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Queering the Welfare Queen: A Black Feminist Reading of Daniel Peddle's *The Aggressives*

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Queering the welfare queen

In this paper I examine the social construction of the welfare queen and the ways queer black womanhood impacts this construction by examining the depiction of Octavia in Daniel Peddle's documentary film *The Aggressives* (2005). My background in black feminism makes me sensitive to the interplay of black masculinities and black lesbian identities in aggressive women. While aggressive women's masculinities demonstrate agency in resisting the perception that they as women of color are available objects of the male gaze, the masculinities that they embody are indicative of power structures that work to subjugate them. Patricia Hill Collins' description of the welfare mother informs my analysis. Collins asserts, "[a]t its core, the image of the welfare mother constitutes a class-specific, controlling image developed for poor, working class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law" (2000, 78). Collins argues that the welfare mother is a reincarnation of the breeder woman, an enslaved black woman thought to be more suitable to bear children than white women because of her ability to produce children the way that animals do. Both the welfare mother and breeder woman images allow the state or dominant group to insert themselves into the lives and reproductivity of black women (2000, 78). The construction of the welfare mother frames African American women as indolent and content to reap unearned social service benefits to which she, along with all other U.S. citizens or qualified residents in need, are entitled. An interrogation of larger social structures of racism, sexism

and classism dismantles the construction of the welfare mother when considering substandard resources, such as jobs, education and health care that increase a demand for the use of social service programs in poor communities.

I think through Collin's construction of the welfare mother in relation to Peddle's representation of the young aggressive woman, Octavia.

Show Octavia's introduction. (25 seconds)

Octavia occupies a queer womanhood; she identifies as aggressive which situates her within a masculine space in the black lesbian community. When unpacking constructions of the welfare mother in relation to Octavia, whose representation in this documentary, I argue, is informed by this image, her aggressive identity complicates the welfare mother construction. Racialized and gendered bodies are vulnerable to a confluence of oppressive forces that the film *The Aggressives* wittingly or unwittingly represents. The interlocking modalities of oppression that Octavia experiences as a result of being marginalized by her race, class, sexuality and gender should also be interrogated so that an analysis of her depiction in this film does not further marginalize her. In my larger thesis project, I do this work. The intersections of Octavia's gender identity, sexual orientation and class draw out complexities in constructions of the welfare queen. As represented in *The Aggressives*, Octavia encounters heterosexism from her mother while coming to terms with her sexual identity.

Show Octavia and Mother (1 minute 25 seconds)

Unlike most other Aggressive women portrayed in this documentary,

Octavia's mother, Crystal is featured. Crystal vehemently disapproves of her daughter's sexuality and gender expression. We do not actually see Octavia and her mother Crystal interact, we only hear Crystal's voice off camera in one of Octavia's scenes, in which Crystal shouts an indignant comment about making herself food and not providing for Octavia or her girlfriend. Crystal fits the role of Collins' Black Matriarch who is blamed for the socio-economic deficiencies that are a result of inadequate social and economic resources. "White men and women blame Black women for their children's failure in school and with the law as well as black children's subsequent poverty" (Collins, 76; 2000). Octavia's mother's repudiation of her daughter may be linked to the blame she is being assigned for her failure to rear a proper woman who is feminine, married to a man and abides by the law. Octavia's mother is not depicted as affectionate or loving toward her daughter, only critical and castrating, another characteristic of the Black Matriarch (Collins, 77; 2000).

Show Octavia's Prison scene (1 minute)

Octavia falls into the category of welfare mother by virtue of having a baby out of wedlock and raising her son in her mother's home, but she complicates this image with her sexuality and gender expression. Octavia is both mother and father to her son. Octavia is unique in that she is the only aggressive mother depicted. After her release Octavia lives with her girlfriend in her mother's home. We don't know who takes care of her son. If Octavia takes care of her son, the director does not show her mothering. We have no idea how she

manages motherhood, but the director offer a glimpse of the way Octavia was mothered. The depiction of Crystal's mothering is rife with impatience, rejection and denial and models for Octavia a parenting style that promises to leave her son wanting. As I watch Octavia in this film I wonder if she receives the state aid that she is entitled to as a mother of a minor child. What we do know is that Octavia sells drugs to have money for dating women. The director's choice not to discuss Octavia's motherhood until we see her incarcerated and that we never actually see Octavia mothering reinforces the negligence associated with welfare mothers.

Crystal's impatience with Octavia and her hope that being a lesbian is only a phase distances Octavia from having any meaningful familial relationships. There are no depictions of father figures in Octavia's life or her son's life, these omissions of black men in the family supports the director's construction of Octavia as a welfare mother and Crystal as a Black Matriarch.

Although, the assemblage of footage that emblazons these two narrow constructions of black womanhood paints a grim picture of Octavia and her mother Crystal, I do see room for possibilities. While Octavia's embodiment of black masculinity may be narrow in scope -- selling to drugs on the corner to make ends meet -- proves to be detrimental to her freedom, her non-heteronormative sexuality and gender identity has the possibility of creating a space for empathy and understanding in her family. While Crystal may not ever embrace Octavia's sexuality and gender identity, Octavia's son may grow up

with an understanding that masculinity and femininity are qualities that grow from within rather than simply an imposition from external sources. Maybe the son of an aggressive mother will have more patience and understanding than the mother of an aggressive daughter is able to muster.