

# SEX, LIES, AND *GRAND THEFT AUTO*: THE CONTEMPORARY EFFECT OF RACIST CARICATURES ON THE PERCEPTION OF THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

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## Abstract

The *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) Saga* (1997-2013) developed by Rockstar North has been one of the most successful action-adventure videogame productions with millions of fanatic players globally and billions in earnings (Wright, 2022: 1). Yet, in spite of its commercial *frenzy*, it has often been denounced for the debasing depiction of non-playable female characters designed to function as ornaments, be ridiculed, killed for fun or level upgrading, sexually objectified to serve the “male-gaze” experience as described by Mulrey (1979: 837) and others (Malone, 2014: 11-25; Ruberg, 2018: 314-27; Waszkiewicz, 2019: 175, 180; Wright, 2022: 150). Still, literature proves scarce in terms of research on the lack or the negative representation of Black female characters in the game even if the preponderance of playership consists of mainly Black male adolescents (Wright, 2022: 142). Hence, the focal point of this paper rests upon the deconstruction of the image of certain female figures of Black descent that has been denounced as being prejudiced across the *GTA* series (particularly the installments of *Vice City* (2002), *San Andreas* (2004), and *V* (2013), where such characters appear the most) via the introduction and systematic analysis of the following deep-rooted and long-standing racial stereotypes, namely the *Mammy*, the *Jezebel*, the *Sapphire* and, finally, the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman*, and their effect on male and female playership.

**Keywords:** *GTA, Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman*

## 1. Introduction

Rockstar North’s *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) Saga* (1997-2013) is one of the most popular action-adventure videogame productions, amassing millions of devoted gamers and fans worldwide and generating billions of dollars in revenue (Wright,

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2022: 1). Despite its rampant commercial success, it has been heavily criticized for the stereotypical portrait of non-playable female characters with many scholars' suggesting that it crosses the lines of satire and moves towards reinforcement of biases that could severely impact players' perception of women in real life (Malone, 2014: 11-25; Ruberg, 2018: 314-327; Waszkiewicz, 2019: 175, 180; Wright, 2022: 150). In particular, what can be traced in the game is the absence as well as the misrepresentation of ethnic-minority female characters, such as those of Black descent. This is critically analyzed in the present paper as a void in academic literature in need of exploration via the use of ingrained racial tropes, namely the *Mammy*, the *Jezebel*, the *Sapphire* and the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman*, indicating how these possibly affect both male and female players outside the game setting.

First and foremost, the main objective of the *GTA* franchise is for the players to select a character, increase their social status and make a reputation mainly among gangsters by completing missions (Mehra, 2023: n. p.). Specifically, a noteworthy element which is traced is the characteristics the playable main characters/protagonists share, namely the fact that they are male, have a convictions history, and their purpose throughout all the installments of the game franchise is to rise through the ranks of the criminal underworld by accomplishing a set of various main and side quests that unlock new territories and facilitate plot progression (Mehra, 2023: n. p.). These mainly involve committing a set of different offences, such as physical assaults, shoplifting, drug dealing, drive-by shootings and vehicle thefts, as suggested by the title of the game (*Grand Theft Auto*, 1997-2013). Neither strict linearity nor a structured storyline characterizes *GTA*, which constitutes an open-world game that offers players autonomy over the way and order in which they can achieve the assigned challenges without simultaneously overlooking the gameplay rules (Mehra, 2023: n. p.). Additionally, there is free spatial mobility across a plethora of fictional places, which are based upon real-life locations, mostly in America, like New York City and Los Angeles (Mehra, 2023: n. p.).

In general, there is a form of "homogeneity", lying beyond the identity construction as well as personality and social deconstruction of the average video gamer (Waszkiewicz, 2019: 174-175). Such a depiction is associated with the act of satisfying the needs of the "ideal imagined player", who – based on mistaken perceptions rather than real demographics – often describes a well-off heterosexual Caucasian male appetitively aroused by aggressive behavior and voyeur of sexual activity (Waszkiewicz, 2019: 174-175). These traits are thought to describe certain attitudes that ostensibly define, mark and validate manhood (Przybylski et al., 2012: 69-70). This is applicable not only to adults but also to younger ages despite the "M" ("Mature") rating attributed to many games by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) as in the case of *GTA* (Turtiainen, 2017: 10). In the gaming world, players are provided with unlimited opportunities to experiment with various analogous *assumed* along with socially-fabricated and -assigned masculine identities that facilitate direct yet guided physical and emotional expression along with extension of the self (Przybylski et al., 2012: 69-70). Hence, the gaming portrait of women follows this norm, fostering the creation of the players' ostensibly *ideal* image.

To be more precise, what can be evidenced in the earliest *GTA* games is the manifest absence, under- or negative representation of non-white female characters, which is a strong indication of “symbolic annihilation” (Haines, 2019: 12). This specifically relates to the systematic denunciation, disparagement, disregard or intended erasure of certain social categories from the popular media, such as persons with disabilities, members of LGBTQIA+ community, or ethnic-minority groups, like those of Black descent in this case (Haines, 2019: 12-13). Even though there has been a significant change in the later *GTA* games with the inclusion of characters from different racial backgrounds other than the Caucasian ones, the portrayal of Black women may be regarded as stereotypical, propagated over the passage of time and affecting real people in society negatively (González, 2014: 18-20; Turtiainen, 2017:17-18).

Black women have been the locus of research interest across time owing to their constant struggles to achieve social change in a world filled with deep-seated biases that have forestalled their lifelong process of gaining a unique and socially-acknowledged identity (Banaji et al., 2021: 3-5). They have truly been the direct target of long-established prejudice that has arisen as a *natural* consequence of institutional racism dating back in the period of slavery, fear of the unknown and imminent threat as well as media representation, and it has taken the form of offensive caricatures, which have escalated into “controlling images” that continue to degrade and dehumanize this specific racial and gender group, like various others (Collins, 2000: 23). Indicative examples are the stereotypes of the *Mammy*, the *Jezebel*, the *Sapphire* and the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman*, which will be touched upon in the present paper via a close examination of certain female characters from four notable installments of *GTA*, focusing upon their behavior, external appearance, narrative role and certain linguistic features. Although *GTA* is thought to be a “satire” of the American media culture and society, and, thus, it must be approached accordingly based on the creators’ statements, it is intriguing to observe how these caricatures have influenced the game developers’ mentality towards the characters’ overall design and treatment, and, by extension, players’ perception of women, which continue to fuel concerns over biases spread across time despite opposite intentions (Turtiainen, 2017: 20; Wills, 2021: 2-4).

## 2. The *Mammy* stereotype

First and foremost, the *GTA* saga presents a sardonic version of the *Mammy* stereotype, especially in its fourth installment, that is *Vice City* (2002). In particular, Christian (1980: 12) offers a rather poignant portrait of this stereotype, stating that the *Mammy* is of black origins as well as fat, having such large breasts that she is capable of feeding all the starving children at a global scale. Truly, in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002), the character of Auntie Poulet incarnates this racial caricature being displayed as an overweight and buxom elderly woman of Haitian descent, which could negatively affect players’ perception of older Black women in real life

(Rogers, 2016: 97-99). What is notable is that even the name of the character, namely “Poulet”, means “chicken” in French, which further intensifies this mocking and derogatory aspect of the character’s build (Bruce & Gipson, 2002: 57).

Christian (1980: 12) continues the ironic description, stating that the *Mammy* is also portrayed with a headwrap with the purpose of concealing her “kinky” hair, which is as an indicator of her “ugliness”, while being asexual, profoundly religious and credulously believing in witchcraft. This stereotypical portrait is indeed observed in the game, since Auntie Poulet’s garment consists of an unappealing yellow or purple knee-length dress with a matching headwrap owing to which no evident sign of her hair color, length and texture can be discerned, along with white or purple slippers and grey socks (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002). These colors are considered to be really important due to their symbolizing the attire of Papa Legba, namely a West African fertility or trickster deity that is said to function as an intercessor between humans and the supernatural world according to the Haitian Voodoo religion (Hume, 2013: 143-146). Hence, Auntie Poulet could possibly stand as a figure of this kind via this thought-provoking color scheme and involvement with witchcraft, facilitating players’ interaction with the spiritual world within the game setting.

Additionally, the headwrap constitutes a form of expression of the cultural identity of the African women with a rich history dating back to the early 1700s when – especially Nigerian – queens used such fabric to embellish their hair and to indicate their aristocratic, religious and marital status (Benda, 2021: 168-169). Still, what started as a statement of sumptuous wealth and spirituality soon evolved into a symbol of serfdom at the age of slavery in the mid-1700s and onwards when female domestic and plantation servants were obliged to wear headwraps as a sign of obsequiousness (Buckridge, 2004: 89-91). This uniformity imposed among the African women slaves completed the look of the heavily-commercialized *Mammy* caricature spread across the popular media (Johnson, 2016: 7). Hence, Auntie Poulet’s headwrap can function as a direct reference to the stereotype of that time yet, apart from its apparent practicality and stylistic flair, it evokes her pride in her Haitian roots while simultaneously being a symbol of resistance, authority and devoutness to her religion.

Moreover, Auntie Poulet’s ritual practice can be evidenced in a plethora of Voodoo paraphernalia traced in her place of residence, such as skulls, hallucinatory potions served on a pretense of being harmless tea refreshment, wax candles and dolls that are employed with the intention of overpowering potential enemies by means of sorcerous force (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002). Also, even her mats laid out on the floor of her shack for both religious and decorative purposes depict and allude to Voodoo deities of the Yoruba pantheon “Iwa” (meaning “spirits”), like the snake-figured “Damballa”, who is the protector of the injured and the creator of the universe, “Erzulie Freda”, who is the embodiment of the ideal woman and a symbol of purity and beauty, the mermaid-like “La Sirene”, representing the marine life (Siedlak, 2019: n. p.), and, last but not least, the three-horned bull-shaped deity called “Bossou Twa Kon” that is the powerful liberator and a prominent figure of the Haitian religion (Oswald, 2008: 22).

Furthermore, Auntie Poulet challenges Christian's (1980: 12) description that the *Mammy's* external appearance is linked to her submissive and docile personality "used in the service to her white master", while, as a motherhood figure, she is characterized by affection and faithfulness. To be more specific, though seeming benevolent and caring at first glance, the character stands out as an authoritative matriarch, a manipulator and a relentless boss of a Haitian gang group involved in various criminal acts (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002). She is also in a longstanding rivalry with a Cuban gang led by Umberto Robina for reasons of territory and drug-trafficking control (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002). As shown especially in the "Juju Scramble" mission, Auntie Poulet proceeds to persuade Thomas "Tommy" Vercetti to consume the supposed-to-be-tea liquid she has brewed herself, which turns out to be a hallucinogenic drug out of her voodoo ritual, causing him to perform a series of illicit tasks in her name at the expense of the Cuban gang to which he has friendly ties (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002). What is notable is that Thomas does not seem to recall any of his actions after the mission, indicating that the effect of Auntie Poulet's potion is truly powerful (*Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, 2002).

Elaborating upon Auntie Poulet's voodoo practice, such African witchcraft has often been related to wickedness and abjection with the aim of hurting or, in some cases, brutalizing the white oppressors in an act of seeking vengeance (McGee, 2014: 70). This had led to the emergence of another stereotype, namely that of the *Magical Negro*, which began to disseminate across time owing to the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) out of false depiction of Black suffering (McGee, 2014: 72-74, 236). During this period, various rumors and drawings portraying seemingly black-on-white violence in the form of demonic rituals against the French soldiers-conquerors were spread due to the Haitians' strong desire to liberate themselves and retaliate for the barbaric acts executed against them (McGee, 2014: 72-74). Hence, the twisted image of the *Mammy* was created to persuade the public that slavery was humane, while promoting, in fact, institutionalized racism (Collins, 2000: 23). Still, as a trope in literature and film industry, the *Magical Negro* describes a Black character with spiritual powers that mostly functions as the sidekick of the – predominantly – Caucasian protagonist (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009: 137-140). A depiction of this kind may not fully accord with the role of Auntie Poulet, who stands out as a *cartel queen* and not as a mere aide, but it certainly serves as a socially and culturally sensitive stereotype of an ethnic-minority group's exhibiting serfdom towards the white race (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009: 143-144).

Finally, there needs to be a noteworthy reference to the *Aunt Jemima* stereotype at this point in juxtaposition to the *Mammy*. Lexically speaking, the names "Mammy" and "Aunt" are both used in the fiction of the antebellum South to describe both a person and a role within the plantation home (Athnasios, 2021: 5-6). These stereotypes function as "controlling images" fabricated with the purpose of concealing the harsh living and working conditions alongside the long suffering of Black female slaves (Collins, 2000: 40). The difference between these two terms rests upon the fact that *Aunt Jemima* constitutes the evolution of the *Mammy*, and is characterized by a more cheerful and pleasant personality (Athnasios, 2021: 5).

Also, the daily duties of *Aunt Jemima* are mainly restricted to cooking, which in the case of Auntie Poulet refers to her knowledge as well as skillful making and use of voodoo potions (Athnasios, 2021: 5-6). Even her oral discourse within the game is indicative of her ascribed role. However, she satirizes her role to downplay her strength and criminal activity actuated by dark magic: “Mmmm... The Cuban boys so clever. And me? Just a silly old woman”, so she sarcastically wonders why and how “a little old woman” like herself “with a big old cooking pot” can pose as an intimidating figure (*GTA Wiki, n. d.: n. p.; Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, 2002*). Overall, the character of Auntie Poulet is carefully designed in such a way so as to bear a unique confluence of certain distinctive traits of a tripartite of stereotypes, namely that of the *Mammy*, the *Aunt Jemima* and the *Magical Negro*, which she manages to effectively deliver in a satirical manner.

What needs to be pointed out, though, is that there is a fine line between satire and reinforcement of biases. While the inclusion of the aforementioned details in Auntie Poulet’s description (namely clothing and home-decoration choices, oral discourse, rituals and criminal behavior) may add depth and complexity to both the character and the storyline, socio-cultural sensitivity concerns may arise, since it could still propagate various harmful misconceptions among players and the public about how Voodoo practice and Black – mostly elderly – women may be erroneously considered to be interconnected. Over-exposure to such racial caricatures may lead players to internalize and normalize the stereotypes promoted, facilitating the perpetuation of systemic discrimination, institutionalized violence and inequity (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019: 10). Therefore, the game developers should be mindful of the potential implications the representation of certain social groups may have on players and generally society, they should approach this issue responsibly, thoughtfully and with care, especially in the next series, so as not to promote marginalization and dehumanization due to ignorance or false depictions (Mou & Peng, 2009: 928-931).

### 3. The *Jezebel* stereotype

Another recognizable stereotype presented especially in the fifth installment of *Grand Theft Auto* (2013) is the *Jezebel* one, which is exhibited through Tonya Wiggins. This “random”, as called in the game, character belongs to the category of “Strangers/Freaks”, providing the male protagonist with a small bonus mission, additional health or pleasure rate, and an objective (*Grand Theft Auto V, 2013*). In terms of her external appearance, *Jezebel* contradicts *Mammy*’s sexless depiction, having attractive European physical features, which, as Jewell (1993: 45-46) pinpoints, tend to appeal to and erotically stimulate the Caucasian viewership, and mainly playership in this case.

The *Jezebel* stereotype can be certainly identified in the character of Tonya Wiggins. To be more precise, she is a young, fair-complexioned woman of African descent with brown eyes and ear-length, dyed-red hair, fleshy lips and a smaller nose, having full-face make-up with vivid shades of grey, red and purple (*Grand*

*Theft Auto V*, 2013). She is a licentious temptress often willing to sell her body and other services for a few dollars to satisfy her own and her husband's, JB Bradshaw's, crack-cocaine addiction (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). When further adumbrating Tonya's portrait, what becomes apparent is her pair of tight, low-waist, denim shorts that highlights her long legs matched with a lime-green sleeveless shirt, which gives prominence to her conspicuous tattoos in both of her arms (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). She also wears white lace-up and open-toe espadrille wedges with colorful heels along with standout accessories (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). These include golden-yellow *hoop* (namely large and round) earrings, a matching triangular-shaped necklace and a watch on her right wrist, together with a set of tribal-inspired *bangle* (namely big and round) bracelets on her left wrist, whose colors match those of her shoe heels (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). Such a portrait aligns with the Jezebel archetype constructed by the media in the context of gender, race and sexuality.

Tonya frequently professes that she has reduced the drug abuse and she merely does "baby-hits just to get a taste" every once in a while, which seems rather doubtful to Franklin Clinton's eyes, who is one of the three male protagonists (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). In this way, *Jezebel* goes hand-in-hand with Weaver's (2016: 60-62) *Financially Needy* and *Drug User* stereotypes owing to the media's and entertainment industry's disproportionately overrepresenting Black Americans, and mainly women, as destitute and drug addicts. Tonya and her husband reside in the area of South Los Santos, running a towing vehicle business together, whose responsibilities they often seem to disregard due to their substance dependence (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). In order for the business not to declare bankruptcy, Tonya asks Franklin Clinton, who is a friend of her spouse, to "pull" some work favors on her behalf in the form of side-missions to save their job (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013).

In addition, Tonya claims that she possesses a certificate in cosmetology, which she accidentally describes as "cosmology", as she brags about her long stylish nails (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). This triggers Franklin Clinton to mock her, asking her if she is about to make a space flight, and in an attempt to further demean her educational status, he states that she learned Maths "on the corner in Davis" Avenue outside a booze store, insinuating that it was sex work and not school that molded her (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). In this way, what can be stressed is that Tonya is designed as having some features of a Black "bimbo", meaning that she is an African-American female character that may be enticing yet is portrayed as lacking fundamental pedagogical background and potentially intelligence (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000: 337-338).

Another *Jezebel* stereotype can be traced in the character of Millie Perkins in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004). Millie is a promiscuous, young woman of Black descent, who works as a croupier at roulette games in the mafia-owned *Caligula's Palace* casino located in the area of Las Venturas, where she also resides (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). She is one of the six girlfriends of another male protagonist of the game, namely Carl Johnson— unless he decides to kill her instead of dating her to speed up his mission to receive a keycard to enter the casino and rob it (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). In terms of clothing, Millie is

depicted as wearing the typical dress attire of her workplace, namely black pants with a white collared, button-down shirt, a pair of black shoes as well as a black vest with a matching bow tie (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). She also shares some soft European features, since she has a lighter skin complexion with brown eyes and a small nose, and, when especially at work, her make-up is earth-tones and her hair is usually tied up in a tight, sleek and low ponytail (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

Be that as it may, Millie is fond of BDSM practice, assuming the role of a dominatrix as signified by her respective outfit, namely her black leather underbust corset accompanied by a pair of black thigh-high socks that leave her buttocks exposed, and a black lace choker necklace (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Moreover, when exercising her habit, her make-up is heavy with smokey eyes and dark lips, and her hair is tucked behind her ears (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Furthermore, her place of residence is filled with many BDSM gadgets, toys and equipment, like a metal bondage bed, ticklers, harnesses, a leather swing, a black tight gimp suit for sexual pleasure, and others (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Even the license plate of the car she drives has the word “SPANK” written on, which alludes to her BDSM habit (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

Both Tonya’s and Millie’s overall physical characteristics satisfy what Mulvey (1975: 835-836) describes as “scopophilia”, since the passive female character is sexually objectified to maximize the active male player’s or spectator’s pleasure derived from the latter’s act of looking at lustful visual content. Mulvey (1975: 837) further suggests that the female figure is dressed in accordance with such a dictating “male gaze”, which casts its erotic fantasy upon it, as in Tonya’s and Millie’s looks. This means that, since the majority of white – often heterosexual – men owns a gross percentage of the media while being heavily invested in the entertainment industry, it should be held accountable for perpetuating debasing sexualized images of women made by and mostly for their own sex (Harris-Lowe, 2017: 30-31; Mulvey, 1975: 837-838; González, 2014: 18-20; Venegas, 2012: 95-97; Wright, 2022: 142).

Another issue raised is that such depictions not only limit the diversity of roles assigned to female characters but also foster body image dissatisfaction created due to the game developers’ act of projecting figures with deformed and, thus, unrealistic physical proportions, which, by extension, distorts – predominantly female – players’ self-perception of healthy bodies and acceptance of their diversity (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019: 7-10). In this way, several mental problems could arise, like low self-esteem due to unfavorable comparisons between real and animated bodies as well as beauty standards, depression, and constant anxiety over external appearance resulting in eating disorders, distress and impaired social functioning (Raouf et al., 2022: 2-5).

Additionally, what should be remarked is that the *GTA* Saga allows the playable male protagonists to have the choice of paying for the services of prostitutes and brutally kill them after the act so as to take their money back. Even Millie Perkins in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), who, though not a sex worker, can be physically assaulted depending on the player’s personal choice let alone other



female characters across all *GTA* installments (1997-2013). This sense of having the freedom to act with no remorse, however, reinforces the biased victim-blaming image of women, and especially female sex workers, being regarded as unworthy of any sort of empathy, respect, compassion and humane treatment (Beck et al., 2012: 3017-3027; Ruberg, 2018: 7-8). Also, it even bolsters the misconception that such *Jezebels* are regarded as *expendable* and deserve to be abused once they have served their purpose, which is a significant dimension of the repercussions of the “male gaze” (Ruberg, 2018: 12; Weaver, 2016: 60). This further suggests that the ability offered to players to enjoy absence of consequences in the virtual world of video games may negatively impact how they perceive, comprehend, and interact with women in reality, leading to high criminality levels, especially gender violence (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019: 10).

Indeed, a meta-analysis study from Gentile et al. (2004) has shown that the astounding percentage of 89% of the most best-selling video games in the United States contains some form of violent content, while approximately 50% of them, including the first installments of *GTA* (1997-2004), includes physical and sexual violence targeting other characters, especially female ones, within each game. Although this does not necessarily suggest a direct causal relationship between excessive playing of such video games and exhibiting delinquent behavior, it certainly indicates that the former could be a serious risk factor of the latter based on relevant data (Anderson & Bushman, 2001: 353-358, 2002: 27-35; Ferguson, 2015: 646-665; Greitemeyer, 2019: 635-641; Olejarnik & Romano, 2023: 1-10). Truly, according to behaviorism and the social learning theory, repeated exposure to violent video games and other media could potentially lead to the reinforcement of aggressive behavioral motifs, which individuals adopt through close observation and imitation (Shao & Wang, 2019: 1-7; Yao et al., 2019: 662-669; Zhang et al., 2021: 1-11). Hence, extending the analysis within the framework of *GTA*, children and adolescents may internalize the negative behaviors and attitudes they are exposed to within the game, resulting to the ‘normalization’ of interpersonal violence and the perpetuation of gender and ethnic stereotypes. Yet such an inference must be approached with caution because, even if there is some basis for concern, we need to consider the broader context and the multifaceted nature of the influence of video games on human behavior based on more research for holistic and accurate results.

#### 4. The *Sapphire* stereotype

*Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) also presents the *Sapphire* stereotype through another supporting character worthy of analysis named Denise Clinton, who, unlike others, neither has any quests related to her throughout the game nor does she seem to affect its progress significantly. Denise is the aunt of Franklin Clinton on his mother’s side, both of whom live in the area of Strawberry, Los Santos (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). She is a well-preserved woman of Black descent in her 50s, who relishes jogging around the vicinity while rhythmically and repetitively singing empowering mottos

of female liberation with the purpose of adding a spiritual dimension to the overall feminist cause (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). However, such a “new-age” feminist approach is often treated with mockery and disdain throughout the game by the rest of not only male but other female characters, too (Malone, 2014: 67).

As far as her external appearance is concerned, Denise has an athletic look, consisting of a pair of white trainers and black workout leggings, a varsity-stripe, lightweight yellow or blue hoodie jacket, and an asymmetric cold-shoulder (namely having one sleeve) top in turquoise or purple color (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). In addition, her make-up is natural with earthy tones, her hair is not loose but tied into a messy up-do, and she has long round-shaped, white nails (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). Finally, some silver jewelry, namely a set of carved-face earrings with a matching tribal-inspired feather necklace, completes her neat look (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). What can be inferred is that she does not seem to conform to any fashion rules, setting herself aside from fashion homogeneity stereotypically ascribed to other female characters across the *GTA* Saga, such as the *Jezebel* Tonya Wiggins.

A plethora of *Sapphire*'s personality traits and behavioral patterns can be identified in the character of Denise. To be more specific, the character exhibits impoliteness, sassiness, unnecessary loud vocalizations when conversing, anger-management issues and obstinacy, which set the basis for the later development of the *Angry Black Woman* stereotype (Collins, 2000: 156; Donahoo, 2017: 61; Townes, 2006: 62; Weaver, 2016: 60). Even her body language signifies her emasculating and aggressive personality, since she is often seen in a hands-on-hips pose, reflecting an intense emotional state of vexation, impatience and rage, accompanied by head shaking, finger pointing and generally excessive hand gestures, foot tapping, and bruxism (namely teeth grinding) (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013).

Denise's interpersonal relationships are frequently characterized by volatility, being repugnant to anyone she may find disrespectful as inferred, for example, by her inability to have long-term romantic partners (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). This can be also indicated via her multiple posts on the online social networking service “Lifeinvader”, where she keeps grumbling about the fact that she cannot find a man due to Franklin (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). This is because she usually has the tendency to accuse others of her miserable state instead of actually trying to change her lifestyle, which is consistent with the *Sapphire* racial trope (Luckoo, 2018: 34). What can be additionally noted is that Denise exhibits a compulsive sexual behavioral pattern as stated by other characters, which can be further substantiated by the fact that she is often heard producing orgasmic moans during her yoga practices while extending her pelvis on the lumbar spine as well as her willingness to become a certified pelvic-floor trainer (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013).

In general, the feelings of grief and sorrow Black enslaved women were gripped by owing to the harsh living and working conditions in the plantations and as in-house servants, which was rightfully expressed into rage, laid the foundation for the development of the *Sapphire* trope during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Lewis, 2015: 29; West, 2012: 289-290). The *Sapphire*'s behavior is perceived as masculine, owing to the deep-rooted prejudice permeated especially across the popular media, suggesting

that there is a robust connection between the black female body and the properties determining the male sex (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016: 5; Townes, 2006: 62). This is heightened by the fact that, due to father absence, Black females were obliged to take care of the various household responsibilities while being the *breadwinners* in parallel to support their families (Luckoo, 2018: 34). Denise in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) has assumed a “quasi-parental role”, becoming both a mother and a father to her nephew, Franklin, with *Sapphire* stereotype intersecting with matriarchy (Lewis, 2015: 16).

In this way, *Sapphires* tend to be critical of other – mostly African-American – males’ impoverished, unemployment or lackadaisical state, their sexual preferences, since they often blame them for showing attraction to Caucasian women instead of females of their own race, or even their *fractured* community ties (Townes, 2006: 61-62). Indeed, Denise is endowed with justice sensitivity and she always reacts to any potential incidents of wrong-doing she may detect (Lewis, 2015: 13). Hence, she is known for making acerbic remarks and being cynical towards her nephew, whom she often verbally abuses, describing him as one of her sister’s “mistakes because she blames him for exhibiting a volition, adopting a phony attitude as well as neglecting their home duties, his gang group and the hood he was raised in (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013). Such adherence to the roots, though, is indicative of Denise’s pride as a Black female and of her desire to strengthen the bonds among the members of her ethnic group so as for the latter to keep its dynamic character across time (*Grand Theft Auto V*, 2013).

Although the overall game portrayal of Denise Clinton as a *Sapphire* caricature seems to ridicule the racist mythology surrounding Black females, special attention must be paid. The reason rests upon the fact that studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) have provided compelling evidence that frequent exposure to negative stereotypes can activate certain brain regions related to threat perception and social judgement (Bagnis et al., 2020: 1-11; Chekroud et al., 2014: 1-9; Kubota & Phelps, 2016: 299-310). Thus, individuals may start over-associating these traits with the targeted group, and, in particular, Black women, leading to one-sided, generalized and inaccurate views about them (Beck et al., 2012: 3017-3020; Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019: 10; Mou & Peng, 2009: 928-931). This can thereafter influence how players may treat and interact with Black women in real life because such erroneous perceptions can shape their expectations of and behavior towards them, resulting in discrimination, micro aggressions, or even overt racism, since they may act on these learned associations unconsciously (Beck et al., 2012: 3017-3020; Stevenson, 2023: 9-11).

## 5. The *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman* stereotype

In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), Denise Robinson is another female character of Black descent classified as a “Stranger/Freak” worth mentioning. As a resident of Garton area in Los Santos, she is also one of Carl Johnson’s girlfriends,

like Millie Perkins, offering the male protagonist her vehicle, namely her emerald “Hustler” coupe car, and a blue suit used for pimping missions as rewards (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Just like other characters, she can be sexually exploited, abused and even killed upon the player’s preference (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

Denise is a skinny young Black woman with a casual athletic style indicative of the Grove Street Families gang she is a member of (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). In particular, appearing with little or no makeup, she wears an oversized navy-blue or green T-shirt with a v-neckline, having the slang term “GROWLER” in capital letters embroidered on the back as well as the number 88 both at the front and at the back that is placed in the center in striking large size and red color (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). A white lightweight long-sleeved blouse can be discerned within the T-shirt for both functional reasons, like enhanced warmth, and aesthetic purposes, such as layering (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). She also wears a pair of white baggy sweatpants with elastic cuffs in the ankle area, matching trainers and a blue paisley bandana, which could further mark her gang affiliation (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

It is not accidental that the capitalized noun “GROWLER” is written on her T-shirt, meaning “an unappealing female”, since it could be an indication of sarcasm on behalf of the *GTA* developers who wish to create an image that may be subjected to the typical stereotypes surrounding the *Ghetto Hood Girl* or *Angry Black Woman* but it certainly contradicts that of the *Sapphire*. Truly, as inferred, Denise does not seem to conform to the discriminatory feminine beauty standards concerning build, facial features, clothing and hairstyle as set by societal norms (Johnson, 2016: 39-40). Her portrait also semi-accords with the *Angry Black Woman’s* racial trope standards because she does not seem to argue over social justice and equality issues as in the case of Denise Clinton presented in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), which is heavily satirized (Harris-Perry, 2011: 182-220; Wills, 2021: 2-4). Still, an aspect of this deep-rooted stereotype traced can be discerned in the repetitive projection of the single-sided image of a Black woman being intrinsically audacious, belligerent, confrontational and always irritable with no apparent reason (Welang, 2022: 115).

The *Ghetto-Hood* discriminatory traits reinforce her loud, aggressive and threatening personality that takes pleasure in all prejudiced aspects of living in the hood, which signifies that Black females have been stigmatized out of their lack of willingness to adhere to assumed gender roles (Johnson, 2016: 39-40). Even on the license plate on Denise’s car the emphatic capitalized word “HOMEGIRL” can be seen, alluding to her being proud of leading a ghetto life as a young woman (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Indeed, she loathes driving around well-off regions but prefers hanging out in establishments in the vicinity of Los Santos, like fast-food restaurants, namely “Cluckin’ Bell”, and nearby clubs, such as “Alhambra” (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

What is truly remarkable is Denise’s favorite, yet illicit recreational activity, which is to perform drive-by shootings with submachine guns either from her own or Carl Johnson’s vehicle at the expense of antagonist gangs, like the Mexican *Los*

*Santos Vagos* and the African-American *Ballas* (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). The purpose is to amuse herself, construct her personal identity and cement her reputation within the gang group she belongs to or in the mind of the rival ones (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). This can be depicted through a fun meter appearing at the top of the screen during the game, which increases as she shoots other individuals (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

What is not clarified throughout the game is the kind of job Denise does for a living but it can be assumed that she may be employed as a sex worker due to her previous unintended pregnancies, which resulted in her putting three babies up for adoption (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). This idea is reinforced by the pimp suit the male protagonist, Carl Johnson, is given by Denise upon total progress completion as well as the fact that the word “Hustler”, which is the brand name of her car, constitutes a slang term meaning “pimp” or “prostitution” (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Last but not least, though a member of Grove Street Families, she is seen in the territory of *Los Santos Vagos*, perhaps because she may be offering sexual services to the members of that rival gang (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004). Finally, in the “Hot Coffee Mod” version, in which Carl Johnson has a sexual intercourse with Denise, he often compliments her performance comparing it with that of a professional, which could further substantiate the assumption that she may actually be a sex worker even though this is not officially stated (*Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004).

What is further noticeable is the aspect of “speech stereotypicality” traced in the oral discourse of Denise, affecting the extent to which Black female characters, and, by extension, real individuals within the American society are perceived and treated as potential offenders, as in the case of Black residents of ghetto neighborhoods (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021: 1-3). Language truly constitutes a strong marker of the social status of an individual, activating various biases about gender, race, facial features, and even criminal status (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021:2). Drawing upon the research of Kurinec and Weaver (2021: 2), the character of Denise Robinson in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) uses “African American Vernacular English” as proven by the frequent use of the habitual “be” (“better not *be* hittin’ me” instead of “better not hit me”), omitted “be” (“you tryin’” instead of “you are trying”), the unstressed present perfect “been” (“we *been* married” instead of “we have been married”), the third-person singular/plural absence and use of “ain’t” together with double negation (“that *ain’t no* manners” instead of “those aren’t manners”). Additionally, as far as phonology is concerned, what can be observed is the “g-dropping” phenomenon with the prevalence of the alveolar nasal [n] in words ending in “-ing” (“enjoyin’” rather than “enjoying”), and the dropped “-r” or nonrhotic dialect (e. g. “stat” instead of “start”), and, moreover, the pronunciation of [th] as [d] (e. g. [dæt] rather than [ðæt] in the word “that”) (Kurinec & Weaver, 2021: 2).

In another study of Kurinec and Weaver (2019: 4), what is stressed is that although the credibility and validity of “African American Vernacular English” have long been established, there is still prejudice against its users, perpetuating biased assumptions that circulate around ethnic-minority groups and offending behavior,

which is also spatially reinforced, especially if these individuals reside in ghetto neighborhoods. As in the example of Denise Robinson in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), who lives in a predominantly African-American district of South Los Santos that is poverty-stricken with increased offending rate, she uses this specific language system that is mistakenly yet frequently disparaged as slang, less standard, inappropriate, incorrect, gang-related and crime-prone (Kurinec & Weaver, 2019: 4-6). As inferred, the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman* stereotype can be understood via language as well, which is another element of mere importance as “controlling” as “image”, extending Collin’s (2000: 40) account, and it can be skillfully yet deviously manipulated to degrade residents of Black descent and present them as a menace to mainly American society at large.

Overall, via the character deconstruction of Denise Robinson, what can be inferred is that she embodies certain distinct elements of the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman* stereotype. From her external appearance and oral discourse to her confrontational personality traits and involvement in illicit activities, Denise appears to perpetuate some discriminatory representations. As stressed throughout this essay, even if the *GTA Saga* (1997-2013) has been known for its projecting exaggerated characters with a sarcastic overtone, the repeated portrayal of such stereotypes can reinforce harmful misconceptions about Black women, since the players may subconsciously associate the individuals of this specific ethnic-minority group residing in ghettos with deviant behavioral motifs, leading to race and socio-spatial stigmatization, as studies have demonstrated (Beck et al., 2012: 3017-3020; Mou & Peng, 2009: 928-931; West, 2012: 150). Therefore, this particular analysis underscores the significance of encouraging the development of more varied and complex in-game characters approached with special care and sensitivity with the purpose of challenging and mitigating the impact of biases.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, the study shows that even though the *GTA Saga* developers have made some changes in promoting character diversity over the years, certain stereotypical elements still seem to permeate the game. These could subconsciously have a negative impact on players’ perception of and interpersonal relationships with real women outside of the gamespace. Particularly, no matter how *benevolent* or *harmless* the intentions may be at first glance, gender stereotyping is pervasive, since, especially, excessively sexualized images of in-game female figures exhibiting the *Jezebel* stereotype could encourage, or even *glorify* violence against women as well as lead to a wider acceptance of the rape myth alongside victim-blaming attribution. This indicates that the great extent of autonomy and the right to unaccountability granted to players within the virtual environmental settings of the video games could have, among others, adverse effects on their sensory awareness, understanding and treatment of women in real life.

Another concern that has been touched upon in this paper is that these stereotypical portrayals of Black women not only restrict the variety of roles and

the fluidity of identities that can be attributed to female characters, but they also encourage body image dissatisfaction, especially among female players. This phenomenon occurs because of the over-projection of figures with deformed and, therefore, unrealistic somatic proportions as in the case of both the *Mammy* and the *Jezebel* racial tropes. This, in turn, distorts players' perceptions of both their own and others' bodies, and their acceptance of their diversity, leading to the rise or exacerbation of many health problems. To combat these issues, game developers need to expand the target playership and concentrate on creating more diverse, accurate and well-rounded female characters with whom players can identify and, so, a healthy and realistic body image can be prioritized over –predominantly male – hypersexualized fantasies which are heavily commercialized for profit.

Even in the case of the *Sapphire* and the *Ghetto Hood Girl/Angry Black Woman* tropes, which do not seem to abide by the typical biased beauty standards regarding feminine body proportions and facial characteristics as prescribed by societal norms, discrimination can still be traced via Denise Clinton's and Denise Robinson's speech patterns, clothing choice, deviant behavior and their main place of residence (namely the ghetto), which are all stereotypically interconnected in cognitive psychology terms. Specifically, as observed in the essay, the human brain may subconsciously link certain socio-racial features with particular behavioral motifs and backgrounds due to overexposure to analogous images, resulting in implicit biases with sometimes dreadful outcomes for the targeted individuals, or, in this case, women of Black descent. Still, more research is required to further investigate how video game narratives and character portrayals can perpetuate or challenge stereotypes related to race, criminality, and urban environmental settings.

What is thus addressed is the imperative need to confront and review gender representation, perhaps from a feminist perspective, in the *GTA* series and, subsequently, the gaming industry as a whole, embargoing recurring patterns of biased portrayals of Black characters and ideas about women spread across space and time. Hence, careful consideration is needed on behalf of the game developers when deciding to incorporate such figures to avoid causing confusion and propagation of hurtful biases. Only by striving for a thoughtful creation of more holistic, inclusive, multi-faceted and active characters that stand out for their authenticity and empowerment in terms of representation can the video game industry progress towards developing more *human-centered* and less *player-centered* games with a positive impact on players themselves.

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## **SEKS, LAŽI I GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAVREMENI UTICAJ RASISTIČKIH KARIKATURA NA PERCEPCIJU TELA CRNKINJA**

### **Apstrakt**

Saga *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) (1997–2013), koju je razvila kompanija *Rockstar North*, jedna je od najuspešnijih produkcija akciono-avanturističkih video igara, sa milionima posvećenih igrača širom sveta i prihodom koji se meri milijardama (Rajt, 2022: 1). Međutim, uprkos komercijalnom uspehu, igra je često kritikovana zbog ponižavajućeg prikaza ženskih likova koji se ne mogu kontrolisati, osmišljenih da služe kao ukrasi, predmet poruge, žrtve ubijanja radi zabave ili napredovanja u nivoima, seksualno objektivizovani kako bi zadovoljili „muški pogled”, kako ga opisuje Malri (1979: 837) i drugi autori (Malon, 2014: 11-25; Ruberg, 2018: 314-27; Vaskijević, 2019: 175, 180; Rajt, 2022: 150). Ipak, mali je broj radova posvećenih nedostatku ili negativnom prikazu crnkinja kao likova u igri iako većinu igrača čine uglavnom crni adolescenti (Rajt, 2022: 142). Iz tog razloga, osnovna ideja ovog rada se temelji na dekonstrukciji prikaza pojedinih ženskih likova crnačkog porekla okarakterisanog kao predradusnog u čitavom serijalu *GTA* (naročito u delovima *Vice City* (2002), *San Andreas* (2004) i *V* (2013), gde se takvi likovi najviše pojavljuju), kroz uvod i sistematsku analizu sledećih duboko ukorenjenih i dugotrajnih rasnih stereotipa: *Mammy*, *Jezebel*, *Sapphire* i, na kraju, *Devojke iz geta/ljutite crnkinje* i njihovog uticaja na muške i ženske igrače.

**Ključne reči:** *GTA*, *Mammy*, *Jezebel*, *Sapphire*, *Devojka iz geta/Ljutita crnkinja*