



# Fat, Black, and Butch: The Use of Internet Nudes to Resist Racism and Practice ‘Erotic Therapy’

Gabriela Loureiro

**ABSTRACT:** The cyberspace and its participatory culture are frequently seen as a potential place where marginalised groups could tell their stories the way they see (Hughes, 2012). Given that Black women deal with an interlocking system of oppressions, one Black feminist in Brazil is creating new ways to deal with such oppressions in the digital sphere through the Internet nude. Raquel, a Black Brazilian woman living in Brazil who is also lesbian and fat, posts her nude on social media as a political statement about body positivity and anti-racist aesthetics. Based on a discourse analysis of an interview with Raquel about what the nude means to her, a couple of questions are raised: What are the opportunities and the limitations offered by the cyberspace to subvert social norms? What does the online backlash that Raquel suffered tell us about how the Black female body is constructed in public media in Brazil? What does her continued desire to use nude photos tell us about the potential within this act of taking nude selfies?

**KEYWORDS:** Black feminism; gender; cyberspace; embodiment; race

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In a time of continuous digitalisation, with the on-going development of new medias, the ways in which these processes happen to affect socialisation and subjectivities, it is necessary to go beyond the idea that the image is merely informational and explore its potential for affect and transformation of perceptive and affective structures of everyday life (Hansen, 2004). New technologies give us the opportunity to rethink the relations between affect, embodiment,



and image (Featherstone, 2010). Social networking technologies have been seen as a potential space for marginalised groups to tell their stories the way they wish (Hughes, 2012). In Brazil, half of the population have access to the Internet in their homes, a growing number according to national statistics, and 80% of them use their smartphones to access the web<sup>1</sup>. As a result, more people in Brazil are using the Internet for personal reasons<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, more individuals can produce media in a participatory culture, which is the relation between more accessible digital technologies and a shift in power relations between media industries and their consumers (Burgess and Green, 2009). In their work about YouTube, Burgess and Green (2009) explored the liberating yet troublesome traits of the video-sharing website regarding participatory culture, questioning who gets to speak and who gets attention, besides the compensations and uncertainties involved.

One example that shows the contradictions of participatory culture in networking technologies is the case analysed in the present article. Raquel, a 24 years old Black woman from Brazil who identifies as a lesbian and calls herself “Fat and Butch”, published nudes on her Facebook profile as a “feminist manifesto” against the racism, sexism, homophobia and fatphobia faced in her daily life. While Facebook provided her a platform to share with thousands of other users her nudes and thoughts about society, it also suspended her account for 30 days after an organised group of people reported one of her photos and Facebook saw it as a violation of the network’s regulation, the so-called “Community Standards.” In fact, Raquel was a victim of an organised attack: in a matter of hours, this particular photo had four thousand comments, most of them racist and fatphobic, one thousand shares, many of them using humiliating approaches, and one hundred hate messages in her inbox. Although she was punished by both Facebook users and the network itself for posting nudes, she continues to use Facebook until now as a way to express her thoughts and engage with other activists. Therefore, as we can see in this example, networking technologies can be useful and liberating spaces at the same time they enable censorship and online harassment. Moreover, the backlash that Raquel suffered tells us a lot about racial discourses in Brazil and her insistence in taking and sharing nudes is significant to understand the photography as a therapeutic practice, topics we will discuss further on.

## The Self in Participatory Culture

Another recurrent comment is the emphasis on the self in social media, an increasing fascination with the self in the Western culture that is perceived in reality television and other popular entertainment shows (Hughes, 2012). The emphasis on the self is also marked in personal blogs and social network in which people build character types to describe themselves in public, sometimes also to understand and perform themselves at the same time (Burgess and Green, 2009). In other words, the photos, videos, and words that people choose to publish on their social media – for example, selfies during a workout, pictures of travels and dishes, group photos among friends and family – are not randomly picked, they are part of this persona building process. In their analysis about YouTube, Burgess and Green (2009) exemplified this shift in social media towards the emphasis in individual's lives with the change of YouTube's by-line from a storage facility to a platform for public self-expression ('Your Digital Repository' to "Broadcast Yourself").

One important element of the concept of participatory culture is the notion of the user's agency. Usually, the user is depicted either as the passive recipient, as in old media such as television, or as the active participant well-versed in new media skills (van Dijck, 2009). Agency thus represents production in opposition to consumption, a binary that fails to recognize the multifarious concept of user agency (van Dijck, 2009). Given the evidence that over 80 percent of all Internet users neither create nor interact with online content, but merely scroll it (OECD, 2007), van Dijck (2009) questions the concept of participatory culture if the majority of Internet users are not participating, but consuming content. However, I find van Dijck's perception of online participation rather limited. Despite recognizing that even in what is called 'old media' viewers have increasingly acted as participants in game shows, talk shows, and quizzes over the past 15 years, van Dijck (2009) called the Internet users who don't create neither interact with content "passive recipients of content." The fact that users do not necessarily interact with social media posts does not mean that they are passive or mere recipients of content; they might absorb or question the content they see in new media in different ways, for example in inbox messages, interactions outside the cyberspace, by themselves or in closed groups. In fact, the last one – closed groups – is one of the ways in which women share nudes in Brazil, in what we might call "online communities." Van

Dijck also mentions mediated experiences in group identities (communities) in his work on YouTube, but he claims that community is tied to the involvement of users in a common cause or preference in music, movies, books or brands.

‘Communities,’ in relation to media, thus refers to a large range of user groups, some of which resemble grassroots movements, but the overwhelming majority coincide with consumer groups or entertainment platforms. (van Dijck, 2009, p.45)

Just as his notion of participation of Internet users, I find van Dijck’s concept of online communities rather generalizing, and one example of how diverse online communities can be is the widespread creation of groups of Brazilian women on Facebook with the purpose of sharing nudes as a therapeutical practice. It would be unethical to reveal the names of the groups since they are closed and demand that the participants don’t reveal details about them, but in my research about Internet nudes in Brazil I found three groups with that purpose, one with ten thousand members, another with six hundred and a third with 621 participants. All three groups explained in their descriptions that they were created with the aim of sharing nudes and love in “female solidarity” and to explore the female desire for a greater freedom. In order to be clear, in the present article, the nude is interpreted as a digital photo usually taken with the front camera of a smartphone, although it can be other types of cameras, showing a naked body or a naked part of a person, which usually is the same person who is taking the picture. The nude is also called “not safe for work selfies.” Recently in Brazil, a new culture is becoming increasingly popular, in what the participants of my research called “cultura do nude” (“nude culture,” in English). Nude culture can be understood as the widespread sharing of nudes and the popularization of the practice of taking and sending nudes online. The origin of the Internet nude harks back to sexting (having sex through text messages). So originally, people would take nudes with the purpose of sending it to the person with whom they were sexting and enhance the pleasure of seduction and online sex itself. However, apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat permitted such openness that people started to send nudes to friends as a casual thing, not necessarily to tease, but to register a moment they liked and share it with people they love. The widespread sharing of nudes gave way to the acclaimed expression

“manda nudes” (“send me nudes” in English). This expression is now an internet meme, and people use it in varied contexts: sometimes to mean that some discussion is boring and that they would rather be receiving nudes than this or as a form of compliment to celebrate one’s attractiveness, like “you are so good looking that I want you to send me nudes”.

In my research, I decided to explore the meanings attached to them in a social media context, I spoke to ten people who are in such groups, all of them aged 18–30 years old, seven women and three men, four of Black, three Mixed and three white, from different economic and geographical backgrounds in Brazil. Some of the participants were not in the particular three groups mentioned before, the men specifically participated in WhatsApp groups and Raquel, one of the participants, didn’t post her photos in particular groups but on her profile on Facebook. In the interviews, I asked them about their meanings of a nude, the reasons why they take it, if they think is empowering and if it can be feminist. Some of the questions raised during the interviews were: can the nude be used to deconstruct naturalised sexual practices in the search for alternative knowledges of pleasure? Is it a care of the self practice? Can the nude give different meanings to the body? In this paper, I present the case of one of the interviewees, Raquel, to speak about her experience with nudes. Raquel described the whole process of taking nudes as “having a conversation with herself,” but not any conversation, a loving dialogue:

To me, it means the expression of a moment when I am ok with my body when I understand that I don’t need to dress up in a certain way to feel beautiful, it’s more a record of a good conversation with my body.<sup>3</sup>

## Nude as Therapy

Raquel’s conversation with her body can be related to the concept of phototherapy. Phototherapy can be understood as a practice of resistance through the validation of anger or discontent of one’s “inability to come to term with these fragmented selves constructed out of the needs, views, attributions of others and our powerlessness in relation to them” (Martin and Spence, 2013, p.403). Based on the notion that women are encouraged to accept situations that they should resist, Martin and Spencer developed the idea of phototherapy as a healing art, a form of

assertiveness trying to access women's "needs better and try to get them met, individually and collectively" (Martin and Spence, 2013, p.403). Martin and Spence's concept is more attributed to family matters as a "health education" inside the field of psychoanalysis, which is why they affirmed that "phototherapy engages with primarily the 'needy child' within us, all who still needs to be seen and heard" (Martin and Spence, 2013, p.403), but I believe that the concept can also be applied to nudes, as in an "erotic therapy".

In phototherapy, similar to what happens in traditional therapy, the photography (therapist) encourage the child (author of the nude) to recreate its own history, feel safe enough to protest and then learn how to be its own nurturer; a process in which reinventing and asserting oneself becomes possible "by becoming the subject rather than the object of our own histories" (Martin et al., 2013). If a person is labelled as an other – either regarding gender, race, sexuality, age, disability or class – phototherapy can be a way to redefine oneself and become active subjects in their dissonant history. Thus, the action of taking and sharing nudes can be therapeutic or even a healing process (Loureiro, 2016).

New digital medias bring new opportunities for people to document and display themselves, and this attention to oneself and the 'self-centeredness' present in digital photos is a key feature of the online environment (Barton and Lee, 2013). Sharing nudes is also about writing lives and selves and spreading it on the Internet. As other new practices, it can change how people see themselves, after all, presenting an identity online is not just about who we are, but how we want others to see us (Barton et al., 2013). But in order for the nude to be a transgressive self-invention practice (Tiinderberg et al., 2015), it will depend on how the photograph is taken, because practices of self-care are liberating only when the person in control is self-aware of it (Markula, 2004, cited in Tiinderberg et al., 2015).

In terms of self-invention, an important concept is the "looking glass", a process in which people fashion an identity in everyday life, not only in terms of cultural preferences but also constructing and presenting their bodies in a way that generates erotic meanings or pleasures, specifically online and with social tools offered by the Internet (Attwood, 2010). The looking glass relates to body image, which is the visual sense that others have of oneself based on a person's appearance, one's 'look' (Featherstone, 2010). The mirror is the most obvious form to do that, but the camera through photography is also a way to not only to represent the body im-

age but to imagine one's body image (Featherstone, 2010) – particularly the camera phone, which is part of an everyday object such as the smartphone. In their analysis of gender and digital media, Sal Humphreys and Karen Orr Vered (2013) compared the camera's function as an interface with the interface that Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987, 1990) explores while reflecting about the negotiation of her identities as a lesbian, mestiza and borderland dweller. Anzaldúa called this negotiation "mestiza consciousness" and the main characteristic of this new consciousness is "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (Anzaldúa, 1987). As she explains in the introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* (1990):

As mestizas – biologically and/or culturally mixed – we have different surfaces for each aspect of identity, each inscribed by a particular subculture. Over this surface, she continues with her metaphor; the mestiza might also wear a mask for protection. Between faces, surfaces, and masks are "interfaces" and "it is the place – the interface – between the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks. (Anzaldúa 1990, xv–xvi)

To cope within a given context – in Anzaldúa's case, being a Chicana in the United States, but also a lesbian and feminist activist, writer and theorist – the mestiza creates a new consciousness by changing the way in which she perceives reality and the way she sees herself. The tolerance for ambiguity is important here because she doesn't need to abandon parts of the self to cope within one context (such as the American or the Chicana culture), she develops an ability to "juggle cultures" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). Anzaldúa thus questions the possibility of having one fixed epistemological or political standpoint destabilising ethnic, gender, sexual standpoints as foundations of identities (Koegeler-Abdi, 2013). This new consciousness is achieved through the simultaneous acts of "being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and 'seeing through' an experience" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.64). In other words, "the movement through fixed consciousness to a hybrid subjectivity formed through multiple and mobile identities" (Humphreys and Vered, 2013, p.6). Similarly to Anzaldúa's shifting subjectivities, new spatial practices such as the nudes, facilitated by media interactions, may generate new experiences of identity challenging what Anzaldúa would describe as "permanent boundaries of a fixed self" (Anzaldúa, 1990, p.145 in Humphreys et al., 2013, p.6).

This consciousness about oneself relates to the care of the self practice developed by Foucault (1988) in his later work after he recognized that the individual was presented as a passive body in his earlier work and dedicated himself to the notion of the self (McNay, 1992). To explore the care of the self-concept it is important to explain the technologies of the self:

Which permit individuals to effect by their means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, cited in Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988, p.18)

In other words, technologies of the self tell us about how people act upon themselves (Foucault, 1988). Certain Western societies inherited the Christian morality of self-renunciation as the condition for “salvation” according to which the only way to know oneself was through self-renunciation, so the principle “know yourself” erased another ancient Greco-Roman principle, the “take care of yourself” (Foucault, 1988). Taking care of oneself in ancient Greco-Roman cultures meant activities such as meditation, reading, studying, writing diaries and rereading them: “all the unimportant things” (Foucault, 1988, p.29). Originally, the care of the self was connected to the knowledge of the self in a way that the first contributed to the second, but this link among the two was broken between the times from Plato to the Hellenistic age (Foucault, 1988).

Foucault’s care of the self concept was rapidly adopted by feminist theorists and understood not as an indulgent act or a distraction from politics, but a provision for effective citizenship without underestimating emotions (Heyes, 2006). We owe the care of the self to ourselves and others so we can constitute ourselves as ethical agents (Heyes, 2006). During my research, many women spoke about the moment of taking and sharing nudes as a therapeutic practice very similar to the description of the care of the self concept. In their accounts, taking and sharing nudes changes their relationships with their bodies, just as the notion of what is photographable (Tiinderberg et al., 2015). For this reason, and drawing on Foucault’s concept of care of the self and Alzandúa’s “mestiza consciousness,” I argue that some Brazilian Black women use the nude as a way to escape homogenizing

tendencies of power through the assertion of their autonomies.

On the other side, feminist theorists also made critical remarks about Foucault's care of the self concept. Grimshaw (1993), for example, criticized him for ignoring forms of self-surveillance, shifting from the notion that disciplinary practices are forms of control to the idea that they might rather constitute autonomy. Besides, Grimshaw (1993) asserts, the concept is based on ascetic practices used by the ancient Greeks, specifically an elite class of privileged males who are assumed to be free, not only neglecting issues related to race, gender, class or sexual orientation once again, but also ignoring his own warning that 'nothing is innocent'. Furthermore, Foucault was not the only one to theorize about the care of the self.

The importance placed in the care of the self is not new to black feminist scholarship. More than 30 years ago, the Combahee River Collective affirmed that its politics "evolve[s] from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work" (Combahee River Collective 2014, 267). Neither is it something from the past, as bell hooks insists that "all the great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic" (hooks 2000, xvii). But this theory is not necessarily about moving beyond limitations of selfhood and producing new forms of political communities as affective politics, but also a simple practice of self-valuation (Nash, 2013). Black feminist interest in love stands for a specific self-work, which encourages the person to transcend the self (Nash, 2013). A good example is Alice Walker's call for a womanist self-love, the so-called "love herself. Regardless" – meaning in spite of everything else. In this interpretation, we can see it as a Black feminist advocacy for unconditional love starting with the acceptance of ourselves in the first place, but also an articulation between self and politics (Povinelli 2006, cited in Nash, 2013). Raquel appears to believe in something similar:

"In the end, the nude is a tool for you to show people who are far away that yes you are beautiful and confident with your body, with who you are and with what you want to express. It is a tool of digital empowerment that will impact on your day to day, because it is a way to fight standardization and the racist ways to portray us, if the media don't cooperate and stop showing perverted images of ourselves, we will through social media."

Raquel is describing her view about the political use of the body. Bearing meanings of class, gender, race (Scott and Morgan, 1993), bodies are indeed connected to power. In practice, this means that the body is also a site of agency and empowerment (Langman, 2008). For Linda Williams, porn can portray women with agency and desires be used to resist patriarchal codes (Williams, 1989, cited in Langman, 2008). If we follow this reasoning in which porn can be a tool to “give women agency to explore their own sexuality and redefine their sexual norms” (Langman, 2008, p.369), the nude can also be more than a device for sexting and be used as a vehicle for a different and individual erotica, even an “erotic therapy”. In other words, the nude can help women to feel more confident with their body-image and to claim a “feminist manifesto” against the heteronormative and oppressive way in which female bodies are presented in the media. Many women apply this concept in their daily lives and use their bodies to contest social or cultural norms, for example with the nude (a form of erotica) and amateur porn. Raquel, for example, frequently sees and uses her body as a political manifesto capable of challenging social norms. She started to take nudes to affirm herself and faces an organized attack by internet trolls. Raquel didn’t plan it to go that further, as she recalls:

“Last year I started to take nudes not to send it to the chicks. It was more to show them that we can do this type of stuff. (...) At the time I didn’t think ‘oh I am taking a nude to post on Instagram’ it was more because I was feeling good, having a good day, took a nice pic and wanted to share.”<sup>4</sup>

As mentioned earlier, one of her nudes became the target of an organised troll attack online, with thousands of comments humiliating her. In the photo, which will not be displayed here to protect the participant’s anonymity, Raquel is entirely naked, standing up, her left knee leaning in her bed, displaying her buttocks. Her right arm is holding her left elbow and hiding her nipples; her breasts are supported by the right arm. She is wearing only a pair of glasses and displaying a shy yet provocative smile. The position of her body somehow reminds pin-up poses, showing the body while covering some parts in a clear attempt of evoking sexiness, which brings some tensions between the idea of liberation while imitating old sexualised models of sexiness. The background of the photo is Raquel’s bed-

room, with walls covered with written phrases, one of which it can be read “Si, se puede” (“yes it is possible,” in Spanish).

According to phenomenology theory, embodiment and oppression are linked in everyday life, and social interaction and, as a result, group oppressions are not primarily enacted in law and policy, as might seem obvious, but on informal and unnoticed everyday speech, automatic bodily reaction to others, aesthetic judgments, jokes, images, stereotypes (Young, 1990). Oppression works through body aesthetic, through images, discourses, and stereotypes that continuously “legitimate” racism, sexism and homophobia for example, in Raquel’s case. Her everyday experiences as a “fat and butch” Black women are not only reflected but also reinforced online. The hateful messages are part of the continuum of violence that she always faces. Similarly to what Ariane Cruz (2014) argued in her work, Sisters are doing it for themselves about African American female pornographers trying to transform mainstream representations of Black womanhood in pornography, as a Black Brazilian woman Raquel uses the nude not only for self-appreciation but also in a political project of resisting racist and sexist representations of Black female bodies.

The fat black female body plays a triple role as the antagonist of what is accepted as normal, completely in the outskirts of normative boundaries, making its incorporation impossible (Shawn, 2005). Raquel’s embodiment goes even further, being an unapologetic lesbian who resists shaving. The interesting part is that, while her position is the farthest possible from the white male power center, because of its concentrated state of “otherness” in relation to hegemonic standards, it can also be an ideal location from which to observe how white patriarchy works, as a look on the other side of the looking glass (Shawn, 2005).

## The Black Female Body in Brazil

To understand how Raquel’s body might represent this antagonistic role, it is important to take a look at the main representations of Black female bodies in Brazil. It is known that mainstream constructions of beauty were used to reinforce the agenda of the patriarchy, so it is not a coincidence that the Western conceptualization of idealized femininity is white (Shaw, 2005). One figure that is central to this discussion is the myth of Mammy, present in the African Diaspora in the Caribbean and the Americas:

The first controlling image applied to African American women is that of the mammy, the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour. (Collins 1991, p.71)

Mammy serves to soothe racial anxieties by creating a Black character with exaggerated traits who is acceptable for whites: she is subordinate, maternal and nonsexual, with a large body, dark skin, and non-angular facial features, thus without posing any sexual threats to white women (Collins, 1991). As a domestic caretaker, she represents a "ready availability of nurture despite her own economic oppression effected by those she must serve" (Collins 1991, p.72). Mammy's image was eternalized in films such as *Gone With The Wind* (1936), in which she is seen lumbering around the plantation house, a shadow against which white women's beauty is reaffirmed, the privileges that her dedication to the white family permits reinforcing which role Black women should aspire to. Her large body also symbolizes her maternal resources, "the ultimate state of Black allegiance to whiteness" (p.21), an infinite reserve of maternal dedication as the caretaker of the white family's children, suggesting an impossibility of oppression against Black women since their supply of strength and love can never be depleted.

This is a common racist construction involving fatness and Blackness that still haunts Black women. According to Shaw (2005), Black women reacted by reinventing themselves over and over again, although their efforts often resulted in them being tyrannized by unrealistic body-image goals privileging slenderness and creating new hegemonic oppressions. Myths that defeminize Black womanhood such as the Mammy image contributed to the effacement of Black femininity and the dehumanization of Black women (Shaw, 2005). The construction of Black femininity as essentially non-feminine because of her physical strength and aggressiveness were useful to differentiate it from what white femininity should be (Beckles, 1999, cited in Shaw, 2005).

The stereotypical images of the black mammy and the mulata are crucial to understanding race and gender inequalities in Brazil and to hide and naturalise historical politics of race and gender discrimination while perpetuating the na-

tional image of Brazil as a “racial democracy” (Caldwell, 2000). During the colonial period, women were differentiated based on patriarchal practices which associated white women to marriage and black women to illicit sexual practices – white women were designated to honor the social role of mothers and wives, enslaved women and then the mulatas were associated with “dishonorable” relations (Caldwell, 2000). The theory of Luso-Tropicalism, created by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, affirmed that there was a symbiosis in the union of the European with the ‘tropical’, which would explain an easier fraternization between the Portuguese and African, Oriental and Indigenous peoples in their colonies and the colonizer’s “natural propensity” for miscegenation (Freyre, 1958). The sexualised figure of the mulata emerges as the result of such miscegenation between the white Portuguese and the Black woman in what Pinho (2010) called the “hypersexualization of racial mixing.” Angela Gilliam (1991) called the Luso-Tropicalism theory “the Great Sperm Theory of National Formation”:

It metaphorically violates black women in retrospect, as if the historical rape it documented were not enough, by crediting the formation of Brazilian national culture – and of the mulata herself – to Portuguese men and their predilection for black women. (Nascimento, 2009, p.57)

Freyre’s work about Brazilian culture is extremely influential and his theory of racial democracy, which he originally called ‘ethnic democracy’ in his “Order and Progress” (1970), is still central in Brazilian nationalist discourse and part of dominant notions of Brazilianness and race (Pinho, 2010). An illustration of this notion of Brazilianness is Giacomini’s (1994) work on the “Show de Mulatas” (“Mulata’s show” in English). Giacomini (1994) describes the spectacle of mulatas in Rio de Janeiro, in which they are presented – in the beat of the Samba drums – to the audience as symbols of Brazil, as they dance, smile and invite the white men in the audience, many of them gringos (the Brazilian slang for “foreigners”), to come closer. The show can be seen as a symbol of the ritualization of Brazilian society’s hegemonic representation: Brazil markets itself to the world as a great racial democracy in which the mulata, representing the stereotype of the irresistible, sensual and available woman, conquers the white man, reversing white men’s domination over Black women for centuries and reconstructing the racial domination, thus

reaffirming the ideal of racial democracy (Giacomini, 1994). However, in this praise of racial mixing lies a camouflaged ideal of whiteness, as if mixing could end racial conflicts and extirpate Africanness from the national identity, repressing notions of racial determination (Nascimento, 2010). White privilege continues to prevail in Brazil and is perceptible in the media, for example, in which beauty standards are reinforced showing white and blond women as a symbol of femininity (Cadwell, 2010). One example is the overrepresentation of White women in Brazilian telenovelas (TV soap operas), which are considered not only an artistic and cultural media product but also a central agent in Brazilian culture and identity (Lopes, 2003). The dress codes, haircuts, slangs and lifestyles presented in Brazilian telenovelas replicate mainstream beauty standards (Baptista, de Araújo and de Brito, 2009). In thirty years, between 1984 and 2014, the major TV channel in Brazil, TV Globo, presented 162 telenovelas – 91.3% of the main characters in the shows were white and 8.6% were Black, while 53% of the Brazilian population is Black.

Raquel attempts to refuse racist and fat-phobic stereotypes questioning the Eurocentric standard of beauty while performing her view of Black femininity showing her naked body. Thus we can understand the nude as counterproductive of mainstreaming representations of nudity and the female body, since Raquel, according to her words, uses the nude to resist social and cultural standards of behavior and beauty. She brought a sense of belonging to the nudes, seeing them as a way to occupy space and feeling beautiful regardless of how women might look:

I think the nude can be empowering because I have been seeing many girls affirming themselves through the photos, you know, taking out that feeling of not belonging to this social space, we have to impose ourselves. (...) It's a way to fight all this patronisation, this racist form of portraying us. It's us by ourselves, literally.<sup>5</sup>

Raquel's experience with nudes demonstrates the body's potential as a privileged space to resist sexist, racist and homophobic constructions of the Black female body in Brazilian public media. Along these lines, the resistance of an Afro-Brazilian woman who insists on showing her body and affirming herself through online nudes has the potential to challenge hegemonic Brazilian discourses on gender, race, and nation, discourses that privilege whiteness and deprecate blackness

within Brazilian national identity, as explained earlier. Thus attempting to reclaim her body, Raquel is reinvesting it with positive significance and affirming her right to belong not only to the Brazilian nation but also to exist and affirm herself on cyberspace as differently embodied subject, free from racialised and gendered notions of inferiority.

Moving now from the discussion about sexuality, it is essential to remember that in Brazil, where Eurocentric aesthetic standards prevail, Black women are traditionally identified as being sexual rather than beautiful (Caldwell, 2007) – as exemplified in Giacomini's (1994) case of the "Show de mulatas" – reinforcing old myths about Black female sexuality. Black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist terms that further depict blackness as anomalous and disorderly, reaffirming the racist stereotype of the Black woman as a sexual primitive (hooks, 1992).

When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality, in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfilment at the centre of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects. To do so, we must be willing to transgress traditional boundaries. (hooks, 1992, p.106)

hooks (1992) speaks about the creation of Black women's representation as sexual subjects, something Raquel attempts to do with her nudes, presenting her idea of sexiness. Her body played a major role in the attacks she received online for "daring" to expose herself sexually since many of the attacks she received carried the word "fat" and "slut." If we understand the central role of the body in the cultural assessment and self-perception of individuals and the idea that difference constitutes identities – female defining maleness, blackness defining whiteness – then the fat black female body's triple removal from the west's conceptualization of normalcy provides an ideal location from which to look at dominant white patriarchy.

According to Lorde (1984, cited in Collins, 1991), the erotic is one among many kinds of power, regardless if it is used or not, and the suppression of the erotic is also a way to suppress information and power in our lives (Lorde, 1984, cited in Collins, 1991). The power within the erotic can be seen in the case of the mulata, as her body comes to represent the ideal of a whole nation in a racial ideology that

represses notions of racial determination (Nascimento, 2010). On the other side, if sexuality is a domain of repression when tied to race, gender and class, there is a strong potential in the erotic for Black women to explore and seek pleasure and agency (Collins, 1991). One example is African American female pornographers who are trying to transform mainstream representations of Black womanhood in pornography creating new images of black female sexuality in a DIY (do-it-yourself) style (Cruz, 2014). Thus even if sexuality is a domain of oppression and empowerment at the same time, the erotic is a source of power for Black women (Collins, 1991), and Raquel seems aware of that on cyberspace.

Nonetheless, embracing the erotic can be quite challenging for Black lesbians, even among Black feminists. Black feminist theorists and activists have been shedding light on the effects of homophobia on Black women and Black feminist lesbian writers such as Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker insisted on speaking about lesbian relationships in Black women's literature (Collins, 1991). In spite of that, one of the main obstacles faced by these women was the reluctance of Black heterosexual women to examine their homophobia, and one of the reasons for that is that heterosexuality is usually one of the only privileges that Black women have (Collins, 1991). Another reason is the Eurocentric thought of the lesbian as the ultimate other since visible Black lesbians challenge the norm of whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality, generating anxiety, discomfort and a challenge to dominant groups (Vance, 1984, cited in Collins, 1991). As mentioned above, in Brazilian culture, for example, the two main figures representing the Black woman are connected to white patriarchy, the mammy, who serves the white family, and the mulata, which is used as a symbol of miscegenation and cordial relations between the races in an ideology used by the white elite to purge itself of any responsibility in the violence of racism and patriarchy (Nascimento, 2010). One of the figures is desexualised (the mammy) and the other is hypersexualised within heteronormativity.

Regarding the violence inherited in racism and sexism, it is essential to remember that African Diaspora resisted west's fat-phobia, resisting ideals of slenderness and whiteness (Shawn, 2006). The economical and cultural authority that the west imposed in subaltern populations with Eurocentric values affected Black women significantly in the Diaspora. What is seen as beautiful according to the western values is the opposite of the fat black woman's body, but her body is also has a

significant role in the formation of both Blackness and whiteness because it works as an oppositional identity anchor (Shawn, 2006), that is, the definition of one is based on what the other is not. Thus, blackness is defined by what whiteness is not and vice-versa. One example is the rise of le cinéma colonial, referring to French colonies in Africa with depictions of happy and exotic savages in position to France as the “civilizing force”, after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War during the 1930’s, thus using the colonies to reassure its nationalism (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). In a similar way, during the nineteenth and twentieth century, after Freud’s provocations about the nature of femininity and with a desire for knowledge and mastery over blacks and women while raising primal fears and desires, French men appealed to the “ultimate difference”, that is, the sexualized savage, inspiring repulsion, attraction and anxiety over their imaginations of the Black Venus (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). They displayed the body of Sarah Baartman, also known as Hottentot Venus, as an artefact in nineteenth-century Europe and used her to support the racist claim that Blacks were more akin to animals than humans (Shawn, 2006). Baartman is a symbol of the marginalization and objectification of Black women in the postcolonial world, exposing Europe’s gendered and racialised perception of Black female sexuality (Shawn, 2006). The inclination to identify the Black woman as overtly sexual was also a way to justify rampant sexual exploitation of African women during and after slavery and to sexualize the society from which she came, classifying it as “uncivilized” or “primitive” (Nash, 2013).

Tate (2015) affirms that the way in which Black women’s bodies were seen within the colonialist imagination is very alive today both in the metropolis and in former colonies. These bodies were seen as made for reproduction, either for sexual services, producing children or to provide white leisure, mere flesh for consumption, nude for sale at slave markets or in paintings for the white elite (Tate, 2015).

## Conclusion

If we look at Raquel’s understanding of the nude, she is not trying to find the truth about herself or liberation in consumption practices; rather she is in the process of experimentation and self-discovery. As argued before, to use the body as a vehicle for self-expression can be a way to challenge beauty standards and boost

self-esteem through a more positive resignification of the body, not necessarily a negative practice that damages individual's stuck in "false consciousness" neither a practice of "marketization of the self." Even if seen as a narcissistic act, we can question if narcissism is always negative. According to Heyes (2006), care-of-the-self-practices are a condition for effective citizenship, not indulgence. Thus, taking and sharing nudes in a conscious subjective process can be a care of the self practice that allows people to reinvent and assert themselves in a therapeutic process.

New digital medias bring new opportunity for people to document and display themselves, and this attention to oneself and the 'self-centeredness' present in digital photos is a key feature of the online environment (Barton and Lee, 2013). Sharing nudes is also about writing lives and selves and spreading it on the Internet. As other new practices, it can change how people see themselves, after all, presenting an identity online is not just about who we are, but how we want others to see us (Barton et al., 2013). But in order for the nude to be a transgressive self-invention practice (Tiinderberg et al., 2015), it will depend on how the photograph is taken, because practices of self-care are liberating only when the person in control is self-aware of it (Markula, 2004, cited in Tiinderberg et al., 2015).

If performativity produces identities and subjectivities permitting the resignification of bodies (Butler, 1990), the nude is also a type of performativity (Loureiro, 2016). After all, building subjectivities depends on the production of our selves as embodied subjects, which means that the nude has the potential to be both a sexual re-appropriation of erotica in a way that plays with identity and an instrument for seduction, sometimes even both at the same time. If bodies move through their relations in the world (Coleman, 2009), the cyberspace has the potential to be a liberating space, but not without contradictions, as it enables online harassment and censorship at the same time.

Even so, the re-appropriation of the nude can bring new ways to experience embodiment and affect self-knowledge, which is seen as a vital tool by many Black feminists. Collins (1991), for example, affirmed that Black women must be self-defined and self-reliant agents of knowledge to confront race, gender, class and sexual oppression:

Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance. By objectifying African-American women and recasting our experi-

ences to serve the interests of elite white men, much of the Eurocentric masculinist worldview fosters Black women's subordination. But placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis offers fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of this worldview. (Collins, 1991, p.221)

When Raquel conceptualizes the interlocking systems of oppression affecting her life and creates mechanisms to cope with them through erotica, she is rejecting generalized ideologies of domination and articulating her own experiences. What she is saying with her nudes is: "this is me, yes I am Black, female, lesbian and fat and I have a sexuality and a body which I find beautiful and will display as I like." The visibility may bother internet trolls that try to bring her profile down, but her statement is far more powerful. She is the agent of knowledge, but not any knowledge: self-knowledge, which can also be read as a type of self-love.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). 2015. Pesquisa Nacional Por Amostra de Domicílios (Pnad) – Acesso à internet e à televisão e posse de telefone móvel celular para uso pessoal : 2014. [Online]. [Accessed 22 December 2016]. Available at: <http://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv95753.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). 2015. Pesquisa Nacional Por Amostra de Domicílios (Pnad) – Acesso à internet e à televisão e posse de telefone móvel celular para uso pessoal : 2014. [Online]. [Accessed 22 December 2016]. Available at: <http://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/visualizacao/livros/liv95753.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Loureiro, G. (2016). "*Manda nudes*": *body image, counter-sexualisation practices and erotica as a Brazilian cyber-identity project*. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). University of Leeds.
- <sup>4</sup> Loureiro, G. (2016). "*Manda nudes*": *body image, counter-sexualisation practices and erotica as a Brazilian cyber-identity project*. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). University of Leeds.
- <sup>5</sup> Loureiro, G. (2016). "*Manda nudes*": *body image, counter-sexualisation practices and erotica as a Brazilian cyber-identity project*. (Unpublished Master's dissertation). University of Leeds.

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