he either leads or anchors the movement of the pair. He is, indeed, expected to be taller than his feminine partner in heels and she should be slight in build, with Herbison-Evans (2006: Online) generalising that 'most women are shorter than most men'! Consequently, the ideal, aesthetic, visual (re)presentation of the masculine lead is to be taller and bigger than his partner. He is required to have considerable upper body strength and a broad chest in order to support his partner – not only in guiding steps and patterns but also in lifts, turns, and tricks which are physically demanding and sometimes quite extraordinary performance spectacles. His arms and chest area provide the 'framing' to her picture – a metaphor often invoked to describe ballroom and Latin dance partnerships (Lawrence 2009: 200). Conversely, the woman's upper body is mostly poised slightly back and arched away from her masculine partner. Observers might not readily characterise this posturing as overtly erotic or sexualised. However, I would argue from the positioning of the upper body of the woman that she is opening the base of the neck to the man – the area known as the 'suprasternal notch'. This area is significant in body meaning; it is widely recognised as an erogenous zone. Its exposure suggests trust, or confidence, in the partner and a non-verbal communicative action of self-surrender towards the

partner. This positionality suggests an offering of the woman's body and being as object to the masculine subject – an action rarely performed by the man towards the woman (but sometimes seen in masculine-masculine partnering, albeit less so than masculine-feminine partnering).

The experiential basis contained in these partnering images conceivably lies in the normative expectation of greater physical strength and size being a biological attribution of men as opposed to naturally smaller, lighter, more flexible women. In general dance terms, men are identified as physically stronger than women and they are required to be so as a 'natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 33). Thus, degrees of physical strength are 'immediately' and instinctively identified as a 'superimposition of images' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 27) onto different aspects of the concepts attached to feminine-masculine relationality.⁷⁹ Physical strength has long been considered a sign of strength of will, strength of mind, force, control, and status in Western culture. All have traditionally been celebrated and associated with what Dayton (2018: 65) terms 'an interplay between erotic and belligerent themes' in his analysis of eroticised combat in Homer's *Iliad*. In ballroom and Latin dance, this aggressive masculinity is explicitly arranged in opposition to the softness or coyness of the feminine role. In Dayton's discussion of the Trojan myth, he further comments on the bond between combative and erotic desire and its correlation with masculine strength and glory: 'There's nothing quite so bracing for one's manhood as a helpless victim groveling before you' (ibid: 72). Embracing defeat, in this sense, implies relinquishing one's manhood (Dayton 2018). To clarify, I do not claim that women are imaged in dance partnering as weak or victims. However, I am pointing

⁷⁹ Lakoff and Turner (1989) provide additional discussion on similar immediate and natural superimposition in poetry.

out that they are persistently subordinated in the movement, and choreographer/dancer/viewer expectations are grounded in norms of masculine ascendancy which are trailed into the present from a long way back in Western cultural history. Clearly, modern society has demonstrated significant difficulty in either relinquishing or reconfiguring these norms and remarkable facility in returning to them.

Reasonably speaking, one should bear in mind that masculine-feminine relationality occurs in a variety of contexts, some of which might have moved significantly beyond the heteronormative patterns repeated in mainstream ballroom and Latin. However, for these purposes, I focus specifically on the eroticised, intimate, bodily 'tension' or disguised 'effortful action' contained in closed position (Johnson 2007: 22). What seems to be emphasised in such imaging is a mimicking of traditional courtship or sexual encounters – the flirtations, the 'connection' in the couple, the physicality, and, indeed, the climactic moments that may remain 'imprinted on the body' for some time (Davis 2015: 65–68). What becomes apparent, though, is that mainstream ballroom and Latin dance is simulating one specific kind of sexual encounter between two specific kinds of people over and over again. As Jones (1998: 153) notes: 'Conventionally speaking, men act and women pose.'

4.5 Sex/Gender Performance and Performativity

The stylisation in mainstream ballroom and Latin dance does not involve movements that denote a direct focus on genitalia or explicit sexual actions that might be associated with erotic dance as such. In fact, overtly sexualised displays on a dance floor are frowned upon, and any interpreted expressions of desire are to be what

Pettyjohn (2007: 4) terms 'appropriate', which denotes strict regulation. Malnig (1992: 12) notes an emphasis on 'elegance and social grace' in early developments of exhibition ballroom dance but, as overt sexuality in public space has transformed, so has popular screen dance. Demands to be desirable or sensual or sexy are intensely associated with partner dance performance albeit that close hip-to-hip contact and exaggerated pelvic sway are supposed to be mere innuendo or 'seduction' (Davis 2015: 70). Various dances have different qualities but all demand a strong, believable partner connection which is particularly emphasised through eye contact in performance. Judges will penalise partners if there is a lack of connection between them. For example, dances like the cha cha, samba, salsa, and mambo are supposed to be sexy and flirtatious. The jive, boogie, and swing dances are more coquettish in quality, while the waltz, quickstep, and foxtrot are more elegant. The tango, paso doble, and rumba are more intense and sensual; they depict impassioned connections between partners. Ward (1993: 21) asserts that 'dance can be a form of sexual expression in itself', while Frith (1983: 19) states: '[T]he most obvious feature of dancing as an activity is its sexuality ... redolent with sexual tensions and possibilities, as private desires get public display, as repressed needs are proudly shared.' Malnig (1992: 9–10) recognises early moral panics about intimate body contact, citing a commentator who characterised early exhibition dance spaces as being an 'evil influence' and the air being 'heavy with unleashed passions'.

Over and above desire evidenced in the partnership, in traditional masculine-feminine partner dancing, there seems to be a pronounced visceral emphasis on the masculine body as sexual subject and the feminine body as sexual object (Gibbs

2005: 25).⁸⁰ This partnership configuration is based on extremely traditional, predictable, or even old-fashioned gender norms, in spite of the fact that the steps and patterning are easily able to be performed by any sex/sexuality/gender. There has been little development in this convention in traditional mainstream ballroom and Latin, which supports the concern that, in order to remain as popular as it has become, ballroom and Latin must conform to (assumed) societal demands for heteronormativity. Butler (1990: 19) explains this subtle embedding as follows: 'The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female".'

While there have been significant social adjustments since the early twentieth century, especially regarding the emergence of women from the home into public life and institutions, commentary about the moral questionability of early social dance spaces (Malnig 1992) is reflective of a certain social hostility towards the feminine at a time when political and legal change for women was inevitable, yet unwelcome. There was probably a collective anxiety surrounding the increased demands women might make or resistance to patriarchal norms they might exhibit. A fear of what reckless consequences for established morality may ensue seems evident. As Brown (2008: 172) has argued: 'This acknowledgment of female sexual pleasure was at the crux of the moral panics surrounding social dance in the 1910s.'

In contemporary Western societies, where women enjoy equality with their masculine counterparts, the hostility towards women seems to have been, to some

⁸⁰ Gibbs (2005) provides interesting discussion of this 'body-as-object' and 'body-as-subject' distinction in reference to what people ordinarily notice about their bodies.

extent, re-directed towards LGBTQ+ people. Feminist-friendly advocates have advanced equality of women, but individuals who do not fit the heterosexualised, cis-gendered mould are far from equal in many respects in almost every society across the globe, with a number of societies still perpetrating horrific human rights offences against LGBTQ+ individuals (Buffington et al. 2014; Notaro 2019; Stearns 2015). Progressive societies and communities have been fighting for the legalisation of non-heterosexual marriages and partnerships as well as parental and other rights or freedoms previously denied to LGBTQ+ people (Notaro 2019). It was surprising, then, that on 21 July 2014, the British Dance Council suggested a proposal for a change of rules which entails that a partnership is to be recognised as ‘one man and one lady in all adult amateur and professional competitions and championships unless otherwise stated’ (cited in *Daily Mail* 10 July 2014: Online). Same-sex dancers were not happy with this proposal, and there is justification for the dissatisfaction.

Modern society’s discomfort with a disruption of gender norms is exposed in many dance show references or related commentary. An earlier comment by *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005) judge Nigel Lythgoe (cited in Dehnart 2008: Online) regarding his problem with ‘effeminate’ male dancers echoes familiar prejudices:

Because they need to be very strong. Dancing is role-playing most of the time. And you need to be strong and lift girls. You need to look stronger than the girl you’re dancing with. You control the dance, especially in ballroom. So, if you mince about the stage, you’re not doing what the choreographer is asking you to do.⁸¹

81 This commentary is not limited to this article alone and could be read as somewhat familiar rhetoric against the current demand for LGBTQ+ rights which is featuring strongly in global debates.

From such articles and associated commentary, I would argue that there is much concern that the men should *appear* to be strong and, by implication, straight. To be clear, if one actually views same-sex or queer ballroom and Latin dance competitions, there is no ‘mincing about the stage’. This language is very stereotypical. To reiterate, these steps are performed in the same way as masculine-feminine partnerships, unless they are parodied, carnivalised, or spectacularised in an over-the-top way as part of a parody or drag performance, for example. A number of assumptions become evident in the aforementioned stereotyped statements: If same-sex partners do queer dance spaces, the dancing will exhibit men as being weak; if men lift men, they are not being ‘strong’ in terms of acceptable masculine role play; masculine control is necessary to masculine-feminine role play; men in same-sex partnerships will appear effeminate or ‘mince about’; choreographers want to choreograph masculine-feminine partnerships. Such assumptions show a widespread inability to conceive of different types of partnerships – especially in mainstream ballroom and Latin, which must exhibit close contact and, therefore, legitimate erotic desire as heterosexual.

Truth be told, once again, the dance community is well aware that no matter how roles are performed or perceived, this has little to do with actual sexuality/sexual practice of performers. However, there is an expectation of repeated and reproduced masculine leads and one can derive, from the reasons given, that this is rooted in a cultural fear of homosexuality and a rejection of images that display homosexual desire. In other words, if shows can exhibit cis-gendered male dancers that are overtly masculine (with cis-gendered female partners), it is better for dance in

general, and more men will dance because their performed masculinity will protect them from (social) exclusion. Hirose and Kei-ho Pih (2010) discuss similar problems with '*authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group' (Connell cited in Hirose and Kei-ho Pih 2010: 196, emphasis in original). Herein lies another point of incongruity: if dance (re)presentation were mere role play and nothing more, and it was recognised by audiences as such, then surely there would be no problem. Clearly, viewers and producers alike are well aware that this role play, in various contexts, forms a significant and persuasive part of cultural discourse and must, therefore, be steered in a particular way so as to endorse the heteronormative ideal in mainstream media and society. This mechanism secures popularity and revenue with the added benefit of protecting social norms from disruption.

In order to appear masculine, then, the strong man should necessarily command the movement of the pair. He must support the woman in his frame; he must decide her position and guide her towards where she needs to be on the floor; he turns her, lifts her, dips her, twists her, and manipulates her body into what is perceived to be beautiful, perfected, desirable form – all the while displaying his strength. The very ability of the woman to achieve this form is dependent on a leading, dominant man no matter how strong she may be.



Image 12: Paso doble

(Source – Setenta 2015)

Culturally speaking, 'such self-assertion and exertion of force have been reserved for males' (Johnson 2007: 23), with female-as-subject often missing from the discussion. In the lead-follow relation, readers will notice a subtle erasure of feminine subjectivity and agency, albeit in somewhat ambiguous terms. It is not explicitly stated that women are to appear 'weak', just that the man is to appear 'stronger than the girl'. This power play between the dancing couple is not only endorsed by a social ratification of alpha-type masculinity but, at the same time, a certain hostility towards 'effeminateness', even when it is only implied or expected. This is further hemmed in and disciplined by the rules of competition.

4.6 Reinforcing the 'Male Gaze'

Stereotypical behaviour becomes extremely difficult to counter because such images are quickly internalised by viewers and projected onto subject positions, whether seen or performed. Subject positions determine for individuals not only how they think they should act but, also, how the other should respond to their actions. The

way in which this is gendered in partner subjectivities seems to be very much under, and for, what has become widely known since second-wave feminism as 'the male gaze', coined in Mulvey's (2012) work on mainstream cinema. The 'male gaze' is a theoretical concept explaining what ensues in being or doing when viewers are invited into the viewing perspective of a heterosexual, cis-gendered male. In ballroom and Latin dance partnering, audiences look at the masculine body as actively indulging the masculine ego while the feminine body is passively indulged, meeting the need/demand/desires of that masculine ego.

Moreover, the dancers', as well as the audience's, attention is directed towards the feminine body in a particular way. Mulvey (2012) notes that 'the look' is usually captured on three different levels: first, as an object for the camera, which is inherently voyeuristic and 'male'; second, as an erotic object for both of the characters, with the man doing most of the looking; third, for the audience, based on the first two. Mulvey (2012: 62) continues to explain:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

In ballroom and Latin dance, the feminine body is styled for, or presented to, the audience in brightly coloured, sparkling costumes and heels that accentuate and expose her physical attributes in an eroticised way, thereby inviting viewers to

indulge in her idealised, feminised form, as Mulvey suggests (2012). The woman is impeccably groomed with flawlessly sculpted hair, dramatic stage make-up, and smooth, shiny, tanned skin. This grooming is done ritualistically before every performance, as performing dancers would attest to, with the greatest attention to detail (see Image 13a below).



Image 13a: Hair and make-up in feminine presentation; Image 13b: Typical masculine presentation in ballroom

(Sources – Image 13a: Briceno 2019; Image 13b: Celebrity 8x10s 2014)

Associations between the mimicked sexual act and any negative affect such as pain, disgust (Stekelenburg 2018), or messy corporeality (Braddy and Huff 2018) are never present in such imaging. Any sexualised (re)presentation in this performance context is usually extremely sanitised or contrived to the point of over-acting characterised by exaggerated gestures and facial expressions. Moreover, the masculine lead is often muted into a largely unremarkable and unmarked black-and-white background, emphasising that the feminine body is the entity towards which one must look. Many critical writers have commented on this non-explicit (re)presentation of maleness as such, with Bourdieu (2001: 12) describing it as

'always metaphorically present but very rarely named'. In terms of centre-periphery movement of the pair, the man is the anchor and the female is the movable part. Not only does the masculine lead anchor or guide his feminine follow around the dance floor but, in the way he *presents* her, he invites the audience to gaze at her through his lens. Typically, the woman does not present the man. Furthermore, I would argue that, in viewing the feminine body in this way, the feminine viewer assumes a kind of temporary cross-identification with the masculine subject. This identification does not serve to assume masculine subjectivity, but to familiarise herself with, or teach herself, that which is required of her as object in order to receive the masculine attention and indulgence which is assumed to be the woman's goal in a heteronormative arrangement of desire. Furthermore, the implication is that the performativity of feminine desire is not to celebrate her pleasure in and of itself; it serves to legitimise masculine virility and prowess.

Accordingly, the masculine lead always emerges in this imaging as the dominant power within a constructed 'gentleman' fantasy, and the 'lady' remains passive to the active gaze from the 'gentleman'. Mulvey's (2012) work would support this observation in that she claims the masculine gaze typically takes precedence over the feminine gaze, reflecting an underlying power asymmetry in the dance binary. Sullivan (2003) has noted that critiques of Mulvey's (2012) theory of the gaze have rendered it untenable, specifically when it has been remarked that masculine males (in cinema) are also objectified or the viability of an alternative theory of gay/lesbian spectatorship has been explored. However, Mulvey's (2012) analysis, which emphasises fixity and singularity, works well here. Mainstream ballroom and Latin does not convincingly present the gendered partnership as the scopic point for the

LGBTQ+ spectator's gaze; it is overtly regulated as heteronormative and cis-gendered in positionality, posturing, presentation, and portrayal. Alternatives to the narrowly defined and (re)presented 'gentleman-lady' pair are not part of the main competition or showpiece, although performers and viewers who present or express as 'gentlemen and ladies' cannot be excluded from the debate.

Note again, as with the dancers themselves, the actual sex or sexuality of individuals does not preclude them from being drawn into the heteronormative 'male' gaze directed towards the feminine-as-object. It simply suggests the possibility that bisexual/gay/trans/intersex/queer viewers may be viewing the masculine performer as an object for themselves as well. This has little to do with masculine performativity as it presents in mainstream imaging. Given the virtually unquestioned heterosexism and patriarchy in society at the time of modern ballroom and Latin's early stages of popularity and formalising, it is untenable that either LGBTQ+ dance partnerships or viewers were ever considered in initial formulations – either of dance conventions or of rules. Both the roles of dancers, as well as the expectations of audiences, were probably introduced within a rigidly enforced, exclusively heteronormative partnership in mind, no matter what materialities underlay them. At present, these roles and (re)presentations feed into some uncomfortable stereotypes of a 'fixity of aggressive male sexual impulses' (Whelehan 1995: 79) and the cis-gendered female's responsibility to meet these needs.

The 'male gaze' seems to offer yet another public instruction of how to (re)produce the construction and control of heteronormative, eroticised bodies. Beyond that, I would argue that the relational figuring of masculine and feminine movements

depicted in ballroom and Latin dance does not really celebrate the feminine body in and of herself as some would claim; the movement is contained within a dependency on the movement of the couple. This says something significant about masculine presence. Berger (2008: 45–46) notes this phenomenon (which echoes the point in Chapter Two):

The promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual – but its object is always exterior to the man. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always toward a power which he exercises on others.

Johnson (2007: 23) has noted studies in which there has been documentation that feminine physicality has been constrained in cultures, precisely because expansive movement was traditionally seen to be 'unladylike'. With women and girls more actively involved in sports and able to assert themselves with more facility in contemporary society, much has changed in the socialisation of girls. The strong, forceful woman is not as much of a social anomaly as in years gone by, although one should acknowledge there is some way to go in the battle for gender equality in numerous social milieus around the globe.

4.7 Queering Eroticised Spaces and Cultural Visibility of the 'Other'

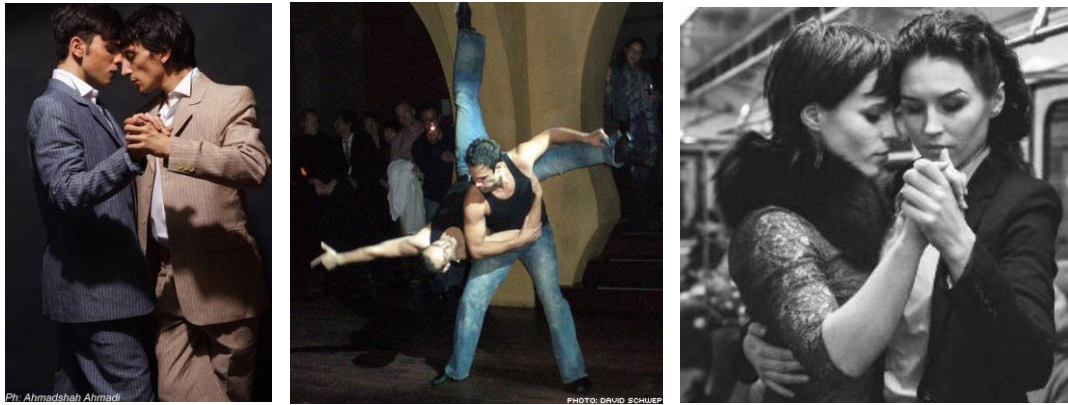
Gender performativity in traditional partner dancing is expected to be unambiguous for the audience. Men must simply *do* masculine and women must simply *do* feminine. It seems the inability to interchange masculine/feminine roles constructs

stable, coherent subjects/objects and fosters the regulation and repetition of gender relations. Johnson would perhaps recognise this in what he terms 'the projected quality of motion' (2007: 24). The relationality of that motion occurs within a hierarchy of masculine over feminine and heterosexual over any other sexuality. Kelly (2010) maintains effectively that, in actuality, discourses on the body do not necessarily coincide with those on sexuality and, given the above discussion, I would assert that they should be very clearly distinguished.

It would seem that a multiplicity of gender identifications could disrupt the reification of these hierarchies in order to allow the creation of dynamic and intersecting identifications which could rewrite the ascendancy of a singular gender designation. Queer ballroom and Latin, for example, is practised in a way that avoids heteronormative codes and interchanges the traditional leader-follower movements in the practice of 'switching' (Davis 2015: 143). Steps, figures, and body movements are fluid in order to facilitate open-role, non-binary, or same-sex partnering (Davis 2015). However, it should be noted that queer ballroom and Latin and same-sex ballroom and Latin are not usually part of the mainstream competition or showcase. Both forms, while they are gaining in popularity, are not widespread norms, only occurring with 'low frequency' and often being 'treated as a sensation' (Pettyjohn 2007: 5).

Regarding the social construction of heterosexualised (re)presentations of desire, they are not only normative, but also appropriated as the ideal. The 'one gentleman and one lady' partnership with which audiences have become so thoroughly familiar is not only perceived as common sense, but is simultaneously extended to value-

laden (re)presentations of an ideal relationality as natural, healthy, beautiful, good, socially acceptable, sensual, passionate, loving, genuine, and so on. As Fiske (1989: 119) reminds readers: 'Clichés bear ideological norms, which is why they are such powerful constructors and circulators of common sense.' Many instances of an alternative or non-heterosexualised (re)presentation of desire are presented as 'carnavalesque' – a celebration of pleasure or entertainment (Fiske 1989: 82). These performances are often laden with over-the-top humour, drag, and caricature – highlighting the entertainment aspect of the queer partnership but also the parodic, thereby downplaying any normalising possibility in its reproduction beyond the stage or screen. To be clear, I do not wish to demonise drag or carnivalesque performances in any way, as they have an important place in entertainment cultures and the politics thereof; I simply want to explore the possibility of routinely endorsing difference in the mainstream space, which I support on a number of levels, not only in dance subcultures. I am claiming that, from observation, displaying unparodied desire between partners of a differentiated sex/gender seems difficult to accommodate in the mainstream space. Consider, for example, the following images which display same-sex desire in queer tango in a non-spectacularised, legitimised way. The partners exhibit passion and desire for one another that, while it can be considered beautiful, is not usually witnessed in primetime television programming. (Incidentally, one might notice that in Image 14, page 190, the traditional 'lead' is, in fact, the shorter partner).



Images 14, 15, & 16: Queer tango

(Sources – Image 14: *Buenos Aires Stay* 2013; Image 15: *Bryant* 2011; Image 16: *Queer Tango Scotland* 2015)

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 10) comment on this focusing effect of metaphorical (re)presentations in terms of ‘highlighting and hiding’, which results in a partial structuring of one concept in terms of another. In dance imaging, this focusing effect on the heterosexualised couple has implications for people’s understanding of who desires and how they desire. When queer and same-sex performances are pervasively treated as sensationalist, what is highlighted is the performance, the unnaturalness, the extravaganza of such desire; on the other hand, heterosexualised (re)presentations of desire are represented as truly intimate, real, and wholly believable. In short, queer partnering, viewed in this way, is not simply seen as different, but inferior; it is made strange. Consequently, it is extremely rare that, for example, an openly queer partnership would be displayed in popular shows or competitions.⁸² In this way, the heterosexualised partnership becomes the seriously-taken norm while every other kind of partnership must be something else – something that needs a special framing, a different kind of justification, some added

⁸² An exception would be Chaz Bono and partner, Lacey Schwimmer, on the 13th season of *Dancing with the Stars* on ABC in 2011. Bono’s trans status was known and referenced in the media at the time. However, this partnership still performed as a man and woman within the usual heterosexualised steps and figures. They did not exchange roles or interchange steps and patterns.

explanation, or some distinctive contextualisation. The heteronormativity becomes the repeated and repeatable action, while queer partnerships are consistently relegated to the marginalised zones of otherness and peculiarity. Imagining difference as legitimate desire or relationality and, therefore, naturally occupying part of the mainstream is a rarity for choreographers, dancers, and audiences. As Lakoff and Turner (1989: 33) claim: 'the power of the [artful construction] resides in the relentlessness of the characterization, whatever the metaphor'. Queer and non-binary ballroom performance legitimates and values the authenticity of queer and non-binary desire as normal and not a 'subversive act' (Butler 1990). Conceivably, in terms of cultural visibility and in the Real, then, if there was a freeing up of the sex/gender binary, there would probably be a lot more ambiguity and multiplicity (Fausto-Sterling 2000) in both posturing and presentation of identity formations, in general. A plurality of gender and sexuality expression in single individuals would entail a plurality of relationality between them as well, and 'hard' or 'soft' (Ingram and Waller 2014: 5) binary expressions attached to race, class, age, and so on would not be fixed.

In terms of racialised intersections, while many popular and competition dances did not originate in white, affluent society, they were appropriated and transformed for this sector of society by, for example, Vernon and Irene Castle, Maurice and Florence Walton, and others early in the twentieth century (Malnig 1992). The actual cultural contribution of Africans and 'Other' cultures to this history was largely hidden and unacknowledged for some time (Heckscher 2009: 19). So, while the contribution of these cultural groups clearly shared responsibility in forming these identities and (re)presentations, they have been persistently excluded from the tradition because

they were perceived as lacking the moral and social legitimacy to be part of the mainstream displays thereof. This phenomenon continues to this day, with many different groups simply not present in professional dance. Brown (2008: 171) concurs:

But these moments of cultural 'exchange' were not necessarily moments of respectful recognition, as illustrated by Irene Castle herself. 'We get our new dances from the Barbary Coast. Of course, they reach New York in a very primitive state and have to be considerably toned down before they can be used in the drawing room,' Irene Castle reported to the *Dancing Times*. 'There is one just arrived now – it is still very, very crude – and it is called "shaking the Shimmy",' she continues. 'It's a nigger dance, of course, and it appears to be a slow walk with frequent twitching of the shoulders. The teachers may try and make something of it.' Irene Castle's explanation of the dance that has 'just arrived' (from where? And who 'delivered' it to the 'teachers'?) reveals the processes of mimesis and erasure in popular performance, the right to represent.

Certainly, this process of sanitising the exotic and the primitive – which formed the point of fascination in the first place – for the sake of acceptability and respectability forms an ironic double bind, a tension that is familiar at the level of the popular. McMains (2009: 303) describes a similar reforming of a 'stereotype of excessive and deviant Latin sexuality' for modern Latin dances so that Westerners could 'assum[e] a mask of Latin-ness' without 'the burden of racial discrimination':

They can enjoy pelvic thrusts or lustful embraces judged to be too wild, sexual or vulgar within their own cultural frame under the guise of 'Latin' dance. The fact that the ballroom Latin dances have little in

common with actual dance practices in Latin America has been of little relevance to their success in the West. Their marketability depends on their fantasy of Latin-ness they enable Westerners to sustain, one that allows them to project their own anxieties about sexuality and physicality onto an exotic 'Other'.

Dance halls/clubs have traditionally been a space in which people could gather and engage in this liberating subculture in order to escape the repressive conventions of society. Fiske (1989: 78) comments on similar emancipatory sentiments regarding the development of the department store in the late nineteenth century, which 'provided the first public space where a woman could safely and legitimately go without a male escort'. Such 'escapist' accounts are nothing new to authors in several disciplines and are noted by, among others, historians such as Grider (2018: 21). He investigated these quests for sexual freedom in his discussion of nineteenth-century Pacific mariners' unconventional, sometimes extreme behaviour, characterised by 'an erotic obsession with nudity and sexual pleasure' and an 'erotic obsession with violence and cannibalism'. Grider's (2018) work exemplifies one incidence of a relatively common occurrence throughout human history. At regular intervals, freeing oneself from the constraints of civilised society, domestic life, and the proper conduct required to participate fully therein is a recurring theme in the human experience. Alternative spaces have long been created or pursued for this purpose, with many people returning home and participating in conventionalised living before and after accessing such cordoned-off spaces or far-off places. If transgressions are found out, there is often an excuse akin to temporary insanity. Tate (2015: 50) appropriately terms these types of apologies as 'white men gone wild in the tropics' in her discussion of black women's bodies in the media. Assorted literature is peppered with accounts of eroticism and decadence often attributed to

appeals of the exotic or the primitive, as well as being entangled with imperial and colonial legacies (Davis 2015). Within ballroom and Latin dance codification, however, the original intent to escape social conformity resulted in a standardisation that has, for all intents and purposes, significantly constrained development in the popular space. Innovations have been left to the margins and other dance forms or non-mainstream divisions. What has perhaps been lacking in society in general is a will (or an audacity) to disrupt everyday, popular spaces in which hegemony is born.

4.8 Conclusion

The culturally created and sustained models of gender/sex/desire do not typically take the form of a dynamic, diverse, spontaneous, undefinable, complex, negotiable, indeterminate way of being. Lakoff and Johnson claim: 'The most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphorical structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture' (2003: 22).⁸³ Thus, cultural product shows deeply entrenched, long-held values. On this view, one would have to accept that the '*masculine is up; feminine is down*' metaphor is one that exists within a coherent system as exemplified in imaging of ballroom and Latin on popular screens. This is not to say that the masculine-feminine value *actually* exists in culture, but it is embedded and consistent within a *metaphorical* system. The resurgence of this traditional dance form in Western popular culture seems to signify not only a societal preoccupation with conventional gender/sex/body rhetoric, but also a re-validation of a heteronormative aesthetic of desire. Such trends in Western popular culture may

83 Critics of Bono – like Monica Cole, director of OneMillionMoms.com – went as far as to tell *Inside Edition*, 'We will not be able to watch the show [*Dancing with the Stars*] with Chaz on there. This is going to be very confusing for children, and should not be included in their cast'. Indeed, the only context in which 'hypersexualisation' concerns is brought up in the context of ballroom and Latin is with regards to child or young competitors/participants. For full article, see Connelly et al. (2011).

be cause for concern because they are most often representative of larger social, political, and cultural frictions. Hopefully, the need for a greater understanding of, and expanded discourse on, sexual difference and its (re)presentations will not lose out to prevalent commercial demands of media markets. If society is not able to create mainstream spaces that display multiple gendering and heterogeneous ways of being, it would be fruitful to, at least, elevate societal consciousness regarding stereotypes that endorse discriminatory or hegemonic practices while parading as truth. The task of reimagining the aesthetics of desire lies with producers, actors, and consumers of popular culture material and media alike. There would have to be some recognition that heteronormative performance does not possess, in itself, some sort of good, value, or desirability that queer performance does not. Furthermore, discourses on sex, gender, and desire should be differentiated clearly and consciously to avoid an unnecessary conflation of concepts within complex metaphorical systems. Hopefully, this will facilitate a dialectic treatment of ideality in each of these categories so as to combat ever-looming hegemonies in society and culture, especially where the materialities of personal choices, freedoms, and subjectivities are at stake. I now turn to commercial hip-hop video imaging to further develop the discussion towards raced or racialised aspects of erotic performance. I question whether raced performative frames are, in fact, a powerful and successful challenge by the previously 'excluded and abject realm' (Butler 1993: xxiv) of black sexual self-representation to the symbolic hegemony of white desirability imaginaries and norms that persist in mainstream spaces.

CHAPTER FIVE⁸⁴

'Black Man Taking No Losses'⁸⁵

The Place of Race in Erotic Performative Frames of Commercial Hip-Hop Videos

It's the four corners that surround you: the guns, the drugs, sex and the blood. The box is planted in your mind, so that's all you will see as a kid and as an adult growing up in society ... So that box is really keeping you institutionalised, believing that your world is the only one out there ... The same thing that makes it special is what makes it tragic. What makes Compton special is attitude. Even though people may put down the gang culture, these gang cultures actually come from home grown families that stand for something. They're just misled. But we have this pride buried deep in our hearts and our souls that's just waiting to be lit any chance we get. This is fire of not only dignity but also talent and creativity ... my ability to still connect with mainstream ears or have a universal appeal just comes from how I was raised. The way I approach records – from my slang, my imperfection in my speech or the way I'm talking – there's a message there, but it's actually also human at the same time. It comes from a unique, genuine place rather than somebody pointing a finger at you. (Lamar in *Ebony* 2015: Online)

5.1 Introduction

The citations above are excerpts from a 2015 interview in *Ebony* with Kendrick Lamar, hailed by many as 'the new king of hip hop' (Kornhaber 2015: Online). In the

84 I write this chapter from the perspective of a consumer in the global market who bought and loved this music long before considering the particular political and cultural histories from which it emerged. Many worldwide consumers, regardless of race, nationality, and ethnicity, consume hip-hop as a metonymical container and transmitter of 'black culture' (Rodman 2012). This framing brings up important ontological contestations of raced performance and performativity.

85 Contained in the lyrics of 'King Kunta' from the album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Lamar 2015).

interview, Lamar – viewed as one of hip-hop’s finest MCs⁸⁶ (Baltin 2017; Platon 2017) – explains his take on, by now, very familiar themes connected to (re)presentations of the music genre and lifestyle⁸⁷ which have not escaped the critical attention of academics and lay people: hypersexuality⁸⁸, hypermasculinity, sexism, excessive materialism, and gratuitous violence/crime usually associated with gang culture (Chaney and Mincey 2014; Collins 2006; Watkins 2005). In this chapter, I consider some figurative markers in performative frames of erotic performance⁸⁹ within the context of these concerns but with particular reference to the very problematic notion of *hypersexuality/sexual excess* and its rather peculiar connection to race, so commonly critiqued in the aesthetic construction of commercial hip-hop videos or popular media, in general (Dines and Humez 2015; Forman and Neal 2012; hooks in The New School 2014). Unlike ballroom and Latin performance, where this concern is usually raised in terms of children who are perceived to be too young to express in such overtly sexualised ways, hip-hop imaging is often described as ‘excessive’ (Baldwin 2012: 230) and even harmful. This is especially evident in the work of critical feminist scholars (Collins 2006; Rose 2008; Sharpley-Whiting 2008). It is particularly evident in the work of those who are concerned with sociocultural problematics linked to violence against women, and intersectional theorists such as Crenshaw (1991: Online) focus on media representations of women of colour as a possible incitement of this violence within ‘overlapping structures of subordination’. Many critics lament the loss of the political origins of hip-

86 An MC, M.C., or Emcee is a term which has been in use since the 1970s, and in hip-hop usually denotes a lead performer or rapper in a hip-hop or rap performance.

87 Lifestyle, in this sense, is explained by Hess (2007: 22–23) as follows: ‘rap is something that you do, but hip-hop is something you live’.

88 In critiques, the term hypersexuality is not used in the psychological diagnostic sense of ‘hypersexual disorder’, sometimes linked to theories of sexual addiction (Kafka 2010).

89 To reiterate, the focus here is specifically on the visual performance – not aural lyrics or music – which allows for the identification of conceptually interesting performative frames that may be connected by commonly identifiable symbols and patterns.

hop with a sense of nostalgia (cf. Hess 2007; Rose in Cornell University Library 2009; Watkins 2005). Concepts of 'hyper' or 'excess' necessarily presuppose a boundary of normality or acceptability in terms of desire and sexual expression. What precisely falls inside or outside that boundary, or why it should, is decidedly unclear in critiques on commercial hip-hop (re)presentation, especially in terms of what constitutes performances of *black* sexuality framed as a 'hard' (McLeod 2012: 171) performance denoting power in *black* cultural self-representation – hip-hop's metaphorical ontology. Apart from a predominantly black performer base and the designation of the genre as 'black music' (Rodman 2012: 187), there is little to suggest that any of the performance movement elements in hip-hop can be attributed to 'blackness' per se.

The repeated and repeatable stylisation of eroticised black bodies (in commercial hip-hop) can be seen as staking an authoritative claim on the mainstream music industry by mostly black performers who dominate the genre and represent desire on their own terms in their own way. While hip-hop has some transracial expression with white performers like Eminem⁹⁰ and Iggy Azalea⁹¹ selling well, non-black top sellers are significantly in the minority in mainstream videos and their 'authenticity' has been questioned (Rodman 2012: 187). In Lakoff's (2002) discussion on stereotypes, successful, non-black, mainstream rappers, like Eminem, would be 'salient exemplars' – sometimes framed as 'anti-ideal prototypes' (Lakoff 2002: 10)

90 Eminem is a top-selling artist who dominates in the mainstream and commercial hip-hop video scene. Hess (2007: 24) argues that 'while Eminem emphasises the poverty of his youth', his identity 'does not meet traditional concepts of realness through blackness'.

91 Azalea is a white Australian who has garnered some backlash for attaining popularity and commercial success as an outsider who raps with a black Southern inflection. The industry has been criticised with regards to her success for 'using whiteness to sell blackness' (Richards 2015: Online). Another currently popular white artist, Macklemore, is classed as alternative (cf. Oware 2018). Both are not representative of the majority of performers in the mainstream but, after Grammy acclaim, raised fears about 'black erasure' and questions about who the genre 'belong[s] to' (Richards 2015: Online).

as Azalea has been on occasion (Oware 2018). Interestingly, Azalea certainly does not fill the white desirable body norm alluded to in Harding's (2008) characterisation at the beginning of Chapter One – Azalea's shape, dress, speech inflection, and posturing are very much in line with commercial hip-hop stylisations and idealisations similar to artists like Nicki Minaj (see Image 30, p. 235). Black male rappers are a large 'central subcategory' (Lakoff 2002: 9) of the general category of, say, rappers, while black female rappers are significantly in the minority and might form part of a smaller 'subcategory' by virtue of their gender, not race. On the other hand, performative frames can also be seen to reproduce problematic social (or sexual) stereotypes attached to the category of black people defined only by race. Lakoff (2002: 10) explains the problem: 'This is a model, widespread in a culture, for making snap judgments – judgments without reflective thought – about an entire category, by virtue of suggesting that the stereotype is the typical case.' As already alluded to, theorists such as Rose (1994, 2008) express these concerns. Stereotyping the entire category of black people by what one might see in mainstream hip-hop imaging would qualify as such a judgement, and care needs to be taken in how prototypes are applied.

hooks (in The New School 2014: Online) claims that black women in media cultures are routinely seen to be ready to 'fuck on the minute' with minimal (re)presentation of the affective components of desire in popular culture (re)presentation, generally, and in hip-hop, specifically. This dialectic between sameness and difference may be seen to be embedded in what Tate (2005) terms a 'race performativity'. Tate (2015) expands upon Butler's theory of gender performativity and addresses the reproduction of the black woman's body as multiply displaced:

Hers [the Black woman] was a raced, classed, gendered, sexualized and aged docile body caught in an interpellative matrix between discourses on 'race', dominant body politics and aesthetics, against which Black women's multiple bodies struggle to emerge as others of representations. This interpellative matrix attempts to silence Black derived aesthetics ... but there were always alter/native-bodies which co-existed with the dominant view of ideal women's bodies as thin, frail and white. (2015: 3)

Her view could be applied to the performative elements in images of black eroticisation. These "race"-ing stylisation practices ... and [their] various wilfully produced embodiments' (Tate 2016: 33) may be rejecting and destabilising normative discourses on bodies. At the same time, though, some of these practices may also rest on somewhat predictable exclusionary politics and hegemonies which shape stereotyping and ideology that engender copious alienations and exploitations of black people in broader society and culture. As Tate (2015: 7) proposes, the lens of race performativity allows for such (re)presentations to be analysed as 'both performative failure and productive of excess'. Some critiques hold that ongoing subjugation of the black erotic body is exploited for monetary gain (hooks in The New School 2014), others contend that claiming and embodying these stereotypes is reclaiming sexual agency (Lee 2010), while critics like Morgan (2012) defend these representations as choices that are conscious and preferred, liked, or valued. I will now consider hip-hop performance and some of its repeated stylisations and question whether it is advantageous to frame them as 'black' at all.

5.2 Narrowing Raced and Gendered Characterisations in Commercial Hip-Hop Performance

While the music of hip-hop is well celebrated, the lyrics and lifestyle have come under mixed reviews. The imaging receives less attention and, when it does, it often focuses on the exploitation of women and problematic (re)presentations of masculinity contained in lyrics. Oware (2018: 47), in his analysis of masculinity in rap names 'braggadocio', 'sexism', 'misogyny', and 'homophobia' as central categories. Such negatively framed categories may be interpreted as performance strategies that 'Others' use to (re)claim pride and dignity in the face of ongoing social, political, and economic inequality that is rooted in a complex racial history of sexuality in the United States of America. This reclamation resonates in many racialised contexts across the globe and may well be the reason for high popularity and sales of the music genre. Many forms of social inequality are unmistakably racialised in their various incarnations across geographies. In the United States of America, connections between social struggles of this ilk and early hip-hop origins are well documented in scholarly literature on the music genre (cf. Gray 1995; Grossberg 1997; Rose 1994). However, global consumers and emulators may be unaware of these origins. Lamar's (*Ebony* 2015) sentiments above echo the difficulties associated with envisioning and realising alternatives in a (racially, gendered) homogenised space, similar to the points mentioned in the previous chapter.

That commercial hip-hop has tapped into some of those gendered, raced, and classed performative elements and capitalised on them handsomely is evident from the imaging in this chapter. Alongside that success, though, appraisals that question the problematic consumption of stereotypical imaging retailed in commercial hip-hop

(cf. Kitwana 2002; Rose 2008; Sharpley-Whiting 2008) or any other cultural effect, for that matter, are not without merit. However, I would agree with Rose (in Cornell University Library 2009: Online) that one would also want to exercise some caution in critique so as not to contribute to an ‘already existing marginalisation’. More forceful critiques in the post-feminist vein take further steps, incorporating the idea that *equality*, as a generalisable principle, cannot be selectively applied according to different identity markers or categories of sex/gender, race/ethnicity, class, size, ability, age, and so on. Morgan (2012), in a bold claiming of her brand of ‘hip-hop feminism’, expresses a decidedly more anti-second-wave sentiment as follows:

Holding on to that protective mantle of victimization requires a hypocrisy and self-censorship I’m no longer willing to give. Calling rappers out for their sexism without mentioning the complicity of the 100 or so video-hos that turned up – G-string in hand – for the shoot; or defending women’s reproductive rights without examining the very complicated issue of *male choice* – specifically the inherent unfairness in denying men the right to choose whether or not *they want* to parent; or discussing the physical and emotional damage of sexism without examining the utterly foul and unloving ways black women treat each other ultimately means fronting like the shit brothers have with them is any less complex, difficult, or painful than the shit we have with ourselves. I am down, however, with a feminism that demands we assume responsibility for our lives (2012: 418, emphasis in original).

Indeed, critical writing on hip-hop is bringing important perspectives to the problem of racialised (re)presentation in media and popular culture and how it relates to complex affects of pleasure, sexuality, and desire. Since 2017, hip-hop (and R&B) has been recognised as the biggest-selling music genre in the world, and its popularity, distribution, and sales continue to expand globally, especially with the

proliferation of streaming services and convergence possibilities (Caulfield 2018; McIntyre 2017; *Nielsen* 2018). McIntyre (2017) states: 'In fact, R&B/hip-hop is almost as popular on streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music than the next two genres (rock and pop) combined.' I will not get into the finer distinctions of music genres here as this is a visual image study on (re)presented bodies. Although some race and gender diversity within the genre is noted, at the level of the popular, hip-hop usually incorporates rap, and these (re)presentations have become considerably narrowed in the mainstream (Rose 1994, 2008)⁹². The portrayals that Rose (*ibid*) references are stereotypical but their (re)production is extremely lucrative (*Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* 2007). As Steffans (2005: xiv) claims: 'We live in a world where the only goals at the end of the day are profit and top ten spots on the *Billboard* charts.' Hip-hop is not only a 'thriving but [also a] hypercompetitive economy' which forms 'strong synergies' between the commercial hip-hop industry, other entertainment areas, and corporate America (Watkins 2005: 58). These 'strong synergies' have drawn hip-hop culture away from margins of popular culture and continue to release mass product for sale that extends far beyond the music on a global scale (Watkins 2005: 61). Critics have long noted the contestations around commercialisation which one may think of as one development within a series of developments and transformations in the hip-hop industry.

92 R&B is a separately named, but usually connected, music genre (for example, Trace Urban calls itself a 'hip-hop and R&B' channel), with some hip-hop artists successfully crossing over between the two genres. 'Rhythm and blues', however, is a distinct style of record production, incorporating pop, soul, funk, hip-hop, and electronic influences and which is celebrated for its rich, sumptuous vocals. R&B is not the focus of this chapter and hip-hop, which includes rap, DJing, sampling, scratching, beat-boxing, and so on is also associated with an entire lifestyle/culture (George 2012; cf. Chaney and Mincey 2014).

5.3 Hip-Hop Evolutions: Shifting Value Attachments in Authenticity, Popular Appeal, Commercial Success, and Critical Acclaim

American hip-hop has always been associated with a deep-seated sense of authenticity, metaphorically expressed in the phrase ‘keeping it real’ (Chang 2005; Forman 2012a; Hess 2007). The discourse of authenticity and its connection to truth-telling, regardless of how complex and contested it has become in the ‘authenticity debates’ (Neal 2012b: 69), forms part of hip-hop’s global appeal in the sense of the ‘human’ element, its rejection of white/elite idealism or white ‘respectability politics’ (Lee 2010: ix), and its tie to the Real. The repeated citationality of *authenticity* in hip-hop may well overshadow the *performance* of the script.

Following an era in which political discourse included forceful voices from the civil rights and black power movements against white-dominated America, a younger generation found a different way in which to converse their materialities and bring uncomfortable conversations about black urban or street life out into the mainstream (*Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* 2007; Forman and Neal 2012; Rose 1994). Gil Scott-Heron is an artist frequently credited with influencing the beginnings of hip-hop; his memorable words allude to the kind of social alienation from which the music genre emerged: ‘We are tired of praying and marching and thinking and learning. Brothers want to start cutting and shooting and stealing and burning’ (cited in Baram 2014: 80).⁹³ Anderson (2015: 14) comments on hip-hop’s early developments:

Despite my use of 1520 Sedgwick as a symbol for the introduction of hip-hop to the world, scholars that have documented the history of the

⁹³ These lyrics are from Gil Scott-Heron’s *Evolution*. Concerns about misogynistic imaging and lyrics became a concern later in the 1980s (Baram 2014).

culture create clear links to the African diaspora. The South Bronx may have been the birthplace but it was Caribbean dancehall music and culture that fertilized the seed from which hip-hop grew.

The culture and signification of hip-hop has come a long way from what Williams (1981: 200) calls 'early stages of particular forms'. There are expected permutations of innovation, development, and process moving the genre away from its origins in terms of style, space, place, and time. Emerging from social conflagrations of conflicted community dynamics, economic and political tensions, very high youth unemployment rates, and the problematic protectionism of gang culture, it would seem that communities and people who are disaffected in late modern systems of capitalism or globalisation find resonance in the music genre as an 'authentic' voice of 'the people'. Hip-hop translates well beyond the American market but still retains many elements of the early performance styles. When one considers the posturing and gesturing, the confrontational way in which MCs perform (exemplified in Images 17, 18, and 19 on page 206), such targeted gesticulations often represent movements of people who are frustrated with their story being silenced or misunderstood. The hand movements and pointing (including 'gun' pointing) direct the focus of what is being said to the camera/audience, rarely turning their gaze away. These gesticulations are representative of projection, expansion, and forceful action typically associated with demonstrative, if not aggressive, masculinity – much like that exhibited by men in rock (Johnson 2007). While it appears that these MCs have something significant to say and they will get audience attention, they will be heard but their movements and speech/lyrics are not directed at the women counterparts in the frames (who are usually behind or beside them as in Images 20,

21, 22, 24, 25, and 26 [pp. 213, 228, and 231]). Their movements are purposefully directed at the audience as follows:



Images 17, 18, & 19: Posturing and gesturing

(Sources – Image 17: Genower and Cain 2017; Image 18: Mendelson 2016; Image 19: Pereira 1990)

‘Keeping it real’ (Forman and Neal 2012) carries an implication that these portrayals are *real*, *accurate*, or *true* (re)presentations of black, urban life or sexuality, suggesting that these personations are inspired by materiality or have material import.⁹⁴ Interestingly, if one contrasts the costuming in Images 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 (pages 206 and 215), men protagonists do not often wear elaborate costuming and make-up as the women performers do in Images 28, 29, and 30 (page 237). These portrayals are reminiscent of gendering in popular culture images more generally (including those in the previous and following chapters that showcase masculine dominance).

Frankly, as with all (art and) performance, it would be hard to tell how much is based on, or involves, real life or actual experience (Eysenck and Nias 1978), and this would vary among artists as well (Hess 2007). Added to that, the quandary of

⁹⁴ I mean this in the familiar sense of ‘art imitates life’ and the complexities involved in connecting entertainment forms to social realities (Jones 2013).

analysing performance is that it is difficult to determine whether what is being portrayed in imaging is showing consumers how society *is* (either in a descriptive, exposing, or celebratory mode), or commenting on how it *should* be (either directly or indirectly), or, indeed, satirising these phenomena with some ‘outrageous sexual humor’ (Crenshaw 1991: 257). Suffice it to say that, if one cannot make a direct connection between mediated (re)presentations (which are often overtly stylised and purposely distort elements of the Real) and social behaviour, one cannot make a direct connection to political veracity either. Multiple differences in interpretation demonstrate this tension between preservation and creative freedom well. Hess (2012: 644) references Benjamin who argues that ‘mechanical reproductions lack the artist’s aura, which can be perceived only in a one-of-a-kind original’. Authenticity, framed as having something important, real, or true to say, seems to get lost in mass production and mass distribution, which is assumed to be motivated by making money. However, I would not judge either motivation as good or bad. Politically speaking, Bourdieu (1996) offers a more useful caution to consumers about the temptation to believe the (re)presentation and conflate it with the Real:

The political dangers inherent in the ordinary use of television [or similar visual media] is that images have the extraordinary capacity to produce what literary critics call a *reality* effect. They show things and make people believe in what they show. (1996: 21, emphasis in original)

It is difficult to deny, downplay, or excuse the conundrum, particularly if people’s materialities embedded in socio-political problems and resistance are connected to, or conflated with, performance, have affective import, and are then capitalised upon for monetary gain. Hess (2012: 644) remarks that hip-hop artists and musicians have

lost some control in the production and marketing processes and argues that ‘new business models challenge this loss of control as artists move between corporate and independent labels’. In this way, the repeatable personation itself might skew consumers’ understanding of a separation between mediation and reality (Eysenck and Nias 178; Fahs 2011; Stearns 2009). This is not personification as when a ‘physical object is further specified as a person’ (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 33) but when a performer (or performance/characterisation) is conflated with a real person. Hess (2012) argues that independent labels offer an effective counter to the mainstream or big-name production enterprises. Fiske (1989: 10) states that ‘the relationship between popular culture and the forces of commerce and profit is highly problematic’, and in the evolution of hip-hop, the quarrel rages on. Certainly, the more the global market expands and flows, the less consumers will be aware of either authentic origins or transnational reconfigurations of the genre (Gilroy 2012). Hess (2007: 37) explains that because ‘back in the day’ authenticity narratives are prominent and nostalgic in tone, ‘top-selling mainstream artists must prove that they maintain connections to hip-hop’s original culture’.

Related to these tensions, hip-hop also contains performative elements of ‘resistance’ (Dyson 2007; Forman and Neal 2012; Kitwana 2002, 2008) which come from ‘the streets’ – in other words, real communities with genuine struggles. These scripts have been taken up in many contexts. While hip-hop sometimes celebrates street beginnings in a ‘rags to riches’ (Hess 2007: 41) formulaic script, it also celebrates the so-called ‘imperfections’ – as Lamar (2015) describes in his interview with *Ebony* (and in his *King Kunta* video in Image 21, p. 213) – in an embrace of the

anti-ideal or non-ideal prototype. Regarding the importance of 'street' beginnings and significations, Forman (2012b: 10) argues:

The streets figure prominently here, as they were – and remain – a crucial signifier in hip-hop identity and authenticity. Having long been portrayed as an undisciplined space that is prone to its own codes and standards, the streets also often constitute this unruly Other to proper, mainstream or cultured society. In a more antagonistic dynamic, the streets harbor threat and chaos, the source of revolutionary unrest and disturbance; these values have, for better or worse, been grafted onto hip-hop throughout its evolution.

Consequently, opinions are at variance about the political content and intent of the art form as well as its connections to lived contexts which, like any other, especially those that become commodified for mainstream commercial markets, is always situated in ongoing social revision and growing commercialism.⁹⁵ Even though the bulk of hip-hop is American, what the world now sees on popular screens cannot be a simple carryover from the origins. The genre has hybridised considerably into what George (2012: 44) describes as a 'cultural hurricane' combining graffiti art, DJing, beat boxing, B-boying, breaking, and a myriad of different influences. Chang (2005: viii) understands hip-hop culture as follows:

My own feeling is that the idea of the Hip-Hop Generation brings together time and race, place and polyculturalism, hot beats and hybridity. It describes the turn from politics to culture, the process of

95 There are many different writings on hip-hop. Some opponents of the hip-hop genre come from a distinctly religious point of view such as Lewis (2009). Lewis (2009) follows a line of argument, more familiar in populist, moral critiques, that disparages the so-called glorification of what they term a 'thug lifestyle'. Several critics in this vein use religious texts as justification for their views but I should state that I do not engage this kind of religion-specific (very moralising) critique.

entropy and reconstruction. It captures the collective hopes and nightmares, ambitions and failures of those who would otherwise be described as 'post-this' or 'post-that'.

West (2005: xi) describes three aims of hip-hop music as follows: 'to provide playful entertainment and serious art for the rituals of young people'; 'to forge new ways of escaping social misery'; and 'to explore novel responses for meaning and feeling in a market-driven world'. Darby (2005: 5) argues later in the same volume that hip-hop music is about knowledge and likens legitimate artists to 'poor righteous teachers'; those who now benefit from monetary and material gains come under some criticism and are often referred to as 'sell-outs' or, at least 'diluting the message'. So, endorsements of hip-hop worldviews/lifestyles (which are not generic but often associated with the masculine categories Oware [2018] describes on page 201) are by no means supported by all critics as authentic political or social commentary following the civil rights era. Critics are conflicted and performances are varied. Writers such as Pearson, Kilson, and McWhorter (in Kovacs 2014), among others, have expressed their reservations about the music genre's contribution to social and political discourse and action. However, Kovacs (2014) argues that hip-hop is essentially an art form, or an entertainment form, and should not be framed as social or political commentary. I would argue that the genre reflects both, and not necessarily in a mutually exclusive way, but the distinction might prove theoretically useful. Like most forms of popular culture, it must be acknowledged that various cultural products, especially outside the mainstream, possess vastly differentiated elements and cannot be assumed to be homogenous in production, performance, consumption, or interpretation. As Quickley (cited in Chang 2014: 252) comments, '99 percent of what is foisted on us as "hip-hop culture" is produced by less than 1

percent of the artists involved ... those who have massive commercial support'. Hip-hop, broadly speaking, can neither be essentialised nor can it be defined by what is shown in the 'narrow' mainstream (Rose in Cornell University Library 2009). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the size and popularity of the commercial hip-hop industry, and its rooting in African (American and diasporic) culture (Chang 2005; Keyes 2002; Rose 1994), it is most certainly not representative of all black cultural life, or even a majority thereof, either in the United States of America or elsewhere. Kitwana (1995) cautions against such 'synonymization', acknowledging that it is a strong representative and communicative force. Kitwana (2012: 452) signals 'hip-hop as the definitive cultural movement of our generation', at the same time acknowledging the narrowing and dominance of the mainstream typified in the images selected in this chapter.

With global popular and commercial success now clearly established, critical acclaim has been slower to follow. William Schumer's 'Secular Cantata No. 2' received the first Pulitzer Prize for music in 1943, and another 54 years of European-tradition music was eventually disrupted by the first jazz winner, Wynton Marsalis (Lynsky 2018). With only two more jazz winners along the way, 2018 became the first year to see a winner from the 'world of popular song': Kendrick Lamar's *Damn* took home the honours (ibid). Lynsky (2018) contextualises this historical moment:

Lamar's Pulitzer has been celebrated as a vindication of hip-hop, and a particularly sweet one given that *Damn* features a pointed sample of Geraldo Rivera on Fox News making the absurd claim that 'hip-hop has done more damage to young African Americans than racism in recent years'. But, four decades after it evolved out of Bronx DJ culture, hip-hop is both critically adored and commercially supreme.

Indeed, this win is a significant moment in the history of hip-hop. However, in spite of such critical acclaim, commercial hip-hop still struggles with criticism for trafficking negative imaging, particularly in terms of representing black people and black women (Kitwana 2002; Rose in Cornell University Library 2009; Sharpley-Whiting 2008). As Monroe (2014: 183) states:

While scholars from various fields have dutifully documented the rampant commodification and consumption of what we now call hip-hop, the attention paid to women in hip-hop primarily focuses on the denigration of black women by misogynist rap lyrics or the successful female MCs who have blazed trails in the hypermasculine space that is hip-hop.

Admittedly, authenticity, in commercial culture, does relate to (re)presentation of the Real but characterisations also need to be *believable* in order to sell. The 'believable' performance of raced sexuality in commercial hip-hop seems to be gendered into certain types of hypermasculine males who are interested in sex with women but not much in tender, vulnerable, or 'softer' forms of erotic intimacy with women who represent that (Ingram and Waller 2014; McLeod 2012).⁹⁶ Again, these may not be representative of individuals, and one individual person may perform or express several sexual personae depending on context. Indeed, one striking feature of male-female relationality in commercial hip-hop imaging is the apparent disconnect between men and women. Video vixens, who perform in these videos, have little rapport with male MCs and are relatively uncommunicative or expressionless. This

⁹⁶ Lyrical hip-hop, as introduced in *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005) by choreographers Napoleon and Tabitha D'umo, could be seen as a possible exception.

differs when female MCs take centre stage. Such one-dimensional (re)presentations of female sexuality are embedded in a broader sexual politics that seems to influence commercial hip-hop as well as many other forms of entertainment. The orientational and ontological metaphorical content of such performative frames requires closer examination.

5.4 Orientational and Ontological Metaphors in Performative Frames of Commercial Hip-Hop Imaging

The analysis focuses on the imaging of bodies (not lyrics) in commercial hip-hop videos. Kitwana (2008: xii) reads hip-hop culture as one that references a 'hip-hop specific language, body language, fashion, style, sensibility and worldview'.

5.4.1 Orientational metaphors and aesthetic construction in commercial hip-hop imaging

In the field of cognitive linguistics, many variations of orientational metaphors have been listed and analysed but the up/down, centre/periphery, and front/back prototypes are prominent (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). The up-down metaphorical orientation works more or less in the same way as the previous chapter so I will not repeat the analysis, except to state that, more often than not, performing men are placed (or look) higher than women in the frames, with many a video vixen crawling around the MC while he performs to the camera. The difference is that they are rarely filmed as touching or intimate in any way, which would suggest that this imaging has more to do with power over everyone in the frame than singular masculine domination of a woman in a pair. However, the concepts of

centre/periphery and front/back are more remarkable in the performative frames of commercial hip-hop.

As exemplified in Images 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, and 26 (pp. 213, 228, and 231), the male MCs occupy the centre of performative frames while women surround him on the periphery or behind him, often blurring them or cutting out parts of them. MCs are most often in front of an entourage; they rarely turn around and show their back sides or bottoms to the camera as the women so often do. Traditionally, being 'up' shows who has power and strength or ascendancy. Similarly, those who are positioned in the 'centre' and in 'front' show more explicitly who gets attention, who dominates a conversation, who speaks, and who is heard, who leads, who is active, who gleans admiration or adoration, and so on (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 2003). It is important to note that, in many of the images, women in the backing positions are quite expressionless – detached from the MCs – with the MC expressing just as little interest in, or communication with, them. Steffans (2005: 124) comments that this is usual practice in the performative frames of hip-hop videos (see Images 25, 26, and 27 on page 233) as well as in social conventions on set: 'As a silent rule, the feature girls never fraternized with the artists and, in many cases, actually looked down on their noses at the artists.' In the performative frames of hip-hop videos, then, the front-back positioning highlights the dominance of the male protagonist, playing into the aggressive masculine stereotype while hiding any hint of intimacy with the women in the frame. Yet, on Steffans' (2005) account, this is due to the attitude of the women themselves. These video vixens are professional performers, represented by top commercial agencies, and they do not view themselves as disempowered or subordinated (Lee 2010; Steffans 2005). In contrast, the men in

backing groups usually posture as 'friends' in kinds of homosocial comrades, echoing the protagonist's movements, supporting what he is saying. This may be shown in the following examples where the MC is front and centre, performing before a crowd, group, backing chorus, or backing dancers behind them:



Images 20, 21, & 22: Prototypical orientational placings

(Sources – Image 20: Johnson n.d.; Image 21: Denham 2015; Image 22: Microphonebully.com n.d.)

In many (re)presentational and societal circumstances, and to the exclusion of the bulk of the population, this front and central positioning in hip-hop videos is often read as one of (black) male privilege. Historically, social order privileging is usually reserved for cis-gendered men, heterosexuals, white people, affluent people, beautiful people, able-bodied people, and so on. In other words, these concepts of who gets attention are associated with the means to exchange and acquire cultural and social 'capital', 'value', and 'goods' (Bourdieu 1990: 132) as well as being associated with a more general ontology of status. However, loaded meanings are *attached* to simple concepts of 'up', 'centre', and 'front'. They cannot be conflated with them and yet, they so often are, leaving alternatives difficult to envisage. To conjure up an image schema in which a weaker, meeker, quiet, unaware, passive follower is placed in a higher up or front-and-centre position in performance seems to go beyond the mind's eye and expectation of producers and consumers alike. Pittman (2005) comments that the struggle for recognition and domination is a

central theme in hip-hop music, especially present in battle raps, and likens this struggle to one of life and death. Certainly, the familiar, angry, aggressive, masculine posturing demonstrated in a significant number of popular videos would support this view. Many hip-hop artists have defended these (re)presentations stating that they are simply conversing their reality (Bailey 2014; *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* 2007; Shusterman 2005). Women video performers seem to have been co-opted into the oppositional fray, yet they are notably silent in the visuals, usually performing some kind of raunchy back-up to the masculine (or sometimes feminine) speaker who is front and centre (see Images 20, 21, 22, and 23 on pages 215 and 222). When white women pop artists collaborate with hip-hop artists of late, they are more often portrayed as goddesses (for example, Katy Perry with Kanye West in 'E.T.') or strong women co-speakers who do not need to be checked or policed by hypermasculine 'playas'⁹⁷ (for example, in the music video for 'Bad Blood' [2015], Taylor Swift and Kendrick Lamar never share a frame except for one where they sit alongside one another in a car). The picture changes significantly when Yo Gotti and Nicki Minaj collaborate for 'Rake it Up', for example. Black women artists more often portray the 'goddess', 'glamazon', or 'queen' archetypes in the R&B genre than in commercial hip-hop. Possible exceptions include Queen Latifah with 'Ladies First', yet women protagonists are in the minority in the mainstream performance space. When they dominate, they are often desexualised in comparison to their vixen counterparts (as in Image 4, p. 113), or they mimic them in joint chorus performances (see Images 28, 29, and 30 on page 237). Gines (2005: 98) elucidates the following dilemma with regards to the over-representation of the Jezebel against the hypermasculine male in commercial hip-hop: 'And so, the stereotypical

⁹⁷ 'Playas' in hip-hop vernacular are popular, cool trend setters who have the attention, agency, and means to get what they want.

dichotomy between men and women is reinforced: men only want sex, women only want money, and both will do whatever it takes to get it.'

In considering commercial hip-hop as a space of eroticised visibility, the absence of 'virgins' or 'mammies' and the presence of 'whores' or 'Jezebels' (Springer 2008: 77–80) placed in subordination of a hypermasculine male says something about the coercive instrumentalisation of these raced bodies in a somewhat stereotypical sexual contract mentioned above – that is, one may pursue *either* love *or* sex but not both together. What is highlighted, then, is that the sexually overt woman uses her sexuality not for her own pleasure, but to gain capital or enjoy proximity to power – both of which are actually possessed by the man. The trope that depicts personations of loving or intimate relationality is simply not there. Returning to the notion of 'the erotic' as elucidated in Chapter One by Berlant and Edelman (2014: viii) and Bataille (1962: 29), the *erotic* is taken to include, but mean more than, sexual activity. Is it possible, then, that much of commercial hip-hop video imaging is not *erotic* by these definitions. The imaging is more likely to be representative of 'simple sexual activity' (Bataille 1986: 11) if one were to classify in that way (cf. Rose 2008).

There seems to be a strong emphasis on the immediate gratification of fun, money, and sex in commercial hip-hop – a lifestyle that requires financial success and sales to maintain. Love, intimacy, and long-term relationships seem to be seen as hampering the lifestyle and are explicitly rejected with sentiments and lyrics often doing so quite aggressively – cautioning other men not to be taken in by recycled images of women, e.g., 'gold diggers', who might trap them into long-term,

problematic arrangements, especially those involving children or a draining of finances. This sexual script takes various forms usually involving female entrapment of males (Harding 2010) – such as a woman who knowingly becomes pregnant and forces the man to take some financial responsibility for their child(ren) and for her while she is caring for their child (perhaps most famously exemplified in the lyrics of ‘Gold Digger’ by Kanye West, featuring vocals by Jamie Foxx). In broader, common, racialised vernacular there has been significant social denigration of black single mothers, sometimes referred to as ‘welfare mothers’ or ‘welfare queens’ (Hancock 2004), who might be defrauding the welfare system by wrongly collecting money from the state. This social anger script is often played out by the fathers of these (illegitimate) children, as well as by the ‘good women’ (Sharma 2013) who are able to hang on to their men or would not engage in deviant behaviours which result in illegitimate children. This attitude towards women is echoed in terminology such as ‘vixens’, ‘hoes’, ‘bitches’ and in multiple, whiter versions such as ‘sluts’ and ‘whores’ used in pornography scripts (cf. Dines 2010). Again, such disdain for women might come from a long history in the industrialised West of elevating the nuclear family to an ideal and families who do not fit that model are assumed to be lacking moral worth. The motivation, however, is a little more sinister in scripts that benefit men who are not expected to be responsible for domestic labour (in the home), which neither pays nor gives them access to social, political, or cultural capital. These so-called ‘bad women’ are viewed and treated with contempt and disgust, instead of recognising the plight of poor, single mothers and the preceding/present realities that gave rise to their circumstances. They are persistently characterised in the discourse as ‘young, female, black, ignorant and lazy yet cunning and conniving, a menace, a leech ... the focus of a fearful and paranoid national psyche’ (Adair 2000: 1). All too

quickly, the scripts become the reality as Spivak (cited in Redhead 1995) warns in Chapter One. Adair (2000: 3) convincingly states:

This is then the paradox of language; that it constructs a reality and then neutralizes that construction so we find it difficult to intuit or even to recognise language's complicity with power, privilege and oppression.

Instead of exposing, questioning, or even disrupting the underlying scripts, myths, codes, and frames at work in this overprovision of (re)presentation, commercial hip-hop imaging very often simply reproduces them. While these externally produced, common-sense scripts are surely to be unsettled, as writers like Collins (2004, 2006) and Adair (2000) call upon critical feminist scholars to do, one must still hold an intra-industry (re)production of such stereotypes accountable for their part in maintaining the hegemony. This would, most likely, result in some severe backlash and anger, if not justification, from the producers, performers, and supporters of the lifestyle and product. Indeed, in the *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* in 2007, artists communicated how they had no choice but to reproduce a range of problematic stereotypes if they want to make money and if they wanted to advance through the ranks or enjoy sustainability in the industry.

On a more sympathetic reading, one could detect a more profound (perhaps political) statement from the masculine protagonist in the imaging: He is not going to assimilate himself into some white gentleman-like personation, yet he will live the good life. He will enjoy material success and he will have all the sex with all the women he wants. However, he will do it his way, on his own terms, in his own

space.⁹⁸ The kind of privilege usually associated with white privilege – wealth, power, popularity, fame, celebrity, beauty, success, superiority, and so on – now gets co-opted into the black, affluent hip-hop lifestyle. This lifestyle can provide all the benefits but, ironically, within the problematic, familiar frames of ‘sexism, misogyny and materialism’ that have plagued white patriarchy to the present day (Adair 2000: 113). What is commonplace in commercial hip-hop is a pretty forthright (re)presentation of masculine braggadocio – a strong, masculine, alpha male dominating and prospering on the streets, in the clubs, and in luxurious houses – complete with his surrounding band of men and chorus of women in the background (Images 20, 21, and 22 on page 215). The women in the imaging are usually scantily clad (while men rarely are) and have a predominant iconography, especially in terms of their body imaging and the ways in which they move their bodies (Sellnow 2010). Apart from the raunchy women ‘bumping and grinding’ or the agile ‘booty-popping’ and ‘twerking’ that audiences have come to know and love, the frequent captivation with black women’s bottoms in contemporary media industries, including the commercial hip-hop industry, has been noted by critics.⁹⁹ Tate (2015: 48–49), discussing black women’s body imaging in the media (and specifically referring, here, to professional tennis player, Serena Williams), notes the following dialectic:

The media coverage and the online comments and images focused on [Williams’] bottom so that her body became the location of fascination, celebration, the grotesque as well as desire ... From this viewpoint,

98 Coates’ *Between The World and Me* (2015) provides an interesting perspective on the historical formation of black masculinities in the United States of America that he explains as ‘bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion’ (Coates 2015: front flap). Similar social injustices and fraught histories are explored in the documentary series *Finding Justice* (2019) – on screens at the time of writing this thesis.

99 One thinks, in this instance, of imaging like that in Nelly’s *Tip Drill* video (2012) – originally released in 2003 – where he swipes a credit card down the bottom of one of the women, which commanded some backlash.

Black women's bottoms perform the aesthetic labour of resisting the white racist iconography that would place them as unruly, deviant indicators of heightened sexuality by replacing them with a point of view which, like Williams, revels in flesh and transgresses the dominant reading which would make them other.

Objectifying the woman's bottom (or other body parts) sexualises and fetishises those parts in interesting and, again, contradictory ways as Tate (2015) points out. On the one hand, performers displace white, iconic aesthetics of desire and conquer these spaces, successfully procuring the gaze. On the other hand, these icons may be received with disgust, shame, or disdain, which perpetuate the stereotypical race and gender ideologies that critics have, by now, sufficiently highlighted. Alongside fetishisation, Sernhede (2000: 309) also addresses the matter of a fascination with primitivism:

To anyone who has studied MTV's music videos, it must seem obvious that contemporary culture is presenting open desire for the other in a completely new way. The foreign is constantly presented as more erotic, sensual and natural. Doubtless, the intent of these images is to highlight intensity, ardour and directness. There is also a prominent element of the fascination with African American culture that we can trace in the craze for primitivism on the part of youth and popular culture during the twentieth century. Primitivism is to a great extent about the expression of the physical and the search for intensity.

Why this has some added significance here is because, in order to present the bottom to the viewer, the woman must face away from the viewer/camera so that the bottom predominantly occupies the frame (as in Images 23 and 24, pp. 220 and 228). Often, the rest of her is cut from the frame. In this way, she is also

anonymised, silenced, and relegated to the role of a dismissed identity, not to mention the unavoidable association with rear entry sexual practice. At the same time, her bottom is celebrated as a site of sexual attraction, desire, and fascination.



Image 23: Usher's 'Body Language' video

(Source – Philly Customs 2014)

Tate (2015: 50) locates the racialisation of black women's bodies within the particular histories of colonialism and enslavement, convincingly arguing that black women were 'painted as loose to account for white men gone wild in the tropics'. This reproduction is somewhat troubling for critics of the genre. Viewers are exposed to the recurrence of the hypersexualised, black woman who leads the man astray by using her body and her craftiness, thereby alleviating the man from responsibility for transgressive sexual behaviour. Added to that, the idea of a genuine, unadulterated desire for, and intimacy with, the black woman's body is delegitimised. This is emphasised when women's body parts (bottoms and hands are the most frequent – see Images 23 and 27, pp. 220 and 231) are repeatedly focused upon in the frame, which is popular in this imaging.

This repetition continues in an industry that *could* produce alternative, varied meanings of erotic relationality but mostly does not. Reasons given for the

(re)production often follow more or less along similar lines of Watkins (2005: 108), who claims that what 'every other successful hip-hop figure' really wants is 'black kids' respect and white kids' money'. Whether the stereotype is perpetuated, glamorised, or updated for a predominantly white consumer base, as is commonly claimed, or it is perpetuated because masculine dominance (in general) sells, the continual and massive flow of (re)production does little to alter a space that allows for sexism, misogyny, and misrepresentation to linger (a problematic acknowledged by artists at the *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* in 2007). More disturbingly, such repetition and widespread distribution of this imaging could push societies to the point where 'the social world is primarily described – and in a sense prescribed' by what one sees and what is actually out there (Bourdieu 1996: 22). Indeed, it is not a black phenomenon that sex sells and that sex which touts a conventional (hetero) sexual contract occurring between dominant males and submissive females sells particularly well.

Historically, many forms of music and musical performance have provided sites for resistance to, or relief from, the more formal constraints of establishments and institutions as well as the less formal, regulatory tendencies of respectability controls in social settings. Audiences are free to participate in this kind of resistance or escape in private spaces – both directly and vicariously. In the context of the opening discussion on problematic, stereotypical sexualisations, there is still comparatively little resolve around the moral panic surrounding 'sexual excess' in hip-hop. Lee (2010: x) reports that critics, novelists, and playwrights are reluctant to reject what he has termed 'middle-class sexual decorum' in an attempt to portray black people positively and, so, counter negative racial stereotypes. This is understandable as an

intense reaction to a racial history replete with accusations of black people being immoral, unintelligent, uncivilised, and so on, with criminal and libidinal excess possibly being portrayed as the worst of it (cf. Bailey 2014; Oware 2018). However, I would argue that, in terms of lifeworld contexts, sites such as hip-hop videos, stages, and club dance floors could be seen as appropriate settings in which to sexually posture, express, or practise in an unpoliced way. Lee's (2010) objection to feminists in the academy perpetuating a respectability politics encased in Victorian sexual standards can be seen as deeply problematic when placed against colonialist, segregationist, and slavery histories framing 'black sexuality' as, 'aggressive' 'objectifying', 'fetishizing', 'primitive', 'dysfunctional', 'vulgar', 'morally obtuse', and, of course, 'excessive' (Oware 2018: 82–85), and raises serious tensions in women empowerment discourses.

The very notion of *excess* logically implies that there is a *line* of acceptability: What is sexual excess measured against? How much, beyond which boundary, is too much? Is the problem too much sex? Or, is it too much *enjoyment* of sexual pleasure? Is it perhaps the unthinkable: that women might *want* to construct themselves as sexual objects, either partially or fully, in this era of #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #TimesUp, and #PussyRiot?¹⁰⁰ Is one's only alternative, as a woman, to present as asexual wife and mother? Societies', states', and religions' endorsement of sex within heterosexual, monogamous relationships as an acceptability borderline is fast losing ground in modern, industrialised societies. Divorce rates and the ever-popular marriage/relationship counselling industry should alert publics to the fact that heterosexual, religiously sanctioned marriage is a far cry from any utopian form of

100 These hashtags represent contemporary movements that advocate for the rights and empowerment of women and highlight the widespread problem of sexual assault and exploitation.

life. Yet, societies still grapple with received traditions that are based on long-time metaphorical associations with, and deep cultural embeddedness in, fear of physical harm or social hardship if one does not engage in middle-class pursuits.

In the broader cultures of sexuality, Rubin (1984) brings up a critical dispute. She argues that there exists an ordering of sexuality and sexual practice in culture that authorises 'good, natural, normal sex' and specifies this sexual practice as 'heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial' (Rubin 1984: 152). Rubin (ibid) explains further that good sex should be 'coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home' and should not involve pornography and associated notions. Much of the eroticised content in commercial hip-hop, then, would presumably be classified along rather essentialised lines as 'bad sex', which Rubin (ibid) argues is seen in a relatively sex-negative culture as 'dangerous, unhealthy, depraved and a menace to everything'. Now, the problem with conflating 'good' sex with 'natural' sex or 'normal' sex is telling. What is common or repeated may not necessarily be 'natural' or 'normal', and none of these concepts necessarily implies notions of 'goodness', 'normativity', or what *should* be. Logically speaking, these entailments are as arbitrary as the value assignments attached to them. It seems that the politics of hip-hop may be one that transforms difficulties and oppressions arising from the material basis of (street) life into an 'occasion for pleasure' as Grossberg (1997: 80) argues for the case of rock 'n roll.

5.4.2 Ontological metaphors and the politicising of eroticised bodies in commercial hip-hop

In sexual politics, the virgin/whore dichotomy is a well-known binary that is commonly associated with what Freud termed the Madonna/whore complex (Springer 2008; Weeks 1989; Wolf 1998).¹⁰¹ This binary correlates the virtuous, sexless woman with the pure mother figure and places her in diametric opposition to a more impure, adulterated, or sexualised woman (Gilmore 2001). As typically happens with binaries, contrary poles are not equal in their conceptualisation and not much critique takes note of the endless possibilities that could occur in conceptual spaces between such oppositions. In Derridean terms, this ‘in between’ would be referred to as *différance* (Derrida 1976). Often, in popular culture, the idealised, ‘good girl’ stereotype is pitted against the demonised, ‘bad girl’ stereotype in a double standard of morality, commonly reflected in numerous mediated (re)presentations of women in eroticised performance.

Patriarchal societies are alleged to uphold control over women and their bodies by, among other things, categorising women into these two ‘all-good’ and ‘all-bad’ groups, thereby propounding only two ways in which to construct women’s sexuality or women’s sexual expression, which often results in polarised readings of cultural phenomena (Slipp 1993). One implication of this kind of opposition, is that a kind of *jouissance* is assumed to occur between men and ‘bad girls’, while families (that sustain stable societies) are formed by unions between men and ‘good girls’. I use the term *jouissance* in the way it may be derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis (Johnston 2014) or in the work of Žižek (1989) – that is, as an always sexualised,

101 In Freud’s theory of psychosexuality, he proposes that the impotent or sexually dysfunctional man is trapped in an impossibility – he loves the virgin but desires the whore.

transgressive enjoyment typically residing at the boundaries of what may be discussed or experienced in the Real or the public sphere. The question of moral panic and its connections to the power of convention emerges in substantial ways in the popular culture imaging of modern, diverse societies. The commercial hip-hop industry forms one of these interesting, yet conflicted, sites for mediated forms of eroticised relationality. Regarding the virgin/whore dichotomy, one may discern a noticeable absence of the 'virgin' (also referred to as the 'Madonna') trope and a pronounced exhibition of the 'whore' trope performing what has now become known as 'raunch culture' (Levy 2015). By *raunch culture*, I am referring to a generalised practice, display, and expectation of public erotic culture that has become commonplace, if not conspicuous, in the popular culture panorama of many contemporary societies. In commercial hip-hop imaging, raunch culture is celebrated in a somewhat ambiguous exchange between producers, artists, and consumers alike:

From blues to country and rock and roll to neo-soul, popular music is replete with love songs. And hip-hop is no exception. Although it is generally associated with illegal drugs, vulgar language, gratuitous violence and raunchy sex, those schooled in the culture know that the music also speaks to the mysteries of the heart. (Shelby 2005: 14)

In the vein of keeping it real, it might be productive to ask what the justification for the apparent anger, dismissal, or misogyny towards women might be (Chaney and Mincey 2014; Sharpley-Whiting 2008; Watkins 2005). Dyson (2007: 113) offers this explanation:

And the moment a woman steps off that pedestal [of respect] – even if she is otherwise viewed as respectable – she’s a problem. In the crude language of patriarchal disdain, she’s a ‘bitch’, the equally derided, often more powerful ideological twin of the ‘ho’. Women who confront and vacate the patriarchal respectability are viewed as bitches or ho’s.

Throughout history, disruptions of patriarchal roles of men as dominators have been met with contempt, irrespective of the particular cultural configuration in which this interference may take place. When ‘bitches’ express their anger, men retaliate with aggression. What is interesting in commercial hip-hop imaging, though, is the similar rejection of more positively viewed patriarchal roles of men as *protectors* of women. Rose (2008: 115), recalling that such sentiments are buried in the roots of white conservatism, picks up on the familiar pattern that black women were not seen to be worthy of patriarchal protection, especially if they were perceived as ‘deviant or sexually excessive’. Moreover, some protection was afforded to black women who were in intimate relationships with white men, and this ‘good girl mimicry’ may also have been a means to survival or advancement (ibid). Now, in the contemporary, commercial hip-hop market, both men and women artists who want to sell product and sustain careers in the industry seem to make use of ‘sexual excess’ in the imaging of black women, particularly (Lee 2010: 111). However, Lee (2010: xi) notes that matters of so-called ‘sexual excess’ of women have routinely generated moral panic among both academics and lay people who advocate for forms of ‘respectability’. He has been criticised for this by a number of academics who claim that these views do not adequately take into account the sexist and racist histories against which black female sexuality has been contextualised as dysfunctional or recognise that the ‘pro-sex framework advanced by white women [is] an always difficult space for Black women to enter and inhabit’ (Lomax 2011: Online). I will

return to the problematic notion of sexual excess below. Although there has been significant concern raised from both hip-hop and feminist critics (cf. Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1994, 1996, 2004; hooks in *The New School* 2014; Kitwana 2008; Rose 1994, 2008, 2009; Sharpley-Whiting 2008), there is little departure from the usual (re)presentation in the commercial market, which holds producers, artists, and audiences in a somewhat precarious double bind. The goal of making money seems to be at odds with producing alternatives. As distribution grows, more money is made and the fascination with the industry increases, as does its reach and imitation globally. With that expansion, differences in gender, sexuality, and expression of either or both are bound to clash.

The problematics associated with portrayal, participation, and performance of women in the industry is quite subdued in many historical discussions and documentaries on hip-hop. Women's musical contributions are noted but their struggles, and the prices they pay, remain a relatively small part of the dialogue. In the music documentary series *Hip-Hop Evolution* (2016), Luther 'Uncle Luke' Campbell gives a thought-provoking interview regarding the case of the group 2 Live Crew. In 1990, the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida ruled that the group's album, *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, was legally obscene – the first time that such a legal judgement was handed down and, eventually, overturned by the Eleventh Circuit. This was deemed a major win for hip-hop as a 'voice for the voiceless' and free speech.

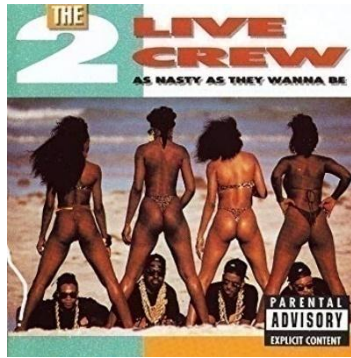


Image 24: 2 Live Crew, As Nasty as They Wanna Be album cover

(Source – Amazon Music n.d.)

A striking tension emerges in television coverage from the time.¹⁰² While many commentators contextualise this music as entertaining, humorous, and fun, some did not see it that way. Anti-obscenity lawyer, Jack Thompson, objects to what he calls ‘trafficking in obscenity’ and ‘glorifications of the brutalization of women’, which Campbell vehemently denies: ‘We don’t do that in my music, man. I’m tired of you saying that, too.’ In spite of explicit, sexualised, aggressive lyrics and performance imaging, Campbell’s lawyer claims that, ‘this is about race ... this group speaks from a special place and it may be that the Jack Thompsons and other peoples who complain about it, have no sense of that world’. Campbell states that there is no such degradation of women in the music (in spite of shocking lyrics, also noted by Crenshaw [1991: 254] below), maintaining: ‘You would have to know our culture in order to judge us, and those people in there don’t know our culture.’¹⁰³ This statement echoes sentiments of mis-reading and mis-recognition of male performers mentioned previously. Predictably, then, a significant number of male-apologetic and sex-positive commentators justify and rationalise commercial hip-hop imaging in

102 Sherriff Nick Navarro tried to ban the group for its raunchy and comedic performances in what DJ Laz characterises as ‘audio porn’ (*Hip-Hop Evolution* 2016), which also ‘crossed over’ with white audiences becoming more interested and engaged in the material.

103 The aforementioned statements by Thompson, Campbell, and Campbell’s lawyer were transcribed (by myself) from *Hip-Hop Evolution* (2016).

similar ways, with some work recognising male vulnerability and more affective range present in the genre than has traditionally been attributed to it (cf. Chaney and Mincey 2014; Jeffries 2011; Shelby 2005). Crenshaw (1991) addresses this case in some detail, claiming graphic lyrical (re)presentations are heavily influenced by intersecting complexes of 'racism and misogyny' (1991: 258). However, lyrics that speak 'about cunts being fucked until backbones are cracked, asses being busted, dicks rammed down throats, and semen splattered across faces' (Crenshaw 1991: 254) are not represented in the visual performance which consists of relatively familiar mainstream hip-hop performative frames occupied by the usual dominant men rapping with scantily clad women as back-up dancers gyrating around them in settings like clubs, streets, homes, and pools (Images 23, 24, 26 on pages 222, 230, and 233). A closer look at performative frames reveals similar disconnects across the mainstream hip-hop video industry.

5.4.3 Performative frames and relationality in commercial hip-hop

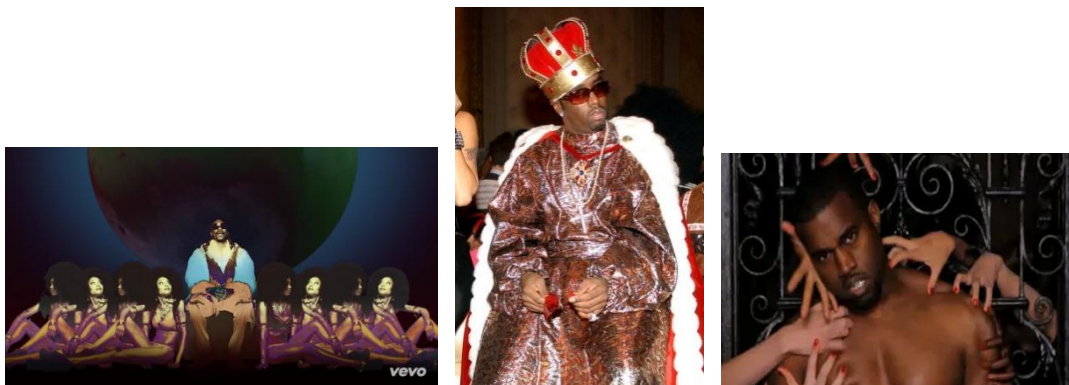
Given the problematic racial background against which 'black sexuality' has been portrayed as excessive and unacceptable, feminist critics calling this politics to account have a difficult space to negotiate, especially in terms of intersectionality between sexuality, gender, race, and class (Crenshaw 1991; hooks in The New School 2014). Many anxieties about the nature of the public sphere and its cultures begin with sentiments that originate in the protectionism of white, masculine privilege and are often a continuation taken up by other groups, as West argues (during the *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* in 2007). Sharpley-Whiting (2008: 12) has elucidated where commercial hip-hop culture may have taken on, and contributed to, such problematics, albeit in different racial settings:

It is not that these [women's] issues never existed before the hip-hop global takeover. But the very public celebration and commercial trafficking of such images and behaviours has made them appear normal, acceptable and entertaining. That young black men face their own set of challenges is undeniable; patriarchal and misogynistic notions of manhood and masculinity combined with racism have deeply impacted the ways in which men interact both with one another and with women. These interactions have currency in hip-hop...

Hip-hop is fun and entertaining, and it is also 'coded and understood and performed as "black"' (Rose 2008: xii; cf. Neal 2012a); consequently, as Baldwin (2012: 230) claims, 'for better or worse, becomes a reference for "authentic" blackness'. Most writing on the music genre mentions race, often remarking on the largely white audience and consumption of hip-hop (cf. Collins 2006; Jeffries 2011; Kitwana 2008)¹⁰⁴. Writers have also noted demands by different minorities (for example, Latina/o, white, or Asian) for recognition within the industry. Ramsey (2003: 38) confirms that these issues have been routinely raised as 'the perceived boundaries surrounding ethnicity and musical styles are rigorously policed'. I would argue the same for performance styles. Not only is the 'white consumption of black stereotypes' (ibid) problematic but the entailments of such stereotyping make for a glaring social and relational awkwardness – both for black sexual subjects and people who might desire them. This would apply to both men and women performers, especially if their actual bodies are habitually assumed to convey physical as well as cultural blackness. I would argue that over-representations of black men as 'pimps', 'kings', and 'playas' could be just as destructive. Men, in this

104 The white consumer base is usually put somewhere between 70–80% of the total (cf. *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* 2007; Oware 2018; Rose 2008).

context, are often portrayed and postured as self-aggrandising, uncaring, narcissistic and, in a criminal or menacing context, as angry ‘thugs’, to quote a commonly used term (cf. Jeffries 2011: 77; Morrison and Dangerfield 2007: 409–411; Slatton and Spates 2016: 1). Oware (2018: 48) creates subcategories of ‘materialist bravado’, ‘sexual bravado’, and ‘narcissistic bravado’ in his analysis of masculine performance in hip-hop. This kind of belligerent masculinity usually come across in costuming and imaging of ‘pimps’, ‘kings’, and ‘playas’ demonstrated as follows:



Images 25, 26, & 27: Male performers

(Sources – Image 25: Kendrup 2015; Image 26: Chynaking 2018; Image 27: Joseph 2011)

Potential relational partners might well be governed by this imaging to believe that they have to position themselves in some kind of misplaced response to stereotypical ‘excessive’, yet emotionally disconnected, ‘hard’ (McLeod 2012: 171) characterisations of masculinity if they desire, or want to be desired by, black sexual partners. Even with perceived idealisations of black music, then, Gray’s (1995: 9) contention carries some weight – ‘that television representations of Blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourse about ‘whiteness’ as well as the historic racialisation of the social order’. However, (re)presentation is rarely that simple, and white, middle-class, heterosexual marriage

as the normative or normal boundary (in the sense that Rubin [1984] suggests) of acceptable sexual expression is rarely explicitly stated. Rather, it is implied, perhaps inadvertently. Tate (2016: 6) also notes the problematics with performative blackness operating against (historical) orders of white supremacy and racism but suggests elements of race performativity can be read as race-positive choices, self-affirmations, 'philic, rather than phobic'. I would suggest that hip-hop is an example of such a performative site.

Hip-hop has multi-ethnic roots, as mentioned earlier, but commercial hip-hop has narrowed its focus to the urban, African-American man, which Rose (2008) argues is not keeping it real. Consequently, it is the black man that gets the most negative attention as the bearer of masculine hegemony in critical work on the genre, and the black woman is often positioned as the hegemonic subordinate. While hooks (1994: Online) does posit this critique, she counters some criticism of what she remarks is a demonisation of black men, insisting that 'gangsta rap does not appear in a cultural vacuum, but, rather, is expressive of the cultural crossing, mixings, and engagement of the black youth culture with the values, attitudes and concerns of the white majority'. She further defends marginalised black men and asks: 'How many disenfranchised black males would not surrender to expressing virulent forms of sexism, if they know the rewards would be unprecedented material power and fame?' (ibid). One could extend this consideration to women artists finding themselves entangled in the same sort of dilemma and defend their choice to sexually assert themselves as 'hoes' because this is the professional price that has to be paid for recognition on a man-centred stage or the social price one must pay for a man's care, affection, and protection. Their intent, therefore, may not be to lead

men astray from otherwise righteous paths, but to self-preserve in less than optimal circumstances. Scholars further suggest that black women have been reluctant to criticise and unsilence harmful behaviour exhibited by black men towards black women (and children) due to what they term 'race loyalty', which is hardly unexpected, given the shared traumatic racial histories of slavery, colonialism, and segregation from which both have emerged (cf. Crenshaw 1991: 254; hooks 1994; Morgan 2012: 416; Rose 2008: 127).¹⁰⁵

The hip-hop industry in general is significantly dominated by men so it is bound to yield problematic (re)presentations of (black) women's sexual expression, which does not escape the criticism of black feminists. Rose (2008: 140), for example, states her objection as follows: 'Love and intimacy require enormous sacrifice and sustained vulnerability; the models of black manhood promoted in hip-hop are allergic to both.' Shelby (2005: 18), on the other hand, argues that romantic love manifests in a number of hip-hop lyrics and, when referring to intimate love relationships in their lyrics, many artists refer to women in caring, intimate contexts as 'bitches'. Gines (2005: 99), writing in the same volume, allows that there is some evidence of a virgin/whore dichotomy in commercial hip-hop imaging with the 'down-ass chick' occupying the virgin position and 'tricks/hoes' occupying the 'whore' position. However, Jeffries (2011: 101) notes that, in hip-hop, even the 'down-ass chick' is sexualised. I would suggest that the classic virgin trope, which is not at all openly sexualised but, rather, sexually repressed or virtuous and more suited to the role of devoted wife and eventually caring mother figure, is not typically present in

¹⁰⁵ Two recent examples come to mind in this regard: the polarised public responses to the airing of 2019 documentaries covering the alleged sex crimes of music super stars, Michael Jackson and R. Kelly, range from outrage in solidarity to vicious backlash from their supporters. Critics in the documentaries are vocal about silent supporters in black communities.

this imaging (David 2015; Jeffries 2011; Springer 2008). In fact, it seems she is missing.

I would argue that, in popular culture generally, women are not usually portrayed as navigating between either of the virgin/whore signifiers or a variety of alternatives in between. However, I would argue that, in reality, this is wholly possible or probable in the sexual expression/practice of a single persona and may vary in a single day according to fluctuating lifeworld environments that demand context-appropriate behaviours. Perhaps commercial hip-hop artists do not have much to say about the 'good sista' type of (black) woman or about white women who remain protected by their (racial and class) privilege from stereotypical attachments of 'sexual excess' (Hines 2014). Hines (ibid) references MacKinnon (2007) here, who argues that white women are not exempt from sexism but may be released from the oppression of racism. It could be that neither of these two tropes (good girls and white women) are particularly threatening or augmenting to (masculine) privilege or dominance. Often, male artists in commercial hip-hop seem to be directing their attention towards specific (stereo)types of black women. Kitwana (2002: 87) points out that, in many instances, male artists refer to women, and black women in particular, as 'bitches, gold diggers, hoes, hoodrats, chickenheads, pigeons, and so on'. Conversely, in some women artists' possible attempts to overcome the dilemma, Gines (2005) argues that, even when these 'whore' stereotypes are wilfully co-opted into women's performances or the script is flipped by women artists such as Rihanna, Beyoncé, or Nicki Minaj in an attempt to take control of their modes of sexuality, these antics are often not successful in their conveyance of sedition to an audience. This may be demonstrated in the following images where the female artist is front and centre but

still backed by a female chorus posturing in similar ways to those playing back-up to male MCs:



Images 28, 29, & 30: Examples of women artists in performance with female chorus as back-up

(Sources – Image 28: Just Jared 2016; Image 29: Billboard 2016; Image 30: Variety 2014)

Female protagonists frequently end up reinforcing black sexual stereotypes which often consist of hypermasculine men remaining in the roles of ‘playas’, ‘kings’, and ‘pimps’ and women remaining cast as ‘bitches’, ‘hoes’, and ‘Jezebels’ (Gines 2005: 99–100). The message is quite clear in this regard: women are useful for raunchy sex and glamorous props but not much more than that. More recently, hooks has levelled some pointed critique at popular artist, Beyoncé. Instead of praising Beyoncé as Lee (2010: 18) does when such artists ‘expose their flesh and relish their sexual power’, hooks calls Beyoncé a ‘terrorist’ during a discussion entitled ‘Are You Still a Slave?’ that took place at New School in New York (Hines 2014). hooks was referring to popular media over-representing black female bodies as sexualised in what she called a ‘major assault on feminism ... from visual media’ (cited in Hines 2014). hooks (in The New School 2014) rejects the notion of inverting the script in favour of moving away from it, being counter-hegemonic and, in so doing, liberating black women’s bodies. Hines (2014: Online) reports on the heated discussion that took place at this event as illuminating ‘one of the thorniest debates in feminism’ and

hooks suffered some backlash from ‘the Beyhive’¹⁰⁶ as a result of her forceful critique. This contestation demonstrates how, in spite of possible intents to depict a reality or engage in social commentary, the imaging, audience reading, and consumption thereof can result in a perpetuation of problematic stereotypes (cf. hooks 1996). Springer (2008), in the same vein of feminist critiques as Gines (2005), points out that these extremes are hardly representative of a realistic voice on black women’s sexuality but they have consequences for social life. Springer (2008: 77) asserts: ‘Public assumptions about black female sexuality mirror the contradiction we deal with daily: hypersexual or asexual.’ Placed against the background of Freud’s virgin/whore dichotomy, it would seem that not only black women’s sexuality is constructed in this way, perhaps finding a cross-racial commonality where feminist critics from all races are unhappy with this construction and the ongoing prejudice it propagates. However, with white women (in pop music, for example), panic about hypersexuality is diluted because of race privilege. In terms of racial contracts in eroticised imaging, white women are often viewed as *acting* wayward or *having* fun, while black women are viewed as actually *being* deviant and dysfunctional in a ‘folk theoretical’ way as if these are ‘essential prototypes’ (Lakoff 2002: 10) of (female) blackness.

Male hip-hop and rap stars are often framed as ‘social outlaws’ (White 2011: 65) and demonised in mainstream culture, with sexual contraventions and sexual exploitation frequently referenced (cf. Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1994; Neal 2012a). Equally, though, a notable absence of alternate (desirable and desiring) depictions of black women could represent a symbolic destruction of complexities within black sexual

106 The ‘Beyhive’ is the name of Beyoncé’s fan club (*Beyoncé.com* n.d.).

expression in popular culture, more broadly speaking. Why this may be and who might benefit from keeping the ideology locked in place is an interesting question to pose. One is reminded, in this instance, of (white) men's anxieties around the issue of (white) women occupying public space as they rose up during suffrage movements in the early 1900s (Florey 2013). One of the great fears was that women participating in public life or activities outside received sex roles would result in a neglect of home, family, and, consequently, society. Moreover, men might have to take on women's roles and not be able to join in these political and public aspects of 'manly' socialisation, which could exclude them from the benefits of various economies that are exchanged therein. The numerous images shown in Florey's (2013) work are telling in their (re)presentations and rhetoric, which often mock the very notion of women participating in public space. The same may be argued for the prominence of hip-hop in black culture being seen as a deviant form of culture which threatens white civilising norms.

While differentiating the body imaging within the commercial hip-hop visual landscape is possible and could be fruitful, as one might see when varied performative elements enter the frames, it seems improbable that the bulk of performances, either as MCs or 'video vixens/models/hotties/hoes' will change much. Both Kitwana (2008) and White (2011) report reservations about white people coming into or monopolising the performance space for their own capital gain and changing the space. Hess (2007: 22–23) also comments that the 'rhetoric of "real" hip-hop developed in response to the threat of industry appropriation' and 'assimilation' (cf. McLeod 2012). In spite of these concerns, hip-hop holds onto its claim as a black, heterosexualised performance space and, while it has been

derided for its homophobia and exclusion of differentiated expressions of gender and sexuality, narrow (re)presentational forms may be a way to hold onto that claim. Watkins (2005: 109) further argues that the hip-hop industry has exposed white anxieties about 'blackness' entering 'spheres of white domestic comfort, privilege and consumer culture'. Ongoing stereotyping of black 'hyper'-masculinity and black 'hyper'-sexuality from within the commercial industry may well function as a means to service that claim. What is perhaps not being said about raced erotic imaging as 'black' is that white patrons are comfortable with consuming such images as 'Other', even enjoying them in a primitivistic, fetishised, or exoticised way but not as part of them, their culture, and their practice. In this way, the economic capital generated from keeping white people out of the performance space works for producers, performers, and consumers alike in some kind of stereotyping symbiosis. Unfortunately, if this mutual exchange is the case, there is, and will continue to be, little disruption of white supremacist thinking about blackness within the exchange or undeclared racial contract. What this means is that the white gaze allows a continued consumption and enjoyment of commodified blackness without ever really engaging in the value/ownership/embrace of blackness as part of shared culture.

I would concur with hooks (1994: Online) that 'the sexist, misogynist, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving' that are celebrated in commercial hip-hop and rap are prevailing values in contemporary society and co-opted or repeated across contexts. However, I am hesitant to extend this problematic towards a view that believes *all* these values are sustained by a *specifically* 'imperialist, white, supremacist, capitalist patriarchy'. Patriarchy endures with great facility and support in many non-white, non-western traditions across the globe, as do differentiated

versions of supremacy, imperialism, and capitalist ideology. This speaks to translatability. In reality, such mechanisms operate and sustain widely across many ethnicities, geographies, and cultures that have long been exposed to other options and, where they do, those cultures should be accountable for how and why they do so. The popularity, variety, and volume of misogynistic (re)presentation and praxis suggest the problem is widespread. Whether they originated in a particular cultural, racial, or ethnic milieu, sexism no longer belongs to any singular racial, ethnic, or cultural pathology. Explanations of origin and history, while interesting, do not serve as adequate defences in this era of free information and debate.

5.5 Conclusion

Almost all critical writing on hip-hop brings up the issue of race, and many address intersectionalities with gender. The enclosing of women who vacate the virginal signifier as ‘the sinful sex, the polluted sex, the licentious sex’ (Gilmore 2001: 5) – an evil, destructive force from the dark side which is uncontrollable by men – can be found in texts and traditions the world over throughout history. This is not a political novelty that can be attributed to the hip-hop culture and lifestyle and certainly not to some ‘performance’ of blackness. It is simply performed by mostly black performers in this genre. However, in terms of the metaphorical analysis of performative frames, one might acknowledge that commercial hip-hop does little to disrupt a sexual prejudice that is often exchanged among men, often echoed by women, symbolically repeated in imaging, and has achieved a global popularity, not only in the way women (and girls) present themselves but also the ways in which relationality plays out in hip-hop lifestyle mimicry. In this way, the line between performance and performativity is crossed, and one problematic ramification is not only an

(un)conscious stereotyping of women but also a fascination with, desire for, and longing to be, those stereotypes. Gilmore (2001: 5) argues that misogynistic denigration of women is

not always an attempt to politically dominate and control women, but often a psychic attempt to diminish the importance of the object of man's inner struggle and to reduce the bifurcated object to worthlessness ... to relieve their inner turmoil by demolishing its source.

Performance that reflects something different to the usual stereotyping does provide some resistance but does not seem to do enough or exist in significant numbers to disrupt deeper continuities. This suggests that aggressive, sexually explicit misogyny is produced and consumed as valued cultural product despite a societal consciousness and awareness of potentially harmful influences it may have. That said, there is always hope for shifts in possibility: it seems reasonable to contend that the problem does not lie so much with people and performers who choose to be instrumentalised as sexual objects if this is a conscious choice for whatever (personal) reasons, including commercialisation. The bigger problem lies, firstly, in unnecessary and unfounded attachments of moral vilification from many societal sources to those who wish to (re)present themselves, or who permit others to (re)present them, as sexual objects; and, secondly, with those who exploit people as (sexual) objects without their full awareness or consent. Instead of over-policing eroticised bodies for evidence of 'sexual excess', critical producers, performers, consumers, and publics could perhaps scrutinise their own and others' intents and purposes behind the (re)production. In the fourth industrial revolution, repetition and

distribution is unprecedented but so is the public's ability to openly expose and debate the problematics in popular culture, generally.

To further demonstrate the political complexity of what one may 'know' existing in the everyday alongside what one may desire, Sharpley-Whiting (2008) recalls a personal moment from her student days with some irony: After leaving a critical (feminist) classroom discussion referencing bell hooks, she listens to a Dr Dre album in her car. She discloses an awareness of being wedged in between 'progressive counterpoints' in her intellectual life (ibid: xvi) and contradicting affections for cultural effects that do not support such feminist sentiments (cf. Morgan 2012). In terms of the previous chapter analysis, Davis (2015: 185) articulates a similar incongruence between her love for participation in the supposedly 'retrograde, heterosexist dance' of tango and her critical feminist/post-colonialist stance as a scholar. These are dialectic contestations to which everyone can relate on some level, I am presuming. They are particularly evident with the mainstreaming of pornography into popular film, which, I argue, is an aesthetic of desire encased in classed performative frames when entering the mainstream film industry. The running theme that comes up in critiques of (re)presentations containing pornographic content, though, is subtle in its contextualisation. Unlike bodies in hip-hop performance, bodies in pornography performance are rarely referred to as 'excessive'; they are simply treated as part of a sexually excessive broader culture. Their hyper-normative presence in popular culture (re)presentation is used to question the *general* (not only black) societal problem of using sexuality as the (only) means to inaugurate agency or disproportionately manipulate subject formation. While one might agree that power and choice cannot be reduced to sexuality and desirability, sexual liberalism is often

over-criticised as morally reprehensible. It is this kind of criticism that I find to be misplaced, and I would rather direct a pre-question to the matter of why certain sexual representations are perceived as deviant at all. This line of questioning might resonate with Morgan (2012: 417), who contends that she needs a feminism that is 'brave enough to fuck with the grays' and that is not our 'foremothers' feminism' which often fails to escape the enclosures of moral encoding. I will now look at what the recent, booming success of the erotic film enterprise says about feminist desire and female pleasure (Radway 1991) and 'feminine *jouissance*' (Dirks 2018: 82).

CHAPTER SIX¹⁰⁷

‘Erotica is Classy Porn’

Reframing, Sanitising, and Romanticising Pornographic Performative Frames for the Mainstream Cinema

Class after all isn’t simply a matter of income, or neighbourhood. It’s also embedded in a complex web of attitudes and properties, particularly around the body ... Pornography, of course, dedicates itself to offending all the bodily and sexual properties intrinsic to upholding class distinctions: good manners, privacy, the absence of vulgarity, the suppression of bodily instincts into polite behaviour ... This isn’t to suggest that the ‘lower classes’ are pornography’s consumers, but insofar as porn is relegated to a low thing culturally, it takes on all the *associations* of a low-class thing. (Kipnis 2006: 125–126)

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter’s opening citation, Kipnis (2006) proceeds from a decisively pro-sex or sex-positive stance which celebrates pornography as free sexual expression that is resistant to repressive establishment politics and, therefore, is disruptive of mainstream values. Against this point of view, is an alternative feminist critical stance which, in spite of being caricatured as sex negative, claims not to be opposed to ‘sexual activity or representations but, rather, to the sexism and racism of pornography, the structure and dynamics of eroticised inequality, and the sexual mistreatment, abuse, and violence that occur in connection with its production,

¹⁰⁷ I have previously published on the *Fifty Shades* novels (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b), prior to the film releases (Van Reenen 2014). This chapter is a semiotic analysis which focuses on the films (2015, 2017, 2018), released as a trilogy under the same titles as the novels. There are significantly more recent writings on the novels currently available.

distribution, and consumption' (Russo 1998: 9). In this chapter, I consider the imaging, metaphors, and framing of popular pornographic material or erotica exemplified in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015, 2017, 2018) films (hereafter, *Fifty Shades*) as representative of culturally visible sites of classed encounters that intersect with value attachments of race, gender, size, age, and ability. I relate sociocultural orderings of desirable bodies to the exploitation of 'identifiable characteristics' as desirable characteristics expressed in the opening citation of Chapter One (Harding 2008: 71–73) and assert that, with erotica and erotic performance on popular screens, particularly, (re)presentations of Othered bodies are very difficult to come by. To be clear, I am not discussing actual BDSM sexual practices, histories, and cultures, which realise enormously diverse expression and politics in various contexts around the globe. The same applies to pornography (explained in Chapter Two). I am discussing the *Fifty Shades* representation of BDSM, which became a global phenomenon (in books and films) and which is assumed to be a very narrow illustration of BDSM.

6.2 *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Consumers of erotic performance material, especially women (Fahs 2011), seem to be caught up in a paradox of simultaneously wanting to exercise their sexual agency openly, freely, and functionally yet not wanting to support a culture in which '[d]omination and subordination are made sexual, sometimes in explicit representations of rape and violence against women, but always in objectification and commodification of women and their sexuality' (Jensen 1998: 2). The same might apply to sexual minority groups. Conceivably, with images, the same would apply to men who want to stake a claim on their masculinity in order to fully own

agency while denting it to an 'Other'. The *Fifty Shades* cultural phenomenon, as well as critical and lay responses thereto, highlights these tensions while bringing out a number of concealed discourses in the mainstreaming of pornographic content which historically has been policed under significant scrutiny and legal censorship in the public sphere but is very much in plain sight in the public media landscape of the modern era (Ren 2014; Stearns 2009; Weeks 1989). Modern legislation in some contexts now permits readers to freely buy, possess, and read legally published erotic works by authors such as D.H. Lawrence¹⁰⁸ without fear of being prosecuted under obscenity laws or the Hays Code¹⁰⁹ (Merryman 2008).

In years gone by, BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) sexual practices have largely appeared somewhat subliminally in mainstream film but, certainly since the advent of 'permissive movements' (Weeks 1989: 249), they have become more explicit, more frequently displayed, and more popular (Freeman 2010; Mason-Grant 2004). The release of *Nine ½ Weeks* (1986), which starred well-known actors (Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke), saw BDSM themes extending to wider audiences, and the film enjoyed mainstream, global presence as well as considerable commercial success. Erotic thrillers, for example, have since become an established genre on popular screens with films like *Basic Instinct* (1992) or *Color of Night* (1994) doing well. 'Kinky' erotic practice also appears in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), in which an upper-class doctor unwittingly enters ritualised group sex occurring in an unnamed, secret, high-society clique after his wife admits to considering an extra-marital affair. The fact that

108 The novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by D.H. Lawrence was successfully published by Penguin in the United Kingdom in 1960 after a legal defence (artistic merit and the public good) against obscenity was successful. The case was highly publicised.

109 The Hays Code is an informal name for the Motion Picture Production Code, adopted in 1930, which governed and censored American film making for about thirty years.

the more popular of these films or those that have bigger box office success largely involve the escapades of white, young, affluent, thin, quasi-athletic, heterosexual men and women (see Image 31, p. 250) is telling and will be expanded upon in this analysis. To be sure, performative frames of class are amply deployed in the *Fifty Shades* novels (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) and films (2015, 2017, 2018). I would suggest that this strategy is employed as one means to allay moral panic about questionable/dysfunctional relationality or what Bonomi, Altenberger, and Walton (2013: 733) more plainly observe as 'abuse and harmed identity'. The BDSM element might be received by a relatively conservative public as unacceptable, deviant, kinky, or even squicky sexual practice which has been linked to concepts of sin, depravity, criminality, dysfunction, pathology and, in many societies, still is (Sullivan 2003). Unusual sexual practices are usually known as *kinky*, while kinks that invoke affects of disgust are known as *squicks* (Ogas and Gaddam 2011). Bonomi et al. (2013) indict *Fifty Shades* as enfolding abusive behavioural patterns into emotionally charged, erotic romance narratives (they reference the novels) in a deliberate romanticising of intimate partner violence behaviours from the male protagonist. Orbach (2009) and Dines (2010) both point out the sentimentalising of harmful practices in their critiques of such narratives. In *Fifty Shades*, the male exhibits problematic behaviours: he is jealous; he isolates the female protagonist from family and friends; he gets aggressive; and he is very controlling. While I agree with Bonomi et al.'s (2013) behavioural assessment, the discussion will show that there are several more problematic framings and erasures taking place in the *Fifty Shades* films, and they rest on familiar, even fundamental, relational frames.

6.3 Pornographic Content, Erotica, and Metaphorical Framings of ‘Mommy Porn’

6.3.1 Tensions around the (re)presentation of women’s bodies in mass-media content

The United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe have been time-honoured strongholds of modern feminism (Rendall 1985). Although extremely diverse, and sometimes conflicting, in their various permutations, the common thread that connects feminist scholarship, writing, and activism is the elimination of social injustice and oppression that is aimed at women and girls. A tremendous amount of work has been conducted by feminist researchers and activists in the area of sexual (re)presentation (Dines et al. 1998; Lennon 2014; Shrage 2012). Consequently, (re)presentation in media, particularly violent and objectifying images of women in pornography, especially, remains a contentious issue (Humm 1992; Mason-Grant 2004). All the ‘waves’ of feminism in their transforming motivations have had supporters and detractors. Many feminisms’ efforts at political and social liberation or reform have not attained the desired results, while others have been successful. Whatever the variance in feminisms’ strategies and goals may be, their multiple labours against inequality, injustice, and patriarchy have given women a platform to pursue dignity and ‘individual autonomy for women’, and they paved the way for powerful movement cultures by understanding the power of a group motivated by a common purpose, ‘a sense of collectivity ... the necessity for association’ (Rendall 1985: 324). Third- and fourth-wave feminists, who demand female sexual autonomy, freedom, and agency and adopt ‘sex-positive’ stances towards feminine sexual pleasure and against *repression*, view sexual politics from a different standpoint than those supporting regulatory, pro-censorship, or anti-pornography campaigns – often

personified as 'sex negative' in their fight against sexual and social *oppression* (Fahs 2011). As Bell (2007: 157) states: 'If anticensorship feminists are watching female desire, antipornography feminists are watching female subordination, degradation, and exploitation'. This tension between these sexual politics and the politics of sexual pleasure emerged in the debates on *Fifty Shades* as well as in ongoing debates on eroticisation of mediated bodies (cf. Dines 2010; Roiphe 2012; Trachtenberg 2013).

Fraught beginnings have given rise to the widespread, vibrant, contemporary movement culture in which participating publics expose sexual crime and violence, publicly protest inequality and injustice, and safely question received sex and gender norms in complex and contested ways. What Rendall (1985) underlined as sexual and erotic (re)presentation/entertainment aimed at 'making women pleasing to men' (1985: 61) is one of the prominent struggle sites of contemporary feminism. The power of the media industry to influence feminine subjectivity and life by *what* the industry chooses to represent and *how*, receives a fair amount of attention in current efforts (cf. *The Representation Project* 2019). Historically speaking, though, concerns about feminine behaviour were often directed at social and public convention. The small numbers of women who did not observe accepted standards of politeness, respectability, silence, and modesty in social and public life were branded a cause for 'social concern' (Buffington et al. 2014; Rendall 1985; Stearns 2015; Weeks 2003), often at enormous personal cost. Minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, immigrants, and migrants find themselves in similar positions in societies today (Notaro 2019). Mass-media (re)presentations and the politics of entertainment were taken far less seriously as conveyors of ideology

than they are today. Prior to #MeToo and similar movements, both the practice and structure of oppressive systems did not get the public attention they now have. Such systems were endorsed, both wittingly and unwittingly, by men and women, church and state in societies and communities across cultures. The political roles of women in all public spheres, but especially those of erotic and sexual (re)presentation, have often been degraded and dismissed. With regards to the actual work and needs of women, Rendall (1985: 61) comments: 'Always the cultivation of the understanding was subordinated to frivolous accomplishments.' More recent academic literature suggests that these attitudes are waning, and such matters are being fruitfully addressed in both academic and lay contexts (Fahs 2011; Fahs et al. 2013; Friedman and Valenti 2008; Gwynn 2013; Hollows 2000; Long 2012).

Against this backdrop, the unprecedented literary sales of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) followed by film versions (2015, 2017, 2018) generating major box office success – specifically at the three geographic locations mentioned above (United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe) – raise an interesting question. Why do aesthetic constructions of desire revert back to conventional, even old-fashioned (re)presentations and scripts when attempting to popularise kink or pornographic content for mainstream screens? *Fifty Shades Freed* (James 2012b; 2018) begins with a marriage but ends in the ultimate happiness frame – a happy family with children. Bell (2007: 148), in an analysis of weddings and pornography as performances, claims that weddings and pornography involve three kinds of performance in that they 'can be faked, they make relationships, and they can break the cultural structures that form them. Most important, when weddings and pornography are examined as making, breaking, and

faking sex, they reveal the political stakes in these cultural performances of sex'. Florio's (2018: Online) comment, though ironic, may offer a clue as to how the family gestalt in the romance ultimately will not be broken by anything: 'On Feb. 9, the latest instalment of the *Fifty Shades* hits theatres, and it includes Ana and Christian trying out a whole new type of bondage: marriage.' The article shows the following image from *Fifty Shades Freed*:



Image 31: Ana and Christian's fairy tale ending – a traditional white wedding

(Source – Florio 2018)

Bell (2007) points out the importance of the function of the wedding performance: '[Weddings] *grant* political, social and economic privileges to their sanctioned participants but, conversely, they *create* outsiders to those entitlements; *instantiate* sexual norms; and *depend* on frames of belief for their efficacy' (2007: 149, emphasis in original). From the promotional and media hype, the films are being billed as an 'unconventional romance' which explores 'dark desires' and is marketed as 'thrilling and all-consuming' (see DVD cover blurbs). Readers and viewers might expect that this erotic (re)presentation is fresh and exciting and, if one knows nothing about BDSM, it probably is. But, as Bell (2007) suggests, such media framings fall within the boundaries of sex for socially sanctioned participants, especially if the

sexual play itself is classed as performance – that is, exciting, part-time, private adventures for rich, white, heterosexual people who are generally not suspected of contributing to the moral degeneration of societies. The participants' general moral conduct can still implicitly contain 'heterosexuality, procreation, sexual regulation, and asymmetrical gender roles' (Bell 2007: 150), which is certainly the case with these films. Readers and viewers will get some education and a little graphic (re)presentation of BDSM sexual practices but will hardly be connoisseurs of this highly ritualised and structured culture through the films, let alone be geared to engage in this relational subculture with any earnest. The dominant-submissive play between the narrative's protagonists is mostly contained within 'red room' frolics or is subliminal, with not much more than 'vanilla sex'¹¹⁰ occurring on screen a lot of the time. Sexual play is separated off; it rarely interferes with the drama of the plot or the happy family life image with which the films conclude. In this way, the red room serves to demarcate any out-of-the-ordinary sexual practice as part-time pleasure seeking. There is no suggestion that BDSM would be a full-time lifestyle for this successful couple and, more importantly, the theatricisation of the red room contributes to the unreality of it.

¹¹⁰ Vanilla sex could be described as conventional sex practised in a culture or subculture – in this instance, heterosexual sex without BDSM elements.



Image 32: Christian's 'red room'

(Source – Highfill 2015)

The films may well answer a demand for erotic or pornographic film, by women for women, to the public but it is doubtful whether it can be touted as a contemporary feminist response to Freud's famous, unanswered question of what women want. Many contemporary feminists would not agree. Griffin (1992: 81) would caution that this content is 'a classic mental pattern by which images must accelerate in their violence until they become actual events, events which devastate countless human lives' (cf. Bonomi et al. 2013; Dines 2010; Mason-Grant 2004).

For now, I will accept that erotic and sexualised mass-media content has indeed become more publicly noticeable and is less and less perceived with moral panics as attendant to 'society's moral breakdown' (Gagnon and Simon 1973; Mason-Grant 2004). I would argue that the runaway success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy is not simply due to the new-fangled idea of BDSM-for-everyone, although that 'attention grabber' (Bourdieu 1996: 17) did help for the novelty component, but it is embedded in a larger moral model that fits better with pro-sex stances underlining more recent, liberal feminisms that focus more on nurturance than strict morality (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). On the level of ontological mapping, I suggest that the success of

Fifty Shades rests on the familiar trope of a chance meeting, followed by a risky, melodramatic romance which must resolve its trials and tribulations before concluding in the idealised 'HEA' or 'Happily-Ever-After' (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 106) of marriage with children. Variations of *boy meets girl*, *boy loses girl*, *boy gets girl back* form the typical model of a romantic comedy film genre in popular entertainment. Newbold (2002: 133) explains that this 'dominant form of closed narrative is provided by the institutional mode of representation or the standard Hollywood narrative structure ... [of] opening, conflict and resolution'. Slightly differing details do not disrupt the formula very much (McDonald 2007). Newbold (2002) gives a comprehensive list of very familiar role, plot, and genre blueprints. The 'experiential gestalt' (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 70) of *having-losing-finding* is so expected in this genre that there is often disappointment, dissonance, or despondency when the reader is confronted with a more unorthodox plot. Going against this grain could be a plot in which one of the protagonists dies hopelessly – such as in *Love Story* (1970) – or the couple does not end up together – as in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). These structural metaphorical departures are often classified into the romantic drama genres (Van Reenen 2014). McDonald (2007: 13) further explains:

The basic ideology the romantic genre supports is the primary importance of the couple. While this is usually the heterosexual, white couple, certain films from the 1990s onwards, have attempted to widen the perspective to include gay and black couples. None, however, have tried to suggest monogamous coupledness itself is an outmoded concept; even *Annie Hall*, possibly the most radical film in choosing to deny the audience an ending with the couple's union, does not suggest

the goal of finding one's true love is no longer desirable, merely impossible.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 70) explain that 'the cluster forms a gestalt – a whole that we human beings find more basic than the parts'. The gestalt of the *couple* may indeed be a gestalt which is more valued than individual partners – even in this postmodern age of individualism and its performative partner, freedom. That gestalt is activated over and over again in any form of romance, no matter what the particulars of the story are. Gestalts of the couple are intimately connected to gestalts of the family. Images of (good) motherhood are overwhelmingly associated with nurturance, and certainly the female protagonist in *Fifty Shades* gets this framing and utilises it effectively to rehabilitate her man as any good romantic heroine should. It seems no accident, then, that to mitigate any unfavourable reading of the *Fifty Shades* (sexual) content, the narrative was compelled to move towards a conventional 'happy ending' of marriage and family – a 'necessary union' which is almost 'indispensable' to romance readers (Radway 1991: 66). The conventional white wedding in Image 31 (p. 250) reinforces Radway's claim.

6.3.2 Mommy porn

Related to the nurturant metaphor, not only does the literary content show a typical romance progression towards a classed ideal of marriage and family, but Roiphe (2012: Online) remarks that the popular press 'condescendingly' dubbed the novels 'mommy porn' shortly after their release. The safety that domesticity is assumed to guarantee comes at the price of boredom, and the need for escape and the eroticisation of domesticity is used effectively to validate *Fifty Shades* for a middle-

class consuming audience. Of course, that cannot be presumed but social scripts on women, at the level of the popular, so often make this normal (Fahs 2011). James, the author of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, expresses her view on the modern woman on ABC News: 'it's just hard work doing everything' (2012: Online). This implies that modern women need to find some release from the strictures of everyday routine – either literally, in the arms of an alpha male, or vicariously, through someone else's fantasy of one (Radway 1991). Some pornography sites use the term 'mommy porn' to denote mothers or MILFs¹¹¹ doing pornography. In this context, though, one could infer the term to mean pornography for wives/mothers, which implies that wives/mothers are not the target market of the pornography industry per se. The market at which the novels aim – white, suburban wives/mothers – needs a special kind of pornography. They need a pornography that has a love/romance script attached by virtue of their essence as mothers who are assumed to be *the* nurturant prototypes (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Radway 1991; Sullivan 2003). *Motherhood*, in any acceptable family or moral model (Lakoff and Johnson 1999), is metaphorically connected to nurturance. This feature is wrapped up into the female protagonist's actions throughout the narrative and, indeed, she engages in sexually submissive play as a means to take care of the male, even though it is sometimes read as her exploring her sexuality (cf. Dirks 2018)

Fifty Shades, like romance fiction, looked set to provide another acceptable form of escape from assumed domestic drudgery for wives and mothers in the suburbs, with many women proclaiming in conservative, respectable encasings that they enjoyed

111 This acronym stands for 'mothers I'd like to fuck' – that is, desirable older women.

the story, and the sex was by the wayside. This concurs with Radway's (1991: 66) analysis of popular romance novels of the *Harlequin* or *Mills and Boon* ilk:

[R]eaders are interested in the verbal working out of a romance, that is, in the reinterpretation of misunderstood actions and in declarations of mutual love rather than the portrayals of sexual contact through visual imagery.

Erotic fiction habitually reproduces patterns of gender stereotyping with formulaic scripts that explicitly sanction male dominance and sexual aggression. Gagnon and Simon (1973: 279) assert: 'No one would dispute that women are often humiliated and degraded by the sexual treatment they receive in films.' However, pornography, kink, or BDSM (re)presentations continue to mainstream (Dines 2010), becoming more popular. The 'corporeal signs' and 'discursive means' (Butler 1990: 131) that makes this kind of violence erotically desirable and satisfying are not only contained in gonzo porn¹¹² itself, but in popular imaging everywhere. In this way, material practices of subordination reassert themselves in cultural or social formations, trading as sexual capital but, in liberal terms, are increasingly framed as liberating for women or for sexual minority groups. The freeing of sexual minorities via pornography (framed as instruction in the absence of visibility and validation of difference) is well known to critical feminist scholars (Russo 1998). However, it is a rather generous leap to assert that BDSM can be proposed as a sexual practice model to which women must now aspire for their liberation as the marketing material flaunts. It seems unlikely that people, in general, should uncritically aspire to mimicking BDSM sexual practice as a means to reclaim their sexual agency and

112 Gonzo pornography is a style of pornographic film that places the viewer as directly as possible into the scene. It is noted for shock content. Dines (2010: xi) describes it as a genre that 'depicts hard-core, body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased'.

spice up their marriages, particularly if they are not neurologically wired to experience erotic or sexual pleasure from bondage-discipline, dominance-submission, or sado-masochism (cf. Doidge 2010). As I have argued before (Van Reenen 2014), individuals not having this kind of predisposition will probably not experience any sexual pleasure, either being in pain or provoking pain, let alone experience the explosive orgasms described in the novels if they actually enact fictional BDSM encounters and/or fantasies of coercion, violence, or rape.

The penetrating politicisation of the role of motherhood, in general, is often maliciously applied in divisive popular conceptions with, for example, '[white] mothers often moralized through visual logics that represent them as angelic figures emanating compassion, love and healing' (Shome 2015: 109), habitually positioned against the failings of Othered mothers.¹¹³ Zack (1997: 151), pointing out negative framings of 'white motherhood', comments on race, class, and maternity: 'White women with more than two or three children are viewed as nurturing, self-sacrificing and perhaps asexual in motherly ways, as well as not very smart.' Not only are white mothers often framed as unintelligent in popular discourse, they are often assumed to choose motherhood because they are more suited to 'the pre-political fabric of society' (Rendall 1985: 9) and are unable to partake in more serious pursuits such as careers. This framing is a remnant of the historical attachment of females to domesticity and domestic labour and bears inscriptions of being 'technologically inept, irrational, incapable of logical thought, and uneducatable' (Shifman and Lamish 2014: 94). Zack (1997: 151) goes on to qualify intersectional points of contact (echoed in the previous chapter): 'But, holding social class constant, women

¹¹³ This is also evident in the ongoing hostility in white conversations on motherhood between 'stay-at-home moms' pitted against 'working mothers' in countless popular publications and programmes.

[of colour] who have more than two or three children are popularly stereotyped as irresponsible, selfish, over-sexed, and scheming.’ Intersectionally speaking, then, while white women are often framed as unable by virtue of their gender, women of colour are often framed as unwilling *and* unable, by virtue of their gender, race, class, and capability, to be serious professional and political competitors.

Without getting ‘torpedoed by definitional debates’ (Jensen 1998: 3), pornography may include ‘any material (either pictures or words) that is *sexually explicit*’ (West 2013: Online, emphasis in original), further qualified by Jensen (1998: 3) as ‘producing sexual arousal for mostly male consumers’. However, what feminist critical analysts address is ‘a powerful mass-market industry that normalizes, sanctions and participates in sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, and other forms of discrimination that are made into sexualized entertainment’ (Russo 1998: 18). As the title of this chapter suggests, though, an erotic film is usually a film that has erotic qualities associated with sexual affect as well as a more philosophical reflection relating to the aesthetics of desire, sensuality, erotic expression, and love (Long 2012). A pornographic film is regarded as a sex film which is not usually perceived to possess any artistic merit or advance some public good (ibid). It is unclear whether *Fifty Shades* falls into either of these two binary groups. Gagnon and Simon (1973: 273) qualify, similarly, that pornography has the ‘necessity of including actual sex’. This familiar, definitional separation between sex and the erotic can be aligned with Berlant and Edelman (2014) and Bataille (1986) in Chapter One (who also resonate with Lorde 2007a). The question is whether erotica is simply classed-up pornography that results in the same political function of producing and maintaining inequality.

'Mommy porn' in the form of *Fifty Shades*, then, seems able to occupy familiar, comfortable ground in spite of the 'porn' content. *Fifty Shades* successfully delivers pornographic content to a female audience (apparently) that is traditionally assumed not to want, need, or be able to handle harder core pornographic content because they embody 'essential prototypes' (Lakoff 2002: 10) of nurturant beings by virtue of their feminine/female status. Linking the romance to domesticity is not a new literary strategy, either within scripts or for consumers. Freeman (2010: 5) argues: 'Mid-nineteenth-century writers figured maternal love, domestic bliss, romantic attachments and eventually even bachelorhood as havens from a heartless world and, more importantly, as sensations that moved to their own beat.' She (ibid) goes on: 'The emerging discourse of domesticity, especially, inculcated and validated a set of feelings – love, security, harmony, peace, romance, sexual satisfaction, motherly instincts.' These cultural constructions are consigned to an area that functions outside industrial and public life and they are very much enclosed within the pre-political fabric of the home and family. The harder core pornographic content purports to satisfy these 'mommies' assumed yearning to be more sophisticated, cooler, more 'fun, edgy, chic, sexy and hot' (Dines 2010: 25). Indeed, numerous references in, and about, the novels and films refer to Jane Austin and Charlotte Brontë, and the narrative presents similarly to a modern-day reformulation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Austin 1853). The way in which visual sanitisation and image framing takes place in order to fill the gaps and stymie the losses of excitement in domesticity will now be considered in terms of orientational and ontological metaphorical constructs.

6.4 Orientational Metaphors in Erotic Performance of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* Films

Orientational metaphors have been clarified in the previous chapters as metaphors concerning spatial orientation, naturally correlated with embodiments of: 'up-down, in-out, deep-shallow, central-peripheral', 'over-under'; 'forward-backward'; 'front-back'; and so on (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). As may be predicted (because the erotic script alludes to a dominant-submissive relationality), the orientational metaphors in the sex scenes of the *Fifty Shades* films (2015, 2017, 2018) mostly follow the patterns examined in the previous two chapters that enforce a model of a dominant male and a passive or receptive female. Not to repeat the gendered and raced analyses contained in Chapters Four and Five, I will now look at an interesting element of this relational model that focuses more on the action and activation of sex. The movement repeatedly constitutes the masculine role as *active* or *mover* and the feminine role as *passive* or *moved*. Lakoff and Johnson (2003: 14–21) work with various linguistic expressions, one of which is: 'conscious is up; unconscious is down'. Associated orientational metaphors, where the up-ness may be replaced by 'mover' mapped onto 'masculine' roles and the down-ness replaced by 'moved' mapped onto 'feminine' roles is pervasive in the performance of the erotic in *Fifty Shades* images and should be familiar to readers. With a little manipulation from the lingual to the visual aspect, the imaging communicates the following: Mover is conscious; moved is unconscious. Mover is active; moved is passive. Mover controls; moved is controlled. Mover is force; moved is being forced. Mover has more status; moved has less status. Mover is strong; moved is weak. Mover is rational; moved is emotional. Mover decides; moved capitulates. Mover dominates; moved is submissive, and so on. These active-passive positionalities are well

represented in the erotic performances in all three films, which often use restraints, blindfolds, and other sex aids commonly referenced in BDSM scripts. The imaging may be exemplified as follows:



Images 33, 34, & 35: Man as mover and woman as moved

(Sources – Image 33: Crummy 2015; Image34: Jamie Dornan News n.d.; Image 35: 50 Shades Girl 2017)

These orientational mappings read less like a progressive, pro-sex, sophisticated BDSM romance and more like conventional sex roles against which second-wave feminist activists and their followers have rallied for years. As Whelehan (1995: 5) argues: ‘This overt resistance to conventional definitions of what “being a woman” means came to characterize second wave feminist activism’ and is essentially what troubles many theorists in the contemporary context of feminine erotic (re)presentation and implications for women’s sexual subjectivities. In spite of all the objections and the ongoing demands for reforming popular culture products and content, the gazing public is still being tyrannised by unrealistic male expectations of female sexuality and beauty (Wolf 1990). More generally, a lot of popular culture still

seems rooted in comfortable stereotypes of a 'fixity of aggressive male sexual impulses' (Whelehan 1995: 79) and the heterosexual female responsibility to meet these needs. Even when uncommon, risqué images or pornographic material enter the mainstream, and stereotypes form an underlying continuity that alerts critics to target popular representations as assumed to connect social issues with matters of female objectification and subordination. All of these concerns are embedded in classed behaviours of what is acceptable, civilised, 'polite' (Kipnis 2006) behaviour for men and women – in short, erotica is and pornography is not.

In the first instalment of the film trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), there is the familiar 'hook' in the form of a chance meeting (Ballon 2005) followed by the push and pull of both protagonists wanting to be with each other yet being internally conflicted about it; she wants a romance and he wants an agreement in the form of a (signed and negotiated) sexual contract. In this way, the discursive markers of 'second act complications' (ibid: 85) are set up. In this cast, the incompatibilities between the protagonists' wants and needs as well as threats from Other problem characters must ultimately be resolved before the Happily-Ever-After (cf. Radway 1991). In the erotic scenes of the first film, some of which are subliminally represented and others blended away, the female protagonist is usually naked first and fast. The male often pleasures her while he is half clothed, often with his pants on. Interestingly, Ogas and Gaddam (2011: 99) state: 'In the same way that women often find the breathless gasping and moaning of female porn stars to be absurdly inauthentic, male readers of romances might find the emotional confessions of romance heroes to be strangely unfamiliar.' In all the scenes of *Fifty Shades*, no matter the particulars of the positions or BDSM enactments, the female protagonist

is gasping and panting like one of the porn stars that Ogas and Gaddam (ibid) describe, with eyes closed, arched back, and half unconscious at the hands of the male's sexual prowess. He remains in control – the active mover and controller of the sexual action. There is only one scene in which he is visibly aroused, panting and losing himself in the act of domination/sadism. That is the final sex scene of the first film in which he hits her, helping her 'to understand' his sexual preferences while making her count the strikes. She is humiliated, in pain, and crying. After this scene, she leaves his home and leaves him.

In the second film, *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017), after a short time apart, the couple reunite and affirm their love. There is more of the same kind of erotic performance, with the possible exception of the first encounter in which they have more or less loving, 'vanilla' sex with both gasping and panting. During this film, there is progression past his reluctance to open up and talk about his troubled past or 'inner demons' (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 99), and the audience sees his softer interior is only available to her; his 'desire is focused outward, narrowly and entirely on the woman' (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 104). All the problematic 'Others' begin to enter the plot, and they are dealt with by the end of the third instalment. For the duration of the second and third film, the erotic performance, whether it contains BDSM or not, is pleasurable for both parties and the male remains the chief initiator and director of the performance, seldom responding to the female, mostly deciding on the specifics of the erotic encounter. So, while *Fifty Shades* is often praised for its celebration of feminine *jouissance* for the female, from the female perspective (Dirks 2018), the actual physicality, the embodiment, the performance is very much a salutation to male sexual proficiency, boldness, power, and superiority, which, in turn, are

associated with higher class and social status – indeed, ‘up’-ness. The femininities *and* masculinities represented in *Fifty Shades* are resolutely classed in that they require ‘a lot of artifice, a lot of clothes, a lot of props ... a lot of effort’ (Rogers 2015: 129).

6.5 Metaphorical Mappings of Class in Pornographic Performance

The *Fifty Shades* films (2015, 2017, 2018) are good examples of how pornographic visual content can be deliberately sanitised and reframed so that they could move from the margins of what is benignly referred to as *adult entertainment* into mainstream popular culture. Stekelenburg (2018) argues in her study of the writings of the Marquis de Sade and the *Fifty Shades* novels (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) that it ‘reveals some of the common strategies used to sanitise and control the potentially overwhelming revelation of the naked, penetrating and leaking body’ (2018: 50). Of course, more graphic (re)presentations of ‘excessive corporeality’ (Stekelenburg 2018: 57) that one may experience in BDSM such as physical violence, extreme pain, marking the skin, drawing blood, bodily excretions, purging, screaming, withholding breath, begging or crying, and so on, are not shown in the films at all. Regarding the mainstreaming of pornographic content, Dines (2010: 25) explains: ‘What we see today, is the result of years of careful strategizing and marketing by the porn industry to sanitize its products by stripping away the “dirt” factor and reconstituting porn as fun, edgy, chic, sexy and hot.’ What is available in mainstream film is certainly not representative of the internet pornography market (especially in terms of the availability and popularity of gonzo, violent, kinky, squicky, or hard-core pornography). Who could forget Peter Morley-Souter’s comic depicting Rule 34? ‘*If you can imagine it, it exists as internet porn*’ (cited in Ogas and Gaddam

2011: 7). With the advent of internet pornography, 'choice' is indeed 'the mantra' of modern consumers (Orbach 2009: 20). In *Fifty Shades*, though, a lot of the romance cues are very familiar and have been in our midst for a long time.

Nevertheless, when pornographic content mainstreams in erotic romance film, it seems to be purposefully embodying a form of 'good sex' not 'bad sex' (Rubin 1984). After all, the heterosexual, monogamous marriage and family is the ultimate framing of personal and social functionality, no matter what else might be psychologically, politically, or sexually questionable. *Fifty Shades* forms a continuity with this relational ordering which is, almost by necessity, led by a strong male. In order to sell erotic film or pornographic content to viewing audiences who are mostly women, the male protagonist must be socially dominant (physically attractive, physically strong, financially endowed, and powerful); he must be competent (capable, talented, and intelligent); and he 'must have a troubled and tempestuous soul that can only be healed by the magical balm of a woman's love' (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 105). Attributes of social dominance and competence are intimately connected to class because they imply that the embodiment of these results in social success and a lack of these results in social collapse. Class, in this sense, connects to a literacy or set of capabilities for socialisation that more affluent, properly educated, and trained people understand and can perform.

With this in mind, it seems that *Fifty Shades* also frames kink as good sex in a consumerist, flamboyant show of free-market, capitalist understandings of class as a material-discursive formation; that is, the economic empowerment of the hero gives him the social power and personal choice to purchase and spend as he pleases,

particularly when pursuing a mate. The romance scripts in the films are hemmed into multiple performances of wealth privilege (of the male protagonist) such as: owning multiple lavish homes; frequent exotic holidays; privately owned luxury cars, jets, yachts, and helicopters; personal employees from assistants, to chauffeurs, to cooks, to housekeepers and personal security, which the male protagonist refers to as 'my people'; cultural activities with opera, music, dancing, socialising, graduations, extravagant parties, and charity events; successful employment in, and ownership of, business empires, coupled with the inevitable smidgen of altruism (sustainable farming to eradicate hunger and poverty across the globe) which is not represented, incidentally. He gifts and offers these to the female protagonist in a fairly familiar performance of billionaire bad boy, hesitant to disclose his troubled past which he has overcome in a spectacular triumph of good luck, competence, and hard work. As Ogas and Gaddam (2011) note:

Conspicuously absent from the list of romance heroes are blue collar workers (no janitors or welders), bureaucrats (no claims adjusters or associate marketing managers), and traditionally feminine professions (no hairdressers, secretaries or kindergarten teachers). All of the hero professionals are associated with status, confidence and competence ... Power is a reflection of a man's rank in the dominance hierarchy, and women are attracted to men near the top. The man at the very top is the *alpha male*. (2011: 95, emphasis in original)

For the male protagonist in *Fifty Shades*, the emphasis is not on providing, leading, and belonging as with traditional working- or middle-class male roles in an industrialised society (Ingram and Waller 2014) but on excessive consumerism and economic power very much representative of an upper-class billionaire and bad boy.

There are many studies and advice books that have demonstrated the erotic appeal of strong, dominant men – from the way they look, to how they move, how they smell, their features, and so on (Bourdieu 2001; Ogas and Gaddam 2011; Orbach 2009). Likewise, this film series also seems to abide by what men seem to prefer in women if the most popular demand in online pornography searches is anything to go by – namely, youth. Ogas and Gaddam (2011: 55) claim that ‘searches for adolescent women are the most common sexual search around the world by a large margin’. Young, passive, naïve women in need of more mature, dominating, experienced men is a (re)presentational set that will not disappear in the foreseeable future.

Akin to the material-discursive framing of classed performance, is a knowledge-discursive framing of class. The reader assumes the female gaze of the female protagonist who does not know the ins and outs of BDSM practices, contracts, equipment, postures, and so on. The viewer joins the protagonist in her inquiry and education. For example, in the *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017) film, as the protagonists are getting ready to attend his parents’ charity masked ball, Christian presents Ana with a set of jiggle balls. After he tells her to suck them in order to wet them, he instructs her to turn around and bend over. A visibly bewildered Ana says: ‘No, you’re not putting those in my butt’, at which Christian scoffs lightly, replying: ‘They don’t go in your butt’. His experienced, knowing explanation of how to use them and what they are for allows him to guide her and the viewers, as in several scenes during the three films, in a way that both viewers and the female character look up to the male lead as an authoritative epistemic subject. This may be in explaining the functions of nipple clamps and butt plugs or showing audiences how to restrain,

spank, whip, or cuff – most of which is done while the female is semi-conscious, eyes closed, arched back in pleasure while he is conscious, eyes open, the active director and mover as described in the orientations above.

As is tangible with a dominant-submissive BDSM performance, the power-discursive framing of class seems primary because of the straightforward embodiment of physical power and subordination it seems to portray. For critics who happen to be women or sexual minorities, (re)presentation of the BDSM subculture might hit a nerve, so to speak. On the surface, it seems to be portraying or celebrating the inflicting and receiving of pain, restraint, and humiliation which have always been a social reality for subordinated classes (cf. Mason-Grant 2004). However, BDSM practitioners, fans, players, and the few people who study them claim that the subculture is actually ‘about the voluntary exchange of power’ (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 208) during which many socially dominant people find relief in sexually submissive play. Further, the dominant partner’s ability to enact is not unchecked; it depends on the submissive partner allowing it or refusing/stopping by means of, say, safe words. This is by no means a powerless position to occupy. Ogas and Gaddam (2011: 208) further claim that ‘social dominance does not imply sexual dominance – only an increased sex drive’, and ‘BDSM play is usually not aimed at generating an orgasm, though its practitioners usually consider it erotic’. Further, in the films, secrecy and privacy for the couple is a recurring trope – everything from having security staff warding off intruders to rejecting probing questions of family and friends. This might be termed a social-discursive framing of class in which upper classes value, take seriously, aggressively protect, and pay for their privacy and

safety, which is not typical for most ordinary people. It suggests they have a lot of worth to protect.

Politically speaking, is this not the ultimate triumph of class in the sense that Mason-Grant (2004: 158) suggests – that those excluded from the upper classes struggle to ‘denormalise’ their social norms and practices? That is when someone is so accomplished, has so much money, so many talents and skills, so much freedom that the political system, whether functioning on a micro-, meso- or macro-scale, really has little effect on that person’s life and choices. For the male protagonist, class is a clear marker of desirability, and any problems he must overcome will be done through the love of the female. For the female protagonist, her empowerment resides in her sexual irresistibility, special qualities, and unique abilities that she uses very skilfully to get her man the way she wants him, even if he is a little resistant along the way (Ogas and Gaddam 2011). In *Fifty Shades*, the female protagonist shows herself to be ready for this sophisticated, intense, lasting relationship by presenting differently to the anti-ideal prototypes displayed by other female characters in the film (except for his ‘good’ mother) – she is present and committed unlike her own mother; she does not display any of the mental instability of the disturbed ex-girlfriend; she does not show any of the nastiness or abusiveness of the older (witch-like) character that is responsible for his damage; and she exhibits the required respectability, seriousness, modesty, and maturity not demonstrated by her friends. In the films, the recurrent theme of jealousy not only exists between the protagonists, as discussed below, but also extends to Othered men who envy the positions and successes of the male protagonist and Othered women who envy the female protagonist for being able to keep him. Jealousy is a pervasive conflict in

romance scripts (Radway 1991). In this way, one may see how important the feminine psychological cues of love, adorability, commitment, and intimacy are for the *romance* to succeed, with the erotic performance complementing the narrative of that romance.

6.6 Compulsory Demisexuality and Psychological Cues for Women

The question is: would additional consumption of this material actually result in the affective 'turn on' required for fulfilling sexual practice? It seems that the strategy of narrowing the (re)presentational field to heterosexual, cis-gendered, white, upper-class, thin, athletic, able-bodied, young men and women is persistent. Furthermore, brute sex acts, whether reach, queer, kink, hard-core, or gonzo pornography that Dines (2010) describes in great detail, seem to occupy more and more place in the visual sex market. However, Ogas and Gaddam (2011) claim that violent pornography is in the minority in terms of internet pornography content. Nevertheless, the point is that most pornography, whether explicitly violent or not, vehemently departs from any affective forms of intimacy, respect, love, and so on, and its consumer base is overwhelmingly male. Romance audiences, on the other hand, 'prefer to see the heroine desired, needed, and loved by a man who is strong and masculine, but equally capable of unusual tenderness, gentleness, and concern for her pleasure' (Radway 1991: 81). These affections must be displayed in a genuine transformation as a result of her efforts to tame his deficiencies.

Regarding the social order of sexual expression, readers might well be familiar with notions of 'compulsory heterosexuality', which can be understood as an erasure of difference in sexual practice that is variously supported and maintained by

'legislation, religious fiat, media imagery and efforts at censorship' (Rich 2007: 209; cf. Butler 1990, 1993; Rubin 1984). With regards to the idea of pornographic content that is created by, and for, women, there seems to be some sort of compulsory demisexuality infused into the compulsory heterosexuality that is presumed to permeate the female erotic romance gestalt – either in terms of experience, performance, or expectation. Again, the expectations are divided along gendered lines. Demisexuality is defined by *Dictionary.com* (n.d.: online) as 'a sexual orientation characterized by only experiencing sexual attraction after making a strong emotional connection with a specific person. A demisexual identity is a useful indicator for where a person might fall on the asexual spectrum.' This definition would fall in line with the 'mommy porn' metaphor, which has an element of asexuality and nurturance attached to it (Zack 1997). Radway (1991: 169) confirms that, even when female sexual expression is the focus or other atypical romance prototypes are present, they are only tolerated so long as they 'perpetuate the usual connection between sex and love', with the relationship being paramount. Along these lines, in somewhat essentialist, even stereotypical, readings of eroticised behaviour, Ogas and Gaddam (2011: 19) claim:

On the Web, men prefer images. Women prefer stories. Men prefer graphic sex. Women prefer relationships and romance ... When men and women are free to search for anything they want behind the anonymity of their computer screen, they don't just seek out different interests. They seek out different modes of stimulation. Men prefer to watch, women prefer to read and discuss.

I have written previously on the reasons for the success of the *Fifty Shades* novels (James 2011, 2012a, 2012b) and will include a visual of the book covers and film posters hereafter (Images 36 and 37, p. 272):

Many commentators such as Emanuella Grinberg (CNN 2012) have attributed the phenomenal success of the series to a ‘perfect storm’ of several factors: Firstly, the most obvious of these is the old adage ‘sex sells’ and it would seem that kinky sex sells even better than its vanilla counterpart, although the author has been insistent that the plot is a love story and not pornography (ABC News 2012). Secondly, the privacy and anonymity afforded by e-book and audiobook technology allows that one may read socially illicit material without having to disclose to peers or public what one is doing. Thirdly, the clever marketing strategy of tasteful, discreet and understated cover images (a silk tie, a mask, and a key in muted silvery tones) minimizes the possible perceived bawdiness of erotic or pornographic content and thereby captures a wider female demographic. (Van Reenen 2014: 226)



Images 36 & 37: Fifty Shades – Covers of the novels and DVDs

(Sources – Image 36: The Madam-Editor 2012; Image 37: Amazon n.d.)

Incidentally, the image of the key on the *Fifty Shades Freed* book (James 2012b) is replaced by a set of handcuffs in later releases. Note that the film covers are more explicit and feature both actors, so the second and third factors put forward by Grinberg in the citation from Van Reenen (2014) above are no longer applicable once the secret is out and ‘anonymity’ is no longer required – the public fascination with kinky sex is exposed and more acceptable for (progressive) women. Yet, all framings have a classed look about them – young, affluent, able, desirable, heterosexual, white bodies. Elements of BDSM are only *implied*, not explicit, in almost all of the promotional images, supposedly still appealing to a sophisticated female demographic that does not dabble in low-class cultural activity or product and definitely not in pornography. While the male protagonist is always taller, his gaze is directed at the female completely, which is typical in romance films because the emphasis is squarely on the affective component between the couple, not on crude (re)presentations of sex. *Psychological* cues (not *visual* cues, which are for men) employed in romance books and films are directed at women because they are read as appealing to women (Ogas and Gaddam 2011). Yet, with a sense of paradox, I note that many (re)presentations of delight and desire in erotic encounters are replete with instances of transgression and an adamant rejection of normalising forces. The consumption of Othered erotic bodies that push the boundaries of what is desirable and what is lovable, is, in many ways, thrilling and satisfying but these bodies mostly push from outside those boundaries. The boundary of acceptability, as well as the transgression thereof, provides a space for *jouissance*. In many ways, people occupying everyday bodies in ordinary, everyday lifeworlds embody the very notion of transgression (of the ideal). When the transgression is conscious, though,

people are probably aware of what they want to transcend or transgress by rejecting 'identification within the current social order and instead imagine new ways of being and relating that do not exist within the normative social order' (Braddy and Huff 2018: 106). In spite of many claims to the contrary, it is my assessment that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy does not assume that position, so to speak.

6.7 Conclusion

Orbach (2009: 13) argues that body distress is not the only outcome of a digital and hyper-saturated contemporary image culture: 'The very tools that have given rise to a narrow aesthetic could be redeployed to include the wide variety of bodies people actually have.' The characters in *Fifty Shades* fit rather snugly into the narrow aesthetic that Harding (2008: 71–73) describes in the beginning of Chapter One, save for two differences: The female protagonist is a brunette and she does not have big breasts. The Jenna Jameson¹¹⁴, favoured 'porn star' attributes of big breasts, blonde hair, and blue eyes (Jameson and Strauss 2004) are shelved for this erotic fiction character who is much classier than a porn star. I would hazard a guess that this was a deliberate, classed choice: the character of Anastasia Steele is supposed to be a plain girl because her intelligence, astuteness, and agency are the characteristics that enable her to get her man the way she wants him. While the discursive markers of 'big-breasted' and 'blonde' in popular culture signify sexual aptitude (especially oral sex) and the central case prototype of sex objects, their personations do *not* have agency and they are stupid – that is, the 'dumb blonde

¹¹⁴ Jenna Jameson is rated on *Nielsen* as the highest-earning porn star and the first porn star to become a celebrity in mainstream popular culture (Dines 2010). In 2004, she released the book *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, co-written with Neil Strauss, detailing her rather tragic life story and successful professional career as a stripper and porn star. She often refers to the popularity of big-breasted blondes in the sex industry, as does Dines, who remarks that Jameson has 'an all-American look' that removes the actual 'sleaziness' of the industry (2010: 35).

stereotype' (Shifman and Lamish 2014: 100–101). This stereotype is also related to the '10' and 'centrefold syndrome' (Ogas and Gaddam 2011: 172) against which women often judge themselves. Dines (2010: 31) confirms that a '10' is a 'young, white, blonde, blue-eyed female with big breasts and a toned body' and is the ideal prototype for *Girls Gone Wild*.¹¹⁵ Context is telling. For the female protagonist in *Fifty Shades*, all the boxes are checked: she is white, thin, young, able, quasi-athletic, heterosexual (Harding 2008), has a flawless skin, and is well-groomed; the male protagonist repeatedly affirms her beauty and capability, which is important for the reader/viewer. Her being a brunette with small breasts are 'plainness' markers as described in the novels but are as much markers of a woman who should be taken seriously, which is important to the plot but not explicitly stated in the films. Shifman and Lamish (2014: 94) comment: 'A theme that is unique to blonde stupidity [jokes], is the blonde's portrayal as an inept mother.' This stereotype will not do for an erotic romance that ends in marriage and family; bar the BDSM element, this couple must still produce and protect the 'national collective' to escape harsh judgement. Mainstream disruptions in discursive markers of a popular aesthetic of desire are few and far between in these films.

If one had to imagine an alternative set of characters placed into the same narrative, though, would this book have sold? What if the characters were a handsome, black soldier and a young refugee girl in the Sudan; or a disabled computer programmer and a dressmaker in Delhi; or an overweight farmer and a middle-aged hairdresser in Colombia; or a lesbian jeweller in Iran introducing a young trans teacher to BDSM? These characters exemplify the redeployment that Orbach (2009: 13) is

115 This is a well-known reality television franchise that Dines (2010) discusses throughout her critique of the pornography market.

requesting in order 'to include the wide variety of bodies people actually have'. However, without altering the progression of the *Fifty Shades* narrative, I would expect that these bodies with these discursive markers are not going to be good for sales. After the success of the *Fifty Shades* novels, publishers were apparently flooded with similar manuscripts. None have since sold as well and none have exhibited any disruption in old, familiar tropes as innovative, fresh erotic fiction material, let alone revelled in (re)presentations of different, Othered bodies in performances of the erotic. Following Foucault (1990a, 1990b, 1990c), one may be reminded that *governmentality* over bodies in the era of mediation is no longer obviously regulated or legislated. It is far more subtle in its coercion of viewers into its narrow ideality, its cultivation of largely exclusive modes of identification, and its subjection of viewers to ideologies of privilege enclosed in classed (gendered, raced, sized, abled, and aged) framings of erotic performance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

General Conclusions and Considerations for Future Research Directions

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, my general conclusions with regards to the research question are summarised. These conclusions are supported by my principal findings in the critical semiotic analyses of performative frames as they are reproduced on twenty-first-century popular screens. This study has taken a significant amount of semiological and ideological context into consideration but cannot be considered comprehensive in either regard. While concentrating on performance has perhaps filled some gaps left by widely referenced readings of eroticised bodies in popular culture, the hope is that the theoretical concepts and applications offered in this work incite more research on performance on gendered, raced, classed, sized, aged, and abled bodies in a variety of permutations, including those that exist on the periphery of, or outside, the mainstream. Interdisciplinary analyses of the kind conducted in this thesis engender unconventional concepts and methodologies and may have import into established disciplines or traditional areas of knowledge. Accordingly, some suggestions regarding possible directions for future research are incorporated into the concluding remarks in light of ongoing disputes and developments in visual cultures presented.

7.2 General Conclusions

From the analyses of the selected image genres in mainstream, twenty-first-century, visual media, it becomes apparent that, when eroticised performance is aesthetically

constructed on bodies for popular screens, (re)presentations of desire and desirability change considerably when the body prototypes used in these performances are altered. Specifically, the 'identifiable characteristics' listed at the outset of Chapter One were sought out in image samples and designated and analysed against similar and different performative frames – all of which occupy mainstream, globally dominant positions on popular screens. In the designation of metaphorical constructs and framing effects in the image samples selected, erotic performance that is conducted between subjects and objects who are aestheticised, stylised, or personated as heterosexual, white, cis-gendered, middle- or upper-class, thin, young, smooth-skinned, quasi-athletic, and able amply displays expressions of intimacy associated with *erotic* relationality as opposed to simply *sexual* activity (cf. Bataille 1986)¹¹⁶, while expressions loaded with affectual and social, emotional, and desirability capital are largely muted or absent. The argument regarding (re)presentation being, on the one hand, a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy of a particular category of subject prototypes and, on the other, a normative function that either reveals or distorts what is assumed to be true about that particular category of subject prototypes is reinforced by means of hierarchies that emerge in the images and normative values attached to them. In performance, this construction is taken to be intentional, but performative and scripting elements contained in these constructions serve to entrench stereotyping and ideology already in social and cultural circulation which are structured unconsciously and prior to the production-consumption process. Therefore, the artful constructions that may be found in highly translatable media images are

¹¹⁶ Bataille (1986) refers to this kind of sexual activity as brute, animalistic, or as a mode of simple reproduction. The distinction from the affect and mutuality of erotica is clear and allows for a myriad of value attachments discussed here.

appropriating idealised prototypes that are based on a steering politics which is decidedly exclusionary and inclusionary.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) propose a theory of conceptual metaphors that includes structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors which structure people's thought and action. In the theoretical framework that informs the analyses of image sample sets, performative frames are taken to have a similar structuring function that organises and integrates prior to (re)presentation and reception of those images. The image analyses show that 'softer' (McLeod 2012: 171) expressions of intimacy, love, and emotionally charged or 'passionate encounters' (Davis 2015: 181) between erotic subjects and objects are seldom (re)presented when traditionally Othered bodies are occupying the position of sexually desirable subject or object on popular screens. This is evident when one compares the subject-object relationalities represented in the three image sets. For example, when queer, raced, or raunchy bodies enact erotic scripts in each of the three mainstream sample sets, there is notably less framing of intimate connections to each other and their 'look' (identifiable characteristics) is often problematised as part of the narrative; larger and smaller sized bodies are often parodied or comically framed, and their 'look' is habitually cast as the main driver of the narrative; older and disabled bodies are more often framed with frailty and caution. Very often, displays of affection or intimacy on historically Othered body prototypes are subliminal, unrequited, downplayed, or implied, rather than shown (for example, the camera fades away or the frame darkens at the point of touching or kissing, and it is left up to the viewer to imagine the sex act that might ensue). These (re)presentations have little to do with Othered bodies' actual erotic lives – they simply show that a few body prototypes are

repeatedly privileged as legitimate erotic subjects or objects of desire in mediated bodies as they are found in selected genres of popular twenty-first-century mass media. While anyone with any body prototype may view or consume these performing bodies, it seems that only a few prototypes may perform the erotic, may embody erotic desirability, may trade in erotic capital, or may be presented as worthy of the desiring gaze. The metaphorical analysis in Chapters Four, Five, and Six allows for the partial association of identifiable characteristics with value attachments that have no actual connection to these characteristics to be exposed and critiqued as arbitrarily formed but powerful.

In terms of metaphors and frames, the extension of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) linguistically and cognitively grounded theory to the politics of visual performance material proved possible, fruitful, and applicable beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Theoretical applications showed that it is not a new strategy to show dominance by positioning orientational prototypes that are perceived to be reiterations of ideal cases – that is, in the centre, in front, or above – to personate them in roles of mover, speaker, leader, aggressor, and to portray and posture them in privileged, free, fully agential ways. By contrast, subordination of traditional Others works in precisely opposite ways, as does marginalisation, while muting or invisibilising can be seen as the ultimate deletion of the Other. Simplistic portrayals of what are deemed to be *acceptable* bodies, *desirable* bodies, *consumable* bodies, or even *idealised* bodies create a discourse that sustains patterns of (re)presentation that are, at once, exclusionary and inclusionary within a power complex that is decidedly ideological. But, there is something eerily personal and almost cruel about these inclusions and exclusions as they largely play on physical characteristics

which people can very often do nothing about. This interplay smacks of playground politics involving cool groups and outsiders, reinforcing the maintenance and legitimization of unequal power and resource distribution that works at the level of subjectivity. This is how the mechanism of ideology works most effectively (Rose 2001). Accordingly, whatever the object of study may be, one may make a case that none of these can see themselves as being wholly independent of cross-, trans-, and inter-disciplinary investigation, including the erotic.

One of the strongest assertions throughout the study is that, inasmuch as erotic content is an 'attention grabber' (Bourdieu 1996: 17) and is often presented as innovative, progressive, risqué, or new, the analyses undertaken suggest that these (re)presentations largely echo 'ever old' social orderings and ideologies that are routinely the subject of debate among many critical scholars who address the problematic of 'relations of social power' and the inequalities they sustain (Butler 1993: 170). Implicit in Harding's (2008) reading, then, bodies that look like the prototypes she describes in the citation that opens Chapter One are included in narrow parameters of an ideal while the vast majority of bodies across the globe, which actually differ from that ideal, are excluded by means of privileging, body-shaming, and silencing subtexts. The breadth of the material thematised in the literature review shows that these subtexts occur in the foundational assumptions of every discipline as well as in their applications or praxes. In a more general sense, ideal case prototypes are typecast as worthy of special treatment. In the case of the erotic, particularly, this translates into the freedom to express erotic fulfilment, intimacy, and desirability. Discursive markers that are assumed to signify gender, race, class, age, size, and ability result in a marked over-representation of some

kinds of bodies, which, in turn, stereotypes all body prototypes and fosters an unnecessary, exaggerated division and hierarchisation of difference between them. The study demonstrates how even seemingly innocuous categories of research influence both worldview and knowledge.

Examinations of the performative frames selected show nothing *innately* gendered, raced, classed, sized, aged, or abled in particular movements, interactions, and figures denoting erotic performance. Performance and stylisation conventions are applied in performative frames to produce effects that correspond with historical or cultural norms and social mores that are already in circulation. Of course, no one is truly identifiable in terms of the 'identifiable characteristics' that Harding (2008) describes. Of all the different and complex meanings that may be performatively expressed, felt, or extended, the identifiable ones are but few. Consequently, what the sample sets show is that the success and ubiquity of the visual media industry are due to the industry being very good at reducing complex materialities into short scripts or snapshots of current experiences and trends. Popular culture images emerge and take hold of people's imaginaries quickly, so they should continually have to undergo a de-ideologising or denormalising process in which ongoing analyses and differentiated interpretations will make known, question, and challenge ideologies and stereotypes which are deceptively benign in terms of their potential to dominate ways of thinking by posing as commonsensical entities and setting norms for behaviour.

In the mass mediated mainstream, these stylisations are reiterated over and over again, and they are highly translatable in different markets that may have no

awareness of the original productive intent. Due to the deregulation, expansion, and technological advancement of media industries, visual culture has opened up possibilities for the formation of global cultures that are no longer dependent on traditional limitations of space, time, reproduction, and translatability. Very quickly, visual content generates popularity and, therefore, income – especially from consuming mass markets which are younger than ever. Content of this nature is also good for ratings, which means producers will pick it up, pay a lot of money for it, and distribute it; this limits options for producers and creators (cf. *Congressional Hearings on Hip Hop* 2007; *GLAAD* 2009; Jameson and Strauss 2004). Herein lies the deep connection between (re)presentation and commercialisation: ongoing and repeated production of narrow body ideals makes good business sense – not only for the popular culture industry but for associated industries as well. If one's intent is to generate more economic capital, one should acquire and distribute mass product that most people do not have but do want or need and will spend money to obtain. These technologies serve to fuel anxieties about lacking social, cultural, economic, and political capital. Mass media makes these 'pastoral havens' (Visagie 1994: 31) such as the erotic seem accessible, albeit that they come at a price. Because global import is now very facile, cultural imperialism is bound to be a significant problem for local cultural production in global popular cultures.

If most people are (re)presented or idealised as desirable on highly differentiated popular screens, then it would stand to reason that most people have nothing to acquire (by whatever means) in order to constitute themselves as desirable. In plain terms, it does not make good business sense to attempt to sell people what they already have. A heterogeneous representation or understanding of what might

constitute desirability would probably have significant monetary implications for producers of product that promises desirability in global economies. This atomistic approach to aestheticisation of desirability markets the notion that acquiring prototypical parts for, on, and in one's imperfect body and performance will result in an overall increase in desirability and, consequently, becomes a technology for full-personhood happiness. However, I will restate that what is common or repeated may not necessarily be natural or normal, and none of these concepts necessarily implies notions of normativity or what *should* be. Logically speaking, these entailments might be as arbitrary as the value assignments attached to them, and those assignments are decidedly *attached*. For this reason, learning about meaning formation and its attachment to value, aestheticisation, stereotype, and ideology formation is crucial in fostering a critical and responsible consumer base or audience.

For many critics of homogeneity and ideology, including those mentioned throughout the study as well as Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003), the solution to representational dilemmas is to change the culture – either in terms of what is produced, replicated, and consumed or how this is done. Lakoff (2002, 2004, 2008) suggests the solution to these dilemmas would be to change the metaphors one uses or, to use a phrase he frequently proposes in his work on politics, 'reframe the debate'. While, in principle, I would agree, and I certainly celebrate and applaud producers of differentiated or alternative imaginaries, I am not sure that a corrective lens is always a useful one. The fact remains that many producers and performers communicate how difficult adjusting content would be because of the need to satisfy producers and, accordingly, make money. Trading in stereotypical capital is a successful way in which to do that. Unfortunately, with the demand and craving for

circulatable capital being what it is, missing discourses that present a dialectics of the erotic are somewhat difficult to come by. That is not to say that critical onlookers are exempt from treating what is (re)presented as dialectical objects. In the absence of product transformation, a good counter strategy would be to foster a critical consumership that is fully aware of the content they consume as well as its broader involvement in bringing to fruition actual social oppression. Without at least awareness of what one consumes, there can be little *informed* choice, agency, and, ultimately, true freedom. Just because one has choices does not imply that one is fully agential when making those choices, unless one has access to sufficient information at the time of the choice.

Differences in discursive markers of gender, sexuality, race, class, size, age, and ability adjust performative frames of desire and desirability, which has significant implications for conceptual understandings and applications of what would be *acceptable* bodies, *desirable* bodies, *consumable* bodies, or even *idealised* bodies as ideal case prototypes. While eroticised bodies have been singled out for analysis as a normative, critical category for analysis, the analysis demonstrates that these signifying systems are not necessarily distinct from broader signifying systems which also structure societal elements along the lines of vertical hierarchisation of race, gender, class, age, size, and ability (as well as other categories). Therefore, the conceptual and methodological accomplishments of the analysis may be applied in other interdisciplinary fields besides visual and cultural studies.

Performative framing, as applied in my study, offers a strategy for appraising visual content for more than what it appears to be on the surface – that is, entertaining,

aesthetically pleasing, erotic images. Indeed, popular screens present ideas of people, and these ideas should not be conflated with real people. Some of the most discerning and well-informed individuals among us have succumbed to the unreality of popular culture content. Therefore, no matter who is consuming what content, the viewer should remain cognisant that, wittingly or unwittingly, images are never produced without semiotic intent. The approach employed in this study could be applied to any form of popular culture material – not only eroticised bodies – from a young age to supplement some of the missing discourses remarked on in Chapter Two. Popular culture images cannot be treated as a presently performed object; visual performance is a citational exercise that occurs long before anyone arrives at the show, and it will go on long after the viewer leaves the show. Similarly, the metaphors and frames employed in virtual eroticised performances have a pre-existence as well as a post-existence. In light of the content analysed, I concur with Lakoff and Turner (1989), whose discussion on poetry I will adapt for the visual material I analysed: Producers and performers extend and compose metaphors in interesting and novel ways. However, although they create the performances, they do not create the basic metaphors on which the performances are based. To understand creative metaphors, one must understand conventional metaphors and how they are deployed. Conventional metaphors are already there for producers and creators of popular culture, widespread throughout people's worldviews, which constrain the everyday thought and imagination of 'the least literate people as well as in our greatest artistic traditions' (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 8).

From the outset of this study, I attempted to find ways of discussing the affect and relationality of erotic performance and pleasure that do not treat the topic as

excessively unique, strange, or shocking but simply a part of the cultural landscape in which people function every day. In making the intricacies of frames, norms, stereotypes, and ideologies associated with the eroticisation of bodies explicit and questioning their regulatory mechanisms, the intent is really to interrupt the social authorisation with which they operate so that the corporeal and relational nature of people's erotic lives can be decisively reclaimed. In hoping for a visual imaginary that not just values, but actually *anticipates*, difference, I conclude with a reminder from Edelman (in Berlant and Edelman 2014: 18), who states:

[W]e can never be reminded often enough that the political program [of happiness] as a regulatory norm is less a recipe for liberation than an inducement to entomb oneself in the stillness of an image. It is to seek, as I wrote at the outset, 'the stability of a knowable relation,' where the fantasy of knowing the relation seeks to stabilise or mortify precisely what has made it living and relational in the first place.

7.3 Future Research Directions

I concur with Fahs (2011) that sexual politics and practice have become muddled in the contemporary media-saturated era in which communication is overwhelmingly visual and exceedingly mobile. Indeed, exposure to copious quantities of erotic visual content does not imply an ability to read it. Many instances of such contestations can be found in the everyday and, with continual snapshots of complicated matters delivered in a variety of settings, matters of accepted and acceptable conduct are not clear cut. For example, in the recent Biden-Flores case¹¹⁷, what used to be seen as benign affection a few years ago, could now be

¹¹⁷ The case involved Lucy Flores issuing a complaint on television against a previous American vice-president, Joe Biden, who allegedly acted inappropriately with her during a 2014 campaign.

experienced and communicated as a 'violation of personal autonomy' or space as well as demonstrating a lack of 'basic understanding of social norms' (Flores 2019: Online). Matters of sexual subjectivity and conduct clearly need ongoing investigation, debate, and clarification in light of the many transformations currently taking place in theory, policy, and practice. Semiological studies can add deep readings to such debates. This kind of conceptualisation and methodology may be extended beyond erotic (re)presentation to many other areas of (re)presentation and its relation to stereotyping and ideology and to many other areas of knowledge formation. Furthermore, I see no reason that semiotic strategies cannot be employed to read and interpret actual forms of life as well. In this way, notions of performance and performativity can be extended to many everyday interactions and communications, which could provide interesting readings and interrogation of social mores and cultural conventions as well as their regulatory effects.

Further research in consumer influence on production, as well as influence of product on consumers, would be useful. In this regard, sociological work on audience reception and the perceptions of local communities of their own, imported, hybridised, and transnational cultural product would be useful. Are performers performing within a 'culture of surveillance' (Brown 2008: 6) where the ideals of a white American imaginary are expected and, indeed, held up to be normative or ideal standards of beauty or desirability? Ongoing work on transcultural formations and the impact of cross-cultural fusions and appropriations by local and foreign cultures across the globe could provide much information on when or how it is appropriate to engage in cultural connotation, denotation, appropriation, or new formations and when it is not. The kind of analysis that does not focus on the mainstream but on

alternative responses thereto would be interesting and useful decolonial work. Sociologically grounded studies that shed further light on how geographically (and historically) situated audiences or consumers receive and respond to imported imaging from foreign production markets, how useful or harmful those imports might be, how they might be internalised and utilised, and whether such practices are liberating or constraining would be enlightening for readers of popular culture. It has become apparent in recent times that exposure to different forms of life has inspired change and given rise to movements and uprisings, especially in societies that are deemed repressive or regressive. Comprehensive research on external influences and the conditions under which they may be absorbed or imposed in globalising contexts is needed. Quantitative analyses and statistical comparative studies on modes of consumption, distribution, redistribution, regulation, and production would be extremely useful in tracking new developments and changes in local and global markets.

I would suggest that one of the most important areas for consideration by future research could provide information on how selling strategies and consumption patterns are formed, analysed, manipulated, and utilised – specifically, the ‘consumer neuroscience’ and ‘neuromarketing insights’ that *Nielson* (2019) describes. This information would be especially useful in the iGeneration’s¹¹⁸ learning processes (and those of generations to follow) as well as shed light on critical consumership possibilities. Cross-, multi- and interdisciplinary research that would provide possibilities and conditions for developing visual literacy and appropriate media usage could be positioned in formal education initiatives for young

¹¹⁸ By iGeneration is meant the current young generation who is heavily involved in, and dependent on, personalised mobile devices and digital technology as well as the individualised way in which they use them.

consumers. With social media laws still under construction in many societal contexts, ongoing research should serve to raise awareness about critical reading or consumption of digital, visual, and related products. Visual literacy is a crucial area of research and should be viewed as long-term teaching-and-learning development for youth consumers in a rapidly changing and growing market. For the iGeneration, these media are primary sites of communicative action and interaction, the effects of which are not yet comprehensively investigated or reported.

More and more, consumer enmeshment in intersecting identities and identity politics arises from exposure to mass media as well as in actual lived experiences which, as a result of increased people mobility, are increasingly heterogeneous. As people become exposed to more difference, they seem to be increasingly occupying not only multiple identities, but also ambiguous identities, mixed identities, partial identities, and undefined identities. Accordingly, visual literacy, cultural literacy, and political literacy, as well as expectations regarding expression and (re)presentation of meaning in popular culture, need to be further explored and explained in order to counter simplistic discourses that may lead to reiterations of stereotypes and ideologies that perpetuate patterns of inclusion and exclusion in society.

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