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Imhotep, Malika SaraMaat

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Indelibly Marked: Queer Articulations of Black femininity, Vernacular Aesthetic, and
the Performance of Labor in the 'Dirty South'

By

Malika SaraMaat Imhotep

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

African American Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

New Media Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Brandi Wilkins-Catanese, Chair

Professor Tianna Paschel

Professor Ula Taylor

Professor Nadia Ellis

Professor Abigail De Kosnik

Spring 2022

Abstract

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This dissertation is an interdisciplinary, multi-sited project that utilizes auto-ethnographic methods and site-specific archival research alongside humanistic textual analysis to think critically about the ways Black women and gender non-conforming (GNC) Black femmes relate to, embrace and challenge the political and economic landscapes of a cultural circuit that moves between Atlanta, Georgia and New Orleans, Louisiana. Decoupling Black femininity from essentialist notions of “womanhood,” this dissertation surfaces a queer Black feminist *sense* of political economy that accounts for a broad range of survival and sustenance strategies. My research asks: *How do Black women and gender non-conforming Black femmes utilize aesthetic practice to make sense of themselves and the histories their bodies carry as they represent and transgress the overdetermined relationship between Black femininity and labor?* Giving close attention to Southern vernacular aesthetics in works of Black art and performance created and circulated outside of mainstream markets, I argue that 20th and 21st century Black feminine cultural production carries and transforms the mark of 19th century Southern plantation economies. Here, “the mark” refers to the historical conscription of Black female flesh as both a foundational commodity, the channel through which racial inequity reproduces itself, and the origin of modern Blackness (Spillers 1967). In the work of 20th century vernacular visual artist Clementine Hunter (1888 -1989), 21st century online performance artist BeTTy BuTT (1992 - 2014) and my own work as a Black feminist performance artist, I trace the transformation of this mark into a terrain of radical ambivalence and dirty possibility.

Dedication

*for
Jamie A'dedra "BeTTy BuTT" Moore
(1990 – 2014)*

*& all the Black feminine figures that have died
choreographing our dirty possibilities*

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Acknowledgements

She does not know
her beauty,
She thinks [that] her brown body
has no glory

[but] if she could dance
naked
under palm trees
and see her [reflection] in the river.
[then] she would know.

But there no ~~palm~~ trees
on the street [where she lives],
and dish water gives back
no images.

-“No Images” by William Waring Cuney (1973)
as performed by Sweet Honey In The Rock (1985)

First, I get quiet and thank all the water that has thrown back my reflection and the water that has nourished, and cleansed me (Omi-O); all the times I have gotten to dance naked (literally and metaphorically) and come to know my own beauty (& my ugly too); all the poems I hear, the stories they tell; my *positive obsessions* and my spirited melancholy; my clinical exuberance and my manic magic carpets.

Then, I thank my grandmothers’ hands. I thank them for the washing, cleaning, cooking, and coddling they did. I thank them for their work & their rest & their pleasures.

Then, I thank my parents, D. Makeda Johnson and Akbar Imhotep, for prayerfully conjuring me and raising me up to jump at da sun, ask questions, treasure the Word(s), and love my people.

Then, I shout rivers of gratitude for the five fabulous fierce feminist members of my committee for their trust, faith, and care-full attention: Brandi Catanese-Wilkins, Abigail De Kosnik, Nadia Ellis, Tianna Paschel, Ula Taylor

Then, I bow and cry heavenly blessings to my elder/ancestor/angel Njeri Willis, proprietor of ‘My Solitude Bookstore’ in Philly, who gave me shelter, and jazz, and baths, and overripe pears that helped sweeten my first three years of graduate school.

Then, I open up to give deep hugs to the friends and co-conspirators who have helped me along the way: Jamal Batts, Nicole Ramsey, Alan Pelaez-Lopez, Ariel Ward, Frances Brionne Gregory, Miyuki Baker, Julia Havard, Mahasan Chaney, Gilberto Rosa, Rashad Timmons, Zachary Manditch Prottas, John Mundell, Troizel, Swamp, C. Riley Snorton, Taryn Jordan, Nishath Azad, Cathy Thomas, crystal am. nelson. My hometown crew: Asha Haki-Tyler, Jessica Hood, Morgan Johnson, Aliya Nealy. My 'self-aware baddies in fancy draws': Ayana Flewellen & Sophia Smart. My playmati: Felicita 'Felli' Maynard. My Dharma/spirit kin: Tiara R. Jackson, Simran Shah, Ekua Adisa, Damaris Miller. The pathbreakers: kai lumumba barrow, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, doris diosa davenport, Hortense Spillers. My intellectual possibility models: Alexis Pauline Gumbs, L.H. Stallings, Fred Moten.

Then, I touch the earth in tribute to my ancestors, human and non-human, known and unknown (and those that know me better than I know myself).

Preface

The Jook Continuum Black Southern Vernacular Labors across Time and Space

This is a quilt. A utilitarian experiment in the collection, arrangement, and stitching together of thoughts, ideas, and images. This is a story. An attempt to mark down a Black feminist practice of survival. This is a jive. A social dance, a slick vernacular taunt, a lie. I'm using language to say something that only our bodies can know. I won't tell you the secrets but I'm hoping you'll catch on. The place where we meet to do this work, the place we witness permutations of Black feminine figures of the Dirty South, is something like a "Jook."

Described by Black dance/mojo scholar, Katrina Hazzard-Donald (nee Gordon), the distinctly Black social institutions of the early 20th century – the classical jook, the honky tonk, the after-hours joint and the rent party, existed along the jook continuum. These social configurations of space centering leisure and pleasure were a result of the "forced enormous changes" in rural Black life post-Emancipation (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 66). Pushed into 'shoddy confines' by restrictive legislation that sought to retain the racialized social boundaries of the Old South, Black secular and spiritual activity flowered in segregated conditions. In the late 19th century and throughout the early 20th century, the secular amusements of the *Jook Joint* developed alongside a tradition mutual aid organizing in Black communities. One example of this being the longstanding Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs in New Orleans that tended to secular social activity and provided health and life insurance for Black folks who were otherwise barred from receiving governmental support.¹

As both an institution and a movement style *the Jook* comes to represent intramural working class Black sociality and expression in the antebellum South moved up through the Northern states with the first wave of The Great Migration. Alongside this first wave of migration, Black performers and performance troupes traveled across the South, disseminating "vocabulary, toast, rhymes, music and dance" (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 67). The legal and financial constraints on these 'negro minstrels' barred them from the mainstream and consequentially cultivated a intimate genre of entertainment geared specifically at Black southern audiences. Hazzard links the hidden

¹ The longstanding Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club was founded after a Black men's neighborhood club, called 'The Tramps', saw a vaudeville show at a Black social institutional called the Pythian Temple in 1909. While the Pythian Temple building was a flashy structure in the center of New Orleans and a far cry from the backwoods shot houses of rural Louisiana, in Post-reconstruction New Orleans the building asserted the communal ethos of the Jook as an institution that supported Black entertainment, Black business, education, and activism. Wiley, Amber. "PMPLC #021 The Pythian Temple." *Paper Monuments* (blog). Accessed April 30, 2022. <https://www.papermonuments.org/pmplc-021>.

and elicit nature of *the Jook Joint* and its derivative secular institutions to the fact that within the plantation landscape, recreation and leisure had to be pursued in secrecy (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 77). In their insistence on a space to ‘get loose’, the enslaved and their progeny created Black social institutions that necessarily subverted white supremacists impositions of social control.² Within this “recurrent pattern of covert social activity,” *jook* emerges as a mode of being and doing that Hazzard links to an ethos of West African religious celebration (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 77–78). While Black spiritual and secular institutions grew to be culturally and socially distinct, Hazzard points out that the separation was not radical and held many acknowledged and unacknowledged points of confluence. Referring to “the African American jook” as “the most significant development in American popular dance and popular music history,” Hazzard anticipates Stuart Halls assertion that popular culture has “always contained within it, whether silenced or not, Black American vernacular culture” (Hazzard-Gordon 1990; S. Hall 1992).

In her work on Black Social Dance and its accompanying cultural and institutional developments, Hazzard draws heavily from the anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston. And like Hazzard, I too, am indebted to Hurston’s work as a Southern-grown genius. As such, I ground this preface with a close read of a Hurston essay from the early 20th century that lays the foundation of my current inquiries into Black femininity and Southern Vernacular cultures. In the 1934 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston discuss “*the Jook* (pronounced like ‘took’)” as the harbinger of authentic Black expressive culture. Hurston defines *the Jook* as “the negro pleasure house...where the men and women dance, drink and gamble” (Hurston 1934, 29). By vernacular extension “jooking” is “singing and playing in the true negro style” (Hurston 1934, 29). She goes on to assert that the “sensuous” stylings of negro dance were too “conceived insides the Jooks,” where they make their first rounds before being circulated outside to the mainstream (most often by the negro minstrels and waves of North-ward migration discussed earlier) (Hurston 1934, 29). Hurston’s ethnographic work in the US South and the Caribbean yielded a bounty of data that supported her own homegrown understandings of Black life and culture. As a participant observer from Eatonville, Florida trained at Barnard by the father of cultural anthropology Franz Boas, Hurston took to the field(s) of Black life in Harlem, the US South, and Caribbean, with an acute sense of the complicated relationship between Black folks, cultural production, and knowledge production.

In the portion of “Characteristics of Negro Expression” dedicated to *the Jook*, Hurston covers a range of topics from music, dance, negro theater, colorism, classism and cultural appropriation. This shows how the elicit spaces of Black leisure were intricately tied up in broader social, cultural and political discourses. As observed by Hurston “the Black gal,” “Black as the hinges of hell,” with hips that “shake like jelly” is

² As elucidated by Stephanie M.H. Camp, in the antebellum South, Black folks in general and Black women in particular, developed and participated in an ‘outlaw’ culture that allowed them to contest the spatial and temporal constraints of chattel slavery. By dressing themselves ornately and stealing away to “outlaw parties,” enslaved women took control of their “outlaw bodies” and practiced pleasurable somatic political resistance. Camp, Stephanie M. H. “The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861.” *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 3 (2002): 533–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3070158>.

the “queen of the Jook” (Hurston 1934, 30). With a taunt, Hurston insists that despite the popularity of “octoroon chorus girls” and the athletic mimicry of “true negro movement” popularized by white female performers like Mae West, the dark-Black feminine figure and her sensuous shimmy were the axis of Black expressive culture. This foreshadows contemporary discourse surrounding the phenomena of ‘twerk’ and other contemporary sightings of the Black feminine that will be discussed at length throughout this dissertation.

For Hurston, and for the purposes of this dissertation, Black folk and vernacular performance on the plantation, inside the *Jook Joint* and/or the stage and computer screen are never understood to be static and pure nor wholly isolated from the eyes of the master/market. As discussed in the following chapters, Black folk performance traditions throughout the African diaspora are works highly impacted by the contours of their environments and migratory processes of blending and borrowing. It is this diasporic syncretism Hurston indexed in her 1932 production, *The Great Day*, wherein a day’s work in a Black community in Southern Florida concludes with a Bahamian Fire Dance (Kraut 2008, 43). The easy incorporation of the Bahamian fire dance into the work day of Black Floridians is enabled by true-to-life migration patterns AND by the ecological kinship between the South Florida swamps and the Caribbean. As writer, director and choreographer, Hurston shaped this performance with the information she knew first-hand as someone born and raised in the South AND had observed as an ethnographer invested in mining the cultural confluences between the US South and the Caribbean.

This is echoed in Hazzard-Gordon’s description of the ways Black performance trends traveled along segregated performance circuits creating a web of cultural information that fed back into the local *Jook Joints* and then out (or up) into the mainstream. This is the tradition of creative intellectual inquiry to which this *Indelibly Marked* belongs. Taking the working-class vernacular cultures of the US South as an entry point, *Indelibly Marked* tends to the relationships between labor, diaspora, and Black life by centering the scenes of self-articulation proffered by Black feminine figures in art and performance.

Introduction

From *jookin'* to *twerkin'*

A Vernacular Genealogy of Black movement

Indelibly Marked turns towards aesthetic practices of self-fashioning, visual craft arts, and performance to herald and appreciate Black feminist survival and sustenance strategies employed by Black women and Gender Non-Conforming femmes in the socio-cultural geographies of the Dirty South. This is an embrace of folk and vernacular culture that intervenes in the masculinist “folk” authenticity discourses of African American literary and cultural studies as advanced by Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) and critiqued by Black feminist scholars like Ann DuCille (1993) and Hazel Carby (1991). Both Carby and DuCille critique the romanticization of a Black masculine folk culture that enforces a new set of exclusionary limits to Black cultural and intellectual production. DuCille’s critique was concerned with the flattening of “complex and contradictory impulses” into “a single modality consisting of the blues and the folk” (duCille 1993, 69). Carby, in a critique of the post-humous critical exaltation of Zora Neale Hurston by the literary establishment, warns against the essentialisms of a folk culture constructed as permanently outside of history (Carby 1991). While I understand the stakes of their arguments at the moment when they were leveled, as a Southern-born creative intellectual writing in the world they helped to shaped, I am skeptical of Carby’s anti-essentialism and not so worried about DuCille’s “single modality.” It seems to me, that despite the critical popularity of folk idioms and the resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston, the cultures of survival generated and maintained by the ordinary Black folks of the US South have still remained marginal to critical inquiry. Further, this discourse for and against the primacy of the Folk has proved a timeless preoccupation of Black writers and intellectuals. It is the same contention explored in Harlem Renaissance spar between George Schulyer’s “Negro Art Hokum” and Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” It is the same contention that buried and forgot Zora Neale Hurston. *The Tom-Tom Laughs, The Tom-Tom Cries*. Amidst this debate, I remain invested in the Southern folk impulse that led Alice Walker to Zora’s grave site and the worlds of Black feminist thought and practice made possible by that act of ancestral veneration.

Heeding this contention but remaining invested in the veracity of working-class Black southern cultures, *Indelibly Marked* plants itself in the fertile soil tilled by L.H. Stallings and Robin D.G. Kelley who understand Black folk cultures as sites of “visceral

and psychic pleasures” that “are not simply mirrors of social life of expressions of conflicts, pathos, and anxieties” (Kelley 1998, 41; Stallings 2007).

In *Mutha’ is Half a Word* (2007), Stallings employees Kelley’s embrace of the visceral and psychic pleasures of contemporary Black folk ways to examine the representations of sexual desire in “Black female culture.” As illuminated by Stallings, articulations of sexual desire within the Black feminine cultural forms of folklore, trickster-trope, and vernacular, radically expand Blackness beyond the limits of respectability, dissemblance, and authenticity discourses (Stallings 2007, 8). ³ *Indelibly Marked* routes itself through this expanded terrain of Blackness (Black sexual cultures, Black genders, Black languages, Black thoughts, Black feelings, Black sounds, Black movement) towards a reckoning with the ways these expanded notions and practices of Black feminine desire, pleasure, and play shape responses to social and economic precarity.

The term “vernacular” is most commonly associated with language, as-in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), but has also been used to describe other facets of cultural production like art, dance, and theory.⁴ The Black movement phenomena of *jook* and *twerk* both emerge from the intersection of vernacular dance and vernacular language. Hazzard offers an etymology of *jook* starting with early 20th century African-American linguist Lorenzo D. Turner whose research focused on the Gullah-Geechee communities in Georgia and South Carolina. Turner concluded that the term was likely drawn for the West African Bambara word *dzugu* meaning wicked or violent (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 79). Writing in 1983, Robert Farris Thompson connected *jook* to a Bamana-kan phrase “a kagni jugu” meaning “he a good ba-a-ad” which for him rings clearly to contemporary Black vernacular uses of *bad* and *baaad* to signify something or someone is good and/or impressive (Hazzard-Gordon 1990, 80). ⁵

Chadwick Hansen begins his 1967 article “Jenny’s Toe: Negro Shaking Dances in America” with an account of a Georgia plantation song taken from the letters of an English starlet visiting her wealthy husband’s estate in 1838. In the last line of the excerpt in which she records the lyrics of the row-chant from which the article’s title is taken, she writes: “I have never heard the negros on Mr. [Butler’s] plantation sing any words that could be said to have any sense” (Hansen 1967, 555). Starting from this excerpt Hansen stumbles through the employment of a culturally informed reading strategy as he compares Georgia’s Afro-English “Jenny shakes her toe at me” to Louisiana’s Afro-French “gros noir toto.” Reading the two Black southern ‘slave songs’

³ *Mutha’ is Half a Word* was the first academic work I read of my own volition during my first semester of graduate school, as such, it has been a cornerstone text throughout the development of my own questions. Further, over the past 6.5 year of my time in graduate school Stallings has continued to publish works that are almost hauntingly relevant to the things I’m thinking through. As such, Stallings is one of the most-cited thinkers throughout this dissertation.

⁴ The term vernacular comes from the latin root “verna” meaning “home-born slave” which was extended to the latin “vernaculus” meaning “domestic, native, indigenous; pertaining to the home-born slave.” Within the context of British colonialism, the adjective vernacular was used to distinguish between the indigenous languages of everyday use and the imperial language of governance. “Vernacular” has always been a mark of difference with socio-political implications.

⁵ Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. 1st Vintage Books ed edition. New York: Vintage, 1984.

together, Hansen is able to deduce the true meaning of Jenny's shaking.⁶ In a Black vernacular sense that moves past state-borders and obscures its own African origins, 'toe,' 'toto,' and 'to'(pronounced "tow, towtow and tow") reference the hips and backside of a Black woman and in this reference index the tradition of Negro erotic shake dances to which the 'bump,' 'jook' and 'twerk' all belong. Beneath the English starlet's 'sense' is a whole world of Black diasporic meaning, movement making, and sexual culture.

Of particular interest to me is the brief contemplation of African etymology Hansen offers. While a direct correlation between "to" (pronounced "tow") meaning backside was not referenced by his source, which is again Lorenzo D. Turner's "Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect" (1949), Turner does:

find the word "tu," or "tutu," meaning "excrement." The African original, he believes, is the Hausa "tutu," meaning "human excrement." He also found the word "tuwi," meaning "excrement," and lists the Kongo "tuvi" as its original. He lists similar words in Kimbundu and Djerma from the West African languages, and in Tshiluba from the Congo. (Hansen 1967, 556)

In this instance we have the crude correlation between the backside and its products. This linking creates an interesting point of engagement with theorizations of The Dirty South and the lower bodily fascinations that *twerk* articulates (explored at length in **Chapter 1**).

In "The ontology of twerk: from 'sexy' Black movement style to Afro-Diasporic sacred dance," Elizabeth Perez charts a historiography of 'twerk' that reestablishes the connection between the 'sexy' southern movement style and a repertoire of waist and hip centric movements from throughout the African Diaspora. Perez pursues the question of ontology as a corrective to the shallow mainstream race for meaning around twerk following white female pop star Miley Cyrus's 2013 performance at the MTV Video Music awards. In the performance, which I do not intend to spend much time analyzing, Cyrus attempts to force a reading of "twerk" on to her thin white body, descending from the belly of a large teddy bear while a legibly Black masculine voice saying "twerk it out" is heard over a deconstructed instrumental. Conflating her own stiff legged movements with that of the three Black female dancers that surround her, Cyrus interrupts her Disney-established brand of white feminine innocence by associating with a variant of sexualized performance that cannot be mobilized and/or authenticated without the Black female body. Cyrus' attempts to "twerk out" of the limits of her own innocence was an act in line with a long legacy of female minstrelsy in which white women performers took on Black feminine roles, marked by their lewd movements, as a way of proving their talent and artistic credibility. The correlation between this variant of female minstrelsy and the long history of Black feminine erotic performance is discussed further in **Chapters 1** and **3**. While Cyrus' act undoubtedly presented the Black southern vernacular phenomena of 'twerk' to a large swath of the white mainstream and provoked a frenzy of misrecognition, Black performance studies

⁶ This mode of cross-cultural analysis harkens towards Veve Clark's theorization of diaspora literacy. Clark, VèVè A. "DEVELOPING DIASPORA LITERACY AND MARASA CONSCIOUSNESS." *Theatre Survey* 50, no. 1 (2009): 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557409000039>.

provides a means to read around her shallow incorporation by tending to *'twerk'* as a distinctly Black southern vernacular art form.

Dance studies understands vernacular dance as the dance of everyday life which is distinct from professionalized performance-based dance traditions that become 'high art.' Black dance in its formal slippages between vernacular, folk, folkloric, and concert – troubles this distinction (Kraut 2003). For example, Katherine Dunham's company staged Afro-diasporic vernacular and religious dance for concert venues and the proliferation of "African dance" throughout US-based Black communities in the 1960s was largely due to the influx of professional dance troupes and instructors from West and Central Africa. Thus, I argue that what makes Black dance vernacular, as explicated by Katrina Hazzard in the mid-1980s, is the way it relates to broader cultural tenants and institutions like language and space. Since my investment lies in the ways Black feminine cultural producers utilize distinctly southern Black vernacular aesthetics to carry and transform the 'mark' of 19th century plantation economies, I am pursuing a way to think about the Black vernacular in its fullest sense as a bridge between language, movement, art practice and culture.

Perez establishes that while early African-American cultural production was bound by the spatio-temporal constraints of enslavement, there was a distinction between the "sinuous snake hip and fish tail dances [performed] on plantations during festivals and special gatherings, such as celebratory dinners..." and the "the footwork executed to a 'quick stepping tune' as a display of submission for slave masters"(Pérez 2016, 21). Thus *'twerk'* belongs to the 'negro erotic shaking dances' that often, if not always, functioned to rebuke the invasive control white master's had over the bodies of the enslaved. Perez's distinction between the sinuous dances of Black revelry and more hyper-performative jigs and cakewalks performed on the master's command allows for us to imagine that there were some practices the enslaved kept for their own enjoyment.

The matter of what enslaved or otherwise contained/delimited/oppressed Black communities kept for their own enjoyment harkens toward the concept of the 'hidden transcript' proffered by Marxist-agrarian-anthropologist-political scientist James C Scott. While the 'public transcript' functions as the mask, the face played to power, or the underside of the DuBoisian veil, the hidden transcript refers to "offstage speech, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict or inflect what appears in the public" (Scott 1992, 58). Scott intentionally does not place a value judgment on the distinctions between the public and hidden transcript. In his analysis, neither is necessarily more true or less false than the other. Nor does the differentiation between public and hidden transcripts imply that the public is purely a domain of necessity while the hidden is purely a domain of freedom. In its turn towards contemporary Black folk and vernacular cultures and prioritization of Black counterpublics within the sites of the digital, the post-Emancipation plantation and the stage, *Indelibly Marked* does not attempt to reveal the hidden transcripts of Black feminine aesthetic practices. Rather, this work deliberately refuses performances of analytic and/or cultural translation. Rather than offer one fixed set of methods at the onset, each chapter proffers methods of reading, description and analysis that build on to each other. This methodological plurality is grounded in Barbara Christian's incisive critique of literary criticism in "The Race for Theory" (1987).

Indelibly Marked is a dissertation project produced out of the necessity felt by the scholar as Southern Millennial Black feminist creative intellectual to make sense of

her/their labor, exhaustion, and survival. As such, my methods “[relate] to what I read and to the historical contexts of the [artists] I read and to the many critical activities in which I am engaged, which may or may not involve writing...I, therefore, have no set method, another prerequisite [for dissertation projects], since for me every work suggests a new approach” (Christian 1987, 78).

The [digital] Dirty South (Take One)

Perez links the history of ‘negro erotic shake dances’ and Afro-diasporic sacred dance to the contemporary moment through her consideration of *twerk* and the frenzy of misrecognition provoked not only by Cyrus, but also by an uptick in the video circulation of New Orleans’ Bounce “booty shaking” and “p-popping” that was mediated by Youtube following its launch in April of 2005 (Pérez 2016, 18). As discussed at-length in **Chapter 1**, through the content-sharing platform YouTube, recordings of the once insular New Orleans cultural phenomena of ‘Bounce music’ and the movement repertoire that accompanies it, transported representations of profane Black sociality into the mainstream.

On August 28th 2005, exactly 4 months to the day of Youtube’s launch, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast sparking an environmental crisis and mass-exodus. New Orleans was devastated by the storm and a critical break in the levee that protected the city from flooding. For months television and online news outlets circulated pictures of New Orleans reeling from the aftermath. At least 100,000 New Orleanians evacuated to Atlanta in the days before and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall. Many of these evacuees remain in the Atlanta-area today. While this is a statistically smaller number than that of those who stayed in other parts of Louisiana or evacuated to Texas, the influx of evacuees to Georgia was rapid and mainly concentrated in the smaller metro-Atlanta area causing a 1.8 % percent increase in Atlanta’s population in roughly a week’s time.⁷ I extend Perez’s argument about the impact of increased circulation on the mis-recognition of *twerk* to include both new media circulation by way of video recordings and the material circulation of New Orleans’ people and their cultural products in the wake of the storm. While it may seem jarring to move from a contemplation of the history of Black erotic movement to an account of one of the most significant ecological disasters in recent history, for the purposes of this dissertation it is important to continually switch between registers of Black movement.

The spatial and embodied registers of Black movement are brought together instructively in the work of Stephanie Camp. Understanding the practices of everyday resistance that enslaved women engaged in necessitates an understanding of the relationship between enslavement and immobility. Slave owners throughout the South sought to permanently fix Black life within the spatial constraints of the plantation. However, as Camp elucidates, by attempting to control and delimit Black mobility and black bodily experience at large, slave owners “created a terrain on which bondspeople would contest slaveholding power” (Camp 2002, 534). Anticipating much contemporary discourse on Black Geographies indexed in **Chapter 1**, Camp proffers a historical

⁷ “A Continuing Storm: The On-Going Struggles of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees.” Appleseed Foundation, August 2006.

rendering of Black folks' rival geographies in the antebellum South. These rival geographies were fluid spaces "characterized by motion: the secret movement of bodies, objects, and information within and around the plantation space" (Camp 2002, 535). Many of the rival geographies discussed by Camp are literally dark and dirty quarters, swamps, and woods. In this way, the contemporary Dirty South, and the subversive movement and sound cultures it host, belongs to this legacy of fluid black mappings, somatic pleasures and politics (Camp 2002, 538). If *jookin'* was a response to the major spatial shifts in Black life after and/or alongside the plantation, then perhaps we can consider the contemporary proliferation and cultural purchase of *twerk* as another response to a major spatial shift in Black life.

Much more than a sub-culture of hip hop, the Dirty South is at once a specific (albiet contested) geography and a network of sound and movement cultures cultivated in the 1990s landscapes of the US South. The sound and movement cultures of the Dirty South converge and diverge on multiple levels. While the distinct sonic materials reverberating from below the Mason-Dixon Line are sometimes problematically conflated with one another, the regional kinship indexed by the Dirty South points towards a shared sense of relation and otherness shaped by the region's foundational proximity to US Chattel slavery. The Dirty South is a product of those left behind after both waves of The Great Migration. As curator Valerie Cassel Oliver articulates in the essay "What You Know about the Dirty South?," the dirt of the Dirty South indexes the physicality of place *and* the labored relationship to the earth these sonic and material cultures were cultivated in (Oliver 2021).

What does it mean that from *jooking* to *twerking* the mobilization of the waist and hips, the "bawdy dances," the "congo pelvic movements," have historically emanated from the South, correlated with the Black feminine backside (& its byproducts), and "presupposed a degree of social proximity, if not emotional intimacy, between viewers and spectators" (Pérez 2016, 20)? Whether the outside interloper peers in through a YouTube video screen or from the verandah of the Big House on an antebellum Southern plantation there is a persistent interplay between Black southerner vernacular social life, literal movement, and alternative modes of being-in-the-world that warrants examination.

What's in a name? *Black feminine figures*

"Black feminine figures" is the most honest and accurate description of the bodies and bodies of work at the center of *Indelibly Marked*. Since embarking on this project, I have sifted through a number of different ways of naming my interlocutors. First, the work was about the "urban Afro-Femme," then "Black femmes," then "Black women + femmes." After a number of reckonings, personal and political, I come to the page humbled by the inability to impose coherence on the radically transgressive group of living breathing earthly Black beings⁸ that I want my work to be in conversation with and accountable to. I aim to center those walking this planet variously marked by Black femininity. The open secret is that no body evades that mark. But it would be disingenuous to pretend like I'm talking about or to *everybody*. I am talking with and

⁸ A reference to inaugural Black Studies Collaboratory "Elder-In-Residence," Ms. Daphne Muse's preferred pronouns

about Black cisgender women, Black transgender women, Black sissys, Black punks, Black bulldaggers, Black dykes, Black bois, Black transgender men, Black ‘welfare queens’, Black agender femmes, Black nonbinary gods, Black strippers, Black hoes, Black workers, Black cisgender men (who’ve “said ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within”)⁹, & Black ancestors. In this endeavor, I am regarding “The Black Woman” as a concept that warrants destabilization. This regard is grounded in the ways artists and intellectuals marked Black and female throughout the 20th century reckoned with the tensions between Women’s Liberation and Black Liberation in the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s, and into the 1980s.

In a 1973 op-ed published in the New York Times novelist and cultural critic Toni Morrison draws out the semantic tensions of “Women’s Liberation.” Jim Crow laid it bare as segregation distinguished between “White Ladies” and “Colored Women” :

“White females were ladies, said the sign maker, worthy of respect. And the quality that made ladyhood worthy? Softness, helplessness and modesty—which I interpreted as a willingness to let others do their labor and their thinking. Colored females, on the other hand, were women—unworthy of respect because they were tough, capable, independent and immodest. Now, it appears, there is a consensus that those anonymous sign makers were right all along, for there is no such thing as Ladies’ Liberation.”

As elucidated by Morrison, the social configuration she refers to as “the Black-woman concept” was rooted in the notion of an unladylike capacity for labor. Thus, universalized calls for *Women’s Liberation* veiled white women’s desire for identification with the [Black woman’s] laboring body. And from Morrison’s early 1970s purview, Black women remained indifferent to the ideologies of Women’s Lib because of a fundamental lack of respect for the mantle of “White Lady-hood.” In my attempts to define who it is I think I am talking to, I have continually returned to Morrison’s assertion that “...if anything is true about Black women it is how consistently they have (deliberately, I suspect) defied classification.”¹⁰

⁹ In the conclusion of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” Hortense Spillers writes “It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood – the power of “yes” to the “female” within” and I see this rearticulated in the Combahee River Collective Statement when the Black Lesbian Socialist Feminist organizers write: “Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand” Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>; “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” 1978. <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>.

¹⁰ Encouragingly, Morrison incorporates the figure of the Black “transvestite” (via Flip Wilson’s character, Geraldine) into her reappraisal of the terrain of the Black-woman concept: “As for Geraldine, her particular horror lies in her essential accuracy. Like any stereotype she is a gross distortion of reality and as such highly offensive to many Black women and endearing to many whites. A single set of characteristics provokes both hatred and affection. Geraldine is defensive, cunning, sexy, egocentric and transvestite. But that’s not all she is. A shift in semantics and we find the accuracy: for defensive read survivalist; for cunning read clever; for sexy read a natural unembarrassed acceptance of her sexuality; for egocentric read keen awareness of individuality; for transvestite (man in woman’s dress) read a masculine strength beneath the accouterments of glamour.” Morrison, Toni. “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib.” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971, sec. Archives. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-Black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-Black-woman-and.html>.

In a letter sent to Kathleen Cleaver in 1967 soliciting a contribution for a new anthology exploring the Black Woman, Toni Cade Bambara listed the original title for the volume as New Breed: An Anthology on The Black Woman. This archival gossip, shared with me via Instagram by Leigh Raiford, signals Bambara's investment in understanding Black femininity as a revolutionary construct outside the conventional logics of Womanhood and even humanity. The landmark volume was ultimately published bearing the title, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. In Bambara's play of words 'The Black Woman' (is) 'a collection of compositions.' In the introduction to the 2005 reprinting of the volume, Eleanor W. Traylor contextualizes the volumes pluralistic visions of Blackness + Womanhood as part of the "evolutionary enunciation" of "womanist" consciousness (Bambara 2005).¹¹ At the outset, Bambara defines the Black Woman as a composite vision of contradictory elements:

"a college graduate. A drop-out. A student. A wife. A divorcee. A mother. A child of the ghetto. A product of the bourgeoisie. A professional writer. A person who never dreamed of publication. A solitary individual. A member of the Movement. A gentle humanist. A violent revolutionary. She is angry and tender, loving and hating. She is all these things – and more..."

In later writings and praxis, Bambara would use the terms *Afrafemme* and *Afrafemcentrist* to refer to this sensibility grounded in a self-referential and liberatory destabilization of the overdetermined role/category/identity of The Black Woman.¹²

Anticipated by Bambara's "*Afrafemme*," The "*Black feminine*" in Black feminine figures gets dealt with more specifically in **Chapter 1**, but for now I'll say that the work of Bambara and Hortense Spillers alongside the work of contemporary Black queer + trans scholars has been instructive in imagining and naming a relationship to Black femininity that is not shackled to the ruses of biology and the patriarchal dictates of socialization. In her 1969 speech, "On the Issue of Roles," published in the anthology discussed above, Bambara makes the case that we (Black folks) abandon both narrow prescriptions of both Black femininity and Black manhood in a radical embrace of what she calls "*Blackhood*." This "*Blackhood*" is a call to fashion new revolutionary selves,

¹¹ "womanist" here is a reference to Alice Walker's definition offered in the beginning of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*: 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and Black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

¹² See the essay "Reading The Signs, Empowering the Eye" in *Deep Sightings & Rescue Mission: Fiction. Essays, and Conversations* (1999) by Toni Cade Bambara, posthumously edited by Toni Morrison

“perhaps an androgynous self,” cultivated via commitment to the struggle for Black liberation (Bambara 2005, 126). The essay “On The Issues of Roles” appears in the anthology as the closing act of a three article sweep that explicitly deals with the concerns of Black feminist political economy. Kay Lindsey’s provocative short essay “The Black Woman as a Woman” starts this segment and is followed by a revised version of Fran Beal’s 1969 Pamphlet “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female.” As part of a triptych, these two essays lay out the term that Bambara unsettles in her climatic call towards revolutionary Blackhood.

The first act offers exposition by way of Lindsey’s incisive critique of the family as an institution of the State. In a radical refusal of the pathologies of the Black family advanced by the 1965 Moynihan Report, Lindsey asserts that the nuclear family is an oppressive institution that socializes women (Black and white) into roles limited by antiquated perceptions of their bodies (Lindsey 2005, 105). For Black women this socialization leads one to the realization that:

“Among the jobs open to women of all colors...Black women are expected to be primarily mothers, domestics and prostitutes” (Lindsey 2005, 107)

And for Lindsey, the role of the prostitute is “the most outrageous and flagrant form of sexual oppression, in which an individual is forced to sell her body on the basis of both sex and color, rather than use her mind to survive” (Lindsey 2005, 107). While I agree with Lindsey’s contention that The Black Woman has been constructed as “almost totally a physical body” which renders the Black woman a “sexual laborer” where the white woman stands as a “sexual object,” I disagree with Lindsey’s purely abject assessment of the prostitute (Lindsey 2005, 108). Like Bambara contended in her critical response to the 1991 film, *Daughters of The Dust*, I consider the figures of the domestic worker and the prostitute to be “in a better position than most workers to demystify White supremacy” (Bambara 1999, 134).¹³ As such, those two derided subject positions are centered and tended to throughout the duration of *Indelibly Marked*. I consider this an enactment of the call issued by the Combahee River Collective to “use our position at the bottom to make a leap towards revolutionary action.”

Spillers writes towards a similar inclination in the essay “An Order of Constancy: Notes on Brooks and The Feminine” (1985). In the essay, Spillers uses Gwendolyn Brooks’ novel *Maud Martha* (1953) as the basis for a critique of the gynocritical anxieties of her feminist scholar contemporaries. The novel, she argues, presents a necessary interdependence between femininity and masculinity in the body and life experiences of a Black woman. I feel seen and anticipated in the ways Spillers names the anxieties that attend the project of “defining the “feminine” in ways that do not offend

¹³ This point is underscored by the roles the Black actors and cultural workers Verta Mae Smart-Grosvenor and Barbara O play in *Daughters*. As an ensemble player cast in multiple works of Black independent cinema, Barbara O’s portrayal of the “ruined ‘oman,” Domestic laborer and Sex worker, *Yellow Mary* carries a trace of her earlier role as a violent every-day woman in Haile Gerima’s *Bush Mama*. Grosvenor’s work as a domestic and culinary anthropologist writing about diasporic food ways and domestic labor imbue her role as *Hair Braider* in the film with a layer of knowing symbolize that breaks the fourth wall.

its primary subject” (Spillers 1985, 224). As explored by Spillers, Brook’s dark-skinned, working-class, female-born protagonist, Maud Martha represents a:

“feminine [that] is neither cause for particular celebration nor certain despair but near to the “incandescence”, it is analogous to that “wedged-shaped core of darkness” through which vision we see things in their fluid passage between dream and waking reality, as multiple meanings impinge on a central event” (Spillers 1985, 228).

The word that pulled me into this quote is “incandescence.” The dictionary defines incandescent as “emitting light as a result of being heated.” And in this passage, “incandescent” is a direct reference to Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” (1929). The quote from Woolf cited in Spiller’s footnote says:

“Perhaps a mind that is fully masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine ... Coleridge ... meant, perhaps that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided.”

So perhaps the sum of these definitions, following Spillers statements about the mutual co-constitution of masculine and feminine in Brooks’ work (and maybe by extension in the distinctly “Black feminine poetic order of things”) is that the Black feminine is constructed and enacted as an “androgynous mind/lens” that allows for a different illumination/sighting of things. Here ‘things’ are both material, experiential and epistemological. Spiller’s critique of feminist “gynocritical” theorizations of ‘feminine’ is that they too often engage the feminine as merely an “object of the attention of another” (224). Spillers seeks to engage the feminine and “the subject with feminine attributes” on their own terms. “Shadowy and ubiquitous on the world’s body,” Spillers’ construction of feminine is an immensely powerful [entity] that reproduces sameness and difference at once (Spillers 1985, 226–27).

Tracing the feminine through Brooks’ Black feminist poetics, Spillers concludes that the Black feminine (distinct from but related to the “flesh-and-blood entity” of the female body and still tethered to the tropes of social and physical reproduction) locates and creates from the convergence of antithetically destined properties -- “female,” “male,” “mind,” “body,” “same,” “other,” “past,” future,” “beholder,” “beheld” (Spillers 1985, 245). This convergence shapes the Black feminine as an androgynous *all-and-nothing* sort of figure. A self that is plural.

Bambara and Spillers meet in this rhetorical embrace of the androgynous plural self (emerging from but irreducible to the Black-woman concept, the Black female-born body) as a necessary and revolutionary paradigm of Black life and thought. My working-configuration of the “Black feminine figure” is an attempt at carrying this radical vision of a free’d up non-binary Black feminine forward in the terrain of Black feminist thought and practice.¹⁴

¹⁴ It also helps that I am talking about visual culture and art objects where the language of “figures” and “figuration” is already and accepted way to discuss representations of legible bodies.

As illustrated here, *Indelibly Marked* deliberately centers the work of *Black women writing* between the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵ While it remains contentious to refer to this as the “Black feminist canon” or “tradition,” I am invested in championing the enduring utility of these early Black feminist theorizations of gender, labor, and cultural production.¹⁶ Hortense Spillers, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, Jennifer L Morgan, Barbara Omolade, Claudia Tate, bell hooks, and more are my sight lines. I love that they wrote with an awareness of each other and that they did not always agree. By putting these Black feminist luminaries to work as more than nostalgia-laden historical footnotes, I hope this work encourages more deep engagement with their individual and collective oeuvre. This gesture is an extension of my project’s theoretical concerns. As I worked to put closure on this project it became clear that “the problem of Black women’s labor” would not be solved in the body of this (or any other dissertation). But what I could do is sound it out in good company. As Audre Lorde once wrote:

“For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean (feel like)...” (Lorde 1985)

As such, this work seeks to add my emergent voice to a chorus of Black feminist elders, ancestors, and contemporaries.

The central configuration of this dissertation project is *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. As elucidated in Chapter 1, The “Blackfeminine” in *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is a refusal of bio-centric, trans-exclusionary, and non-imaginative notions of “Black womanhood” and “Black femininity.” Attuned to the ways the internalized and externalized violences of slavery and carcerality continually endured by Black people level the ontological distinctions between “male” and “female” labor and brutality, I am reaching after an “ungendered” elsewhere that might be able to hold the relational plays of gender dissent and deviance that mark Black social life, sexual cultures, and sexual economies (Haley 2013; A. D. Davis 2019).

Rather than impose “the ungendering formation” offered by Hortense Spillers in the ovaric essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) on to the lived subjectivities of Black folks as a limit or condemnation, I (gleefully) embrace

¹⁵ Writing in 1985, Hortense Spillers utilizes the formulation of “Black women writing” to think about both the “urgency of Black women writing themselves into history” and “the variety of aims that accompany their project.” I utilize ‘Black women writing’ as a bridge between Black feminist political ideology, cultural criticism and literature. In the seminal article “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” (1978), Barbara Smith argues Black women writing present such an issue to white folks in the academy because of a specialized lack of knowledge “connected to their not knowing in any concrete or politically transforming way that Black women of any description dwell in this place.” For Smith “this place” is both figuratively and literally constructed as the academy but I wonder following the words + anxieties of the late Essex Hemphill if “this place” might be ‘cyber space’ too. Spillers, Edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J., ed. *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985: 249; Smith, Barbara. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7 (1978): 20–27; On The Shores of Cyberspace, Black Nations/Queer Nations? Conference, 1995; Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *Affixing Ceremony*, 2015, Online, 2015, <http://www.tionam.com/affixingceremony#1>.

¹⁶ An example of this contention comes in the Spiller’s essay cited above. Spillers believes the aims of ‘Black women writing’ are too diverse to be called a tradition, while her contemporaries Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington wrote Black feminist literary criticism with the specific aim of heralding a Black women’s literary tradition.

it as a severance from the strictures of Gender binarism (as predicated on the knowability of “the body”). This is a move toward what Alex Weheliye has termed “living in the flesh” – “an alternative instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man [or Woman]” (Weheliye 2014, 43). This is a move towards the “s/he” and “man/woman” appellations Spillers uses to describe the condition of Blackness as forged through the femininized/feminizing experience of captivity. If Spillers is correct in asserting that the “touch of the mother,” is the most indelible mark on modern Blackness, then it becomes imperative that we pursue and claim the “insurgent ground” of unruly Black femininities divested from “the ranks of gendered femaleness” (Spillers 1987, 80). Here, we must follow those who are actively trans-ing Black feminism towards a queer appreciation of “Mais Viva!” or fugitive aliveness (Santana 2019; Snorton 2017; Bey 2019).¹⁷ As articulated by Treva Ellison, Black femme praxis is “a lived politics of double-crossing, or making queer use of racialized and gendered labor constructs” (Ellison 2019, 14). Thus, the kindred theorization I offer with *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* only arrives at the erotics, trickster play, and vernacular expressions centered in this dissertation *through* material experiences of criminalization, exploited labor, precarity, grief, death and survival.

Queering The Black Feminine Domestic

Black women have been historically overrepresented in the service/care industry. In *To Joy My Freedom* (1997) a historical survey of Southern Black women’s lives and labors after the Civil War largely focused on the post-Emancipation political economy of Atlanta, Georgia, Tera Hunter offers the statistic that “by 1880, at least 98% of all Black female wage-earners in Atlanta were domestics” arguing that “domestic labor was a virtual prerequisite for Black survival” (50). The amount of Black women laboring within the service economy remained disproportionately high across the country throughout the 20th century (Morgan 2004). This labor was not the sole dominion of cis-gendered Black women. In *Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender*, Treva Ellison reads the archival record of three Black femme domestic workers, Tisha, Rita and Mary Lee, who were arrested by the LAPD in 1950 for the crimes of self-representation (read: cross-dressing/female impersonation). In telling this story, Ellison queers popular understandings of the overrepresentation of “Black women” with in the post-Emancipation service economy.

Heeding the story of Tisha, Rita and Mary Lee, it becomes clear that the social and economic positioning of feminized Black labor has long been home to queer articulations of self. Within the domestic labor, service, and care economies Black trans and cis women and gender-non-conforming Black femmes have always shared ground. Domestic labor and care work are feminized but not inherently wedded to biological notions of gender. As discussed in each chapter of this dissertation, the histories of

¹⁷ In the article “Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism” theorizes across the lived experiences of Black Brazilian travesti activist Selen Ravache and the work of Brazilian Black feminist theorist Beatriz Nascimento towards an understanding of “mais viva.” Mais viva is the sense of critical awareness and radical embodied knowledge that makes Black and trans resistance possible in the contexts of erasure and precarity. Santana, Dora Silva. “Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2019): 210–22. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7348496>.

enslavement that ushered Black women into domestic service are histories of the brutal “ungendering” of the *laboring* Black body.

Within this context, it is again imperative to center a Black Trans feminist analysis of Black labor that allows us to think differently about what femininity and reproduction can mean and have always meant within the Black social world. It means divesting from the “notions of biological authenticity and realness that inevitability [reach their limits] when trying to capture bodies that shift, trans bodies” (Green and Bey 442). It means holding that the category of woman and, further what Toni Morrison once referred to as “the Black-woman concept,” are contested heuristics designed to fix a social-economic order of things (Morrison 1971).

My work expands the concerns of Black Left feminist political economy by turning towards and holding close the strategic negotiations of Black feminine figures experimenting with survival through aesthetic practice. The relationship between socio-economic precarity and the turn towards aesthetic practice is not new. This is the impulse that generated many of the foundational Black aesthetic traditions in music, dance, and craft arts. As evidenced by Tera Hunter’s historical work in *To ‘Joy My Freedom* (1997) “dancing and carousing the night away,” along with acts of theft (read: reappropriation), sabotage, and labor organizing were interrelated means of subsistence employed by Black women in postbellum Atlanta. The folks I engage over the course of the three chapters and praise breaks summarized below are inheritors of this dynamic legacy. Speaking to and with the work of Black visual and performance artists who share an aesthetic investment in representing, playing with, and perverting the overdetermined relationships between Black feminine figures and labor, *Indelibly Marked* contributes to the emerging canon of Black feminist art and performance histories that interrogate “the centrality of African diasporic female bodies to avant-garde innovation” (Copeland 2017, 27; O’Grady 2020, Civil 2017, Smith 2012, Brown 2008, Keeling 2007, Bennett and Dickerson 2000, Piper 1996). Locating this inquiry in the literal and figurative space of “The Dirty South,” *Indelibly Marked* unearths the Black queer social and sexual cultures that inspire and give depth to popular representations of Black femininity.

Clementine Hunter was born in 1886, the same year as bi-sexual blues luminary Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and transgender proprietor and socialite Lucy Hicks Anderson. All three women were born in the South. Hunter on Hidden Hills Plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana, Rainey in Columbus, Georgia and Anderson in Waddy, Kentucky. All three of these women worked as domestic laborers in private homes and/or hotels before establishing themselves as artists and/or entrepreneurs. Each in their own way, these southern cultural workers queered the relationships between Black femininity, domesticity, and the public. Together their stories queer standing concepts of “the Black domestic” and broaden our understanding of the sexual economy of American slavery to account for Black feminine figures who exceed and/or refuse the mantle of reproductive labor that has been so central to our understandings of Black women’s work.

As chronicled in Bessie Smith’s 1928 “Washwoman’s Blues,” the feminized Black labor of the 20th century service economy was akin to “slavin’” and would leave a laundress “achin’ from [her] head down to [her] shins.” And this had long been the work of Black survival. As described by Angela Davis in her seminal essay “Reflections on the Role of the Black Woman in the Community of Slaves” :

“in the infinite anguish of ministering to the needs of the men and children around... she [the Black slave woman] was performing the only labor of the slave community which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor...*Domestic labor was the only meaningful labor for the slave community as a whole* (discounting some...exceptions when slaves were paid for their work)...” (A. Davis 1972, 87) [emphasis mine]

For Davis, domestic life and thus domestic labor exist outside of a ‘house slave/field slave’ dichotomy and is instead meant to register the work Black women did to maintain the physical, emotional, and psychological lives of their communities. As productive contradictions, Black women laborers (or rather Black feminized laborers) performed the drudgery of field work, alongside biological + social reproduction and a wide array of “survival-oriented activities.” Davis classifies all these variants of labor and reproduction as “themselves a form of resistance. Survival, moreover, was a prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle” (A. Davis 1972, 87).

Chapter Synopsis

Because this is a quilt there are some necessary components. As explained to me by Oakland-bred interdisciplinary artist Andrew Wilson, a quilt is a three-layer sandwich: a quilt top, batting, & back. Used as a structural analogy for this dissertation, the quilts layers index the [role/uses/intentions] of each body chapter.

Chapter 1: “Signifying Property *plus*” is my quilt top. The most visually communicative part of the quilt, the top is customarily where the most deliberate and artful “piecing” happens. In this chapter, I present the core themes, methods, and analytical frameworks of this project. It also deals with the most fraught, spectacular, and wildly circulated object of study: the new media performance art form of *the twerk video*. Through the medium of *the twerk video*, New Media performance artist BeTTy BuTT images herself as a complex configuration of Black femininity whose technologically mediated performances explicitly (re)state an inexhaustible capacity to perform erotic labor. As a young Black woman publicly offering performance works meant to stimulate digital circulation and libidinal consumption, BeTTy BuTT forces us to engage a representation of herself that cannot be cleaned up. It is a self-representation literally choreographed by the dirty, the explicit, and the erotic. Hortense Spillers’ methodological configuration of ‘first-order naming,’ a practice of Black feminist literary and cultural criticism born out of vernacular tradition, is established here as a method of tending to what is pressed upon or opened up by the unmarked performances the videos elicit.

The batting, that unseen layer crucial for warmth and utility is **Chapter 2:** “Feather bed Resistance.” In a counter-mythological reading of the work of vernacular artist Clementine Hunter, I engage the post-Emancipation plantation as a complex site of the interplay between Black labor and leisure. While each chapter deals with the marks of 19th century southern plantation economies, this chapter deals most directly

with slavery and its afterlives.¹⁸ This chapter was also the one most methodologically impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic and demonstrates a turn towards non-traditional sources like forgotten films and children’s books to fill the holes left by limited archival access. As a vernacular artist, Clementine Hunter marked down an understanding of her surroundings (and of herself in those surroundings) that necessarily evades easy interpretation. I argue that her simple gestures towards figuration and her ‘use what you have’ color palette offer what Zora Neale Hurston once termed “a feather bed resistance” to the probe of the white and/or mainstream [art] historical search for meaning. In isolation, it is easy to interpret Hunter as a “good darky” representing other “good darkies.” But attention to Hunter’s ascent into artistic production shows that the initial audience for her creative work was herself. Further, situating Hunter within a community of Black laborers and cultural workers evidences the social lingua franca she shared with her contemporaries within the fields of Cane River and in the broader Black cultural sphere. Within this frame, her memory painting registers Black life without translation in ways that offer what Angela Davis, in her reading of early 20th century Black blues women, terms “veiled protest” through the embodiment of surrealist trickster tropes that queer and trouble standing interpretations of her work.

Chapter 3: “The Tar Baby Principle,” is the quilt’s back, the part that sticks closest to the body. Through a critical auto-ethnographic engagement with my work as a Black feminist performance artist, I pull the needle through all three layers of this dissertation project. In this way, my own creative voice emerges as the stitching that holds all three sites of performance – the digital, the post-Emancipation plantation, and the stage – together. Turning to the folkloric figure of the Tar Baby as timeless configuration of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*, this chapter explores the act and art of documenting Black feminist performance art by weaving auto-ethnographic reflections on my own Black queer feminist performance practice into and against a genealogy of solo Black female performance.

Praise Breaks

In between these chapters I’ve added a bit of decorative sashing, pieces that separate each quilt block. These sashes, denoted as **Praise Breaks**, offer brief analyses of the work of contemporary Black feminist visual artists that each in their own way respond to the call for Black feminist creative practice issued in the body chapter that precedes it.

Following **Chapter 1**’s call for “Black digital funerary practices” that might provide some respite for the seemingly inevitable tragedies that attend Black femme self-possession within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society we live in, the **Praise Break** “On Retrieval: Kenyatta AC Hinkle’s Black feminist spell” offers one artistic approach to dealing with the insurmountable deaths and disappearances of Black women, femmes, and girls throughout the African Diaspora.

¹⁸ Fittingly the brand of batting I used in my first material quilting project under the tutelage of Darlyne Dandridge throughout the month of February 2022 was “Warm and Natural 100% cotton batting”

Following **Chapter 2**'s turn towards Clementine Hunter's Black Southern surrealist art practice and the labored mythos of her Cane River legacy, the praise break "the most beautiful things on the Black earth: kai lumumba barrows sweaty mythos" explores the uses of mythology and surrealism as a means to explore Black feminist concerns around labor and Abolition.

These pieces of writing were produced in deep and principled dialogue/collaboration with the artists featured. While I did not initially consider this work to be directly related to my dissertation project, when I stepped back to assess the whole of my intellectual production (curricular and extracurricular) I was inspired by its coherence. These **Praise Breaks** further underscore the timeless urgency of this project's central concerns. It is also important to me that these pieces of Black feminist "art writing" which are too often regarded as ephemeral live in this dissertation so that my labor and the labor of my interlocutors is regarded as the rigorous practice of collaboration and accompaniment that it is.

CODA

In place of a traditional conclusion, *Indelibly Marked* ends with a Coda. Practicing the citational poetics modeled in the recent work of Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman, this concluding passage offers a lyrical 'parade' of the core arguments and terms through first-order namings of two scenes of Black feminist cultural organizing and performance that took place as part of the Spring 2022 Black Studies Collaboratory Abolition Decomocracy Fellows public program series. Inspired by the work of Terrion L. Williamson, this Coda (as representative of this whole dissertation) models Black feminist practice by *claiming* the moments of crisis, care, and collaboration that simultaneously made and unmade the work (Williamson 2016).

Chapter 1

Signifying Property *plus*

being-in-blackfeminineflesh, dirty possibilities, and BeTTy BuTT's
inexhaustible pleasures

"I would not like to see a reification, or a reading of [the ungendering formulation] back into my historical subjectivity or subjecthood as though it exhausted my possibility because it does not. It certainly defines how I am situated in the world that calls me by my name -- or whatever other name it's calling me, and I have to answer to all of them whether I like them or not, and try to be responsible to them. But *I am not exhausted by them, I'm that plus*. And it's the '*plus*' that I'm trying to get to..."

- Hortense Spillers in conversation with Gail Lewis at the ICA in London 2018 (emphasis added)

On November 23rd, BeTTy BuTT, a founding member of The Official Twerk Team, published a video to her solo-YouTube channel performing to the song "Fuck You All The Time" by Chicago recording artist Jeremih which features a chorus sung by Natasha Mosely. In front of and on top of a white leather couch, BeTTy performed wearing cheetah print leggings, a black tank top and an intentionally exposed red bra with lace details. The heavily edited video, directed by @KANGTATUM¹⁹, paired with the song's deliberately sexy and haunting chorus, echoes, chops, and screws a call to consider questions around the presumed and performed inexhaustibility of black women's sexual, reproductive and erotic labor. Engaging BeTTy BuTT's willful inhabitation of the explicit (*I can fuck you all the time*) and the primitive (*while wearing cheetah print*), I position myself and my own bodily comprehension to offer a reading that carries the tone of a black femme sighting desire in a familiar body. This reading is an attempt to navigate what Hortense Spiller's fixates on as the '*plus*' of black female being-in-the-

¹⁹ At the time of writing @KANGTATUM's Youtube channel has been scrubbed and there is no corresponding social media presence.

world which I have recast as the condition of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. This reading performs what Spillers' describes as a "first order naming," a naming in which "words seem to come off the human tongue and need not be referred back to a dictionary in order to be understood," whereas everything that follows it in this essay is a second order symbolic response meant to contextualize the digital medium of *the twerk video* and allow us to follow BeTTy BuTT into an arena of erotic play (Spillers 2003a, 168–69).

Her legs enter the left of the frame distorted and are met by their double from the right. The two merge in front of a cream-colored couch. A single red pillow at the center of the couch creates a diamond between her thighs. She shifts her weight, then dips into each hip. Another distorted set of her own legs enters from the left before she is brought into full focus.

On top of the beat she kneels on the couch, her hands behind her, one extends to embrace the other. She throws her ass in a circle. She's on the floor, one leg extended towards the ceiling. She is bent over the couch, makin' it vibrate. She sits on the couch, legs spread, facing the camera. Her right arm holds up a wild mass of her own black hair, a bounty somewhere between curls and loose naps. She grinds forward while looking at me. She is bent over again, still vibrating. She lays down on the couch. The red pillow is between her legs, she raises her knees and folds her arms into her chest. Her legs slide up and down as if she were a restless lover. She turns her head and says something (indiscernable) to the camera. [Its interesting that with all this editing they would leave that part in].

When we see her face it is deliberately provocative and comfortably set. She is barefoot. Wearing leopard print leggings. She is brown against the cream of the couch. She is lit from behind. Her nails are painted the same red of the pillow which is the same red of her intentionally exposed lace bra. Her shadow dances too. Arms raised above her head.

She kneels on the floor, back facing the camera, knees spread. Her lower back undulates. As her hands move from over her head. Fade to black. She is standing with her back to the camera. Legs spread further then hips length apart. She isolates and loosens her thighs. Everything that is supposed to shake, shakes. She leans over to the left and places her hands on the couch. She is sitting on the couch legs spread. She folds over herself. She leans over the couch and tosses her hips from left to right. She stands, back facing the camera, and shakes her ass while her hands hold up her hair. She bends her knees and sends her pelvic bone back towards the camera. She is laying on the couch looking back at me. She extends her left leg. She is crawling on the floor. Looking at me. Pussy popping. Tossing her hair. She slides to her knees. She tosses her hair. She is laying on the couch looking at me and circling her hips.(BeTTy Butt | Fuck You All The Time 2012)

This video and the rest of BeTTy BuTT's self-authored performance works uploaded to her solo Youtube Channel and circulated as 'twerk videos,' are her records of her body choreographed and shaped by her intent. In them I see an argument for a rethinking of

black women's performative labors (and how we write about them). In her performance of "Fuck You All The Time," BeTTy BuTT embodies a mode of aesthetic refusal. By denying the viewer a focused, direct look at her face she willfully and erotically "moves outside the realm of racial and corporeal familiarity" (K. J. Brown 2015, 8). By turning her cheetah print covered ass into an unstable punctum within the frame, BeTTy BuTT offers an unstable display of excessive Black feminine flesh in the place of a direct or clear representation of self (Fleetwood 2011, 112).²⁰

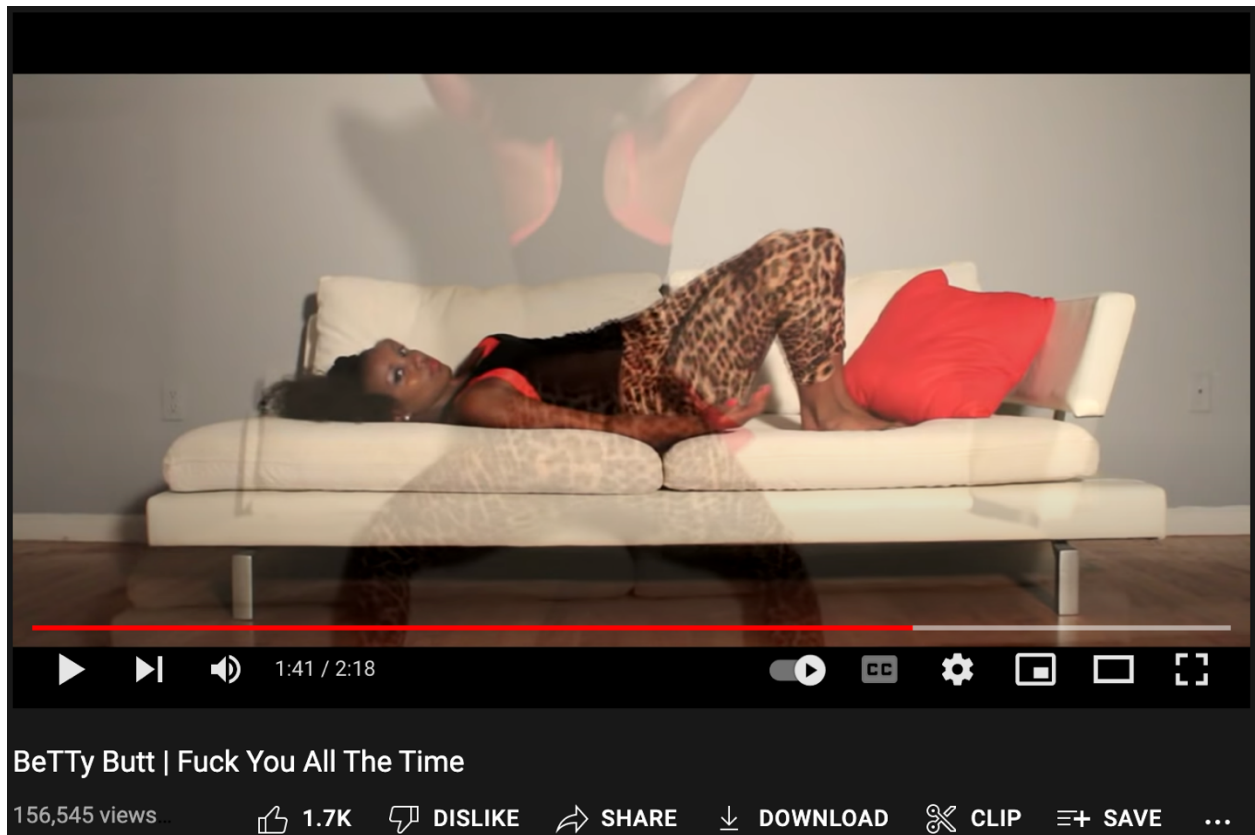


Figure 1. screenshot from BeTTy BuTT Youtube Channel

Through the technological incorporation of special effects designed to distort her moving image, BeTTy BuTT evades an easy knowability (McKittrick 2006, 45).²¹ This

²⁰ Within the terrain of US visual cultures, Nicole Fleetwood explains 'excess flesh' as a disidentification with the (white) male gaze that "that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection (Fleetwood 2011, 112)." Thus, offerings of excess flesh are not invested in the homogenous "liberation" of the black female body.

²¹ In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* Katherine McKittrick develops 'knowability' as an analytic that takes seriously the ways the discursive and physical violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade constructed black women's bodies as 'sights' of profitability controlled by outsiders. This profitability was indexed by the appearance of a body that was "healthy, working, licentious, [and] reproductive." She continues to define this "territorialization" of the body in terms that are generative for my analysis of contemporary black laborers working through the convergence of blackness, femininity and the erotic, positing that, "once the racial-sexual body is territorialized it is marked as decipher-able and knowable – as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, [and]"

disruption of the presumed recognition of the “black female body” works through the erotic to play with and pervert the overdetermined relationship between Black feminine flesh and reproductive labor. While she overtly presents her erotic prowess in ways that could be interpreted as conforming to a stereotypical view of Black women’s insatiable sexuality, she does so in a solo performance of auto-sexuality: “an expression of a free sexuality which has no object but itself, and most especially it is a sexuality not dependent upon men” (D. Miller 1991, 333).²²

BeTTY BuTT’s auto-sexual gestures ‘signify’ on the tropes of Black female sexuality that precede her. Henry Louis Gates describes this mode of Black vernacular play in terms that speak directly to BeTTY BuTT’s digital performance aesthetic: “a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled (Gates 1989, 44).”

In the aforementioned performance, BeTTY BuTT effectively brings the viewer into a digitized hall of mirrors. Appearing to be the sign itself, she doubles and re-doubles her flesh. Gleaning from Amber Musser’s reading of Foucault’s “technology of self,” BeTTY’s performance and its editing “by [her] own means or with the help of others” displays a series of alterations meant to transform the dancing body into a sight of pleasure (Musser 2018, 63). This movement appears in a cyborgian call-and-response dialogue with Natasha Mosely’s *chopped* background vocals.²³ In this dance, both BeTTY and Mosely become complex configurations of black femininity whose technologically mediated performances explicitly (re)state an inexhaustible capacity to perform erotic labor. The coupling of their distorted visual and aural performances is an aesthetic glitch which reveals literal technologies of the erotic Black feminine ‘self.’

As explicated by Jasmine Johnson following Hortense Spillers, “the black female body is “marked up”—signified on—while black womanhood evades a broader public optic (J. E. Johnson 2020, 154).” And I extend this consideration to account for the ways a body that is both Black and feminine can itself intentionally perform a signification that is too often and too easily interpreted as a passive supplication to misogynist dictates.²⁴ In *Embodied Avatars*, Uri McMillian describes this artistic practice of

procreative.” McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And The Cartographies Of Struggle*. 1 edition. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2006. 45

²² Citing the broader context of gender relations in Trinidad’s 1988 carnival, Dan Miller argues that auto-sexual displays of women whining effectively “objectify freedom” and subvert nationalist projects of heteropatriarchal sociality. Miller, Daniel. “Absolute Freedom in Trinidad.” *Man* 26, no. 2 (1991): 323–41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2803835>.

²³ Natasha Mosley’s vocal performance could be understood in the way that Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye read Brandy’s hook on “Can You Hear Me Now?” – Like Brandy, Mosley’s voice is “fundamental to how the song works, how it achieves its effects in the flesh.” McKittrick, Katherine, and Alexander Weheliye. “808s & Heartbreak.” *Propter Nos* 2, no. 1 (2017) 27.

²⁴ A cornerstone of the discourse of the black female sex-object as a passive-suppliant can be found in what Jennifer Nash terms the “biomythography of Saartje Baartman, the Venus Hottentot.” I am

signification as “performing objecthood,” a self-conscious turn of the black female body into both the subject and object of art that “disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity (McMillan 2015, 9).” In “Fuck You All The Time,” BeTTy herself doubles the signifier, inducing the ocular disorientation that provides her space to move towards acts that radiate a sense of auto-sexual pleasure. BeTTy BuTT’s plays in objecthood don’t offer protection from the crude assumptions and actions of those who perceive the Black female body as always, already sexually available. Her work does not necessarily offer a ‘safe space’ to explore the intricacies of Black feminine pleasure. However, her insistently public practice of erotic performance in the digital forces us to sit with the mixed emotions the videos evoke.

I turn to Spillers’ methodological configuration of first-order naming to suggest that tending to *the hieroglyphics of the flesh* lining the surface of black feminine erotic body art might require a mode of bearing witness to *a truer word* that is not preoccupied with unveiling interiority and upends the notion that “black womanhood” ought to be made available to a universalized public optic (Spillers 1987). Further, within the space of dirty possibility opened up by these radical and raunchy plays in objecthood, performance artists like BeTTy BuTT intentionally abandon any semblance of moral authority that might substantiate a claim to know or perform ‘black womanhood’.²⁵ To deprioritize knowability and a moral claim to normative notions of womanhood in a performance of such self-focused, hyperbolic, and erotically insatiable femininity is a queer act in line with what Amber Musser terms the “fleshy mixture” of “brown jouissance” (Musser 2018, 5). In the place of a proper sighting of “black womanhood” these performances offer a sensuous engagement with what I establish in this chapter as “*being-in-blackfeminineflesh*.”

intentionally eliding a focused discussion of this 19th century case-study of Black women’s sexual and performative exploitation because Baartman’s remains are often put to use in ways that fixate on her abjection and then read the abjection back on to the bodyminds of contemporary Black feminine figures in the sex industry. Whereas the antipornography thread of Black feminist Thought is invested in a recuperation of the Black female subject vis-à-vis protection from sexual exploitation, my work embraces Black sexual economies in and outside of the sex industry as areas of knowledge production. For more on Black feminism and anti-pornography See Audre Lorde *Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power*. United States: Out & Out Books, U.S. (1981); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1985). Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14 (1988): 912 – 90. Catharine MacKinnon, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 301 – 2. Jennifer Nash, “Strange Bedfellows: Black Feminism and Antipornography Feminism,” *Social Text* 26,4 (2008): 51-76 ; For more on Black sexual economies and the pornographic as a site of knowledge production see Davis, Adrienne D. “*Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle*”: *The Sexual Economy of American Slavery. Black Sexual Economies*. University of Illinois Press, 2019; Nash, Jennifer Christine. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books, 2014; Miller-Young, Mireille. *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books, 2014; Cruz, Ariane. *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*. NYU Press, 2016.

²⁵ In *A Dirty South Manifesto: Sexual Resistance and Imagination in the New South* L.H. Stalling discusses “moral authority” as a pillar of both conservative organizing and some well-meaning counterefforts in the New South. As explicated by Stalling, the quest for and defense of moral high ground ultimately reproduces a hierarchy that is antagonist to Black, and specifically Black queer, world making. Stallings, L.H. *A Dirty South Manifesto*. University of California Press, 2019.
<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520299504/a-dirty-south-manifesto>.

Dirty Possibility

Rooted in a refusal to disregard the messy complexities of Blackness and embodiment, dirty possibility is a blues epistemology. Defined by Clyde Woods as a praxis that emerged from the particular experience and position of the enslaved Black Southern Working Class, blues epistemologies mobilize cultural ingenuity to explain, organize and act in opposition to dominate regimes of power (Woods and Gilmore 2017, 25). In the context of the African American South, the original regime of power is that of the Plantation. Central to the world's economic advancement and bolstered by white nationalist ideologies, trans-Atlantic Plantation cultures and economies conscripted Black laborers in the US and global South into the abject condition of human property. This abjection marks, stains, and dirties the long histories of Blackness throughout the modern world. Within the classificatory logics of the Plantation, the white male planter class reigns supreme and the African American, specifically the African American woman, is situated at the bottom of a totalizing hierarchy. However, as illuminated by Woods, the growth of the planter class and its ideologies of power was intimately related to the growth and potential power of the black southern working class (Woods and Gilmore 2017, 29). Wood's indispensable contributions to the study of Black geographies and Black life offer a method of reading cultural production as an essential part of understanding political economy. This approach is essential for any attempts to understand the African American South because the regions vernacular cultures of survival and resistance are often devalued, misinterpreted, or flatly erased.

Much more than a sub-culture of hip hop, the Dirty South is at once both a specific (albiet contested) geography and a network of sound and movement cultures cultivated in the 1990s landscapes of the US South. The sound and movement cultures of the Dirty South converge and diverge on multiple levels. While the distinct sonic materials reverberating from below the Mason-Dixon Line are sometimes problematically conflated with one another, the regional kinship indexed by the Dirty South points towards a shared sense of relation and otherness shaped by the region's foundational proximity to US Chattel slavery. The Dirty South is a product of those left behind after both waves of The Great Migration. As curator Valerie Cassel Oliver articulates in the essay "What You Know about the Dirty South?" The dirt of the Dirty South indexes the physicality of place and the labored relationship to the earth out of which these sonic and material cultures were cultivated (Oliver 2021).²⁶

Dirty possibility is also a material condition. I know the Dirty South most intimately through Georgia Red Clay and the swampy waters of New Orleans. The seeds of this intellectual inquiry were sown in 2005 when I witnessed the changes in the social and cultural geographies of Atlanta in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. At least 100,000 people evacuated to Atlanta in the days before and after Hurricane Katrina made

²⁶ The essay appears in the monograph "The Dirty South: Material Culture, Contemporary Art, and The Sonic Impulse" which was published by Duke Press to accompany the art exhibition of the same name curated by Cassel at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in 2021. The show has since traveled to the Contemporary Art Museum of Houston and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas

landfall in August of 2005.²⁷ The vast majority of these evacuees remain in the Atlanta-area today. While this is a statistically smaller number than those who stayed in other parts of Louisiana or evacuated to Texas, the influx of evacuees to Georgia was rapid and mainly concentrated in the small metro-Atlanta area causing a 1.8 % percent increase in Atlanta's population in roughly a week's time ("A Continuing Storm: The On-Going Struggles of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees" 2006). Atlanta's foundational stank – described by Kiese Laymon as "root and residue of black Southern poverty, and devalued black Southern labor..." – encountered the culturally fecund murkiness of the post- Katrina exodus giving material levity to the imagined black space of the Dirty South (Laymon 2015).

In *A Dirty South Manifesto : Sexual Resistance and Imagination in The New South* (2019), L.H. Stallings defines 'the Dirty [South]' as a "simultaneous place and practice of intersectional politics [and] critiques of moral authority (Stallings 2019, 5)." For Stallings, the dirt of the Dirty South undergirds regional aesthetic philosophies that radically intervene in, stain and interrupt southern publics that are overdetermined by the sexual economies of plantation slavery. In a series of compelling manifestos interspersed between each chapter, Stallings offers tricky creative entry points into the work of sexual resistance by way of reckoning with (under)grounded and embodied southern knowledges. As described in their 'Dirt Manifesto,' "dirt's very existence is about dispossession and dispersal" and there are "things you can do in and with dirt that will ensure human survival (Stallings 2019, 137–38)." Thinking with those geophagiaist who taste the dirt to detect its properties, Stallings calls for a rethinking of our intimate relationships to dirt as a material occurrence and as a derogatory description of sex and sexuality. Dirty possibility turns towards these controversial intimacies in an embrace of the honest truth of black bodies whose varied labors have always produced sweat, funk, and desire.

Dirty possibility emerges in the way Southern rappers like New Orleans' Mia X, Memphis' Gangsta Boo, Miami's Trina, and Atlanta's Diamond and Princess assert themselves as a different breed of 'woman' that is assertive, crude, sexual, resourceful, prosperous and 'unlady like' (to reference the title of Mia X's second album). The Black feminine figures of Southern rap in the late 1990s and early 2000s interrupted the hierarchy of powerful male rappers and female eye candy that was popularized through the convergence of Hip Hop, 1990s video culture, and the pornographic. The small sample of Black women Southern rappers I mention represented differing orientations towards the fantasy world and sexual economy created and promoted through "hip-hop's presentation of abundant consumption and sexual permissiveness" (Miller-Young 2014, 143). In her work on Black women in the pornography industry, Mirelle Miller-Young has argued for "Ho theory" as "an analytic for black illicit erotic performance aesthetics, identity formations and labor tactics from the point of view of the purported ho" (Miller-Young 2014, 147). Ho theory was offered in the lyrical work and costuming of these Black southern women rappers (and several of their Northern contemporaries). Mia X offered a grown and sexy, pant-suit clad boss-lady image of herself as the First Lady of [Master P's] No Limit Soldiers, whereas Trina established herself as "Da Baddest" Bitch through an aggressive embrace of a glittery sexual that aggressively

²⁷ Appleseed Hurricane Katrina Project – Atlanta Report, August 2006

declared itself as an aspiration to ho's and niggas alike.²⁸ The configuration of "Dirty South Feminism" was coined by Adeerya Johnson M.A. (@nubianlocz). Applying a "hip-hop womanist lens" to the analysis of contemporary Southern cultural production, Johnson offer dirty south feminism as a means to explore narratives of southern Black girls, Black queer women, and black gender non-conforming femmes who negotiate autonomy and personhood through performances of twerking and booty shaking (A. Johnson 2021, 3). Dirty south feminism offers a corrective to standing discourses on Black women's relationships to hip-hop music and culture by prioritizing the voices of Southern Black girls, women, and femmes. By exalting self-articulation and performances of embodied knowledge that explicitly challenge respectability and heteronormativity, Johnson challenges the dominant scripts that cast black feminine figures from the South as victims of a patriarchal culture.

Throughout the Dirty South, the Black strip club is a celebrated cultural institution. As Miller-Young points out, in the sexual cultures proliferated by Hip Hop of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the strip club becomes a symbolic cultural practice that moves beyond any given physical location (Miller-Young 2014, 155). In *Funk the Erotic*, L.H. Stallings describes the Black Southern strip club as a profane site of memory in which Black women enact a will to remember "human, nonhuman and inhuman relations (Horton-Stallings 2015, 177)." If, as Stallings' argues, black dance in strip clubs functions as "a means for making sacred subjectivity in the absence of historical African cosmologies and Randolph's theories of sexual magic" then *the twerk video* functions as a digital mediator of black feminine sacred subjectivity (Horton-Stallings 2015, 178). For the purposes of this argument, "sacred" can be understood in alignment with the way Katherine McKittrick, following Sylvia Wynter, uses "demonic" to denote both a geographic sense of black women's absented presences in the representation of modernity AND a schema "hinged on uncertainty and nonlinearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future (McKittrick 2006, xxiv)."

Which is to say, that *the twerk video* cites and sights the black feminine body in erotic motion as an entity supernaturally *outside* of the expected order of things. Whereas some Black folks hail this "outside-ness" as grotesque, derogatory and "bad for us all," I follow Stallings (and a Bevy of cultural workers from Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, Miami and the Carolinas) in asserting that these dirty erotic labors play a role in the survival of Black communities and thus, Black ways of being, doing, and knowing.

²⁸ Here I am reading the artists appearances in music videos that accompany singles they released in 1998; Trick Daddy, and Trina. *Nan. Wwww.Thug.Com.* Miami, FL: Slip "N" Slide, 1998; Mia X. *What You Gonna Do. Mama Drama.* New Orleans, LA: No Limit, 1998.

***Pop That Thang*²⁹!!! : being-in-blackfeminineflesh**

“popping is an art, and like art, it isn’t for everybody” – Mia X

The idea that contemporary black women and femme performers are “captive” to the social and political imperatives of the plantation is a reductive reading of the condition of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. This reading shows up in Black Studies as the legacy of sexual woundedness that generations of social reformers, black and white alike, have worked to overcome (Hine 1989; Higginbotham 1994; S. Hartman 2019). Presenting, and later profiting off, the body’s performance of sexuality is a variant of erotic labor or sex work.³⁰ This outright performative enjoyment of and investment in the carnal has been and remains a contested topic within the long tradition of Black feminist inquiry. How might we harness the life sustaining powers of the erotic’s most radical manifestations while bearing witness to the ways the black feminized body remains publicly freighted with the historical wounds of embattled racialization? This question is rehearsed in Jasmine Johnson’s assertion that ‘flesh dance’ – the movements and gestures associated with Southern hip-hop culture – is overdetermined by male-authority. “Flesh dance” she writes, “positions women as the property of men; yet this fact does not foreclose the possibility that these public and popular performances of femininity, authored by misogyny, could also be a source of subversive power (J. E. Johnson 2020, 14).” But what if instead of hearing it as an imposed command, we engage the scene or sound of recorded and mediated instruction as an interruption or maybe an invocation of the subversive power and corporeal pleasures being enacted as black women and femme’s choreograph command of their marked bodies through a series of quotidian gestures and performance practices? As Kamala Kempadoo writes concerning gender, race and sexual labor in the Carriibbean:

“It is through [the] everyday acts of embodied subjects in their racialized, gendered, and economic specificity against dominant sexual regimes and norms that is possible to speak of sexual resistance and rebellion in the region. These oppositions, however, are not always visible to the indiscriminate observer, but require interpretation through a lens that takes sexuality as a central category of analysis. This may mean a rereading of history.” (Kempadoo 2004, 192–93)

The twerk video is a Black performance phenomenon that emerged at and exceeded the co-incidence of the launch of content-sharing platform YouTube in April of 2005 and the forced migrations of poor and working-class black folks along with their cultural products in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in August of that same year. Often featuring Black women and/or gender non-conforming (GNC) Black femme performers, appearing solo and as performance troupes, *the twerk video* is a self or collectively

²⁹ While here “pop that thang” is a reference to a colloquial turn of phrase popularized in New Orleans as a way to describe the choreographies of “pussy-popping” that became what we now understand as twerk. This phrase has a longer Black social history. Most notably, it is the title and chorus of a song released by The Isley Brothers in 1972. The Isley Brothers. *Pop That Thang. Brother, Brother, Brother*. T-Neck, 1972.

³⁰ My use of the term “sex work” here speaks to an Afro-diasporic understanding of transactional sex and sexuality activities as charted by Kamala Kempadoo. See Kempadoo, Kamala. *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labor*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

authored performance work that rehearses and mobilizes the practice of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. Here I extend Ntozake Shange's poetic declaration, "I useta be in the world," into dialogue with Hortense Spillers' exhumation of "unprotected [black] female flesh." The turn of phrase *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* exalts explorations and contentious performances of sexuality and interiority that are markedly black, markedly feminine and non-normative. When Shange writes:

"I useta live in the world
really *be in the world*
free & sweet talkin
good mornin' & thank you & nice day
uh huh
I cant now
can't be nice to nobody
nice is such a rip-off
regular beauty & a smile in the street
is just a set up" (Shange 1989, emphasis mine)

She signals that the practice of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is shaped by a will to escape the ever-present threats of patriarchal violence. This threat alters the modes in which Black femininity is allowed to perform itself. Heeding Shange, the black feminine figure is not allowed to "be-in-the-world" as "free & sweet talkin'" as a white man, Black man, nor a white woman. This is the intersection of racialized gender that Black feminist thought and practice emerges from. It renders the black feminine figure as an embodied counter-epistemology, "a text for living and dying and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations," that cannot depend on the sanctity of a stable, protected body (Spillers 1987, 68). Spillers' understanding of "flesh" has become a central preoccupation of contemporary Black feminist inquiry. As explored later in this chapter and throughout this dissertation project, Spillerian flesh is at once a "primary narrative" of brutal abjection *and* an opening towards a state of being that elicits no ethical or moral regard from the dominate regimes of thought and power. From this space of disregard, enacting "fungible flesh as a mode for fugitive action," the practices of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* offer a repertoire of subversive possibilities (Snorton 2017, 12).

The "blackfeminine" in *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is a refusal of bio-centric, trans-exclusionary, and non-imaginative notions of "black womanhood" and "black femininity." I use "blackfeminine" as opposed to "black femme" to intentionally step outside of Lesbian aesthetic discourse, but the two terms are connected at the root. Both express the inexhaustible "plus" of Black feminist worldmaking in and beyond all manner of confinement.³¹ Attuned to the ways the internalized and externalized

³¹ Femme (along with the masculine signifier "butch") is a social, aesthetic and sexual identifier popularized in lesbian subculture that has long been contested. In her 1982 biomythography, *Zami: Another Spelling of my Name*, Audre Lorde describes being a Black lesbian in 1950s who did not fit into the hetero-aspirant roleplay of "butch" and "femme" identity. Further, in the 21st century as non-binary gender identities have come into popular discourse "femme" and "transfemme" stand on their own as articulations of gender identities that reappropriate femininity from its traditional associations with heterosexual and hetero-aspirant modes of gender performance. Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of*

violences of slavery and carcerality continually endured by Black people level the ontological distinctions between “male” and “female” labor and brutality, I am reaching after an “ungendered” elsewhere that might be able to hold the relational plays of gender dissent and deviance that mark Black social life, sexual cultures, and sexual economies (Haley 2013; A. D. Davis 2019).

Rather than impose “the ungendering formation” on to the lived subjectivities of Black folks as a limit or condemnation, I want to (gleefully) embrace it as a severance from the strictures of Gender binarism (as predicated on the knowability of “the body”). This is a move toward what Alex Weheliye has termed “living in the flesh” – “an alternative instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man [or Woman]” (Weheliye 2014, 43). This is a move towards the “s/he” and “man/woman” appellations Spillers uses to describe the condition of Blackness as forged through the feminized/feminizing experience of captivity. If Spillers is correct in asserting that the “touch of the mother,” is the most indelible mark on modern Blackness, than it becomes imperative that we pursue and claim the “insurgent ground” of unruly Black femininities divested from “the ranks of gendered femaleness” (Spillers 1987, 80). Here, we must follow those who are actively trans-ing Black feminism towards a queer appreciation of “Mais Viva!” or fugitive aliveness (Santana 2019; Snorton 2017; Bey 2019).³² As articulated by Treva Ellison, Black femme praxis is “a lived politics of double-crossing, or making queer use of racialized and gendered labor constructs” (Ellison 2019, 14). Thus, the kindred theorization I offer with *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* only arrives at the erotic play and vernacular expressions centered in this chapter *through* material experiences of criminalization, labor, precarity, grief, death and survival.

In line with Stallings assertion that public black sexual leisure cultures (like Atlanta’s *Freaknik*) and black dance in strip clubs (like New Orleans’ *Club Spades*) are articulations of neutral sexuality – sexuality divorced from reproduction – and occasions for androgynous performances that pleasurably fail at being respectable expressions of Black civic morality, I argue that *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is a queer condition that elicits a reading process that destabilizes “projections made about what gender signifies and can be made to signify by the performative processes of black bodies (Imhotep 2019, 40).” There are deeply political stakes to this queering of black gender performance. I have argued elsewhere, building on Cathy Cohen’s 1997 provocation to consider the ways “primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed their entire lives outside the white middle-class sexual norm...fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and *queer*,” that the indulgent and ‘excessive’ displays of blackness and femininity in *twerk videos* (and other pieces of public/social

My Name - A Biomythography. First Edition edition. Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1982; Nestle, Joan, ed. *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*. 1st edition. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992. Munt, Sally, and Cherry Smyth. *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*. A&C Black, 1998.

³² In the article “Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism” theorizes across the lived experiences of black Brazilian travesti activist Selen Ravache and the work of Brazilian black feminist theorist Beatriz Nascimento towards an understanding of “mais viva.” Mais viva is the sense of critical awareness and radical embodied knowledge that makes black and trans resistance possible in the contexts of erasure and precarity. Santana, Dora Silva. “Mais Viva!: Reassembling Transness, Blackness, and Feminism.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2019): 210–22. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7348496>.

media circulated by black women and femmes) are culturally, politically and economically deviant (Cohen 1997, 458; Imhotep 2019).

How do we know *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* when we see it? Following Johnson in an appreciation and appraisal of “flesh dance’s” intramural significance, I turn to Southern vernacular movement choreographies of “twerk” and the medium of *the twerk video* as sites in which spirited performances of black femininity knead into traumas of ecological dispossession, sexual vulnerability and patriarchal violence. “Revered and reviled,” these performances elicit a method of reading sensitive to the broad range of sensations they stir in the bodies of viewers and performers (S. Hartman 2016a, 171).

As early as 1910 it had been noted in the study of dance that “buttocks direct their aerodynamic fuselage everywhere... emotion from dancing is certainly the most pleasant movement felt by the buttocks, the most vibrant, the most irresistible” (Emery 1988, Ryle 2000). Thus, the repression of the buttocks was a project of European Christian civilizations move away from the wild inhibition of Dionysian feasts (Gottschild 2003, 147). Within the cultural matrix of Western imperialism, the buttocks or ass became symbolic of the distinction between Europeanist and Africanist aesthetic with the latter always cast as savage. In *Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild presents the Africanist aesthetic as one that places value on the “democratic autonomy of body-parts,” where bodies are presented as multidimensional, evidenced by s or z-curve body profiles “ribs and belly forward, buttocks back, and knees bent in postures that suggest motion and kinetic energy (Gottschild 2005, 147–48).” This s or z-curve described by Gottschild is easily recognizable in the shaking postures of Black dancers from Josephine Baker’s 1927 Banana Dance to “twerk-stance” displayed in the stage performances of contemporary artists like Megan Thee Stallion.

What I refer to as a “twerk-stance” is the posture assumed by a dancer preparing to *direct their aerodynamic fuselage* in accordance with the choreographic imperatives most commonly associated with Southern Hip-Hop music. In Johnson’s reading, this articulation of *flesh dance* “italicizes a tension that black social dance has always embodied: it both polices black intimacy and gender while extending a vehicle through which individual and communal pleasure might be instantiated (J. E. Johnson 2020, 2).” Having been colloquially referred to as “booty shakin” and “P(ussy)-Poppin” in Atlanta and New Orleans respectively throughout the 1990s and syncretically hailed as “twerking” throughout the region from around 2005 onward, flesh dance was awkwardly pulled into mainstream consciousness as “twerking” in 2013 by an unfortunate, nationally televised, reference at the MTV Video Music Awards.³³

Outside of or underneath mainstream consciousness, twerk moved throughout the Dirty South as part of a long tradition of ass-centric vernacular social dance. While

³³ “Twerking” was the top Google search of 2013. Clearly pointing to the moment it was awkwardly pulled out of the black counter-public by a beach-blond Bantu knot swinging Miley Cyrus at the 2013 MTV Music Video awards. Much like music critics stumbling to queer the unavoidable and undeniably ghetto Black of Bounce, white Americans young and old found themselves grappling with a cultural oddity. A look at the Google Trend infographic for “Twerking” shows a minor uptick in 2009 that I read as global black counter-public activity follow the emergence of The Official Twerk Team followed by a major uptick in August of 2013.

polyrhythmic back, thigh and hip isolations have long been associated with dance traditions throughout the African Diaspora³⁴, “twerking,” by name, emerged as the dance counterpart to southern raunch-rap in 1993 when New Orleans Bounce MC DJ Jubilee called audience members to “shake it like a dog” and “twerk” as part of his instructional dance song “Do The Jubilee All.” Jubilee is credited as the first to say the “twerk” *on vinyl*, but it was female Bounce MC Cheeky Blakk, proclaimed “Mother of Twerk,” who furthered the cultural institutionalization of twerk by putting it in the title of 1995s “Twerk Something” (Graham, 2013).³⁵ In “Do The Jubilee” twerk functions as a euphemism for the more direct instruction to “shake something baby” that Jubilee, a male MC, issues to his audience. A closer look at the grainy YouTube rip of the original music video for “Do The Jubilee All” troubles the assumption of a female audience with scenes that show DJ Jubilee himself and other anonymous male figures following the dance calls that move them into positions recognizable as “twerking.” Blakk takes the androgynous power of twerk event further addressing her audience, comprised of separate delegations of “hoes” (feminine) and “niggas” (masculine), in the same call-and-response³⁶ fashion as Jubilee, but for Blakk it is the hoe who initially commands the nigga to “twerk something.” Blakk’s “something” is plainly either the female ass/pussy or the male ass/dick. The phallic correlation between man and his money is called out by ‘hoes’ who “rule this mothafucker”(Cheeky Blakk 1995).

Moreover, while Blakk does allow ‘niggas’ a chance to retort “twerk something bitch,” she does not prompt them to claim that they in fact “rule this mothafucka.”³⁷ This connection is reaffirmed by another 1995 Cheeky Blakk song titled “Lemme Get Dat Outcha” in which Blakk raps about callously discarding men, proclaims to “want them dividends” and asserts that “my mothafuckin’ twerkers don’t give a fuck about’cha.”³⁸ In fact, the instrumental element colloquially referred to as the “Cheeky Blakk claps” first heard in “Lemme Get That Outcha” drew percussive attention into the back-body, invoking rhythmic “ass-clapping” and literally reshaping vernacular dance in late -20th century New Orleans (*Vibe* 2017; Blay 2019).

The cover of New Orleans-based Street photographer Polo Silks’ 2017 monograph *Pop That Thang!!!* prominently features an image of the late Magnolia Shorty in full hood-femme regalia, clear plastic cup of drank in her left hand while her right hand holds the head of a wireless microphone up to her mouth. She is bent towards the camera in an active posture, seemingly rapping straight to the ass of the speculatively feminine thighs and torso of a figure in front of her whose head, hands, and feet catch the wall or floor outside of the frame. The monograph is representative of of Polo Silks’ 35mm, Polaroid, and digital archive. The central figure of this collection of images is *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. Its pages are full of scenes of hyperbolic displays of

³⁴ Mapouka in Cote d’Ivoire, Leumbeul in Senegal, Chakacha in Kenya, Bubbling in Jamaica, Perreo in the Dominican Republic, Whining in Trinidad and Tobago

³⁵ The Vh1 article “Twerking: A Complete History” appears after Miley Cyrus’ 2013 VMA performance and is framed by stills from Beyonce’s “Check On it”(2006), a Nicki Minaj instagram post and Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop” video. The latter is notable for Cyrus’ overt use of well-endowed black women as twerking props, asses to be smacked, by and in contrast to her white clad petite bleach-blonde frame.

³⁶ Popular pattern of dialogue found in afro-diasporic expressive cultures and often utilized in Hip-Hop performance. Speaker/MC issues a “call” to which the audience “responds.”

³⁷ Cheeky Blakk, “Twerk something,” on *The Greatest Rap Hits From Down South New Orleans Vol. 1*, 1995

³⁸ Cheeky Blakk, “Let me get that Outcha,” on *Dirty South Essentials*, Vol.1, 1995

working class Southern black femininity and eroticism. The most prominent pose, assumed by Black feminine figures of all shapes, shades, and ages, is that “well-planned ‘booty-tooted out’ pose” (Polo Silk 2017). This static comportment indexes what I’ve called a “twerk-stance” and other Black diasporic significations of ass-centric visual culture. The monograph’s title, “Pop That Thang!!!” and the 2017 gallery exhibition it accompanied emphasizes (with three exclamation points!!!) the centrality of Black feminine flesh to New Orleans’ bounce culture and New Orleans’ culture at-large in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Brief introductory blurbs in the publication by the artists Charlie Vaughn/Uptownz Illest and rapper Mia X contextualize the “sexual freedom, BODY, SPIRIT, and SOUL of underground New Orleans” held in these images, as part of a diasporic circuit of transcendent Black feminine performance (Polo Silk 2017).³⁹

Krista Thompson has discussed at length how the circum-Atlantic proliferation of street photography surfaces a shared aesthetic fixation with light, shine, and “bling” that speaks back to African diasporic reckonings with visibility that are marked and marred by the socio-cultural resonance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Thompson 2015). Within this diasporic visual economy, Black folks make an art of “being seen” through the performative event of being photographed in public as they “theatrically solicit and meet the look of the photographer and passerby [while appearing] not to need their recognition” (Thompson 2015, 69). Central to this performative collaboration between performer, photographer and audience are conspicuous displays of status often indexed by consumer products like cell phones and shoes (Thompson 2015, 67). For the Black feminine figures in *Pop That Thang!!!*, these performances entail a valorization of the whole body, with an emphasis on the most sensational flesh: ass, hips, thighs, and sometimes breast and pussy-prints. These willfully eroticized performances of Black femininity, captured by or staged for Polo Silk’s camera, reference and archive the sexual cultures and aesthetic priorities of the Dirty South in the 99s – 2000s.

In her discussion of the 1990s Atlanta Spring Break phenomena “Freaknik,” Thompson describes Black women’s erotic street performances as embodying the sexual carnivalesque in their exaggerated sensuality (Thompson 2007, 30).⁴⁰ While Black women and femmes in New Orleans were transmogrifying p-popping into twerk, Black women and femmes (many from out the NOLA) traveled in droves to Atlanta for Spring Break. Throughout the festivities they would routinely flash their flesh (as demonstrated by the women in *Pop That Thang!!!*) to signal the start of impromptu public performances attracting largely male audiences who would record, photograph or insert themselves into the act. Thompson contextualizes these performances within the erotic mythology of the Dirty South *and* the contested politics of “law and order” in the New South. This, too, is a diasporic movement pattern. Similar to the crisis of containment that followed what Daniel Miller refers to as the “the wining Carnival” in Trinidad in

³⁹ Vaughn writes: “This seductive borderline dirty dance has connections to hole-in-the -wall blues clubs, dancehall reggae, Latino, and, of course, African movements.” And a page later Mia X recounts: “It’s almost tribal to watch girls mimic moves done in African and Jamaica.”

⁴⁰ “Freaknik” began in 1983 as a picnic organized by students in the Atlanta University Center (Morris Brown College, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University). The first Freaknik was put together by the “DC Metro Club” a collective of AUC students who were originally from the DMV. This history shows that Freaknik was always a convening of cultures across the Dirty South. Burns, Rebecca. “Freaknik: Rise and Fall of Atlanta’s Most Infamous Street Party.” *Atlanta Magazine* (blog), March 18, 2015. <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/90s/freaknik-the-rise-and-fall-of-atlantas-most-infamous-street-party/>.

1988, the “lewd” performances of public Black feminine sexuality at Freaknic in 1994 troubled the middle-class morality of local governance (D. Miller 1991, 325; Thompson 2007, 34). Like the working-class “bacchanal women” who challenged conventions of cross-gender sociality as they “jump’d up” with “systematic gyrations of the hips” until they reach a point of rapture at 1988 Carnival, public performances of Black feminine sexuality at Freaknic in the mid-90s expressed fantasies of non-productive sexual fulfillment that threatened the heterosexist logics of propriety espoused by the post-Civil Rights state (D. Miller 1991, 333; Thompson 2007, 35).

In 1990, Atlanta won its bid to host the 1996 Olympic games. This effort was lead by Local attorney Billy Payne and the mayor, New Orleans-borne Civil Rights legend, Andrew Young. Succeeding Atlanta’s first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, Andrew Young’s tenure extended the rhetoric of Civil Rights in “the city too busy to hate” into a business-centric vision of Black empowerment (Hornsby 1992).⁴¹ In 1995, Atlanta’s local government utilized authoritarian measures, like park and street closures and heightened police presence, to curtail Freaknic’s grasp on the city was poised for gentrification. In response, Black students from the Atlanta University Center (which houses Spelman College, Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morris Brown University) alongside their West Atlanta neighbors openly clashed with law enforcement over the right to take up space (Thompson 2007, 35–36). The 1996 Olympics radically redesigned the social and material landscape of downtown Atlanta. It is within this context, that of a Southern city actively grooming itself for expansion, that a moral doctrine of “law and order” was projected against the annual gathering of young Black vernacular freakin.’ The local government response to Freaknic echoes the paradox of the postcolonial Caribbean nation-state’s desire to police the sexual “while simultaneously mediating a political economy of desire in tourism that relies upon the sexualization and commodification of women’s bodies” (Alexander 1994, 7). As described by M. Jacqui Alexander, the patriarchal nation-state welcomes the influx of foreign capital with open arms, but “blames sexual decadence for the dissolution of the nation” or city (Alexander 1994, 7). For Alexander, this problematic ‘sexual decadence’ is inscribed as the purview of those who have been marked by the state as “non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain” (Alexander 1994, 6). This marking bears a particular legislative assault on the lives and livelihoods of the nation’s sexual minorities (literally criminalizing non-normative sex acts) and simultaneously uses discourses of culture and decency to legitimize the governing body to further instantiate state power.

In Atlanta throughout the 1990s, politicians were working to reify and commodify the city’s Civil Rights legacy and the “lewd” conduct of young Black Atlantans (and young Black folks flocking to Atlanta) during Freaknic was seen as a direct affront to the city’s markedly respectable cultural and political reputation. It is worth mentioning that the contested streets of Metro-Atlanta have long endured as sites where Black gender was policed and regulated to support the city and state’s economic proclivities as explored in Sarah Haley’s work on the political economy of carcerality in early 20th century Georgia (Haley 2013; 2016).

⁴¹ During his tenure as Mayor from 1982-1990, Young boasts 1,100 new businesses, \$70 billion in private investments and more than 1 million new jobs. Young, Andrew, Harvey Newman, and Andrea Young. *Andrew Young and the Making of Modern Atlanta*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2016.

According to Thompson, the City of Atlanta's efforts to control Freaknic in 1995 correlate with an increase in the social surveillance of the black female body at the event in years following. "After 1995," she writes, "as the culture of videotaping *within* Freaknic became an intrinsic part of the event, violence was increasingly meted on female performers by other Freaknic attendees" (Thompson 2007, 38). The instances of rape and sexual assault that plagued Freaknic throughout the late-90s functioned as extensions of the disciplining apparatus of the post-Civil Rights state. In this case study, the agential black feminine figure, asserting her sex on the streets of Atlanta, is seized not only by law and public discourse, but by her male peer who is empowered (or emboldened) by the state and armed with technology to 'put her back in her place' through surveillance and sexual assault. The footage of Freaknic captured by male attendees was a kind of "alternative cinema" enabled by the democratization of camera technology. In this practice of street recording, male Freaknic attendees weaponized their gaze against the bodies of the black feminine figures they beheld.⁴² This real-world dynamic rehearses Laura Mulvey's analysis of the sadist pleasures of male voyeurism (Mulvey 1989, 64). This interplay between the Black feminine figure's performance of command of her own body through publicly staged erotic performances and the interruptions of this performance, by physical violence, sexual violence and the violence of being recorded without consent, is the context through which *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* adapts towards new mediums of articulation.

This history is essential because Atlanta stands as the most respectable metropolis in the Dirty South. As such, it has actively attracted cross-class tourism and migration from throughout the region (and the country at-large). Thus, Freaknics local significance and the particular political economy of its rise and fall are relevant to discussions of black sexual economies in the region. It could be argued that the legacy of Freaknic is a large part of what made the "New South," 'dirty' to begin with. Further, The contested centrality of Black feminine flesh to urban black sexuality in 1990s is the condition of possibility for the proliferation of "twerk" and digitally recorded twerk videos throughout the 21st century.

In the vernacular cinema of *the twerk video*, what Spillers describes as the "irresistible and destructive sensuality" of the pornotrope is mobilized by a global cohort of Black women and GNC Black femmes connected by a thread of black popular culture highly influenced by black sexual cultures and economies of the US South (Spillers 1987, 67). Echoing Amber Musser's discussion of "inhabiting the pornotrope," I argue that 'pornotroping' might also be an act performed by the black feminine subject aware of the "sexual surplus" that is her flesh (Musser 2018). In its depictions of a "fleshy mixture of self-production, insatiability, joy and pain," Polo Silk's *Pop That Thang!!!*, carries the erotic charge of Black social life in the late- 90s and early 2000s (Musser 2018, 5). This

⁴² In the article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Originally published in 1975, Laura Mulvey briefly describes "the alternative cinema" as the opening up of opportunities for cinematic production from the strictly capitalist to the artisanal as enabled by 16mm film technology. While Mulvey indexes alternative cinema as a potentially radical space where patriarchal narrative conventions can be challenged, I am thinking about a variant of alternative cinema that perverts the male gaze through its crass and hyperbolic voyeurism. Which, in Mulvey's terms, is the extreme applications of the scopophilic instinct, "fixated on sexually consuming a controlled other." Mulvey 1989, 59

collection of still images offers queer evidence of the pornotrope's relationship to the pleasures experienced in the bodies of black women and femmes. This queer evidence helps us make sense of *the twerk video*'s function as a performance of self-knowledge.⁴³

The Twerk Video

While tracking the same movement practices and social arenas, *the twerk video* is distinct from what Johnson terms 'flesh dance music videos' (J. E. Johnson 2020, 14). Johnson's examples are the industry-backed music videos of black male rappers and rap groups that enlist Black women performers as narrative elements and accents that flesh out the social world of each scene. By contrast, in both its amateur and more professional iterations, *the twerk video* gives main stage to Black women and GNC femme performers as it's defining and often only spectacular elements. While there are examples when these forms are collapsed into one another, I assert that the distinction is important because the self-authored performance work of *the twerk video* occasions interpretive possibilities that are less crowded with the optics of popular misogyny. As a medium in which black women and black femmes "strip down layers of attenuated meaning" for the sake of erotic consumption, *the twerk video* offers "a truer word" that is impolite. The form forces viewers to consider that "the marvels of [a black feminine figure's] own inventiveness" might be explicit, vulgar and willfully objectified (Spillers 1987, 65). As a dirty or "low" form of cinema, highly sexualized in popular culture and broadly circulated, *the twerk video* is an ideal text in which to read the condition of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*.

My relationship to *the twerk video* as a Black femme who came of age in the imagined geography of *the Dirty South* (via Atlanta, GA) in the early 00's is intimate, challenging, joyous, erotically charged and foundational to my sense of self. A performance troupe at the center of the media phenomenon, *The Official Twerk Team*, was from the Eastside of Atlanta and as a high school student my remote viewings of their videos was complemented by the opportunity to see them perform live at Golden Glide skating rink. I can still recall the thrill and terror of my best friend and I seeing that a photo taken that night, of me supportively holding her arms as she bent over to give a dance, had been uploaded to Facebook by the event promoters. In line with L.H. Stallings' assertion that writing for and with black sexual cultures elicits new methods, I engage *the twerk video* as a site of black folk's expressive theorizing that I *knew* at a haptic level before I met the language of black performance theory (Horton-Stallings 2015, 191–92).

⁴³ Citing Jose Munoz, Juana Maria-Rodriguez defines queer evidence as "an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof." It is a means of refuting expectations for hard material causality and instead savoring the hint or trace of memory and affect. Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. NYU Press, 2014. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfwmq>.

The questions that drive my intellectual and affective compulsions to study with the form of *the twerk video* lie in what is opened up or pressed upon by the unmarked performances the videos elicit. Taking myself seriously as a party to the collective feeling evoked by the sight of black women's erotic performance and desperately wanting to believe that "sexuality is a site of memory, as opposed to a history of violence and terror;" I turn to (and replay) texts that surface the 'wounds' of black women's embattled sexuality, hetero-patriarchal violence, and the contortions of form necessary to sustain feeling through over-written traumas (Horton-Stallings 2015, 199).

The twerk video's play between "being-for-the captor" (i.e. performing for the presumed "male gaze") and "being-for-self" forces a reader who takes Black women seriously as dynamic agents to accept that there is a muddy distinction between being positioned as "property of men" and positioning oneself as an object of public desire (Spillers 1987, 67; 2003b, 165). The signification of property is not the beginning or ending of what she moves to show. Performative erotic play in *objecthood does not represent a totalizing ontology*.⁴⁴ If, as Stallings argues, Black vernacular dance within the heterotopia of the Black strip club becomes "the alternative cartography, the demonic ground" that makes "any strip club an erotic city come alive." Black vernacular dance as mediated online through the form of *the twerk video* harnesses the same potential to disrupt binaries between 'work' and 'play,' 'sex' and 'dance,' 'men' and 'woman,' 'self' and 'other' (Horton-Stallings 2015, 190).

Black femininity is signaled in *the twerk video* by an array of markers that confound the heteropatriarchal scripts of assumed gender designation. New Orleanian Bounce music pioneers Big Freedia, Sissy Nobby, and Katey Redd, who openly bend and transform black gender, utilize the same gestures, movements, and aesthetic accouterments (hair weave, lashes, rhinestones, acrylic nails, spandex clothing) as black women twerkers whose gender performance is in alignment with the gender they were assigned at birth. The fact that openly queer black femme musicians in The Dirty South have historically been the heartbeat of twerk is only one of the more obvious points of confluence between *the twerk video* and black queer social life. Further, New Orleans Bounce music and culture functions as a venue of active collaboration between presumed cis-Black women, Black gay or queer men, gender non-conforming Black femmes, and Black trans-women.

In collaborations between Katey Redd and the late Magnolia Shorty, Sissy Nobby and his ensemble of shakers, Big Freedia and Tarionna "Tank" Ball, Hasizzle, and Angelika "Jelly" Joseph, the choreographic imperatives of flesh dance heard as "calls" rather than "commands." Black dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains "calling" as an element of social dance in the American South originated by enslaved "dance and music specialists" in which dance steps and gestures are rhythmically announced by musicians (Hazzard - Donald 2011, 10). In American social dance's contemporary study and practice, "calling" is most associated with North American

⁴⁴ Black feminist anthropologist Dr. Courtney Morris said this to me over breakfast in Berkeley, California in the Spring of 2019. It is a sentiment that reflects Simone de Beauvoir's concession that "all existents remain subjects, no matter how passionately this is disavowed." Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. 1 edition. New York: Vintage, 2011.

Square Dance. However, as explicated by Hazzard-Donald, the European social dance traditions from which the American square dances evolved were customarily “memorized under the instruction of a dancing master” (Hazzard - Donald 2011, 11). It was not until European social dance entered the colonial, and slave-holding United States that the dance choreographies were “called.” Whereas the most popular West and Central West African social dances in Hazzard-Donald’s survey long incorporated “calling” or “signaling changes in movement, initiated by either the lead dancer or the lead drummer” (Hazzard - Donald 2011, 11). Hazzard-Donald argues that the enslaved fiddler conscripted to the labor of entertaining white folks “would have inserted the African tradition of “calling” danced in an environment where few dancers knew the changes in the dance steps” (Hazzard - Donald 2011, 11). Within the Southern Black social world, the calling tradition became integrated with the vocal song and instrumentation of the Ring Shout, where lyrical phrases “instructed participants on the ritual pantomime” of the occasion (Hazzard - Donald 2011, 11). In this context, Hasizzle’s improvised scat “Get-Get, Getcha Sum!” is not at all a misogynist demand for Black feminine movement; it is more akin to a summoning of a particular kind of embodied knowledge (HaSizzle The Voice 2021).

A highly spreadable response to the calls of Dirty South MCs, *the twerk video* is staged and published in way that compels audiences to share it via various social media platforms. These performances circulate by way of a process Jenkins, Ford and Green’s have termed ‘spread.’ Spread as opposed to virality (“going viral”) affords digital consumers an active role in the dissemination of media. Concerning the phenomena I am analyzing, spread becomes indicative of the ways video content sharing platforms like YouTube allow audiences to observe the dancing black feminine figure remotely across an array of digital and IRL locales (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). This experience of reception mediated by the Internet is distinct from that of the ‘stickiness’ and funk of engaging the live site of the dynamic black feminine figure. While dancers in Southern clubs and digital twerkers like BeTTy BuTT enact similar modes of performance, the Southern strip club is analogous to a server hosting different self-interested ‘sites’ all programmed and performing for immediate capital gain. Whereas for performers and performances who circulate within the digital, revenue increases based on the number of views and views are increased by the places their videos appear. Reception is not specifically tied to the time of production. This shifts the relationship between laboring body and audience.

Ass-Werk

If we presume that twerk is the vernacular contraction of “to work” (as in “to work that ass”) we might begin to understand the ways *the twerk video* speaks to a larger conceptualization of labor as it relates to *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. The popularity of ‘twerk’ in language and practice thus implies that on the backs of Black women (trans and cis) and GNC Black femmes there is important cultural work being performed across various spatial boundaries and moralistic binaries. Twerk videos, like BeTTy’s “Fuck You All The Time,” can be understood as a gendered and embodied medium through which black feminine figures choreograph social and erotic economies.

Centering corporeal self-knowledge of the Black feminine form, *the twerk video* and its circulation occasion sensuous methods of witnessing and analysis attuned to the ways bodies move, are moved, and have been moved by broader structural systems of demand and domination.

In the article, “YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus,” Kyra D. Gaunt offers a discussion of the appropriation of twerk by white female celebrities as a result of YouTube mitigated context collapse and the impact this may have on the Black adolescent twerkers at the center of her online survey. For Gaunt context collapse is meant to signify:

“1) the virtual co-presence of two invisible audiences – culturally black and hegemonically non-black who bring different histories and orientations to twerking and 2) a “connection without restraint” to other YouTubers anywhere, anytime...that allows users to do and say things face-face communications might limit or temper especially concerning racialization, sexuality...” (Gaunt 2015, 246)

This context collapse creates a “deep and loose connection” between content producers and their anonymous audiences. The distant yet intimate connections facilitated by YouTube make for an interesting venue for black feminist readings of sexualized hypervisibility in tandem with a self-conscious refusal of knowability. Where Gaunt turns to “body-work or batty-werk” as the alternative face-work that young black girls perform through amateur twerk videos that may render them as “everybody’s visual ho” to viewers whose own histories and biases “deny the agency of erotic pleasure in musical play.” In my reading of BeTTy BuTT, I incorporate Nicole Fleetwood’s concept of excess flesh enactments into an understanding of *ass-werk*. I assert that Black feminine figures producing and appearing in Youtube content don’t twerk because they have internalized the notion that “black girl’s...bodies speak more powerfully than their voices,” but rather their fleshy *ass-werk* is invested in a staunchly different cultural capital than that of the universalized YouTube vloggers discussed at length by new media scholar Michael Wesch (Gaunt 2015, 252).

The twerk video showcases the “kinetic orality” of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* through choreographic displays of *ass-werk* (Gaunt 2015, 247). This *ass-werk* is an example of what Gaunt, quoting Dan Miller’s ethnographic study of Trinidadian Carnival in the late 80s, describes as “auto-sexual play” (Gaunt 2015, 249). This auto-sexual play does not require or cater to the presence of sexual or pornographic desires on the part of the audience. Concerning *the twerk video*, the content producer may and likely does read/or engage her comments sections but does not have to (none of the latest videos on TheOfficialTwerkTeam YouTube channel enable comments). The viewers experience only matters to the extent that the content producer wishes to engage it. Face-work (and thus batty-werk) assumes that black feminine content producers, particularly those who werk their flesh, are overdetermined by culturally constructed conceptions of themselves. While they definitely constitute themselves as versed in contemporary Southern hip-hop and capable of an impressive range of motion, *the twerk video* (distinct from the amateur bedroom videos from Gaunt’s adolescent subjects) records and promotes a refusal of proper womanhood and an embrace of dirty possibility.

Feminist performance studies present another conception of bodywork. As explained by May Joseph in the introduction to the 1999 *Women and Performance* “Bodywork” Issue, the movement of marginalized bodies disrupts distinctions made between labor and rationality (Joseph 1999). Extending this into the context of black (ass) music, Jason King writes:

“Where the white body comes to symbolize rationality while the black body exist to perform the physical labor which that abstracted rationality requires...this racialized divide, which is also a conflation of the human laborer with property, is tragically transconstituted in terms of gender (J. King 2008, 437).”

Ass-werk emerges from this transconstitution of the racialized divide conflating human laborer with property. *Ass-werk* centers what King leaves under-examined, the specific role of the fleshy, feminized Black ass in this spirited mobilization of the thinking black body (J. King 2008, 439).

In her reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Kathryn Bond Stockton links the ironic naming and socio-economic reality of the fictional black Ohio community “The Bottom” to the “bias against queer anality (and against its pleasures)” (Stockton 2006, 68). While Stockton is specifically interested in gay Black men and anal intercourse, ‘The Bottom’ serves as a site where both the imposed filth of queer sex and that of black marginality can be articulated. Through her reading the Bottom becomes:

“a theory of anality, one where the anus becomes a lens through which one can read “major patterns in black history, black labor history, black folks’ migrations, signs of black gender, and the tender matter of racial castration,” and one that links black space, black sexualities, racial and economic marginality, and queer pleasures.” (Stockton 2006, 68; Nash 2014, 446)

The Dirty South, the socio-cultural circuit that holds both Atlanta and New Orleans, is “The Bottom.” In Dirty South street photography, as exemplified by the work of Polo Silk, and through the medium of *the twerk video, being-in-blackfeminineflesh* presses into and moves beyond the wounded histories of black labor and black sexuality. The link between black space, black sexualities, racial and economic marginality and queer pleasures that Stockton illustrates creates an opening through which *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is embodied by Black feminine figures that *carry the whole ‘hood on their backs*. And as heavy as the load may seem, these Black feminine figures actively subvert their raced and gendered conscriptions through the erotic liveliness of their bodies in motion.

Conclusion: This woman is a ghost

“Time and space are human constructs. Dance is an inhuman force. Dance does more than defy time with its dismantling of the virtual and actual binary of space and matter created by human work society—it generates new matter and methods.”

In November of 2014, Jamie Moore, popularly known as BeTTy BuTT, was shot and killed inside her Atlanta apartment. As reported by the Atlanta Journal Constitution, her murder was the result of a botched robbery targeting her boyfriend.⁴⁶ While conducting research for this chapter, digging through the social presence of yet another dead Black woman in the age of #SayHerName pulled me into a state of mourning. I was confronted by the lifelessness of a body I had spent hours engaging as a site of resistance. Further, all the desire and libidinal excitement motivating my writing was suddenly interrupted by grief.

BeTTy BuTT's solo YouTube Channel was launched in May of 2012 and at the time of writing has 16,213 subscribers and a total of 745,959 views. There are only four videos uploaded to BeTTy BuTT's solo account. Three of them uploaded in 2012 and one uploaded in 2013. Unlike the early videos from The Official Twerk Team, BeTTy BuTT stages her solo performances mostly in public space. In the first video "BeTTy BuTT "Pop That" Twerking in Atlanta," BeTTy dances in a black athletic set and black rain boots in the middle of a baseball field. The second video is footage from what appears to be a club performance. When she does return to interior domestic spaces, they are either hyperstylized as in the video "BeTTy BuTT "Fuck You All The Time" or staged as a direct reference to earlier Twerk Team videos. For example, in the page's final upload "Betty Butt," posted in February of 2013, BeTTy performs in the corner of a stair well wearing a white shirt, pink shorts and yellow thigh high socks. In this final video, BeTTy's costume is a direct reference to those worn by The Official Twerk Team between 2009-2010. Between the costuming and the enclosed domestic staging, this performance could be read as a deliberate attempt to return to the aesthetics that launched her career. Her solo YouTube channel was statistically less successful than The Official Twerk Team Channel. After her departure from the group and up until 2015, Mizz Twerksum and Lady L continued to upload performance works that demonstrate a similar investment in staging and craft but accrued more views because of the foundational notoriety of *The Official Twerk Team* name and YouTube platform. The videos provide no clues to whether or not BeTTy BuTT's departure from the group was amicable.

Not much has been said publicly about her departure from The Official Twerk Team in late 2010, but after filing through photos tagged "#bettybutt" on Instagram, I discovered that Jamie Moore underwent chemotherapy that year, losing her hair and no longer performing publicly until her solo YouTube channel launched in July of 2012. Once in remission, Moore began to garner her old fan base reviving her stage name, BeTTy BuTT through a personal Twitter, Tumblr and Youtube channel. My survey of the tag "#bettybutt," on Instagram and Twitter revealed that in 2013 she launched a clothing line called "lov3heart" – a friend's promotional post announced "she can make dresses bathing suit stripper outfits and much more that fits you."

On November 5th 2014, just a week before her death, Moore posted a photoset of onto her Twitter and Tumblr pages of her dressed in a turquoise mesh bodysuit,

⁴⁵ Horton-Stallings, LaMonda. *Funk the Erotic*. University of Illinois Press, 2015. Pg 192 <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/41095>.

⁴⁶ Foreman, Lauren. "2 Get Life Sentences in Dancer's Death." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 23, 2016, sec. Local News.

bedazzled eye makeup, iridescent fish-scale body art, and color-coordinated yarn-locs. The photos are captioned “Betty Butt/Ameti/Yemoja” (bettybutt-blog-blog 2014). Moore’s explicit embodiment of the orisha Yemeya illustrates a deep level of diasporic self-knowledge. At the time I discovered this photo I had already begun thinking about the metaphysical resonance between black female secular performers and African cosmology systems like Ifá, the Yoruba religion from which the image of Yemeya/Yemoja – orisha of the sea – emerges. But even this turn towards Afro-diasporic cosmology is an attempt to reckon with a sense of grief, a yearning (perhaps also felt by Jamie Moore) to place *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* within a tradition in which death is not an absolute ending.

I was introduced to the concept of “dead reckoning” during a talk given by Dr. Tonia Sutherland at the 2018 African American History, culture and digital humanities conference at the University of Maryland, College Park. Gleaned from *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* “Dead Reckoning,” a term of sea faring origins, has been rearticulated to hold the feeling of finding “yourself bothered by someone’s death more than you would have expected, as if you assumed they would always be part of the landscape, like a lighthouse you could pass by for years until the night it suddenly goes dark, leaving you with one less landmark to navigate by – still able to find your bearings, but feeling all that much more adrift” (Koenig 2021, 105).

My re-encounter with the news of BeTTy BuTT’s tragic death was the sudden loss of a light house. I had spent hours digging through the online archive of Atlanta’s Official Twerk Team, remembering their role in my adolescent formations of dance, joy and desirability along the way. And then I remembered her death. I must have heard about it when it happened. I want to believe I mourned her then, as I do now. But the reality is that the news passed quickly and faded from my memory.

Hortense Spillers, the Black feminist literary critic and cultural theorists at the heart of my current thinking begins her oft-cited pathbreaking essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammer Book” with a moment of direct address:

“let’s face it.” She writes, “I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire’ and ‘Earth Mother,’ ‘Aunty,’ ‘Granny,’ God’s ‘Holy Fool,’ a ‘Miss Ebony First,’ or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’ : I described a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. my country needs me, and if i were not here, i would have to be invented (Spillers 1987, 65).”

What are the contours of this “marking” she references? What forms of labor are referenced in the litany of names? ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar’ are sweet thangs (a euphemism for black women’s sexual labor); ‘Sapphire’ is hard, rude, angry, overworked; ‘Earth Mother’ is the naturalized reproductive vessel, the healer; ‘Aunty’ and ‘Granny’ are familial matrons; ‘God’s Holy Fool’ in catholicism refers to a sanctified eccentric who reveals truth through plays of insanity; ‘Miss Ebony First’ evokes the ethos of a beauty pageant; ‘Black Lady at the Podium’ calls forth the public labor of

negotiating space in the academy. So in a way her stance as a “marked woman” functions as a testament to all the labors mapped on to her body. Her given name is less pertinent to the onlooker than all the names they have been socio-culturally trained to call her. She is every woman. The labor of the podium is indistinguishable from the labor of the pageant.

Furthermore, the labor of *this* mode of writing is intimately related to the labor of the twerk video. Let’s face it, the body I write from is that of a black feminine figure who learned to see herself and how to be seen from BeTTy BuTT and a pantheon of black women and GNC femmes working as dancers, teachers, social workers and sex workers. What you see as sexy in her is indistinguishable from what I see as sexy in me. In the performance that begins this chapter, she leans over the couch to free up her ass in the same manner as I have trained myself in front of many mirrors, DJs, friends and lovers alike. This woman is a ghost who I conjure with every breath. Every dance. Every fuck. Every pursuit of feeling close to freedom.

The underside to all this is the moment that marks us -- what Spillers describes as the “scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile (Spillers 1987, 67).” Jamie Moore’s tragic end and my encounter with the fact of it speaks to what interdisciplinary artist Lorraine O’Grady in her 1992 essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” describes as “the body that has been raped, maimed, murdered” at the end of our every path toward the reclamation of black female subjectivity, this essay is my attempt to deliver BeTTy BuTT/Ameti/Yemoja/Jamie Moore “a healthy present” (O’Grady 1992).

I end with a consideration I wish I didn’t have to make concerning the posthumous compilation of one particular tribute video published the month after Jamie Moore was shot and killed in her Atlanta apartment.

BETTY BUTT FAN FOREVER turned mourning into monstrous intimacy with the publication of an “endurance challenge” that haunts my attempts to see Jamie Moore in her entirety. It is a “simple contest” which utilizes an array of videos originally posted by BeTTy and/or The Official Twerk Team as pornographic stimulus for an ejaculatory competition between presumed male viewers (*BETTY BUTT ENDURANCE CHALLENGE* 2014).

Mission “Not Cum” Impossible ... Your Mission is to Survive... 4 rounds constant masturbation.... to Betty Butt...15 second breaks..... to recover between rounds...good luck...HANDS off YOUR COCK

What kind of fandom is this? Tonia Sutherland’s work on digital afterlives and the distinction between memorialization and commodification asks the question: what does it mean to be black and dead in digital culture? From lynching photographs circulated as postcards to the Tupac hologram performing at Coachella in 2012 – Her work shows the ways embodied records of Black people’s bodies have functioned as “carceral artifacts” engaging their subjects in “compulsory post-mortem enslavement (Sutherland

2018).” In death, Black folk’s bodies are digitally imprisoned by the demands of entertainment. The demand to be entertained is a desire for stimulation. The endurance challenge is but one crude example of the ways Black folk’s bodies are conscripted to labor after their deaths. Jamie Moore’s laboring body, intentionally offered as a commodity she named BeTTy BuTT, intentionally Black, intentionally desirable, can never rest in the digital.

*But maybe, I wonder out loud, we marked by her, we who re/member her with every
breath, with every dance, with every fuck, might conjure up some Black digital
funerary practices, might soften the dirt for her to rest,
even if only in our minds.*

Praise Break

On Retrieval:

Kenyatta AC Hinkle's Black Feminist Spell

“Why are we *still* here?” asks playwright, social entrepreneur, Survivor-Leader and abolitionist Regina Evans at the climax of her one-woman show *52 Letters*. A production composed as a truth ritual to highlight the local realities of human trafficking. *Here* is “the space where the bartering and selling of our children is at a tipping point,” *Here* is Oakland, the epicenter for a trafficking triangle between San Francisco and Contra Costa counties.⁴⁷ And it is *here* that Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle conjured up a spell for *The Retrieval* – her solo-show at the San Francisco Art Commission (SFAC) Main Gallery in the Spring of 2018.

Hinkle's work is largely research-based and anchored to an impressive repertoire of the writings and recordings Black women have left behind.

India ink meets sheets of Dura-Lar by way of the artist's handmade brushes which are forged from nature and used until they return to common branches, bits of twine, Spanish moss and feathers. This foraging is in line with a tradition of resourcefulness that Hinkle locates in her inheritance of Black womanhood. The women are full of a kinetic energy, channeled into them by the artist's dance-compelled mark making.

⁴⁷ Quote from Regina Evans one-woman show “52 Letters” which brings awareness to the issue of sex trafficking in the US. Sian Taylor Gowan, *Surviving International Boulevard*, Documentary, 2016.

Photographs of fabulous, familiar, and forgotten Black women fixed to the walls of her Oakland studio watch Hinkle work. They hold her accountable. The work of Hinkles' *un-portrait* is based in its capacity to channel the energy of Black women and children from the African Diaspora rather than descriptively reflect their appearance. Some women desire precisely coiffed baby hairs, or many legs, or multiple breast and hands.

Hinkle's affinity for the historically vulnerable bodies of Black women has been a major through line of the artist's work, inspired by the histories of Blackness, southernness, femininity, diasporic longing, and motherhood she holds in her own body. At this point in the artist's journey we have already witnessed several incantations of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "the impossible goal" of redress in the archive of slavery (and its afterlife).⁴⁸

The accumulationist nature of Hinkles' concurrent series gestures towards what Viviane Saleh-Hanna terms "Black feminist hauntology."⁴⁹ Heavily inspired by Toni Morrison's theory of "rememory," Black feminist hauntology reveals through ghostly reemergence, the ways White supremacist structures of violence have been perpetually unveiled by the presence of Black women. In this way, each of the unending series interrupts, at the artist's will, into another resulting in a rich intertextuality that disrupts colonial logics of time and space and deepens the political charge(s) of the artist's canon. In *The Uninvited Series* (2008-) Hinkle creates disruptive counternarratives by drawing and painting on top of late 19th and early 20th century postcards of West African women taken mainly by French colonialists. These ethnographic photos sought to brand Black women's bodies as dehumanized figments of hypersexualization and conquest, triggering emotions of both repulsion and desire. Hinkle's interruptions of colonial narratives give the women the ability to redress themselves as otherworldly figures subverting the colonial gaze. *The Tituba Black Witch of Salem Series* (2013-) utilizes the artist's lived experience navigating the world in a black and pregnant body, and the literary archival work of Maryse Condes' *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem. The Evanescence* (2016-), one of two current bodies of work that were featured in her solo exhibition at the SFAC Gallery, venerates "more than 64,000 missing Black women in America

⁴⁸ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 26 (June 2008): 3.

⁴⁹ Saleh-Hanna, Viviane. "Black Feminist Hauntology. Rememory the Ghosts of Abolition?" *Champ Pénal/ Penal Field*, no. Vol. XII (March 23, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.4000/champpenal.9168>.

and historical disappearances of Black women throughout the African Diaspora.⁵⁰ 64,000, a 'sublime' number in the artist's words. Sublime not in that it inspires great admiration but in that it forces you to reckon with it spiritually and morally: *If more than 64,000 Black women are missing, where did they go? Who is missing them? Who is looking for them? How am I, are we, complicit in their erasure?* The women who dance through Hinkle's brushes, becoming the *un-portraits* of this series, are here to elicit honest answers. While the central focus of each series shifts location their combined effect is a robust conversation pulling past, present, future, history and myth, into and beyond each other; utilizing Blackness as a permeable, transcendent substance

An earlier series of 100 small-scale brown paper *Evanesced* drawings offered a re-membering of the black female body replete with movement, color and kinship. This newer *Evanesced* cohort has a bigger task at hand. In this current iteration the women and children of *The Retrieval* ask you to contemplate the living people that we render as ghosts. The work is a call to action, an invitation to *see* those who are often overlooked. *The Evanesced: The Retrieval* brings global concerns about Black women's disappearances throughout the African diaspora into the social and political contours of Los Angeles and the East Bay. In its movement along the West Coast, the work represents Black women in ways that aren't shrouded in victimhood to offer a meditation on the abstract forms Black women's presences take on when we know safety and legibility to be expensive myths.

⁵⁰ Eva Recinos, "Inspired by #SayHerName, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle Is Keeping Black Women From Disappearing," L.A. Weekly, March 13, 2017, <http://www.laweekly.com/arts/inspired-by-sayhername-artist-kenyatta-ac-hinkle-is-keeping-black-women-from-disappearing-802> 1319



Figure 2 Kenyatta AC Hinkle posing in front of *The Evanesecead* (photo by author)

Objects from *Kentifrica*, a physical and theoretical location holding the artist's investments in geography, anthropology and the problematics of museum space, make themselves central to recent exhibitions through sculpture and performance. These large-scale objects are often worn collages of items Hinkle has collected and activated. This includes everything from items of clothing to braiding hair. In *The Retrieval* we see this within the *Kentifrican Ashentee Healer*, a Yoruba Egungun-inspired figure. Representative of the Yoruba masquerade tradition of ancestral reverence in Nigeria and beyond, the Kentifrican Healer sports swaths of brightly colored cloth and a kanekalon headpiece meant to conceal the wearer's identity. In traditional Yoruba custom the masqueraders must be men and sight of their flesh is considered a grave offense. The Kentifrican figure rearticulates this form of spiritual masquerade into Hinkle's own black feminist performance aesthetic. In the video work accompanying the exhibition, the *Kentifrican Ashentee Healer* makes her presence known throughout the urban landscapes of San Francisco and East Oakland, day and night, wielding a 'horsetail' made of blue ombre braids, evoking spirit to cleanse the conveniently unseen places black women fade into it. Staged in the

exhibition, the *Ashantee Healer* stands vigilant near the center. Her masked gaze greets the viewer as they enter the gallery space. The vibrance of her silent and assertive posture watches over *The Evanesced*.⁵¹

When the women of *The Retrieval* offer you their backs and breasts, something more complicated than sexuality is being displayed. In traditional West African iconography the figure of a woman supporting her breasts with both hands is a sign of giving. This bodily offering indexes spiritual coolness or gentleness in character.⁵² But the women's bodies function as more than metaphor, breast heavy with life offer themselves to the mouths of their children. US and colonial histories hold tale after tale of the roles enslaved wet nurses and so-called mammies played in sustaining the Worlds around them.⁵³ In Hinkle's oeuvre, these women refuse. At turns withholding their faces, dripping into and out of easily recognizable forms. They are less concerned with their inherent (in)visibility and more adamant about forcing the audience to reckon with their (un)knowability. Which is to say that you may *see* Black women's "excess flesh," but you may never *know* it intimately.⁵⁴ Visibility does not equal consent.

A figure that Hinkle refers to as 'Abiku' sits atop Dura-Lar in an assertive fetal position. The figure's posture indexes its name and the Yoruba tale of forest spirits, continuously born only to die in infancy, tormenting the mother. Abiku's bubbly blackness conjures up a spirit that is not revered. This stories contemporary relevance is not lost on me. Black women have been organizing against alarming infant mortality rates for decades, in the 1990s this crystallized in the movement for Reproductive Justice.⁵⁵ According to the US Center for Disease Control and

⁵¹ The dictionary defines "evanesced" as "passed out of sight, memory, or existence." By making the past-tense verb a proper noun Hinkle turns exalts the forgotten.

⁵² Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. 1st Vintage Books ed edition. New York: Vintage, 1984.

⁵³ Jennifer L. Morgan, "Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 167–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2953316>.

⁵⁴ Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 105–47.

⁵⁵ Loretta Ross, "What Is Reproductive Justice? From SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective,"

Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change, SisterSong: 2007.

Prevention, for every 1000 live births 11.7 Black babies die in the first year of their lives. Here, represented as Abiku, these Black babies are sought out for what they might have to teach us. Socratically asking the viewer: *How do you contribute to the conditions of my mother's labor?*

One woman dances with arms winged behind her, gaze trained on the ground, heavy breast akimbo. Her posture is that of a jumping stomp reminiscent of a ring shout, her body is instrumental, the blur above her head a grey aura of sound.

One woman throws her face as feet kick from under her and an outstretched hand appears, poised to catch. Below her another woman swims with arms poised to gather up the blackness at the bottom of the frame.

One woman is seen in descent. Her head tilts back, arms raised in surrender, chest open to the fall, feet doubling each other in motion, braids buoyant. She is flying.

One woman sits pretty, her body rendered a black (w)hole the universe swirls inside of.

*Do you know these women? Can you
find them?*

A Call

There is a difference between a spectator and a witness. While the spectator looks, they have the privilege of not being obligated to *see*. The spectator treats looking like a luxury and will walk through the gallery space with the same energy that moves them through the aisle of a department store. Hinkle's work demands witness. In the artist's own words a witness is "somebody who will stand, who will not turn away, who will recount what they've seen for justice" (Hinkle 2018). To view and experience *The Retrieval*, is to become acquainted with Black women in their most intangible refractions. Here the eyes, smiles, figures and stories of the African Diaspora careen into and through one another with the dance of a brush stroke. These figures carry in them a challenge to the historically imposed vulnerability of black female flesh.⁵⁶

Those who view the work are tasked with really *seeing* it and allowing the viewing experience to move with them as they exit the gallery to traverse the darkened corridors of the San Francisco Bay Area.

⁵⁶ Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

*To Black women + Black femmes +
Black girls here and there/then and
now:*

“You may go, but this will bring you
back”

- Zora Neale Hurston⁵⁷

An earlier version of this essay was commissioned by the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries for their solo exhibition, Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle: Retrieval. Ms. Hinkle is a 2019 recipient of SFMOMA’s prestigious SECA Award, and on view through April 12, 2020. This version of the essay was awarded the 2020 Toni Beauchamp Prize for Critical Art Writing by Gulf Coast Literary Magazine.

⁵⁷ Introduced to me by Hinkle, this recording is held in the Florida State Archives from Hurston work for the WPA in 1935 and 1939. In the recording she can be heard saying she learned the song from a big crowd. When asked how she learned from the crowd she replies “...I listens as best as I can...and then sing back to the people until...they are quite satisfied that I know it...then I carry it in my memory.” This is how Hinkle describes her relationship to these ghost. Zora Neale Hurston, Halimuhfack, 1935, State Library & Archives of Florida, <https://www.floridamemory.com/audio/hurston.php>.

Chapter 2

Feather-Bed Surrealism

Clementine Hunter's "Nigger Mess" and other ambivalent answers to the Problem of Black Women's Labor

There is a photo in the permanent collection of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art titled "[Clementine Hunter at Work](#)." In this image, taken by an unknown photographer circa 1950, renowned vernacular artist, domestic worker and agricultural laborer Clementine Hunter is seen sitting on a wooden chair. Across from her there is another wooden chair serving as the easel on which she paints a scene of feminine figures at work in the cotton fields of the Melrose Plantation. Like the women she portrays, Hunter's hair is covered, and her head is angled down towards her work. Her right hand braces her left arm just below the wrist to steady her command of the brush. While her face is in shadow, the posture conveys focus and attention. Hunter is at work. Working paint into a figure in the bottom left corner of the image which appears to be a tree.

I like this image because of the dialogue it holds between Hunter and the memories she marked down with her paints. There are multiple definitions of work on display. Hunter is positioned as both a working subject and an [observer/recorder] of other working subjects. In fact, it's Hunter's positioning as a subject actively marking down the images of her familiars that imbues the representations of those familiars with agential possibility. Seen here, they are more than colorful sketches of a scene in rural Southern life. They are representations of Black agricultural labors as seen and interpreted by one of their own. Hunter's 102 year life (1886-1988), lends itself to a diverse range of analytic strategies. Following suit, this chapter moves from archival impressions from early in Hunter's artistic career in the 1950s to her pop-cultural



Figure 3 "Clementine Hunter at Work" (circa 1950), photographer unknown, The Ogden Museum of Southern Art

resonance in the 1980s. Carrying forward the mode of description practiced in my reading of BeTTy BuTT, this holding of Hunter's life and work is a critique of the way her oeuvre was flattened and caricatured through the mid- 2000s.⁵⁸ Reading her as member of a community of laborers *and* as a surrealist I am arguing that Hunter's work represents an "oppositional world view" that make use of political and social ambivalence to represent more dirty possibilities of Black social life in the Plantation South.

As explained by Hortense Spillers counter-mythology "is the return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living" (Spillers 2003b). Whereas I read BeTTy BuTT as deliberately "fucking with" viewers preconceived notions of the relationships between Black femininity and [erotic] labor, Hunter's prolific and insistent practice of "marking pictures" from out her head offers unglamorized representations of the relationships between Black femininity, agricultural, and creative labor that are unconcerned with conveying fact or fiction. Within this context, I aim to craft a counter-mythology of the artist as a radically ambivalent interpreter of Black work and leisure on and in proximity to the post-Emancipation plantation. To accomplish this, I turn to Museum archives, film, and literature to further contextualize the ways Hunter uses aesthetic practice to make sense of the histories she worked in.

"Marking pictures" is the way Hunter described her art practice. She didn't consider herself a painter, but rather used active descriptive language to name exactly what she was doing. In a speech on Hunter's work, patron Dr. Robert F. Ryan offers this anecdote to describe the artist's genius. When asked by TV interviewer Mel Leavitt how she felt when neighbors suggested she might be crazy to be painting all the time, Hunter described how she was sitting up painting in the middle of the night several years before when her husband, Emanuel Hunter, woke up and said, "Come to bed, woman. You keep sitting up there painting like that and you go crazy." To which Hunter answered, "If I don't get this painting out of my head I'll go crazy."⁵⁹ This quotation surfaces the correlation between 'artistic genius' and 'craziness' that has long been a preoccupation of Black popular culture (and Western culture at-large). As La Marr Jurelle Bruce

⁵⁸ On February 25, 2010 William Toye, his wife Beryl Toye, and New Orleans antique dealer Robert E. Lucky, Jr were indicted "for fraud in connection with counterfeit art sales." While it is alleged that Toye began painting Hunter forgeries in the 1970s, the indictment charges that from 2000 until 2009 Lucky and the Toyes conspired to defraud several Hunter collectors by "misrepresenting the authenticity and origin of the paintings LUCKY sold on the TOYES behalf." The eccentric manner of the Toyes led to much media coverage. In a profile from the year of the indictment William Toye, the forger, goes to great lengths to describe his disdain for Hunter's work. According to the story he crafts, his wife purchased paintings from Hunter in 1969. William hated the paintings so much he "destroyed dozens of them by breaking them over his knee. He put others out for trash pickup, but not without first punching holes in them with the pointed end of a bricklayer's hammer. Almost as bad, he kept her collection in a garage with a pet door that let cats come in from the cold [and scratch and piss on the pictures]. Despite or maybe because of his disdain, William would paint dozens of his own Clementine Hunter style paintings in an attempt to profit of her art-market value. The forgery scandal is just one example of the ways Hunter's labor was caricatured and exploited through the mid-2000s. "THREE INDICTED FOR FRAUD IN CONNECTION WITH COUNTERFEIT ART SALES | Press Release." Department of Justice, February 25, 2010. Bradley, John Ed. "The Talented Mr. Toye." *Garden & Gun*, May 2010. <https://gardenandgun.com/feature/the-talented-mr-toye/>.

⁵⁹ "Dr. Robert F Ryan Speech at AoA," 1988 1944. Dr. Robert F. Ryan Clementine Hunter Papers. The Historic New Orleans Collection. <http://hnoc.minisisinc.com/thnoc/catalog/1/109823>. Bruce, La Marr Jurelle. *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2021. Pg. 12-13.

indicates the “madness-creativity intersection is especially fraught and charged when occupied by black folks” because discourses of antiblackness deem the black subject as always already irrational, primitive, and dangerous. In the context of Clementine Hunter’s life and work her ‘crazed-genius’ draws on and subverts the assumptions of racism (black = primitive, irrational), sexism (woman = domestic, subservient to man), and ageism (old = senile, obsolete) (Bruce 2021, 12–13).⁶⁰

Hunter’s marked pictures and archival presence carry a symbolic density, but too often her self-taught aesthetics are bracketed as ‘primitivist’ and ‘juvenile’ or ‘naïve’ and thus are interpolated into flat representations of an Edenic Old South.⁶¹ *Clementine Hunter: Her life and art* (2012), the only book-length monograph on Hunter’s career, gives the impression that Hunter’s paintings are popular and important because of their seemingly uncomplicated representations of Black life content in its place in the plantation landscape. With this framing, the pictures seem to showcase the light-hearted sociality of rural black life, disconnected from the protest or social critique that marked the late 1950s and 1960s when Hunter began to paint. Engaged as novelty items, these images have been interpreted as colorful memories of rural life pre-and post-Emancipation. Like the permanently acquiescent “Good/Faithful Darcy” statue that had been erected in Cane River in 1927, decontextualized Clementine Hunter pictures represent a bygone era of jubilant acquiescence to the scripts of de jure and de facto segregation.⁶² But when engaged from the vantage point of the Black community

⁶⁰ In the essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden’s” Alice Walker engages the relationship between this ‘madness-creativity intersection’ and the socio-cultural oppression of Black [Southern] women. In Walker’s spellbinding prose the “crazy saints” that were some of our Mother’s and Grandmothers were artists full of “springs of creativity for which there was no release.” As such the creative sparks latent in Black femininity were passed on through alternative modes of cultural production like storytellin’ and crat arts like quilting. Walker, Alice. “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens.” In *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell. Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 1994.pg. 401-2

⁶¹ Google Arts & Culture. “The Inspiring Story of Clementine Hunter.” Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-inspiring-story-of-clementine-hunter/mAXhLE-PhSKCJQ>. Magazine, Smithsonian, and Roger Catlin. “Self-Taught Artist Clementine Hunter Painted the Bold Hues of Southern Life.” Smithsonian Magazine. Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/self-taught-artist-clementine-hunter-painted-bold-hues-southern-life-180970572/>. “Clementine Hunter: ‘Success Was about Direct Encounters with the People Who Admired Her Art’ | Christie’s.” Accessed March 23, 2022. <https://www.christies.com/features/The-remarkable-story-of-folk-artist-Clementine-Hunter-11464-1.aspx>.

⁶² “Uncle Jack,” a statue depicting an elderly black man tipping his hat to an imagined white viewer was sculpted by Hans Schular and financed by wealthy Natchitoches Parish banker Jackson Lee Bryant. It was originally installed in riverfront park in downtown Natchitoches with a plaque that read: “In Grateful Recognition of the Arduous and Faithful Service of the Good Darkies of Louisiana.” In the historical context of the late-1920s in the Deep South, this public acknowledgement of Black labor was considered by some to be a liberal and progressive gestures. National news stories published in the Boston Globe and New York Times praised the White citizens of Natchitoches for installing a monument to a negro. Consequently, the statue became a popular tourist attraction. After 40 years, unsurprisingly around the time of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black cultural consciousness, this perception faded and the statue was removed by the city in 1968. Financier Jackson Lee Bryan’s daughter saved the statue and later donated to the LSU Rural Life Museum where it has been installed since September 1972. It’s worth noting that the statue was first installed at the museum entrance and after some controversy around the “message it sent” about the museum, Uncle Jack was moved to the back of the museum grounds “where no one can accidentally see him, and where most people will have to ask a museum employee to point the

to which Hunter belonged, these persistently social representations of black life within the specific landscape and social sphere of the Melrose plantation, offer a nuanced and clever appraisal of Black life. They are a survey of intramural labors, pleasures and curiosities as they are held and reshaped in a Black woman's memory.

In another archive, The Historic New Orleans Collection (housed in an ornate building in the French Quarter), Clementine Hunter is catalogued as “A Primitive Painter” by Louisiana-born photographer Clarence John Laughlin. Laughlin, best known as the Father of American Surrealism, has a photographic canon that attest to an affinity for plantation life and architecture (Leighten 1988). In 1952, he photographed and her work for a feature article that was published in image-focused *Look Magazine* on June 16, 1953. At the time of the photoshoot, Hunter was 66 years-old. Titled “Innocence Regained,” the article profiles Hunter alongside four other elder self-taught artists that the article refers to as “primitives.” Isreal Litwak, Isidor Sommer, Dame Cosmy Hulitar and Esther Hamerman are all white migrants from Europe who established their careers out of New York City. The accompanying text attributes the ascent of these artists, from the benign obsolescence of old age into prolific careers, to a combination of chance, enforced leisure and...latent desire (Willard 1953).

While they are all positioned as some form of cultural outsider to standardized notions of both what it means to be an *American* and an *artist*, Hunter stands out as the only artist among them born within the continental United States, the only Black person and further the only Black woman. She also stands out as the only artist to be pictured



Figure 4 detail from *Look Magazine* Spread (1953)

way.” RoadsideAmerica.com. “Uncle Jack, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.” Accessed December 22, 2021. <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/21928>.

in color on the first page of the spread. The two images of Hunter included in the spread are the largest, taking up a half of a page each.

In the one full-color photo featured in the article she is seated in the corner of a large couch covered by a quilt. Notes in Laughlin's archive reveal that Hunter made the quilt and Laughlin repositioned it onto the couch and later onto an external wall of her cabin for the photoshoot. The walls, ceiling, and one swath of the floor appear to be covered in a matching floral print wallpaper. Following Tina Campt, I am drawn to the muscular tensions, the stasis, of her posture and the ways it may act as a quiet refusal of the gaze of the photographer, the audience of *Look Magazine* and the historical archive which now holds the image negatives (Campt 2017). In contrast to the working image described earlier, here Hunter appears more intentionally positioned. I read her posture as uptight and disinterested. In this pose of resignation her hands grip another tool of her labor, a feather duster. *She glances towards the camera as if to say "go ahead and take the picture so I can get back to my work."* Perhaps literally offering what Zora Neale Hurston has termed "a feather-bed resistance."

In the introduction to her anthology of Black diasporic folklore *Mules and Men* (originally published in 1935), Hurston offers the theory of featherbed resistance as the way Black folks understand and respond to the white search for knowing:

"The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song"(Hurston 2009, 2)

This method anticipated the questions posed by Tina Campt in *Listening to Images* (2017). Extending a Black feminist minor empiricism into the terrain of Art History, Campt uncouples the relationship between self-fashioning and agency by attuning a Black feminist art-historical gaze towards the frequencies of quiet and quotidian refusals (Campt 2017).⁶³ With a focus on the genre of 'identification photography' which sought to fix conceptions of racial and gendered difference "for the regulatory needs of the state or the classificatory imperatives of colonization," Campt ethically amplifies Black vernacular subjectivities that persists within the constraints the archive (Campt 2017, 5). Portraits of Clementine Hunter, which sought to fix her as both a plantation-bound Black feminine figure and an outsider artist, elicit this method of affective interpretation. Within the constraints of domestic labor, white paternalism, art consumerism and fetishization, Hunter's insistently quiet and quotidian performances of ambivalence proffer simple pleasantries to the white probe of understanding.

The photo featured in *Look Magazine* does not portend to relay the curiosity of her will to be an artist or the variety of her labors. Instead, it seems aimed at

⁶³ In the essay "Black Feminism's Minor Empiricism: Hurston, Combahee, and The Experience of Evidence," Lindsey Andrews defines Black feminist minor empiricism as that which "highlights the experience of sensation as an occasion already engaged in sense-making, producing immanent knowledge in the phenomenological composition of sensational experience that is neither passive nor given, but instead always produced—performed—in concert with the world that touches back as it is touched."

documenting the ways this “charwoman⁶⁴ and laundress” relates to her own domestic space. As the text describes, Hunter’s domestic space is also a site of consumption and exchange, serving as “her own personal art gallery.” The brightness and business of Hunter’s sitting room strikes me as directly resonant with the aesthetic of Blackness described and heralded by bell hooks in her 1995 essay “An Aesthetic of Blackness – strange and oppositional.” In this setting, it becomes clear that Hunter lived with and within an affinity for color. As an outgrowth of her own intimate craft practices, Hunter’s choices in painting were deliberately informed by the quotidian aesthetic practices that consumed her life. Before painting she made vibrant quilts and dolls. While these more traditional craft arts have mostly been cleaved from her artistic oeuvre as we come to know it through Museums like the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, the history focused Historic New Orleans Collection, holds several photos of her dolls and quilts, portraits taken by Laughlin and another patron James Pipes Register, images of her cabin, and documentation of an auction held at the Melrose plantation in 1970 (when Hunter was 84 years-old) in which many of her artworks (painting and otherwise) were sold to support the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches.

I use the term “Vernacular artist” to refer to Clementine Hunter as opposed to the terms ‘primitive painter,’ ‘folk artist,’ ‘outsider artist,’ ‘self-taught or visionary artist’ following a recent curatorial intervention at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, LA. Curator of the permanent collection, Bradley Sumrall renamed the gallery dedicated to “outsider, self-taught, and visionary artists,” in an effort to move away from Eurocentric art historical frameworks. In the wall text for the 2019 Spring exhibition titled “Vernacular Voices: Self Taught, Outsider and Visionary Art from the Permanent Collection” which announced this transition, Sumrall defined “vernacular” as that which:

“implies a unique iteration of language -- both visual and spoken -- bound to location and free from the confines of academia. Just as spoken dialects change with the land itself; the Vernacular Art of a region also contains a vocabulary with a strong sense of place.”

While Folk Art, in the Ogden curatorial vocabulary, is a large umbrella associated with traditional craft arts, Vernacular Art branches off into a set of expressive principles more commonly associated with Modern and contemporary art. Hunter, born in 1886 was the oldest artist included in the Vernacular Voices exhibit. Over her approximately 100 years of life in Cane River, Louisiana she lived through, witnessed and documented the transition from the pastoral Old South wed to antebellum social and economic dictates to a New South marked by social and cultural mobilities created by Civil Rights organizing, industrialization and fast paced commerce. But along with being a Vernacular artist whose work employs a social lingua franca of 20th century Black life in the rural south, Hunter was also a surrealist who disregarded convention and marked pictures from her own dream-inflected memory.

⁶⁴ “charwoman” is an antiquated term for a female domestic laborer. In 19th century parlance, a charwoman is a part-time worker as opposed to a live-in ‘maid’.

In *Clementine Hunter : her life and art*, Hunter patrons and biographers Art Shiver and Tom Whitehead write:

“In December of the same year Hunter finished the [Africa House] murals, Rosa Parks’ refusal to obey James F. Blake’s order that she move to the back of a city bus launched the Montgomery bus boycott, and blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to ride the city buses until they could sit wherever they wanted. Hunter seemed to have little awareness of growing racial unrest in America. Melrose, even in the mid-1950s, was still geographically remote, and no one, *certainly not the illiterate artist, could imagine the dramatic social changes that lay ahead* (emphasis mine, 69).”

And this is just one of the more explicit times the monograph proscribes Hunter’s ignorance to promote/protect the romantic paternal notions that undergird most popular understandings of her work. It also dedicates several full chapters to the histories of her White patrons. Hunter is continually described by Shiver, Whitehead, and the White Southern collecting class they represent, as outside of, or oblivious to, the social-political-economic shifts that occurred while she was living and working on and alongside the Melrose Plantation. A major goal of this chapter is to illustrate the ways that her artistic production – and her articulations of her relationship to the various types of labor she performed during her lifetime – actually communicate a radical ambivalence to the plantation logics into which her labor is continually conscripted.

In art, history, and contemporary discourse, Black life is overdetermined by labor. As discussed by Tiffany Leboitho King, “labor as a visual, conceptual, and materialist regime [is used to fix] the Black body’s geographic relationship to the New World” (T. L. King 2016, 1022). More pointedly, the black feminine body is overdetermined in historical and contemporary discourse as the most necessary laborer of them all (i.e. Hurston’s truism “de nigger ‘oman is de mule of de world”).⁶⁵ King’s re-readings of the construction of the Black female body as a working body within the 17th and 18th century plantation landscape disrupts the customary historicization and naturalization of Black women’s labor in a way that helps us listen to Hunter’s images. Just as BeTTy BuTT mobilizes the Spillerian ideal of “signifying property *plus*” in willfully inexhaustible erotic choreographies, Hunter too embodies a kind of living fungibility that marks her as more than just a laborer. King defines this Black Fungibility as “the capacity of Blackness for unfettered exchangeability and transformation within and beyond the form of the commodity” (T. L. King 2016, 1023). In this way, the modifier “Black” stretches the political economic term “fungibility” to account for the metaphorical and discursive values that are also held within the expanse of Black femininity. The Black feminine figure, as discussed throughout the whole of this dissertation project, exceeds the direct, one to one material exchange categories of commodity and laborer. To repeat a core refrain from this dissertation’s first chapter, all the uses to which the Black feminine figure can be put make her a being of

Figure 5 detail from "Clementine Hunter at Work"

⁶⁵ Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Reissue edition. New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1998.

transcendent matter. In addition to confounding the distinction between being a laborer and being a commodity, the laboring Black feminine figure is also prone to accumulate many different skill sets and the social matrix of expectations that come with them. In the context of Hunter, the fact of her being a pecan picker, a charwoman, a laundress, a mother, a wife, a community elder, a fire wood splitter, and a “world renowned primitive painter” exemplifies the infinite possibilities of the Black fungible body. This fungibility is both a problematic mark of enslavement’s inhumanity AND a road map towards possibilities that [exceed/overwhelm] capitalist logics.



Perhaps this Black fungibility is what is really on display in the image of “Clementine Hunter at Work.” In the photograph, the laboring Black feminine figures that Hunter paints have no obvious individuality. They are uniformed in both the sense that they wear identical “work clothes” and because they are all similar in size, stature and pose. Plotted in two horizontal lines between the cotton crops they pick, they represent “the spatial capacity of Black femaleness” within the plantation landscape (T. L. King 2016). While King is not discussing Hunter’s work, she is thinking explicitly about renderings of the black feminine figure in relationship to plantation landscapes. Time here is fungible too. In learning how to talk about Hunter’s work to diverse audiences during docent training at the Ogden Museum my cohort was told stories about how most viewers assume Hunter’s paintings represent slavery. And who’s to say they don’t? Hunter’s memory paintings produced during the latter half of her post-Emancipation plantation-bound life present the timelessness of Black life and labor in the rural Gulf South. *But here, too, is Hunter’s hand.* As her left hand steadies the right, we see the kind of intimate supportive hold that makes it possible for her to perform the artistic labor of marking pictures.

Pulling the performative customs and rituals of New Orleans’ Mardi Gras Indians into dialogue with Caribbean practices of exhaustive celebration, performance scholar Joseph Roach describes the physically taxing artistic labor of producing ornately beaded one-of-a kind Mardi Gras Indian suits as “reclaimed labour.” Citing field work in New Orleans and extensive study of Caribbean carnival traditions, Roach argues that the conditions of grossly alienated labor that constitute Black life throughout the African diaspora give rise to “another form of expenditure in the ritualized occasions of leisure” (Roach 2008, 145). This is particularly relevant to liminal conditions of Black freedom in the US South and Caribbean. In Roach’s summation, Carnival emerges in the shadow of slavery and thus the effort of preparing for and participating in these moments of ritualized leisure allows the ‘Black slave’ turned ‘Black laborer’ to recuperate some of what has been stolen. This is similar to the argument I make in **Chapter 1** about the ways Black feminine figures reclaim their capacities for non-productive sexuality through carnivalesque erotic public performances. Through the analytic of Black

fungibility, we can understand this practice of recreational expenditure as more than a reclamation of labor. It is perhaps also the reclamation of the body itself. In the arena of artistic production, “work” has a different feel to it. The quiet hold of one hand around the other indexes a kind of self-possession that disrupts the alienation that accompanies the capitalist construction of labor.

In a critical uptake of sociologist W.E.B Du Bois’ *The Negro American Family* (1908), Saidiya Hartman articulates “the problem of black women’s labor” as that which makes “apparent the gender non-conformity of the black community, its supple and extended modes of kinship, its queer domesticity, promiscuous sociality and loose intimacy, and its aerial and fluid conjugal relations” (S. Hartman 2016b). Taking this description as an anchor, I trace ‘queer domesticity’ and ‘promiscuous sociality’ through the life, work, and cultural resonance of Clementine Hunter. To do this, I read Clementine Hunter’s artwork, portraits of the artists, gossip and historical anecdotes about her into a composite that illustrates the ways Hunter’s vernacular aesthetics of surreal representation, like the country blues of her contemporary Gertrude ‘Ma Rainey’ Pridgett, “offered an aesthetic invocation of the social impasse and lethal incoherence of a society organized around the demeaning logic of racism (Davis 117).”

Privileging the Folk

Hunter marked down an understanding of her surroundings (and of herself in those surroundings) that necessarily evades easy interpretation. Her simple gestures towards figuration and her ‘use what you have’ color palate offer what Zora Neale Hurston once termed “a featherbed resistance” to the probe of the white and/or mainstream art historical search for meaning (Hurston 1935). Attention to Hunter’s ascent into artistic production shows that the initial audience for her creative work was herself and her community. Clementine Hunter was not a singular and isolated creative luminary validated and primarily shaped by an influx of white patrons. On the contrary, situating Hunter within a community of Black laborers and cultural workers evidences the social lingua franca she shared with her contemporaries within the fields of Cane River and in the broader black cultural sphere. In addition to being a “charwoman,” a “laundress,” and an artist, Hunter was a wife, a mother, and a community member. Engaging her work within a community of Black laborers and cultural workers illuminates the ways her artistic production, her memory painting, registered Black life without translation in ways that offer what Angela Davis in her reading of early 20th century Black blues women terms “veiled protest”(A. Y. Davis 2011, 100).

In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (2011), Davis utilizes methodologies of close listening and interpretation that reframe the work of Blues luminaries like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday within an intramural Black context. By taking seriously the presence of a Black audience with different access to and familiarity with each performer, Davis distills deeper socio-political insights from lyrics and anecdotes that white critics have overlooked and misread. In this gesture, Davis models a way to make sense of the omissions of archival records. As Black blues vocalist often performed songs and sketches that they were not permitted by White record labels to record, there

can be no exhaustive discussion of their content, aims, or intent based solely on what has been left behind on wax. Similarly, Hunter's official archives as held in The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, The Historical New Orleans Collection and the Cammie G Henry Research Library at NSULA were mostly collected and solicited by a White collecting class with its own biases and intent. There is no accounting for the things that may have slipped out or the things Hunter herself might have withheld. In fact, there is no true "Clementine Hunter Archive." The "Clementine Hunter Papers" I engaged in my research were all things catalogued and donated by white patrons and photographers. There is no institutionalized archive that holds the things that Hunter herself thought were worth keeping. Following Black feminist historians Saidiya Hartman and Marisa Fuentes, I don't desire to reproduce archival violence through feverish acts of excavation, rather I am looking at this archival opening (and the literal disruption of my own archival research by the COVID-19 Pandemic) as a place where Black studies and specifically Black feminist theoretical modes of analysis and interpretation can re-assemble a critical account of the past through radical and creative applications of interdisciplinary methods (S. Hartman 2008; Fuentes 2016).

When Hunter began foraging paints and stealing her own time to mark pictures by candlelight, she was operating within what Sylvia Wynter terms "the plot system" – that indigenous and or folk system in which labor and production are involved in the world of use-value, in response to a human need. Like the Afro-diasporic novelists described by Wynter, Hunter as the artist :

"is by the very nature of [her] craft linked to the structure of use-value statements, the impulse of creation thus being directed by human needs..."

Wynter goes on to theorize the relationship between the communal 'folk system' or 'folk culture' in opposition to the modes of market focused production and social hierarchy established and maintained by the plantation. In Wynter's analysis, the plantation produces its own fictions of control and names them "History." This history is deeply tied to structures of market value and thus designate a specific position of the enslaved or formerly enslaved Black laborer. Working both *the plot* and *the plantation* – having command of a "guerilla system of cultural resistance" while simultaneously being the "labor, land and capital" of the plantation – Wynter's Black peasant laborer arrives at a sense of ambivalence between the two venues (Wynter 1956). Clementine Hunter created from a similar sense of ambivalence between the domestic labor she performed for the plantation and the artistic labor she performed initially for herself and then ultimately for another market structure that she would eventually grow tired and skeptical of.

A core text in my discussion of Hunter is a thin hardcover book titled *Talking with Tebe: Clementine Hunter, Memory Artist*. While its intended audience is not overtly academic, *Talking with Tebe* is significant in that it endeavors to let Hunter speak for herself. A historical writer for children and young adults, Mary E. Lyons compiled and edited the book by sourcing newspaper and magazine articles, columns written by Hunter's patron and 'art handler' Francois Mignon, and twenty-two taped interviews held in the Cammie G. Henry archives of Northwestern State University of Louisiana. Lyons' editor's note at the beginning of the book lays out the stakes of this effort. After a personal reckoning with the inequities of the wage-labor system navigated

by southern sharecroppers, Lyons exposes the contradiction in the fact that Hunter “as a low paid field worker and servant...could never earn enough to buy a cabin for herself. Yet her labor helped make Melrose the largest privately owned pecan plantation in the world.” Further, when the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches took ownership of The Melrose Plantation in 1977 it raised 7,000 selling prints of Hunter’s work and the money went towards remodeling Hunter’s old cabin and moving it to a convenient position behind ‘The Big House’ while Hunter herself was left to figure out payments on her mobile home (Hunter and Lyons 1998). Lyons’ representation of Hunter through this composite of archival evidence introduces readers to a woman fully aware of the conditions in which she worked to live.

As a self-taught 20th century black artist from the South, Hunter and her work were at turns derided and hailed for being authentic representations of the primitive sensibilities of Black folks. In an article on another Black Southern vernacular artist, Bill Traylor, Kerry James Marshall interrogates the hailing of the self-taught black artist by “the white collecting class”(Umberger, Marshall, and Stebich 2018) . Marshall posits that:

“nothing changes the perception of a black person within his/her community, or their perception of themselves, more than the unsolicited attention of White folks who had previously been indifferent if not hostile to their very existence. A lingering suspicion over motives tends to mitigate uninhibited sharing, especially in people raised from birth to be deferential to a ruling White overclass.” (2018)

And in this understanding that whatever might have been authentic in Traylor, and by extension in all Black folk art of the 20th century, was more than likely altered by the impositions (and acquisitions) of Whiteness, Marshall insists that we cannot become over reliant on romantic readings of the undiluted “black spirit” as conveyed through the expressive practices of self-taught artists. But the traces of Hunter’s voice that do make their way into institutionalized archives depict a Black southern woman who was never overtly “deferential to a ruling White overclass.”

In a collection of papers referencing Hunter donated to the Historic New Orleans Collection by Metairie-based plastic surgeon turned arts patron Dr. Robert F. Ryan, there are several texts, essays, and speeches written by Ryan about Hunter’s work, life, and humor. In one speech, Ryan describes his first encounter with Hunter. He had been brought along with friends from Alexandria who were going to pick up a painting. When their party arrived, Hunter was in her yard splitting wood. Ryan remarks “I cannot be certain what I expected to find when I met this world-renowned primitive painter, but splitting wood was low on the list.” Ryan is also clear that this old lady painter was not just splitting wood as wood is customarily split. His party was reportedly, “entranced when she drove the ax down into a block of wood” and when it did not split, “instead of working the ax loose, she turned it over, lifted the ax and the block of wood up into the air and brought it down with great force.” This turn of the ax subverted Ryan’s expectation of the elder artisan and by extension his expectations of Black women in their senior years. Perhaps, to Dr. Ryan’s mind, a Black woman’s painterly hand could also be the hand that rocks a cradle or fixes a meal, but the encounter with this older Black woman chopping wood with such force confounded his preconceptions about Black women’s labor. That Hunter did not stop her task or change her style in the presence of her would-be White collectors shows literal strength *and* a strength of character not typically afforded to the caricatures of the “primitive elder artist” as

depicted in *LOOK Magazine* and other popularly circulated images of elderly plantation matrons. Further, as this scene of encounter continues, Hunter first acknowledges her visitors with a “Who dat?” before inviting them in and handing them the paintings they had purchased. When asked by Ryan if she would take another commission and “paint one of the Zinneas” (her favorite flower) and “a Saturday nite,” Hunter plainly states she would “see about it” and then dismisses her guests. Ryan remarks that Hunter “had probably not said fifteen words and seemed very withdrawn. But it was not aloofness as much as her time of judging us.”⁶⁶

In chronicling his encounters with Hunter to an audience of other White collectors, Ryan positions himself as the probe of White inquiry as described by Hurston. If we take his word for it (and maybe we shouldn’t), The Hunter-Ryan exchange offers ethnographic data that supports Hurston’s claims that Black folks developed strategies that they employed to engage with White interlopers. What’s interesting about Hunter is that she does not offer “laughter and pleasantries” or any other congenial gestures, rather she performs a withdrawn disinterest. Part of what communicates her disinterest is that fact that she keeps her focus on the labors she performs daily. In an inversion of popularized depictions of Black folks who drop everything to be of service and attention to white folks, Hunter keeps chopping her firewood. Encountering this anecdote in the archive shifted the lens through which I set out to engage Hunter. As opposed to focusing on the ways she represented literal scenes of agricultural labor on the Melrose Plantation, labor that contributed to the profits of the plantation as an institution, this scene encouraged me to think with Hunter’s relationships to the other forms of labor that constituted her century-long life.

The archives I’ve engaged in my research represent Hunter’s documented engagements with those outside of her community. The closest we get to an “insider’s perspective” on Hunter’s archival presence comes in a 1979 interview conducted by Dorothy R Roberts as part of the Black Women’s Oral History Project undertaken by Harvard’s Schlesinger Library between 1976-1981. I want to describe this as an insider perspective because the interviewer was a Black woman and the context was a Black women’s oral history project but even that is an oversimplification. In truth, Dorothy Roberts was another outsider who came up to Hunter’s porch accompanied by one of her more established White patrons. Hunter’s answers are as short and ambivalent as ever. Listening to the tape there is none of the conversational ease one would project onto the idea of these two Black women meeting across difference. They are coming from different places in almost every way. At the time of the interview, Hunter was 86 years-old. Different generations, different regionalities, different educational backgrounds. And it seems that they were unable to bridge the social gap between them over the course of the interview. At one point, Roberts asks if Hunter has any thought about the civil rights movement and women’s liberation movement “and all the marching and whatnot, and the integration of schools” to which Hunter replies “No, not too much.” And when asked specifically about Women’s Lib and the if she would change anything about the status of women today, she replies “Well I don’t know how might we change. I don’t know.”

⁶⁶ The Dr. Robert F. Ryan Clementine Hunter Papers, MSS 1051, Williams Research Center, The Historic New Orleans Collection.

Citing this exchange, one could conclude that Hunter *was* actually disinterested in politics and maybe even ignorant to the societal shifts happening around her but why should that matter? The urge to ask a question about politics and to probe it's response for some deeper truth (like I initially did) is an attempt to make Hunter's socio-political consciousness legible on terms imposed by 'outsiders'. This is a willful attempt to recuperate parts of Hunter that are none of our business (read: unknowable, subjective, and irrelevant to a discussion of her art). Nevertheless, the original exchange and its portrayal here, do convey the desire of the Black feminist creative intellectual to erect a bridge between themselves and an elder. Perhaps this very desire for intergenerational bridges that might help to make sense of the contemporary condition of the Black feminine in US society was what led Dr. Letitia Brown Woods, first black woman to receive of PhD in history from Harvard University, to suggest the Schlesinger Library take on the project.

But one piece of Hunter captured in the Black Women's Oral History Project interview that escapes the other archives is Hunter's self-described "feeling for [her] people." When Roberts ask, "What influenced you, what made you Clementine Hunter that you are?" She replies:

"well, the church, and the people, my people. I got...had feeling for my people, and I prayed for them and I'm praying for 'em till yet. I'm trying to make heaven my home..."

I agree with Roberts that that is a "beautiful statement." Further, it is an articulation of my argument that contrary to the popular historicization of Hunter and her patrons which is an example of the broader narrative of the Black "outsider artist" and the White collecting class, Hunter's primary sphere of influence was her own intimate community, her folk.

Queer Domesticity : Mythic Black Homemaking in Colonial Louisiana

What might it mean for a Black woman artist making her living on a Northern Louisiana plantation in the 20th century to try and make heaven her home? A direct translation unpacks it as a desire to live a life of Christian piety that makes one fit for entry into Heaven's gates. Thinking back to Hartman's assertion that Black women's labor surfaces the queer domesticity of Black life, I want to think of Hunter's heavenly home as a speculative horizon like queerness and like diaspora. As discussed by Nadia Ellis in *Territories of the Soul*, queerness and diaspora meet in the world of feeling – loss, desire, and zeal – that spans the gap between *here* and *there* (Ellis 2015) . In the context of diasporic identity, the material reality of dispossession and the desire to be elsewhere produce a longing that sometimes manifest as nationalism or nationalistic devotion. In the theological register devotion is both a quality of feeling and an act of religious observance.

As a catholic resident of Cane River, Hunter attended St Augustine Catholic Church. This chapel is depicted in several of her paintings as a central feature of the Melrose plantation landscape. Local lore states that St Augustine Catholic Church was established and built by Nicolas Augustin Metoyer in 1803 but the Church did not enter the archive until 1829 when it was consecrated for religious use by Father Jean Baptiste Blanc (Mills, Mills, and Burton 2013, 195). In this record, as conveyed in Gary Mill's

historical text on the affluent Cane River Creole population, *The Forgotten People*, Father Blanc reported that the church had been erected “through the care and generosity of...Augustin Metoyer, aided by Louis Metoyer, his brother” (Mills, Mills, and Burton 2013, 195). Louis Metoyer was also the title-holder of the land that would become The Melrose Plantation. Socio-economically classed as “Creoles de couleur” (creoles of color) or “gens de couleur libres” (free people of color), these brothers were descendants of a formerly enslaved African woman named Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin.

Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin’s legacy represents the archetype of the “African matriarch in The New World.” Distinct from the pathological Black matriarch conjured up by Daniel Patrick Moniyhan in his 1965 report on the “Negro Family,” the archetype of the *African* matriarch in the New World appears in the origin stories of Black families throughout the South (including my own). Both the “African matriarch in the New World” and Moniyhan’s pathological Black matriarch are myths conjured up to explain the peculiar social phenomenon of Black women’s labor in the role of “head of household.” Since imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy relies on its own myths of male social, political, and economic power, the ‘role reversals’ found within the familial structures of Black folks elicit new narratives that strive to make sense of and ultimately delimit the significance of Black women’s labors.

Emerging in the space between the virgin and the whore that much of Black femininity has been conscribed to, the “African matriarch in The New World,” is the raped (or otherwise miscegenated) 18th – 19th century Black feminine figure who survives, and whose survival makes our survivals possible. One of my favorite sightings of the “African matriarch in The New World,” comes in the literary work of the late Gloria Naylor. Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) and the unfinished manuscript *Sapphira Wade*, explore the legacy of an enslaved woman of mythic proportions who “was nobody’s slave” and bewitched her European master, Bascombe Wade, so good that they married, bore seven sons, and upon his mysterious death she acquired the deed to the imagined territory of Willow Springs off the Georgia-South Carolina coast. After Bascombe Wade’s death in the year of 1823, Sapphira’s island became a community of free black folks before the Civil War.

No archival evidence suggests that Naylor turned to the historical records of the Nachitoches Parish creoles for inspiration in writing this character. Nevertheless, the character of Sapphira Wade bares a deep resemblance to the history and mythology of Marie Thérèse Coincoin. While there is some debate about the true role that Marie Thérèse played in the establishment of the Melrose Plantation, it is said that Black families throughout Nachitoches Parish believed that before the Civil War the Isle Brevelle area belonged to them and these beliefs were anchored by portraits of their ancestors that documented their wealth and culture. There was even a genealogical table compiled by a local priest in the 19th-century that traced the ‘founding family’-of-color to a freed Black woman named Marie Therese. According to historian Elizabeth Shown Mills, these “random shards of history” were spun into a myth by a writer/charlatan known as Francois Mignon (MILLS 2012, 407). Invited into Cammie Henry “Cane River Bohemia,” plantation-turned-artists colony in the 1930s, Mignon operated as the Melrose Plantation’s publicity machine. In addition to publicizing the “myth” of Cane River’s African matriarch, Mignon is said to have established Clementine Hunter’s artistic career.

The mysteries of Mignon, a white gay legally-blind writer who reinvented himself in Natchitoches Parish, warrant their own study, but for my purposes let's linger on the historical murkiness of the African matriarch's survival. The article from which the details above are pulled is titled, "Demythicalizing History: Marie Thérèse Coin-Coin, Tourism, and the National Historical Landmarks Program" (MILLS 2012). In the article, white Southern historian Elizabeth Shown Mills takes the Black legend and lore of Natchitoches Parish to task and ultimately concludes that Marie Therese's importance was exaggerated by Mignon and adopted by the commercial agenda of the Association of Natchitoches Women for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. Here, Mills becomes not just an arbiter of white inquiry but a merciless defender of the absolute "Truths" of the historical record. For Mills, if it is not in the record, it is a betrayal. "Lore, legend, and family history," she writes, "are tricksters that betray those who trust them" (MILLS 2012, 402). Mills faithful defense of the historical record blatantly ignores the ways History is shaped by discourses of race, gender, and power. To riff on Wynter in the key of Saidiya Hartman's imaginative archival interventions, historical fact is just a narrative, a plot, endorsed by the State.

Historical facts reported by Gary Mills (Elizabeth's husband) in 1976 convey that an infant was born to African parents in the Natchitoches outpost of the French colony, Louisiana, and baptized under the Christian name Marie Thérèse in 1742. The church in Natchitoches did not have a resident priest for the first 20 years of its existence, and since the catholic church was the only local archive that would worry itself with accounting the enslaved, the information on Marie Thérèse early years is only found in the imperfect registers of the church. In 1767, Marie Thérèse was leased to a young French merchant, Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer and shortly began to bear his children. The queerness of their domestic arrangement was decried in 1778 by a newly appointed Spanish priest, Father Quintanilla. The pair's formal marriage would have defied the Code Noir and when the pair refused to end their liaison, Father Quintanilla filed charges of public concubinage against them. Consequently, Marie Thérèse was briefly expelled from the Metoyer household. In an effort to restore their willfully illegible union, Metoyer formally purchased Marie Thérèse and their youngest child from their former master, then freed them from bondage (Mills 1976).

Once formally manumitted and relatively secure in her peculiar union, Marie Thérèse began to establish her profile as a business woman. As a landowner and a taxpayer she sold an array of goods in the markets of New Orleans, supported the local church, made medicine and supported her family. She is reported to have owned over one thousand acres of land. Much of this land was worked by slaves she bought. One parcel of this land was granted to her son, Louis Metoyer who some would say is the "true" founder of the Melrose Plantation, but it is impossible to divorce his development of the land from the social and economic contributions of his mother's labor. And it is impossible to divorce the labor of Marie Thérèse CoinCoin from its mythic presence in the lore of Natchitoches Parish.

This is legacy and legend that built St Augustine Catholic Church and the rationale behind its "racial reversals" – a founding family of 'free people of color' who were seated in front of white planters in the congregation. This is one of the contexts from which Hunter understood Heaven. A heaven forged from the queer survival of an African matriarch who strategized her freedom. While some (like the Mills') regard Louisiana Creoles as race unto themselves, they are indelibly marked by their African

blood. In the case of Nachitoches Parish, the mark of the African matriarch and her queer survivals is hailed as a mark of distinction even for the Creole population.

While some regard Hunter as a Creole artist, self-articulations of her ancestry mark a muddier picture. In an audio interview conducted by Mildred H Bailey in 1978, Hunter was asked about her familial background. She explains that her maternal grandmother told her she was from “Ol’ Virginny.” When asked about her father’s side of the family she says her paternal grandfather was an Irishman, potentially a slave trader or descended from slave traders and that her paternal grandmother was a “little ol’ black [Indian] woman.” When asked if “any of those people were slaves?,” Hunter initially says she doesn’t know. But soon thereafter, she says that her maternal grandmother from Virginia was a slave and maybe her paternal grandmother was too. Bailey remarks that she knew Hunter had some Indian blood and asks Hunter if her paternal grandmother was “full-blood Indian.” In response, Hunter emphasizes her paternal grandmother’s Blackness (and smallness) several times by reference to objects in the room (including Bailey’s pants). According to Hunter, her paternal grandmother was a “full Black Indian” (Hunter 1978).

In this same interview, Hunter says her father, born to an Irishman and a ‘Black Indian’ woman, was a “pure Frenchman.” Further she explains that growing up no one called her by her birthname ‘Clemence.’ She was called ‘BeBe’ or ‘TeBe’. She shares that when she got to be a “grown ol’ lady” she changed her name to *Clementine*. She didn’t like having a French name and further “don’t like them Frenchman now” because it’s the Frenchman that make her people “mixed up” and “Creole” (Hunter 1978). Hunter’s self-articulations of racial identity offer another performance of ambivalence. The origin story she crafts at 92, composed of stories told to her by her grandmothers, deprioritizes, and even cast a negative light on her supposed French ancestry. By 1886, when Hunter’s was born, Nachitoches Parish and all of Louisiana had been ruled by the French (1682-1763), the Spanish (1763-1800), the French again (1800-1803), and ultimately the Americans after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Reportedly, the presence of the francophone Creole population in Spanish Colonial Louisiana was so strong and disruptive that Spanish colonialist plotted immigration schemes to bring Acadians and Spanish-speaking Canary Islanders in to dilute the francophone majority (G. M. Hall 1992). Hunter’s familial melting pot was stirred by every wave of colonialism that moved through the Louisiana territory. One could imagine her father, John or Janvier Reuban (depending on who you ask, Hunter called him John), the elicit son of a Black-Indian woman and an Irish trader, assimilating into the more esteemed and powerful culture of the times. This cultural assimilation would go on to reshape his family’s myths in a way that is distinctly opaque. One could also imagine Hunter, or either of her Black matriarchs, experiencing some unspoken harms at the hands of empowered, slave owning, “Frenchmen”-of-color and deliberately distancing herself from them and their ways. I am choosing to incorporate this messy genealogical opacity into a hailing of *Clementine Hunter’s* Blackness.

What is Blacker than a story of ancestral dispossession and survival through the performances of cultural power and/or disidentification? What is Blacker than a set of stories where the only thing we know for sure is that the Mothers were Black?

Promiscuous Sociality : Saturday Night in *Cane River*

Cane River County, in which The Melrose Plantation and St. Augustine Catholic Church reside, is a geography that has long attracted writers, artists, and historians. Published in 2001, Lalita Tademy's New York Times Bestselling, Oprah Book Club selected historical fiction novel, *Cane River*, told the story of four generations of Black and/or Creole women surviving enslavement, the Civil War, and the pre-Civil Right's South. Tademy's *Cane River* interrogated the area's past while a 1982 film of the same name, directed by Horace B Jenkins, used the area's history to explore contemporary relations between Black folks in a post-Black Power South.

On February 7th 2020, I attended one of the first screenings of Horace B Jenkins *Cane River* 38 years after the film's 1982 New Orleans premiere. Set between "Cane River" or Natchitoches Parish and New Orleans, Louisiana, this independently produced Black film chronicles the socially forbidden love of two Black protagonists. Creole-bred prodigal son descended from the lighter-skinned landowning class, Peter *Metoyer*, falls for dark-skinned daughter of sharecroppers Maria Mathis. The two star-crossed lovers meet on the grounds of The Melrose Plantation where Maria is employed as a historical interpreter. Maria reads Gary Mills' book "The Forgotten People," from which I have pulled many of the details about Marie Thérèse Coincoin discussed earlier, in her breaks between tours. From the book she learns that the land and slave-owning Metoyer family did not consider themselves to be Black. Taken by Maria's bookish beauty, football star turned poet, Peter Metoyer sets out to woo her, but first must confront his own history. Inspired by Maria, he also reads *The Forgotten People* and talks about it with his family. He ultimately concludes that while the facts are right, the conclusions made by Mills are wrong. To prove this point, he takes Maria to St. Augustine Catholic Church one Sunday. After mass he takes her to look at the portrait of its founder Nicolas Augustin Metoyer. In a Fanonian inversion he draws her attention to the undeniable Blackness of the man in the portrait. His point: If we were ashamed of being Black, why would we put this Black man on these sacred walls?

This film became increasingly important to me as the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted my research plans. Travel was limited and the archives I had established relationships with were closed to the public. While I was not able to get to the Melrose Plantation and walk the terra firma known intimately by Clementine Hunter and Marie Therese, I was able to watch (& rewatch) this film which offered not only a beautiful look at the landscapes of Natchitoches Parish and New Orleans in the 1980s, but also a romance-inflected study of the ways Black folks in Northern Louisiana related to their peculiar caste-stratified history.

Maria and Peter dare to relate to one another across an intramural color line. This social and romantic exchange is “promiscuous” in the sense that it is an indiscriminate betrayal of a pervasive social code which sought to separate the lighter-skinned land owning “creoles” from the darker skinned laboring “blacks.” The writings of both Gary B Mills and Elizabeth S Mills further codify this distinction under the guise of proffering an objective history of the ‘forgotten [creole] people’. Against the myth(s) of creole distinction, Jenkins’ offered a counter-narrative of transgressive romance in which two Black-identifying protagonists interrogate the histories written onto their bodies on their own terms. This romance demonstrates that the personal is political *and* historical. Their love affair blossoms despite the fierce disapproval of Maria’s mother. Inside the scene of this disapproval, we are brought into the mother’s bedroom. Centered above the mother’s bed is a reproduction of a Clementine Hunter painting I recognized as “[Saturday Night at The Juke Joint.](#)”

In the context of this Black film, the work of Clementine Hunter performs a function distinct from its role at New Orleans’ Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Rather than signify a fixed sense Southern African-American “outsider” art, this filmic framing of Hunter’s memory painting holds her close to what bell hooks has termed “the strange and oppositional” aesthetics of Blackness. Affixed to the wall above the bed of a working-class Black mother, the reproduction of Hunter’s painting illustrates the ways “poor Black parents saw artistic cultural production...as necessary to bring delight, pleasure, and beauty into lives that were hard, that were materially deprived” (hooks 1995, 66). The reproduction of this specific Hunter painting, “Saturday Night at the Honky Tonk” also indexes what the Black social world of Natchitoches Parish meant to its Black inhabitants.



Figure 6 Screenshot from Horace B. Jenkin's "Cane River"

If we take Clementine Hunter at her word:

“The lord done showed me, you know, how to paint different things. I would mark it. I would see it in my sleep and I would get up and mark it with a pencil. My husband told me her said, you gotta be crazy, he say you gotta be crazy getting up at night fooling with a picture. And I would, I say, well, what I answer him, I say, what Got gave you, you ain’t gonna go crazy. That’s what I told him. And I said I got to keep it up” (Hunter 1974; White Jr. 2019)

her paintings are a survey of the intramural labors, pleasures and curiosities held in a Black woman’s memory, influenced by dreams and bestowed upon her by a Higher Power. While Louisiana Historian Sue Lyles Eakin’s unpublished monograph on the

artist hails Hunter as “a historian of plantation life,” I posit that bearing in mind the tangle of rumor, folklore, myth, and bare-faced lies that surround Hunter’s life and work, Saidiya Hartman’s configuration of “critical fabulation” might be a more apt description of Hunter’s representational practice. Through her chosen mediums of diluted oil paints and all manner paintable surfaces, Hunter “[plays] with and [rearranges] the basic elements of the story” of the Melrose Plantation and the Black social life that surrounded it (S. Hartman 2008, 11).

I am encouraged by Sarah Jane Cerevenak’s recent engagements with Hunter’s work in *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, and Ungiven Life* (2021). Building off Stephen Best’s provocation that to see Black social life/Black gathering is to also see the impossibility of an overtly coherent or stable means of being Black, Cerevenak cites/sights Hunter as a part of a Black feminist ecoaesthetic tradition that refuses the architectural enclosures of the post- Emancipation plantation. Refusing realism, Hunter marks a surrealist occasion “for a kind of ecological dreaming” in which Black women’s laboring bodies defy the representational logics of the post- Emancipation plantation economy (Cervenak 2021, 157–64). Just as Hunter’s depictions of black figures in the fields of the Melrose plantation picking cotton mark the material stasis of life on the post-Emancipation plantation, Hunter’s numerous renderings of the Natchitoches Parish Juke Joint aestheticize or mark wayward articulations of Black social life (& death).

As far as I know, there are at least 10 versions of this painting in existence variously named “Saturday Night,” “Saturday Night in Cane River,” “Saturday Night at the Honky Tonk,” “Saturday Night at the Jook Joint” and according to an inscription written by Cammie Henry in 1966 there is “better known” incendiary title “A Nigger Mess - Saturday Night.”⁶⁷ Some art dealers say that Hunter’s repetitive renderings of the drinking and violence of the Jook Joint are extensions of her Catholic piety. But the wall text accompanying a painting of “Saturday Night” featured in a 2021 show at the Louisiana State Museum: The Cabildo in New Orleans’ French Quarter district offers another explanation from Hunter herself. Apparently Hunter, “used to like to hear them play the music” and would “go there and drink [her] head off.” But she, “went down there one...Saturday night, and they was shooting so much all over the place, [she] fell down and when [she] fell, [she] got up...” and ran all the way back home. While she used to drink, she declares she “never made no racket or nothing.” And after that traumatic Saturday night she “got [her] drinking and stay to [her house]. No went back there no more.”

So, it seems that Hunter marked the Jook Joint so much because it was a traumatic memory stuck in her head. A moment where she firsthand witnessed the intramural violences that attend Black sociality. A moment where her good times were interrupted by a hail of gun shots. A moment she ran away from. A scene that taught her to keep her drinking in her house. This brings Hunter into dialogue with Black feminine figures in the other chapters of my dissertation who adapt in the face of intercommunal

⁶⁷ Heritage Auctions. “CLEMENTINE HUNTER (American, 1886-1988). Saturday Night at the | Lot #76033.” Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://fineart.ha.com/itm/paintings/clementine-hunter-american-1886-1988-saturday-night-at-the-honky-tonk-oil-on-panel16-x-24-inches-406-x-610/a/5114-76033.s>.

violence and utilize aesthetic practices to respond, release, fuck with and maybe even heal the precarious histories written onto their bodies.



Figure 7. Screenshot from Horace B. Jenkin's *Cane River*

A close look into the reproduction of “Saturday Night” depicted in *Cane River*’s Black domestic scene reveals Hunter’s surrealist take on Black gatherings centered around leisure and amusement as opposed to labor. A frame within a frame, the image just above the mother’s bed subtly corresponds with the green, yellow, blue, and pink rollers held to her scalp by a sheer white bonnet. Inside the beige trim/mat of the picture frame there is a then greyish-brown line of ground upon which an array of Black figures stand and lie down. From left to right: a very small speculatively masculine figure (gender denoted by a hat and pants) lays on his back holding a bottle up to his face, just above him another larger masculine figure lays against the grass-green back drop raising a bottle to his face, leaning over this second figure, a feminine figure in a blue dress angles down appearing to reach for the bottle, next to them a large pair of masculine figures reach towards each other in a tussle or a dance, to their right a feminine figure in a yellow dress and matching shoes reaches out towards a masculine figure in a white shirt and hat. Behind him, a masculine figure in a red shirt and blue hat holds something long (maybe a stick or club? prepared to strike?). At his back, a feminine figure in a white dress and red shoes falls backward, in front of her a feminine figure in yellow reaches towards her hands (is it a push or a grab?). At the second figures back, a masculine figure in all white (with red shoes) reaches out holding something brown.

While this is just the bottom third of the painting, it is the portion that features a group of Black figures in physical relationship to one another. Unlike some other iterations of “Saturday Night,” in this reproduction (as gleaned from a pixelated reproduction of a still image from the *Cane River* film), there are no red lines on the figures’ bodies denoting bloody wounds. The absence of blood gives way to a fluidity of interpretation between “dancing” and “fighting” that resembles the lived ambivalences

between violence and amusement that mar Black life. When I think of these Saturday Night/Nigger Mess paintings being sold, collected, auctioned, and displayed by the White Southern collecting class, what Saidiya Hartman elicits from the scenes of Black performance/dance coerced out of the slave coffles bares on this post-Emancipation scene: there is no scene of entertainment or amusement that exist outside the perverse violence of white consumption. For a white Southern audience, “Nigger Mess” functions as a testament to the dangerous social proclivities of free Black folks.

Held and literally centered in the intimate space of a bitter Black mother, the image tells a different story. It represents the kind of Black gathering that makes Black life possible. The red Juke Joint in Natchitoches Parish, near the grounds of the Melrose Plantation, was not considered an official part of the plantation landscape. Outside the confines of the plantation, Black folks gathered to dance and flirt, to drink and fight. Spaces of messy and improper social relation sustained the lives of the Black laboring underclass. In this way, the bold red Natchitoches Juke Joint is an inversion of pristine white of the St. Augustine Catholic Church depicted in some of Hunter’s other paintings and large-scale murals. As discussed in the earlier section of this chapter St. Augustine is a social and spiritual center of the land-owning lighter skinned Black/Creole community. As it’s red underbelly, the Jook Joint represents a social and spiritual center for the darker skinned laboring Black community. Classist and colorist moralisms, like those ascribed to Hunter by her white patrons, cast the Black patrons of the Juke Joint as less civilized than those that do their gathering at St. Augustine. This false and unnecessary distinction ignores the lived fluidity between Saturday night *sinnin’* and Sunday morning *confessin’* expressed in Hunter’s repeated renderings of both venues.

As a figure who moves between the spaces of the Church and Juke Joint, Hunter represents a the promiscuous sociality that makes up much of Black life and love. Further, her surrealist sublimations of the traumatic events that unfolded one night at the Honky Tonk, one particular “nigger mess,” index her own metamorphic *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* alongside the social survivals of the Black working class of Natchitoches Parish. Just as the bitter Mother’s bed is Maria Mathis’ condition of possibility, the place from which she is nurtured, protected, and punished; so to is “nigger mess” the place from which Black sociality is necessitated, practiced, and interrupted.

Conclusion: toward feather-bed surrealism(s)

Clementine Hunter’s last painting – purchased by Ed Ward a prominent black community organizer in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana the month before she died – portrayed a scene of black women doing laundry on “washing day” at The Melrose Plantation (Teal 2007). Bradley Sumrall, curator at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, told me that the artist’s work from this period was less desirable than the earlier pieces. Her hands were less precise, and her paints had dried up. But at the place where Black feminine constructions of work eclipse the demands of wage labor, Clementine Hunter continued to mark out pictures of her dreams and her hauntings. This chapter has turned to historical mythology & romantic narrative to engage Clementine Hunter from the perspective of her *folks*. Which is a colloquial way of saying I have been working to contextualize Hunter’s creative practice and the circulation of her art works within an under-cited Black southern counterpublic. Within these Black Southern contexts of film

and oral history, Hunter emerges as a bit of a trickster figure of her own mythic comportment. In these stories Hunter appears as a small yet unimaginably strong Black elder who is quietly humorous and overtly disinterested. By way of conclusion, I set out to think Hunter alongside Hurston to further explore the practice(s) of feather-bed resistance.

Clementine Hunter's life and work illustrate that "feather-bed resistance" is not just about a beguiling manner and subtle acts of misdirection. It is a mode of refusal that knows exactly what you are looking for and where it is hidden. It is a mode of refusal that judges you. A refusal that *knows* you don't know what you are missing. It is nonperformance, *a refusal of things refused*.⁶⁸ In the ethnographic work, *Mules and Men*, Hurston theorizes feather-bed resistance as she situates her own positionality in relation to the community she enters as an anthropologist. "Folklore isn't as easy to collect as it sounds," she relents before offering a summation of the Negro's evasiveness and explaining the reason she returned to Eatonville, FL, the land of *her* particular Folk (Hurston 2009, 2). Hurston's fiction offers another exploration of this practice of ambivalence in the face of intrusion.

The short story "Sweat" first published in 1926, tells the story of Delia Jones, a black washerwoman tormented by a listless philandering husband names Sykes. After the story's climax, Delia, spent from finally confronting Sykes and defending herself, "drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of a big feather-bed." From this location, she finds herself conjuring up "a spiritual earthworks against her husband. [A place where] His shells could no longer reach her. *Amen*." After this moment of self-defense, followed by contemplation, and prayer, Delia emerges with a "triumphant indifference" to Sykes' teases and taunts. It takes a few more months and the intervention of a rattlesnake for Sykes to finally get his comeuppance, but for the purposes of this chapter's argument I am drawn to the scene of Delia's retreat to her literal feather-bed. In Hurston's imaginary, the space set for dreaming (the feather-bed) is also the space where the Black feminine figure falls into her magic and the space where karma bites her oppressor. She rises from the feather-bed with a marked ambivalence to the oppressive force that was once her husband and goes on about her daily work.

If we let the function of the feather-bed as described in "Sweat" inform our understanding of Hurston's theory of feather-bed resistance, we can glimpse the multivalent forms this resistance can take. Like all good trickster technologies, feather-bed resistance is at once cozy and unrelenting, pragmatic and metaphysical, pleasant and disinterested, public and private, desired and indigestible, weak and impenetrable. Like the myths of Cane River, feather-bed resistance denotes a set of practices that confound the projected boundaries between fact and fiction. Hunter's marked dreamscapes emerge from this place, aware of all that is expected of her and at once compliant to *and* dismissive of those expectations. Hunter was prolific because she was compelled by a force, she called God to mark pictures out of her head. A market of white desires met her production but did not propel or control it. Art-historical parlance refers to so-called "outsider artists" who create from a metaphysical compulsion as "visionary artists," but those same impulses marked trained European artists as the Surrealist

⁶⁸ Moten, Fred. Fred Moten: "Blackness and Nonperformance" |AFTERLIVES | MoMA LIVE, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByIIg>.

avant-garde. Hunter does not need to be considered a surrealist in order to be taken seriously, but the genres of African Surrealism and Afro-Surrealism do provide some esteem to her practices of memory painting and aesthetic fabulation.

According to D. Scott Miller's provocative "Afro-Surrealist Manifesto," the Surreal in "Afro-Surreal" indexes representations of the Black present that expose the absurdities of Black life through ambiguity, excess, anachronism, mysticism, and distortion (D. S. Miller 2009). I see these qualities in both the form and content of Hunter's practice: her spirit-sent visions of Black life, her crazed repetitions, the deliberate flatness of her forms, her disregard for "formal perspective and scale." Hunter's trace in Clarence John Laughlin's archive also interpolates her as a figure within Laughlin's practice of Southern surrealist/American Surrealist photography. While Laughlin photographed Hunter as part of a commercial assignment, his papers indicate that, like Dr. Ryan, he was enamored with the artist.

The foreword he drafted to accompany the images he took for *LOOK Magazine* in 1952 was titled "The Work of Clementine Hunter." In it, he subtly pulls Hunter into his own conceptual framework of Southern Surrealism by denoting the way she, a "true primitive," works "almost completely from the instinctual levels of her being, with scarcely anything but the most superficial ordering by the conscious mind..." (Laughlin 1952). There is a trace of the racialized paternalism of the times in the way he clings to the language of primitivism to describe the artist, but he describes Hunter's practice in the same way he describes his own, "... the pictures were not conceived in a coldly conscious way. They were arrived at mostly by means of subconscious intuitions and compulsions" (Laughlin 1941). In Laughlin's engagement with Hunter and his repeated depictions of Black feminine figures as part of Louisiana's surreal landscapes, I hear Jean Paul-Sartre's concession that the work of the African surrealist "is revolutionary because it is surrealist, but itself is surrealist because it is black" (D. S. Miller 2009).⁶⁹ Hunter and the other Black figures Laughlin portrayed were not mere subjects of his Surrealist gaze, they were his peers.

Taken together, these expressions of Surrealism modified by race, class, and region become a Black southern vernacular surrealism which is articulated most viscerally through the spiritual, domestic, and creative labor of Black feminine figures. As Black southern vernacular surrealists both Hurston and Hunter proffered dreamscapes that confound and refuse easy interpretation. In an enactment of Hurston's theorization, Hunter set colorful figurations of Black life "outside the door of [her] mind for [white folks] to play with and handle" (Hurston 2009, 3). Her art and life have been conscripted into myths of rural Black contentment, but within the realm of the [Black] folk who saw and valued her work Hunter might offer something different all together.

All the same, we can read her marks but we "sho' can't read her mind" (Hurston 2009, 3).

⁶⁹ Laughlin photographed New Orleans-based Black female spiritualist Mother Brown in 1945 as part of his "Images of the Lost" Series. The honorific "Mother" denotes the figures connection to matriarchal Black spiritual churches that thrived in early-mid 20th century New Orleans. It's worth noting that while Laughlin does make use of White female models, his images that feature Black feminine figures like Mother Brown and the unnamed Black children in "The Disastrous Gate," (1973) "A Mangled Staircase," (1949) and "A 'Lost' Boy. No.1" (1944) capture Black figures in active relationships to their environs as opposed figures imposed on the landscape for artistic affect.

Praise Break

the most beautiful thing(s) on the black earth... :

kai barrow's sweaty mythos

“Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love.”
- Sappho, “Fragment 16”

Some art is alive. Breathing. Daring you to turn your back to it. It reaches into your mouth. Grabs hold of your tongue. Stills you. Confuses you. Leaves you behind. Or meets you in a fantasy you ain't never told anyone about. Tells your secrets. Holds up a lantern so you might find your way out.

Some say the transformation of the object into a fetish (in the African sense) requires blood, sweat, tears -- some bodily expenditure of salt. Some say that black folks have long been the salt of this here earth, having given of their bodies (blood, sweat & tears), their funk, to the infrastructure(s) and institutions that Man calls modernity (Wynter 2003).

What happens when mule-bred wimminfolk will and work themselves into artists? What do they make of their own sweat? The work of the blk wimmin artists marked “outsider” “Self-taught” “undisciplined” “primitive,” “naive,” “illegible” and other fighting words...belongs to this tradition, a tradition of sweaty mythos, imagination, and righteous insanity.

It is the tradition described in Alice Walker's 1972 essay, “In Search of Our Mother's Gardens.” A Tradition of “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as *the mule of the world*.” But as Walker intones, despite the attempts of masculinist social histories to place them on pedestals of pity, these work-worn blk wimminfolk were not “crazy Saints,” they were artists. (think: Clementine Hunter, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Bessie Harvie, Minnie Evans, Nellie Mae Rowe, Faith Ringgold)

kai barrow loves these wimmin as much as she belongs to them. These outlaws, these artwives, these embattled goddesses entrapped by empire. Studyin' them in the

wildly transdisciplinary way that she seizes the world, barrow understands that all myth(s) of blk wimmin's labored contributions to this world point us towards the absolute truth(s) of abolitionism. As the lead luminary of Gallery of the Streets, a radical network of artists, activists, organizers, scholars, cultural workers, and community supporters committed to exploring radical possibilities within Black geographies, barrow serves as a catalyst for group experiments in "a praxis of imagination" rooted in radical Black feminisms and anarchist principles of social organization.

In a triptych of shows taking place in the summer - fall of 2021, barrow continued her practice of transitory site-specific installations that fuck with the ways meaning is made within the tricky terrain of the "art-industrial complex."⁷⁰ Her Project Row House installation *Phantom of the Anthropocene* invites witnesses into an immersive sensorial encounter with the haunts and haints of the plantationocene that persist to leave their trace on our contemporary conditions and crises. Leveling sand and gravel mark an encounter with Capitol's detritus that trails up and down Holman Street. Copper-toned walls, suspended *Tilandsia* air plants, cotton, burlap and sage smoke fill the house. Viewers are invited to contribute to the environment by lighting sage, leaving their footprints, and inscribing their own thoughts and wisdoms on the walls in charcoal. *Debt*, a solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center New Orleans, featured a chorus of mixed-media paintings that are sculptural in the way they command the space around them. There is no "art on the walls" in this installation.



Figure 8. Installation view of "Debt", kai barrow, New Orleans Center for Contemporary Art, 2021

These works of surrealist abstraction cannot be held down. They levitate. They need to breathe and talk to each other. Fashioned with "A-sides" and "B-sides" like good music, these paintings host goddesses and muses named and unnamed. Stories of persecution and strategies for survival whisper between each canvas. A curious ear can

⁷⁰ <http://galleryofthestreets.org/>

hear them circling the room, accompanied by the orchestral trill of Alice Coltrane's harp. An over-eager eye might confuse the bright red gash of *Aunt Hestia's Scream* for something celebratory but its phonic materiality is that of an essential eruption, a bursting forth of consciousness, a wake up call (Moten 2003).⁷¹ In *Debt* the space of the gallery becomes the black earth, every inch of floor covered in soil, each canvas anchored by a mound of marble gravel. This is a place where things grow. As a member of the Antenna Collective, barrow appeared again in the Prospect.5 satellite show hosted by Antenna Gallery. In the wake of Hurricane Ida, which made landfall August 28th 2021, barrow and the rest of the collective engaged the theme of *Sugar*. Barrow's installation "The Moment of Sale" was fashioned as an earthen tribute to the resistance practices of the enslaved women whose bodies underwrote Louisiana's sugar cane and sex industries. Transforming the back room of the upstairs gallery space, barrow juxtaposed the scene of the auction block onto the space of the bedroom. Of the work, barrow writes:

"...these public and private sites of sex and violence were also places where the enslaved actualized their agency and control. From being uncooperative and "artful" to misrepresentation and self-harm; from organizing work stoppages, to escapes and revolts, the rival geographies of the enslaved provided the space for private and public creative expressions, rest and recreation, community and self-care, coded communication and defiance."(barrow 2021)

barrow's transdisciplinary praxis disrupts the notion of the avant-garde artist as some pristine masculinist loner who grants the public peeks at their genius on select occasions. Rather barrow's black feminist funk insists on labor-intensive collaborations where writers, artists, filmmakers and curators all become workers and stewards of each installation. I have watched barrow put her own sapphic funk into each installation, finding cause for ecstatic movement in the percussive toss of bricks against a wall and the repetitive pat of her own feet coaxing the soil into an accessible path. What you experience when you enter a world of barrow's design is a collective process of transformation. It is the fruit of many minds and hands coming together to bring a vision to life. It is a chorus. Every granule of dirt, sand, and glitter holding its own in a grand polyphony that stirs the senses.

⁷¹ Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream" in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003)

Chapter 3

The Tar Baby Principle

Marking The Performance of the Object

It happens that I am a practitioner of the fine art of strip-teasing. Strip-teasing is a formal and rhythmic disrobing of the body in public. In recent years there has been a great deal of uninformed criticism levelled against my profession.

– Burlesque performer, Georgia Sothern, in a letter to H.L. Mencken (1940)

In order to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns serve a collective function.

– Hortense Spillers, *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammer Book* (1987)

So far, this dissertation has engaged the cyber inexhaustibility of Black femme erotic labor as embodied by BeTTy BuTT and Clementine Hunter's surreal returns to the Jook Joint across the road from the Melrose Plantation. Through the sites of the digital and the post-Emancipation plantation, Black feminine figures offer shapeshifting representations and refusals of the quotidian violences that attend Black social life. This final chapter explores the act and art of documenting the shapes and shifts of Black feminist performance through a critical auto-ethnographic account of my own queer Black feminist performance art practice as the burlesque persona, Lil Cotton Flower. Through readings of two of my early burlesque acts, *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is traced back into the pantheons of Afro-diasporic performance and folklore through the figures of Topsy and the Tar Baby. Centering the work and words of Black women + femme-identified performance artists, this chapter explores the history of the Black feminine figures as subjects who deliberately perform as objects.

The method of 'performative writing' might be one useful approach to holding the sensuous engagements of and with black femininity that enflesh my research and performance practice. But the form we come to know as performative writing in

Performance Studies circa the 1990s has an ironically unmarked predecessor in a narrative tactic employed within Black vernacular performance that is referred to as “marking.” Defined by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan in 1972 as a mode of characterization in Black vernacular storytelling in which the marker (or speaker) conveys not only what was said but the way it was said (Mitchell-Kernan 1972, 176–77). This mode of relay, in which a speaker conveys meaning and feeling through the use of direct quotations that reference both the content and form of a prior moment, resonates with Spillers’ ‘first order naming.’ As practiced throughout this dissertation, the Spillerian configuration of first order naming – “words that express the experience of a community in diachronic time, in daily social relationships, in economic well-being, in subject identity” – informed by the cultural practices of storytelling, signifyin’ and marking, has been a core methodological approach of Black feminist literary and cultural criticism. As such, it is the most apt tool for theoretical and analytical holdings of the configuration of a queered Black femininity studied throughout this dissertation (Spillers 2003a, 168).

In the 1987 article, “The Race for Theory,” Black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian offers a rigorous vernacular critique of the Post-modernist turn in the study of literature. Of central concern for Christian is the way a Western philosophical lexicon threatens to seize the tongues of those who wish to write about the works (a term that she specifies denotes labor in contrast to the logo-centric appellation ‘texts’) of Black, Third World women writers (Christian 1987, 67). In pursuit of publication, she charges, some Black women writers have been “influenced even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation (Christian 1987, 68).” While Spillers, her contemporary, might push back on this seemingly narrow understanding of what language(s) can be used to effectively speak to the needs and orientations of black folks, they do find alignment in a shared appreciation of the ways black “folks have always theorized [...] often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking (Christian 1987, 68).” Christian and Spillers also both make use of the image of the hieroglyph, defined by Christian as “a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative (Christian 1987, 68).” Conjoining this definition to Spiller’s turn of phrase *hieroglyphics of the flesh* – those undecipherable markings on the captive African female body flattened and misrecognized by overdetermined assumptions about the labors she performs – I hear a call to consider the sensual, abstract, beautiful and communicative qualities of that which cannot be recognized or translated into neat academic legibility (Spillers 1987, 67).

Black feminist performance artists themselves have offered articulations of their work and the historical, political and personal stakes of its production using what Christian describes as “sensual language” (Christian 1987, 78). Sensual language is that which disrupts the binary between feeling and knowing – an expression of embodied knowledge compelled by an urgency that “presupposes a need, a desire among folk, like me, who also want to save their own lives (Christian 1987, 78).” Christian’s formation of sensual language anticipates Della Pollock’s 1998 essay “Performing writing” in which Pollock defines performative writing as evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational, and consequential (Pollock 1998). With regards to the first defining

characteristic, Pollock describes evocative writing as that which brings the texts into a higher *sensual* awareness and disrupts “normative distinctions between critical and creative (hard and soft, true and false, masculine and feminine)” (Pollock 1998, 81). In this move away from the closures of certainty, performative writing, like the use of ‘sensual language,’ embraces a rhetoric of open possibility. It makes sense then, that Black feminist performance artists who inhabit the “subject/object uncertainty” imposed on their bodies by the historical markings of enslavement, would instinctively utilize a mode of naming themselves and their work that self-consciously mirrors their strategies of self-fashioning (McMillan 2015, 10). These articulations of object performance in varying contexts surface a keen awareness of the risk and radical potentials that arise when the Black feminine figure asserts itself as both subject and object of art.

In 1975, multi-disciplinary artist and scholar Adrian Piper described “voluntary self-objectification” as a practice that “can be an act of political defiance, a gesture of brazen shamelessness, a celebration of self that absolutely crushes and makes ridiculous any attempt at devaluation or disapproval (Piper 1999, 151–54).” And for Piper, who before her engagements with avant-garde fine art making had allowed herself to become a range of characters/objects from a character in Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” to a go-go dancer on New York City’s Upper East Side, this practice is “the kind that occurs in dancing, in performance of any kind, in modeling, or in permitting oneself to be looked at or done to sexually (Piper 1999, 151–54).” I’m interested here in Piper’s broadening of performance to include an unnamed range of social/vernacular movement and sexual happenings. Piper’s declaration creates space for a figure like BeTTy BuTT to be held and understood as a performance artist whose work with the method of “voluntary self-objectification” has clear Black feminist implications.

In the her 1992 essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” Black feminist performance artist Lorraine O’Grady responds to a feminist call to consider whether or not “the naked female body [could] effectively represent women’s subjectivity in contemporary North American media culture, which regularly presents women’s bodies as objects for a voyeuristic and fetishizing male gaze” (O’Grady 1992). Understanding that her position and experience as a Black woman artist necessitated an appraisal of the naked *Black* woman’s body and questions of *Black* female subjectivity, O’Grady arrives at a conclusion that challenges the premise of her prompt: “The black female’s body needs less to be rescued from the masculine “gaze” than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, and not paradoxically, it erases her completely (O’Grady 1992, 9).” O’Grady, citing Spillers, calls for black artists and art critics to begin to look past embarrassment and shame in order to disrupt the binaries that relegate the naked and/or nude Black female body to the domains of suffering and/or pornographic consumption. While in recent years Black female nudes have undoubtedly become more a forceful presence in contemporary art, these sightings are still subject to the patterns of critique, anxiety and avoidance O’Grady identifies and wrestles with.⁷²

⁷² The contemporary relevance of O’Grady’s charge is indexed by the inclusion of her essay in Mickalene Thomas’ monograph *Muses* published in 2015.

These patterns of critique, anxiety, and avoidance come with us into the business of naming and contemporary cultural production. As discussed in an earlier chapter, new media erotic performance artist BeTTy BuTT, as a young black woman publicly offering performance works meant to stimulate digital circulation and libidinal consumption, asks us to accept the relationship between our eyes, our minds, and our bodies. She forces us to accept a representation of herself that cannot be cleaned up. It is a self-representation literally choreographed by the dirty, the explicit, and the erotic, designed to accrue social and financial capital.

In the performance “Displays (after Venus),” Black feminist performance artist Gabrielle Civil disrupted the form of a conventional artist talk with her body. After the room was filled, she responded to the scripted command “Step Right Up!” by stripping down to her bra and panties, then mounting a table in front of an unsuspecting audience. As she stood in her bra and underwear in front of a projector screen, Civil’s white male participant continued to shout “Turn!” and in response Civil would strike a pose and hold it before the command came again. After repeating this four times, the interlocutor would yell “Next!” prompting Civil to step down from the platform and redress herself before a slide that read “displays: black women, body, performance, experiments” above this an image of Saartje Baartman and below it her name and title: *Gabrielle Civil, Ph.D.*

As described by Civil in her performance memoir, *Swallow The Fish* (2017), this performance elicited an array of emotional responses. Professors of literature and theater who were present remarked that “she looked so comfortable in her body that it made them comfortable;” while undergraduate students, particularly black female undergraduate students expressed feelings of identification, anxiety and shame (Civil 2017, 176). Civil even cites the concerns of a fellow Black woman scholar and friend whose intellectual work on Black women and violence created a context in which to see a Black woman “flaunt [her] body” was to see her “court personal annihilation (Civil 2017, 178).” Civil responds to her friends fear and concern that something will happen to her as a result of these staged provocations by embracing the vulnerability and prioritizing the fact that “if something goes down where [she’ll] never be able to do this work again, [she] can at least say that at some time in [her] life [she] had a relationship with [her] body where [she] wasn’t afraid to show it, to use it, to claim it – fearlessly (Civil 2017, 178).” And for Civil this fearlessness comes from the artistic urgency she feels to represent, enact and document new presentations of her own Black woman’s body (Civil 2017, 179). She articulates this as a “desire to enjoy, play, provoke, make art with [her body], to claim comfort and pain – despite , through and because of having my particular black woman’s body in this particular world” (Civil 2017, 180). To aide her in articulating this multi-valent dance with various presentations of her Black woman’s body, Civil quotes Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s essay “In Defense of Performance Art.” Gomez-Pena’s assertion that “our main artworks are our bodies, ridden with semiotic, political, ethnographic, cartographic and mythical implications” allows Civil to state plainly her intent to expose through embrace, all the signifiers, all the hieroglyphics, marked into her flesh (Gomez- Pena 2015).

Civil’s highly evocative performance work fulfills and extends O’Grady’s charge for Black folks and Black artist to look and move pass shame. For O’Grady this looking pass shame enables our ability to know and name ourselves. But O’Grady knowingly

acknowledges that this is not easy work. On the contrary, “it is slow and it is painful. For at the end of every path we take, we find a body that is always already colonized. A body that has been raped, maimed, murdered—that is what we must give a healthy present (O’Grady 1992).” While twerk videos like BeTTy BuTT’s “Fuck You All The Time” move these tragic realities, concerns, and perspectives into the digital, as a Black feminist performance artist in my own right, I have turned to the embattled Black folkloric figure of the Tar Baby as a transhistorical figuration of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*.

This chapter centers the embodied archive of my own performance work to explore the ways the figure of the Tar Baby might serve as a timeless representation of racialized gender and the transmogrifying labor of survival. I start by marking my inhabitation of the figure in an act titled “The Marvelous Tar Baby” that premiered at The Body Political Burlesque and Variety Show June 2019 in the African American Cultural Complex in San Francisco, California. I then critically engage the act and its explicitly Black feminist content and vernacular form within the contexts of Southern folklore and neo-burlesque. Writing from and about the histories mobilized by my petite dark-skinned Black feminine body on stage, I utilize auto-ethnography to weave this performance into and against a genealogy of solo black female performance. To this end, I highlight the work of internationally acclaimed Black vaudeville performer Ida Forsythe (1883-1983) as an intervention in the historization of both Black feminist performance art and contemporary American burlesque. Since the form of burlesque (as I practice it) elicits *labor* on multiple registers (intellectual, written, performative, spiritual and erotic) all outside of their respective economies, this chapter utilizes the sticky and fragrant plasticity of Black femininity to herald a Black feminist poetics of plurality.⁷³

⁷³ Here, I am utilizing the definition of poetics mobilized by Alexis Pauline Gumbs citing Sylvia Wynter’s talk/essay “Ethno or Socio-Poetics” through which “poetics” is understood as “a process through which to produce a set of relations that exceed and contradict capitalist objectification” Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. “The Black Feminine Domestic: A Counter- Hueristic Excercise in Falling Apart.” *Symbiosis* 13, no. 2 (October 2009): 118

Marking The Act

This section is a transcript and description of my performance “The Marvelous Tar Baby” which was debuted in June 2019 at The Body Political Variety show hosted at San Francisco African American Arts & Culture Complex. The text of the folktale was heard as a voice over. Text in italics represent what my body is doing.



Figure 9. Ra Malika Imhotep as Lil Cotton Flower (2019)

Program Note: centered before you on stage I carry a chorus of [ungendered] black femme genius. these names marked into my flesh are inescapable... so i dance with them. nothing left behind. I steal my stories back and offer up a truer word.⁷⁴

Joel Chandler Harris, "The Wonderful Tar Baby" in The Complete Uncle Remus Tales (1881)

" "Tar baby" is also a name, like n*gger, that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall...and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things... For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together." -- Toni Morrison "The Language Must Not Sweat" (1981)

⁷⁴ This note and the quote that follows have been adapted from the program entry that offered context for this act when it was performed as during The Body Political in San Francisco in June 2019.

.....

*Blackness. A light shines on an empty play space. A glass bowl filled with strips of paper is centered between two bottles of molasses. Offstage I am reading a poem crafted out of lines from texts that put Hortense Spillers into dialogue with Lucille Clifton, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange.*⁷⁵

SPOKEN:

Let's face it.

I am a marked woman
But not everybody knows my name

Let's face it.

My country needs me and if I were not here I would have to be invented

Let's face it.

In order to speak a truer word concerning my self, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess in time over time, assigned by a particular historical order

Let's face it.
there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.

Let's face it.
I must strip down.

In the service of a collective function.

Let's face it.
Being alive and being a woman and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma
I haven't yet conquered.

⁷⁵ Morrison, Toni. "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib." *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971, sec. Archives. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-black-woman-and.html>; Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>; Shange. *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE / WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*. Re-edition. New York: Scribner, 1989; Clifton, Lucille. "Won't You Celebrate with Me." In *Book of Light*. Copper Canyon Press, 1993.

Let's face it

The names by which I am called in the public place

Do not exhaust me

Lets's face it.

Everyday something has tried to kill me
And has failed.

Then there is music. Black lesbian singer-songwriter X'ene Sky's piano cover of Nina Simone's "Wild as The Wind" plays. I enter stage right barefoot wearing a white cotton nightgown and a black chiffon apron. My yarn braids are pulled back into a high ponytail. I am wearing red lipstick. My movements are a slow and deliberate series of gestures I arrived at in conversation with Bajan dancer and performance-maker Valencia James. I caress my face, grab my neck with both hands, clench the sides of my stomach, spread my legs. This cycle carries me to each corner of the stage before I find center. At some point I am crawling. Rolling around giving my best "afro-modern contemporary" bodywork.

VOICEOVER:

Before freedom and again 400 years into its afterlife, Brer Fox grabbed up some tar and turpentine and let me make myself through his hands.

I walk into the play space. Centerstage with my back to the audience, hands undoing the apron. it falls in front of me.

Grinning and feeling all accomplished he surrendered to this muse, mistaking my tenor for that his own greed. You see, the morning i came to him Brer Fox was out to get the best of that ol' Brer Rabbit -- the quick moving trickster always pullin' the wool over Brer Fox, Brer Bear and even Ol'Massa.

Payin' them no mind, i made use of Brer Fox's ol' hands and fix'd myself up real nice and round in all the right places: two pearls through which to see, a wood button for a nose, a thick red slash of lip -- all set into the soft blackness of my face.

My hands slow waft up to my sides then bend at the elbows casting an eerie "hands up don't shoot" silhouette against the white screen before me. They fall down to find the buttons on the front of my gown. It falls as I bend forward. (The crowd doesn't know whether to cheer or remain silent in witness.)

i whisper'd into that ol' Fox's ear to dress me up nice and alluring, and he fetch a few spools of yarn to weave atop my head and set me down right at the lip of the river where

as i can watch the water glitter. little did he know, this here water is my Ma Dear. She the only one i answer too.

While i settle into my prettiness, Brer Fox look on and commence to singing to himself about the rabbit he finna catch on my account and what a nice dinner that meat'll make once it meet his eatin' plate.

And so's i just sit there, lookin' out at the water, havin' deep conversations his ears ain't pitched to catch. Thanking Ma Dear for letting me take form this evening. Not paying much mind to the Fox but thanking him for his hands all the same.

I turn to face the audience. Rhinestoned pasties catching the light. My body a smooth length of even brown. My face carries no distinct emotion but a focused gaze out. I drop to my knees and let my weight fall stage-left as I start to remove the strips of paper from the glass bowl. I arrange them on the ground in front of the bowl before reaching for the bottles of molasses. One is a deep-ebony-almost-black, the other lightened with copper mica pigments.

Then trot up that ol' Brer Rabbit -- moving so fast he almost missed this lil' ol' black thing sitting at the river's edge.

At the sight of that Rabbit, Brer Fox jump under the bush cross the road and hide

Then Brer Rabbit pause, double back and give me a deep glance over -- lookin' real close with some secret heat behind his eyes. First Brer Rabbit get to talm'bout how i'm is a "sassy ol' Jay bird"

I smile as I raise the lighter bottle mixing the pigment with each flip of my wrist. After a little struggle with the cap I pick up both bottles and empty them into the glass bowl. The two sticky streams dance around each other as they pool at the bottom of the bowl.

and I'm almost flattered 'cept for that flame in his eye tell me to keep to myself.

Brer Rabbit commence to getting awfully familiar. He say "hey there, brown sugar how 'bout you let me have a lick at yo sweetness!" and my Tar Baby self just sits there, ain't sayin' nothin' -- Brer Fox still tucked away under the bush, softly humming his eatin' song as he watch.

When satisfied, I put down the bottles and place my hands into the bowl. Mixing the molasses, then raising my hands and watching with delight as gravity pulls the sticky mess down to coat my fingertips.

Brer Rabbit say "okay now! *Earth Mama* why don't you bend over and carry my load" Tar Baby ain't sayin' nothin' and Brer Fox, he lay low.

I begin to coat my arms. My eyes following the molasses with sustained attention. I coat my right leg then reach for a strip of paper that reads "BROWN SUGAR." I coat my thigh in the molasses mixture then stick on the paper. REPEAT ON LEFT LEG.

Brer Rabbit keep searching for a name I'm primed to respond to, he seem to speak from a list that start off calm but then grow indignant: alright then *peaches*? He grumbles... how 'bout it *sapphire*?, oh you must think you *god's holy fool*? --

I dip my hands back in the bowl and smile as I lift them to my face. I coat my cheeks in the molasses mixture then slide both hands around my neck recalling the cycle of gestures from the beginning of the performance. I affix a strip of paper that reads "SAPPHIRE" to the center of my chest.

"How you come on, den?" Brer Rabbit, ask...gettin' big mad .
TarBaby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

Brer Rabbit fix his mouth to say, "black as I is, my nose up so high I caint even smell my own breath"

Then "EARTH MAMA" across my belly and right shin. "JEZEBEL" along the side of my left knee cap. "PEACHES" on my chest atop of "SAPPHIRE." "MISS EBONY FIRST" on my belly. "EARTH MAMA" moves to my right shoulder.

Say he got something to fix me. And I'm just there, ain't sayin' nothin' as the sun heat me up into softness.

Brer Rabbit puff up his chest and says: "I'mma learn you how to talk to a respectable man like me if it's the last act of this here show" And I don't know who he think he talkin' to but being the Tar Baby I am, I keep my mouth shut. Sitting pretty. Getting soft in all the right places.

Brer Rabbit yelling now. He say, "*Cain't you hear me calling you, miss honey?* Or is you as dumb as you is black? If you don't fix yo' face and greet me imma bus' you wiiiiide open"

& Ain't much of nothing for me to do in the face of no madrabbitnigga so I just stay still. Wondering if Brer Fox still watching, i can't hear him humming no more...

Hands dip back into the bowl of molasses then raise to cover my face. My eyes are closed. Now covered in the molasses mixture. I caress my face, grab hold of my neck, my belly, then slide my hands down my open legs.

Brer Rabbit keep on yelling...

TarBaby, keep on sayin' nothin'...

Then that niggerabbit draw back his fist and it land right upside my head where the sun been kissin' and he get stuck. He try to grab at my neck and that hand get stuck too. He kick his legs up right at the *di space between* my legs. He yanking and pulling and twisting just getting' more tied up in my sticky mess of a body.

Hands dip back into the bowl. I bring my arms before my face and caress them. My left hand sliding down my right forearm as my finger curl softly towards my face. REPEAT. Right hand over left arm.

In the struggle I commence to melt 'round myself and it look like we dancing in a pool of molasses.

& I aint never say nothin'

"If you don't let me loose" he shout "I'mma kick the natal stuffing outta you" I don't say nothin' but I think deep about where I was befo all dis. In the dark wet warmth of Ma Dear's belly. The natal stuff I used to swim in. that which this here rabbit is tryna beat out of me.

& I ain't say nothin'

I brace my shoulders and fold my legs underneath me. My forearms fall towards my knees. I assume a meditative posture and take a series visibly deep breaths as molasses drips from my face.

Then here come that ol' fox talm' bout "Howdy Brer Rabbit...you look sorta stuck up this mawnin"

Brer Fox laugh and laugh and laugh. Laugh Like he done forgot how I moved through his hands this morning. What a pretty thing I made myself before he trotted me out for some Rabbit meat.

With my eyes closed I turn to the side and lay down with my knees raised.

Right as the turpentine start to drip out the round of button hole of my eyes, Ma Dear, the river, rear up real big flooding the marsh. She grab me from off the log and start to mixing her sweet waters all around that rabbit and I.

Soon I am loosed from him. Loosed from the slug of flesh that held him and I together.

Soon I give up my self in a dark warmth, the color of tar.

And Ma Dear say, "Baby, I tried to told bout messing with these skinfolks. They don't know how to hold something soft and black as you. Next time be sure to fix yourself with teeth to smile and a tongue sharp enough to cut."

I caress myself as I gather all the strips of paper from my sticky brown body and pull them into a ball that I hold prayerfully at my chest. Laying there I take another series of visibly deep breaths.

FADE TO BLACK.

Folkloric Returns

I owe a large part of my current preoccupation with Southern Black vernacular culture and all its performing objects to a childhood spent in Atlanta, Georgia watching members of the Kuumba Storytellers embody Afro-diasporic folktales.⁷⁶ One such storyteller, Akbar Imhotep—actor, storyteller, puppeteer, puppet-maker, poet—is my father.

In a 2010 video recorded by Spencer Simrill Jr, Akbar Imhotep performs the famous Uncle Remus Tale “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” in the backyard of the Wren’s Nest in Atlanta, Georgia. The Wren’s Nest is a national landmark nestled in Atlanta’s West End neighborhood, and was the home of Joel Chandler Harris, a white male writer who, by some measures, had an exploitative and fetishistic relationship to the Georgia plantation stories he inscribed through the character of Uncle Remus. In fact, the house was purchased and expanded with the profits garnered by his best-selling Uncle Remus books. Harris’ Uncle Remus is a simulacrum—a copy for which there is no original—of the figure of the Griot, the guardian of oral tradition in many African and Afro-diasporic cultures. My father’s work as a Black male performing artist in the particular economy of Southern heritage tourism weaves an Africanist aesthetic and performance repertoire into a Georgia-bred vernacular tradition. This work was an intentional part of his practice of Black cultural nationalism.

To conjure up the folktale’s distinct characters, Akbar Imhotep employs a range of gestures and voice manipulations. He is at once both prey and predator, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear. The only figure of the story he does not himself embody is that of the Tar Baby. The Tar Baby instead is assembled in mid-air, a performing object built through the performer’s gestures. The audience watches Imhotep place the eyes, the nose, and the hat, onto the imagined figure. The Tar Baby comes alive in the mind’s eye, through the performer’s manipulation of space. In the absence of a material performing object (i.e. a puppet), Imhotep conjures up the Tar Baby and requires the audience to believe in the products of his performative labor, to know she is real. In this act, the Griot also simultaneously challenges the audience to reimagine their relationship to the figure of Uncle Remus. He is not real, but acting as his progeny, Imhotep imbues the figure of the Black storyteller with an African-inflected Socratic method of *teaching*. Imhotep’s performance in Joel Chandler Harris’ backyard gives life to Remus’ tales. Figuratively, Imhotep takes the Black puppet off Harris’s hand. Of Harris, Of Remus, Of Brer Fox and Brer Bear, the Tar Baby is an object’s object. *The Tar Baby is invented to hold it all together.*

Most readings of the Tar Baby folktale center Brer Rabbit as the archetypal trickster figure. Black identification with Brer Rabbit is understood as one of the

⁷⁶ Founded in 1995 as an Atlanta-based affiliate of the National Association of Black Storytellers, the Kuumba Storytellers of Georgia is a group of professional storytellers who work to “preserve the African oral tradition, provide awareness on the cultural history of African and African American people, and to serve as an educational resource for the community.” Kuumbastorytellers.org

primary functions of this element of the Black folk tradition (Levine 1978). As discussed in the canon of African American literary and cultural criticism, these trickster tales give black folks space to envision themselves as cunning, and “smarter than massa.” The lore’s ‘briar patch’ has been hailed as the field/the ancestral lands/the ghetto/the hood—and all the other unlivable geographies in which Black folks routinely make and sustain life. These readings are appropriate, useful, and necessary, but I remain *stuck on* the gendered and adorned blackness of the Tar Baby and what seeing (and refusing to discard) this figure as more than just a means to an end might open up for Black studies. Further, inspired by the tradition of Black radical imagination as expressed through black feminist performance art, I am invested in reading my own burlesque staging and inhabitation of the Tar Baby as an act of sublimation that not so much reveals, but revels in the messy and fragrant refusals of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*.

When Hortense Spillers says “my country needs me, and if I were not here I would have to be invented,” I see Brer Fox grabbing hold of some tar and turpentine to make him up an object that will serve to feed him (Spillers 1987, 65). In the folktale, as published by Joel Chandler Harris in 1881, the object is feminized through a process of adornment. It is dressed up “sassy ez a jay-bird” and sat down off the side of “de big road.” In my retelling of the story, the Tar Baby announces herself as an agential muse to whom Brer Fox surrenders. This revisionist Tar Baby takes a counterintuitive approach to the folktale’s meaning, similar to that of the Tar Baby fictionalized in Toni Morrison’s 1981 novel of the same name. For Morrison, the Tar Baby is a sacred expression of ancient properties perverted by antiblack discourse and weaponized by racism and colorism. Morrison roots her revision in Africanist mythos, a gesture that aligns her literary work with my father’s syncretic Black nationalist performance strategies. When marked in my own voice this vision takes on a queer life. Here, as explicated by L.H. Stallings, the Tar Baby becomes “an active being, less constructed by other individuals or beings but still caught in between roles and representations and one’s own self,” which exemplifies the queer aesthetics and rhetorical strategies that enliven the work of the Black female performers Stallings studies within the counterpublics of the Jook Joint and the “chitlin circuit” (Stallings 2007, 124).

In the folktale as published by Harris, the Tar Baby is referred to using she/her pronouns and the semantics of the repeated refrain that “she *keep* on sayin’ nothin’” (*italics mine*) quizzically implies that she could in fact say something but chooses to withhold speech. Utilized as the soundtrack to my non-verbal performance piece, my retelling of the folktale offers the silent character an internal monologue and by extension an interiority. In a bastardized approximation of southern Black dialect, Harris writes:

"Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low."

In my act, Brer Rabbit's broken "merlasses" (molasses) jar is recast as the matter of ablution through which my denuded flesh becomes tar. Seated center stage, I cover my body in the sticky wet slick of (Brer Rabbit brand) molasses, its pungent sweetness colors my arms, legs, torso, and face. Molasses is a byproduct of the process through which sugar cane is refined into sugar crystals. As a counterpoint to 'King Cotton,' 'Queen Sugar' was the moniker given to sugar cane to signal its importance to industry throughout the Gulf South and the Carriibbean. In a gesture towards diaspora, this choice of material also references the Trinidadian carnival mas character "Jab Molassi" or molasses devil. As one of the oldest "Devil Mas" characters, Jab Molassi was traditionally played by freed slaves who used the material by-product of their labor on sugar plantations as an affordable means of disguise.⁷⁷ In this register, the Tar Baby is embodied as a part of the pantheon of Afro-diasporic trickster figures.

The interplay of the character's "sayin' nothin'" against the stream of their own thoughts and perspective recast the audience as witness to a counter-narrative. From this aural vantage point, the physical violence enacted against the Tar-Baby is impossible to ignore or minimize.

"`Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'"
 - Joel Chandler Harris

When I first encountered the phrase "natal stuffin'" in my re-reading of the folktale I was struck by the slippage between Harris' dialectal attempt at the way a Black person might mouth "natural" and the contemporary definition of "natal" – relating to the place or time of one's birth. Brer Rabbit's threat to "kick the natal stuffin'" out of the Tar Baby could be read alongside Orlando Patterson's theorizations of "natal alienation" – the process by which enslaved Africans were differentiated "from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform an understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory" (Patterson 1982, 5). Despite Patterson's discourse of social allowance, my Tar Baby insists on a line of memory between their being and that of the "natal stuff" they used to swim in, the "deep wet warmth of Mama's belly."

This longed after deep wet warmth connotes a queer Black diasporic natality. The Tar Baby's active and reverent relationship to "Mama" and "Ma'dear" embodied in the water they sit in front of and ultimately return to conjures up the maternal water spirits and deities of Afro-diasporic folklore and cosmology like Yemeya (Yoruba Goddess of the Ocean), Oshun (Yoruba Goddess of the River) and Mami Wata (pan-diasporic water spirit commonly associated with Haitian voodoo). Contrary to masculinist reproductions of the "water as womb" inevitably invaded by the ships of modernity, both the Tar Baby and the maternal waters they long for are imbued with a knowing agency that survives (and dissolves) the violence inflicted by the "madrabbitnigga." This

⁷⁷ I was introduced to this element of Trinidadian Carnival Mas by Cathy Thomas after a screening of Ralph Bakshi 1975's film *Coonskin*, an adult animation blaxploitation film that reimagines Brer Rabbit tales.

proffers a relation to maternal waters as a site of critical fluidity and transpossibility. My thinking here is guided and deepened by the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Dora Silva-Santana, and Omi'seke Natasha Tinsley who turn to the Atlantic as a space for sacred pedagogies of crossing, transitioning and queer intimacies. These are not sentimental nor romantic hailings of the ocean. Through "insubordinate" writing practices and spiritual labor, these Black queer and trans feminists bring themselves into relation with the cross-currents of history and memory that populate the Atlantic (Santana 2019; Alexander 2006; Gumbs 2020; Tinsley 2008) .

Confessions of a Spillerian Ecdysiast on the Neo-Burlesque Stage

This chapter is a critical account of my work as a *Spillerian Ecdysiast* – one who, in a literal interpretation of Spillers, “strips down layers of attenuated meaning” by articulating Black feminist theory through the choreographic aesthetics of the burlesque/striptease repertoire (Spillers 1967, Mencken 1945). In “Supplement One” to his 1921 volume, *The American Language*, lexographer and cultural critic H.L. Mencken republished a letter he received from the acclaimed vaudeville & burlesque performer Georgia Sothern in the spring of 1940. In the letter, from which I have pulled my first epigraph, Georgia pleads for the support of semantics to “coin a new and more palatable word to describe [the art of striptease],” in hopes that once freed from the salacious moniker, “the [moral and legal] objections to it would vanish and [Georgia and her] colleagues would have easier going.”⁷⁸ Mencken replied in gest, suggesting that perhaps the cure to Georgia’s “affliction” could be found in the zoological phenomenon of molting.⁷⁹ While Georgia’s friend and contemporary Gypsy Rose Lee (referred to by Mencken as “The Striptease Intellectual”) vehemently rejected the new name, Georgia began to use it in her press materials and even in a letter to the British parliament requesting they suspend the ban on “striptease performances” in the UK.⁸⁰ As chronicled in Mencken’s *Supplement*, the term Ecdysiast took on political salience in 1942 as burlesque artists based in Los Angeles, whom we might describe today as sex workers, rallied against censorship. I introduce burlesque through this story of contested naming and protest to contextualize the history my work as a Black feminist performance artist within the post-1990s ‘neo-burlesque’ industry seeks to stir up.

H.L. Mencken coined the term “ecdysiast” (ec-deze-e-ast) to taunt mid-century burlesque performers who were struggling to defend their craft and careers from

⁷⁸ Mencken, H. L. *The American Language Supplement 1 :The American Language: An Inquiry Into the Development of English in the United States*. 4th edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ As recorded by white male journalist and humorist H. Allen Smith in 1945 memoir *Low Man on the Totem Pole*, Gypsy Rose Lee’s reaction to Mencken’s semantic invention was as follows: “Ecdysiast, he calls me!” cried Miss Lee, tossing her head. “Why, the man is an intellectual slob. He has been reading books. Dictionaries. We don’t wear feathers and molt them off. He makes me think of the girl reporter out in Chicago who asked me if I used zippers when I stripped. Imagine! Zippers! Why, I’d catch my “...“Have you ever,” I interrupted, “read any of Mr Mencken’s works?” “Certainly,” she said. “I’ve read his stuff. In my youth. What does he know about stripping? I hope he comes out to the Fair this summer to see me toss ‘em off and that he lets me know he’s in the audience. I’ll make his hair stand on end!” Smith, H. Allen, and Fred Allen. *Low Man on a Totem Pole*. Blakiston Co, 1945. pg. 64

Depression-era moral panics (Mencken 1945; Friedman 1996). Taken from the Greek *ekdysis* meaning “a stripping or casting off” which had been used scientifically since the mid-19 century in reference to animals like snakes and bird that shed and molt respectively. This antiquated term strikes me as relevant to contemporary neo-burlesque for several reasons. The term’s contested history and political utility seem to anticipate contemporary discourse on the classist and often racialized distinctions made between neo-burlesque and stripping/sex work.⁸¹ I am also drawn to *ecdysiast* for its other-than-human reference to the act of stripping off layers of one’s own skin. While Mencken may have initially meant it as a pejorative association, it calls to mind the fleshy ante-human erotics I always heard in Spiller’s declaration that *i/we must strip down*.⁸² My work on the neo-burlesque stage performs an embodied citation of this Spillerian declaration. Thus, I mark myself a *Spillerian Ecdysiast* self-consciously utilizing choreographies of the erotic and public economies of desire to court my own marvels.

Burlesque is a word of multiple significations. With regards to genre, it is “a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects (OED).” In contemporary parlance and practice it is most commonly associated with staged striptease performance. Robert Allen begins his 1991 historiography of American Burlesque with Briton Lydia Thompson’s 1869 debut in New York. Thompson’s blonde beauty, charismatic sexuality and crass disregard for propriety made her comedic performances of European masculinities a spectacle that provoked “hysterical antiburlesque discourse” which consequently inspired larger crowds (Allen 16). One 19th century white theater critic described the monstrosity of burlesque as that which defies the natural and the conventional by forcing “the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote” (Allen 25). Allen extends this to

⁸¹ Many sex workers and sex worker organizers rightfully make hard distinctions between the labor of full-time and or survival sex worker. My experience as a Black burlesque performer and the conversations amongst Burlesque performers of color I have witnessed and participated in muddy those distinctions. Many burlesque performers have at one point, or another, participated in the formal and/or underground sex industries. And further, regardless of the setting in which I take off my clothes my particular body is always read in relationship to the bodies of Black femme and female erotic laborers. In my work organizing in the campaign to decriminalize sex work in Louisiana, I have personally identified my work in burlesque as recreational sex work. For me “recreation” indicates that staged erotic performance is not my main source of income. 21st Century Burlesque Magazine. “Burlesque Performer: You Are Not A Sex Worker * 21st Century Burlesque Magazine,” February 24, 2016.

<https://21stcenturyburlesque.com/burlesque-performer-you-are-not-a-sex-worker/>.

⁸² Think here about recent trends in Black Studies that critique western humanism through critical engagements with Blackness and animality. Spillers and Sylvia Wynter are forebears of this theoretical tendency. Spillers taught us how Black flesh had never been permitted to be a properly regarded body in the Western sense. Wynter taught us the political constructions of Western Man1 and Man2 were imperial aberrations of human being. Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>. Wynter, Sylvia. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>. Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. NYU Press, 2020. Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Illustrated edition. Duke University Press Books, 2014.

characterize burlesque as “one of several 19th century entertainment forms that is grounded in the aesthetics of transgression, inversion, and the grotesque” (Allen 26). In her transgression of convention, the burlesque performer, represents a construction of the “low other.”

Defined by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, the low other is that which is “despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 5). Here ‘the low other’ resounds as a synonym for Spiller’s configuration of the “pornotrope” wherein the material history of the United States (and by extension the modern world) the “black woman” is constructed as the irresistible yet destructive low other against which proper “morality,” “sexuality,” “femininity,” and “womanhood” are defined.

As indexed by Georgia Sothorn’s desperate plea for new language, traditional burlesque performance began to lose its popularity following the moral policy “crackdowns” of the early 1940s. From the 1940s-1970s burlesque was viewed as a wasteful and morally bereft amusement that was contributing to the moral decline of New York City, and American Society at-large. In New York in 1942, mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and license commissioner Paul Moss closed down the most popular burlesque venues. During this period of stigma and venue closures, burlesque left live theater and became a backdrop for Hollywood dramas exploring the dangerous frivolity of white femininity. “Neo-burlesque” is a term used to denote the burlesque performance and performance culture revived in the 1990s. Borne out of nostalgia for the stylized glamour and sensuality of Golden-Era Hollywood and the early 20th century performance practices that inspired it, burlesque-centered venues reopened, and a new generation of performers began to establish themselves as striptease artists. This is the most broadly circulated narrative of the decline and revival of American burlesque but it’s worth noting that this narrative centers venues that historically served white audiences and gave mainstage to white performers. While white burlesque performers were navigating censure in the mainstream theater scenes of New York and LA, Black exotic dancers, and burlesque performers, who were often already marginalized within in those venues, were able to sustain their careers within the anti-normative Black spaces colloquially referred to as “The Chitlin’ Circuit”.⁸³ In what follows I reroute the history of American burlesque through 19th century Black vaudeville. From this vantage point, I explore the ways the erotic absurdities of burlesque offer opportunities for Black

⁸³ In her study of Black female vernacular culture, funky folklorist and Black sexual cultures scholar, L.H. Stallings asserts that a revisionist Tar Baby, like that fictionalized by Toni Morrison in her novel of the same name, as “an active being, less constructed by other individuals or beings but still caught in between roles and representations and one’s own self,” exemplifies the queer aesthetics and rhetorical strategies that enliven the work of black female performers. Specifically, Stallings reads the Tar Baby trope in the “chitlinfyin(g) drag,” (a mode of low-class Black vernacular camp) employed by 20th century Black female comedienne, namely LaWanda Page. Page’s entertainment career began as a dancer and burlesque performer in the 1930s billed as “The Bronze Goddess of Fire” traveling a circuit of performance venues and social establishments that catered to Black audiences in the eras of de jure and de facto racial segregation in the United States. This informal conglomerate of Black entertainment venues was colloquially referred to as the “Chitlin Circuit.” While the Chitlin Circuit was not an explicitly queer space, its function, as described by Stallings, “did address the needs of Black people consistently ascribed to the realms of [non-normative sexualities]” Stallings, L. H. *Mutha Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*. Ohio State University Press, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1kgqw94>. pg. 124, 127

feminine figures across time and space to dance with and evade the capture of knowability.

I think a lot about what it means for my petite dark-skinned black femme body to take up space on the neo-burlesque stage. I am aware that my flesh is always, already imbued with a litany tropes “mammy,” “jezebel,” “sapphire,” “brown sugar,” to “chocolate drop.” As I performatively redress myself with these labels, staining them sticky with molasses, I am acknowledging with Spillers that though they were not of my invention, I do have some responsibility to them.⁸⁴ I decide how I want to relate to them, and in the Tar Baby Act, I engage them as an anointing then ultimately pull them all into a ball I hold prayerfully above the center of my chest. I am not comfortable with the straightforward line of consumption between the spectacular body and audience that most burlesque relies upon, so I add language. Reading from off-stage imbues my presence with voice so even if I “don’t say nothin” while I strip down there is still the lingering trace of a voice left in the audiences mind. It’s important for me that the audience understands where I’m coming from. I want them to think about their desire, their enjoyment, in the context of whatever it is I have to say. I want them to understand their body in relation to my body and the histories our bodies carry. My work performs what L.H. Stallings terms “trickster-trope,” utilizing “desire [as] a primary tool in self-invention and the reading [and staging] of difference” (Stallings 2007, 35). I see this as another manifestation of what Saidiya Hartman has termed “deconstructive performance,” revolt staged at the sight of enjoyment (S. V. Hartman 1997, 42).

A Black Trickster Genealogy for American Burlesque

My first ever burlesque act, titled “Topsy’s Cotton Belt,” was danced “in tribute to Ida Forsythe, Black Patti and the long legacy of black women vaudeville performers and chorus girls that laughed, twisted, shouted and smiled as they laid the foundation for modern burlesque.”⁸⁵ I was inspired to experiment with burlesque as a medium for Black feminist storytelling by a line in Jayna Brown’s book *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of Modernity* (2008). In the chapter “Letting The Flesh Fly: Topsy, Time, Torture, and Transfiguration,” Brown writes:

“female minstrelsy has its own history, shaped by notions of the black female body’s abilities, availability, and utility. In the mid-nineteenth century, “female minstrelsy” was an official stage circuit term. It evolved into and was renamed “burlesque” in the 1880s but carried forward the practices of racial mimicry from

⁸⁴ As cited in my first chapter: In a 2018 conversation with Gail Lewis at the ICA in London, Hortense Spillers offered the following: “I would not like to see a reification, or a reading of [the ungendering formulation] back into my historical subjectivity or subjecthood as though it exhausted my possibility because it does not. It certainly defines how I am situated in the world that calls me by my name -- or whatever other name it’s calling me. and I have to answer to all of them whether I like them or not, and try to be responsible to them. But *I am not exhausted by them, I’m that plus*. And it’s the ‘plus’ that I’m trying to get to...”

⁸⁵ This language comes from the introductory text I wrote for the act as part of my performance at the 2019 Savannah Burlesque Festival

earlier stage conventions. Early burlesque was female-dominated popular stage work that was often satirical and always about dance, presaging the later chorus line dancers.”

And suddenly I was overwhelmed by the thought of lithe white-bodied ingenues in their glittery tasseled pasties feasting on the remains of Ida Forsyne’s Topsy. As elucidated by Brown, the untamable young Black ‘slave girl’, Topsy from Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, embodies the “childlike simplicity” projected on to Black folks in the late 18th and 19th century. In staged adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsy was a character designed to be played by a white woman in blackface. As such Topsy existed as a “therapeutic opportunity [for white female performers] to access realms of freedom [their] womanhood was otherwise constructed against” (Brown 71). As Topsy, and in other female minstrel derivatives, including burlesque, white women got to “act out” and disregard the stoic purity they had been culturally ascribed to.

In these performances of freedom, they invoked their power over and access to the Black female body (J. Brown 2008, 72; Spillers 1987, 77). But when Black female performers like Ida Forsyne played Topsy, Brown argues, the character’s movements register a spiritual reclamation of the Black body. Free from the respectability politics of the New Negro and seemingly immune to the violence of chattel slavery, Topsy embodied “the disruptive creativity of the black female child,” whose acts of transcendence reflect that of Black performers from the 19th century to present times (Brown 58). Brown’s provocative argument is supported by Forsyne’s own articulations of her body in performance. Though she did not have access to the kinds of documentation utilized by contemporary Black feminist performance artists to articulate their own relationships to their work, Forsyne was profiled throughout the early 20th century and left behind at least one trace of her own perspective in an interview conducted by Marshall and Jean Stearns between 1960 and 1966 for their critical account of the evolution of “American vernacular dance.”⁸⁶

While Forsyne never performed as the character Topsy in official staged renditions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, due to the ubiquity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the archetypal caricatures it gave life to, Forsyne was billed as “Topsy, The Famous Negro Dancer” when she toured London in 1906 with *The Tennessee Students* (Stearns 252). Naturally “little, black and cute,” Forsyne couldn’t *not* appear as Topsy on the vaudeville stage. The bodily comportment she was born into rendered her an unnatural sight, “the little lady who ‘was not born but just grew’” (Stearns 252). Topsy is an imagined object, Forsyne was a Black woman performer, the conflation of the two anticipates what has been discussed earlier in this chapter as “object performance.” Black feminist object performance makes use of this fungibility between living Black woman performer and unreal racialized gendered performance trope. Harkening back to Tiffany Lebotho King’s construction of Black fungibility as discussed in Chapter 2, Forsyne’s Topsy embodies “the capacity of Blackness for unfettered exchangeability and transformation within and beyond the form of the commodity” (T. L. King 2016, 1023). As Topsy,

⁸⁶ Stearns, Marshall, and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story Of American Vernacular Dance*. Hachette Books, 1994.

Forsythe performed her own burlesque, emerging from a potato sack center-stage backed by a line of white ballet dancers who were paid extra to perform in blackface. Described by Brown, Forsythe as Topsy would “emerged limb by limb, then danced wildly until a shot rang out and she fell to the floor.” Forsythe herself articulates this fall as rolling “over and over and up.” In the publication of the interview transcript, The Stearns describe the movement as “over and over and dead.” In this discrepancy, Brown sees the interplay between the tropes of inescapable suffering and inhuman resilience that overwrite Black performance in the popular imagination (Brown 62).

Understanding Forsythe’s “Topsy Sack Dance” (1906) as a burlesque act is a needed intervention in the historization of both black dance and burlesque performance in the US. In its originary sense, minstrelsy was always a burlesque. On the minstrel stage the exaggerated subject was Black life but because white supremacy was the popular sensibility of the time the performances were presumed to be representative and, even more heinously, accurate. Wriggling herself out of a potato sack, limb by limb, dancing wildly across the stage until a shot rang out and then falling to the ground rolling over and over and *up*, Forsythe referenced “the historical memory of living as a commodity, as well as the black child’s [and black woman’s] familiar proximity to violence, cruelty, and death” (Brown 62). She made a burlesque of the quotidian suffering she had momentarily escaped as a Black child born in Chicago in the wake of Reconstruction.⁸⁷ And she also performed a dramatic reveal inside a physical theater narrative that resonates with the performance structures of much contemporary burlesque.

Conclusion: Over, Over and Up

I make the decision to consciously stage these histories in my burlesque because their erasure bolsters oppressive patterns of consumption that *keep* the space of the stage unsafe for the radical presence of the low other. When first performing “Topsy’s Cotton Belt” in San Francisco I knew I needed to end that act by spinning over and over and falling “up.” I repeated the phrase “over and over and up” in my head as Nina Simone’s rendition of “Save Me” built to its rhythmic conclusion. I spun my body as Nina Scatted out “save save save” and fell to the ground with the songs last note. A

⁸⁷ In the cyclical nature of black time that same suffering would meet her upon her return to the US in 1914 as she struggled to find work that suited her prowess and credentials as a performer. Forsythe felt discriminated against by her own people on account of her dark skin and after failing to book shows in Harlem’s most noted theater she “gave up any idea of doing what [she] wanted to do” and took a gig coon-shouting on Coney Island (Stearns 254). Eventually she did land off-and-on work through the infamous Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A), the premiere vaudeville circuit for black performers in the 1920s, but because of her artistic affinity for Russian dance (for which she had achieved much acclaim in Europe) she was woefully unappreciated by Black audiences. From 1920-1922 she worked as a maid and dancer for white female Vaudeville icon Sophie Tucker.⁸⁷ In 1926 she toured the South with The Smart Set and had her first encounters with the horrors of the Jim Crow south. The experience marred her so that despite achieving relative success performing with Bessie Smith from 1927-1928, Forsythe quit dancing all-together when Smith was asked to embark on a Southern tour. After the conclusion of her performing career Forsythe worked as a domestic and spent her last working years as an elevator operator. Stearns, Marshall, and Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story Of American Vernacular Dance*. Hachette Books, 1994.

friend in the audience said I looked possessed as I caressed my out of breath body before hurriedly rising to clear the stage for the next performer. Based on audience applause, I won that first showcase. As I walked through the crowd a white male from the audience tapped me on the shoulder and told me that my act was “well-played,” another commented on my smile. They had gotten something I didn’t intend to give. Something felt incomplete.

In retrospect, I understand “The Marvelous Tar Baby” as a sequel to “Topsy’s Cotton Belt,” maybe even an attempt to correct for the things my first act missed. It didn’t start that way. It started with me sitting in my room feeling unsafe in the world (maybe another black girl had been murdered, I can’t remember). I wanted to write a folktale and didn’t know where to start so I read the one most familiar to me: Joel Chandler Harris’ rendition of “The Marvelous Tar Baby.” I couldn’t get over how violent the story was. I didn’t remember it that way. But the violence registered with me that night and I decided to write from the Tar Baby’s perspective, which felt like my perspective. I am wondering now if it is all an attempt sublimation. Me asserting my body on to the figure of a folktale learning something new about my own ability to survive through the repetition of this act.

As I coat myself in molasses, I imagine I am bathing. Baptizing myself in a fragrant sticky Blackness. Becoming at once edible and medicinal (traits that are always, already read on to my black femme body). I am also haunted by the history latent in Blackstrap molasses, a byproduct of the global sugar economy as heavy with Black folks’ sweat and suffering as the cotton plant. I think about Yoko Ono in 1964 sitting still allowing the audience to approach her with scissors and do as they will for her performance “Cut Piece” (Ono 1964). I think about Karen Finley in 1990 covering herself in chocolate as a feminist statement about consumption for the performance “We Keep Our Victims Ready” (Finley 1990). These are the referents my performance conjured in the minds of peers and mentors. Through the lens of feminist performance art, I am offering a contemplation of racialized femininity, consumption, and vulnerability. To my own mind, I am also engaging in a call and response dialogue with the Southern folkloric traditions I was born into.

In Black feminist solo-performance, the singular body of a Black feminine performer embodies Spillers’ assertion that “the personal pronouns serves a collective function” (Spillers 1987, 67). As explored in the anthology *solo/black/woman : scripts, interviews, and essays*, Black feminist solo-performance explicitly teases at the limits of “identity” and “personhood” through an aesthetic plurality that disrupts preconceived notions about “the black woman.” Building off Morrison’s description of the Tar Baby as “the black woman who can hold things together,” I call the aesthetic pluralities of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* ‘the Tar Baby principle’ (LeClair 1981). If a Tar Baby is a problem that gets more complicated the more you try to solve it, so too is Black femininity a mess of accumulated contradictions that stain both the beholder and the beheld. Employing the Tar Baby principle, Black feminist performance artists put Black feminine fungibilities to work in service to their own plays at psychic and embodied freedoms. These acts are marked on to the body and marked as vernacular retellings of histories, experienced, inherited, revised, and dreamt up. As dramatized in my own intentionally anachronistic acts of Black feminist performance art, the Tar Baby principle embodies the irresistible and destructive sensuality inscribed by Spillers

(Spillers 1987, 67). While Black cultural studies has long fixated on how black folks “wear the mask” and don the DuBoisian veil, holding close the Tar Baby forces us to stick with those Black feminine figures who *bear the mark*.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Here, I am juxtaposing of two moments in Black literature: 1) Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear The Mask” (1896) 2) The scene in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* where Sethe recounts being instructed by her mother : “... 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one who got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'” In 1987, both Spillers and Morrison to articulate a sense of “marked” personhood in relationship to the historical construction of Black femininity. The mark Sethe desires, that would connect her to her mother, is evidence of the moment her mother’s body was made flesh/ungendered. The desire for the mark Morrison articulates is in alignment with the queer natal identification the underwrites my revisionist Tar Baby’s return to water. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred Knopf, 1987, 73; Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. University of Virginia Press, 1993, 71.

CODA

Care as a Problem for Thought/Care as a Fuel for Practice

“I want to think “care” as a problem for thought. I want to think care in the wake as a problem for thinking and of and for Black non/being in the world.” – Christina Sharpe

If this is a quilt, a jive, a jook, a tease; it warrants a closing gesture. In the final week of the quilting class I took online in February of 2022, my quilting instructor Mama Darlyne said to make a sandwich: top, batting, and back. Then pin the layers together. Then baste using a series of big stitches starting from the center: from the center point to the top, from the center point to the bottom, from the center point to each edge.

My center point is the Black feminine figure forged in the dirt of the South. My center point is articulated in the Spillers truism that opens chapter 1, anchors chapter 3 and haunts the mythologies of chapter 2: *My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.*

The work of this dissertation has been to roll this observation around a glossed mouth. Through ruminations on 21st century erotic labor in digital performance, 20th century Black vernacular surrealisms, and the intentionally anachronistic compositions of my Black feminist own performance repertoire, I have marked out the needs of the “country” (and/or any given nationalistic project/institution) and observed the ways Black feminine figures have shaped and reshaped themselves in response to this *NEED* (& the implicit threats of and explicit encounters with patriarchal violence these needs entail). Further, through a close contemplation of the work from the vantage point of each Black feminine figure and the histories they carry, I have relied on the certainty of Black feminine self-invention guided by Toni Morrison’s echo: *She had nothing to fall back on, not maleness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.*⁸⁹

⁸⁹ I refer to this as an echo because the quote appears in both Morrison’s cultural criticism by way of the 1971 article “What The Black Woman Thinks of Women’s Lib” and fiction by way of the 1973 novel *Sula*.

This Morrison quote is my ‘baste.’ The unseen rocking stitch integral to the whole. The thought that keeps the pieces together so that I don’t hurt or confuse myself as I work through the final composition.

The heuristic I use to incapsulate this mode of self-invention driven by the ‘profound desolution’ embodied by Black femininity within an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. Indebted to the socio-poetics of Ntozake Shange, Hortense Spillers and their kin-folks, *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* is a condition of *articulate motion* between how one see’s and is seen.⁹⁰ It is a form of object performance that never finds stasis. It is a practice of fugitivity, a *trickster technology*, an inhabitation of the fungible, a *maroon choreography*.⁹¹

But beyond (or before) all that, I must account for the ways this work has been marked by disaster:

In 2005 I was 11 years-old in Atlanta, GA watchingfeeling the city culturally and socially transform in the wake of Hurrican Katrina and that event has shaped so much of my intellectualsoocialcreative life. 16 years later Hurricane Ida stuck the Gulf Coast and I made my own Dirty South flight path from New Orleans to Atlanta. In Atlanta, as an Ida evacuee I felt splintered by feelings of gratitude, anxiety, and regret. Did I make the right choice? Bring the right things? Should I have stayed? What about my loved ones and community members that stayed behind? This led me to a lot of tears and a week’s worth of crowdsourcing and resource distribution.

I don’t want to be self-indulgent. My experience of living in a city transformed by Katrina evacuees was superficial in comparison to the death and devastation that plagued New Orleans in 2005 , but it marked me nonetheless. In awe of all I have survived over the course of dreaming up and completing this dissertation project, I’m trying to say something about what it feels like for the 11 year-old Atlantan I was to have grown into a 27-29 year old organizer who works, plays, dreams and organizes in and critically engages with New Orleans.

The seeds of my dissertation project were sowed in the wake of Katrina and radically transformed in the tail winds of Ida. I have to write about this honestly. I had to write through the experience of displacement with all its uncertainty, stillness and *care work*. I had to write with the majority of my books and notes in a storage unit across the country.

Between these two moments of Black movement in crisis, I see that care has asserted itself as primary method of knowledge production. Care that exceeds and

⁹⁰ Spillers, Hortense J. “‘AN ORDER OF CONSTANCY’: NOTES ON BROOKS AND THE FEMININE.” *The Centennial Review* 29, no. 2 (1985): 223–48.

⁹¹ Stallings, L.H. Mutha’ Is Half A Word: Intersection of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27978>; ife, fahima. *Maroon Choreography*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2021.

interrupts ‘the work’. Care that interrupts my logo-centric thinking and pulls me into other modes of expression. Care that reorganizes me and pulls me towards my body and the body of those I love.

How do I be honest about this and still meet the needs and standards of the academic establishment?

I take it seriously.

Christina Sharpe has notably anchored contemporary Black intellectual inquiry in practices of wake-work. Sharpe’s provocation to think “black being in the wake as a form of consciousness” makes *sense* in the way that Barbara Christian meant when she heralded sensual language.⁹² When faced with the inescapability of Black death and dying at the symbolic and interpersonal level, taking seriously the ways that death and grief reshape us, one would have to regard it as a “perception” or “state of being aware.” From a wake-borne consciousness, we *feel* with the same, if not, more acuity than we *know*.

The configuration of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* that I have proffered throughout these dissertation chapters is a way to hold queer Black feminine performances of labored survival. It is an attempt at naming the particular modes of wake-work employed and experimented with by Black women (of trans- and cis - experience, of all gender presentations) and gender-non-conforming Black femmes who have been marked as *irresistible and destructive*.⁹³

Just when I thought it was all a fever dream, a hallucination (or at-worst a self-indulgent projection of my own drama), The Black Studies Collaboratory at UC Berkeley occasioned two sightings of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh*. The first was of my own design:

February 11th 2021

Curated by Ra Malika Imhotep, The Performance of Labor/The Labor of Performance is a convening of Black feminist artists and cultural workers who will communally explore the question(s) of how the forms and methods of opera, surrealism, free jazz, poetry, & dance help us communicate the concerns of radical black feminism(s)?

Survival requires acts of collaboration and genius... and my interlocuters, the creators gathered for the event; kai lumumba barrow, esperanza spalding, jazz franklin, X’ene Sky, and Bronte Velez, each embody, express and execute beautiful, wayward

⁹² Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016.

⁹³ Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

experiments that have reshaped the terrain of my own Black feminist thought and practice.⁹⁴ To gather with the group and be witnessed in our communion was a dream come true. Further, in bringing this dream convening out into the public I felt affirmed that whatever *I feel/know is*.⁹⁵

And so, we chewed the fat. We spoke about our work, our lineages, the dirt we come from, and the desire we have for a liberated art form that might, at last, be big enough to hold *the most beautiful things on the Black earth*.

After the public dialogue we gathered in the newly renovated reading room. Kai laid a mound of cotton in front of the cognac-colored sectional. X'ene wrapped herself artfully in a length of raw cotton rope. I placed a white rose atop the mound. Bronte gathered herself against a wall. Jazz mapped animations on to the wall...and the rest escapes capture.

The second sighting came by way of Abolition Democracy Postdoctoral Fellow Dr. Victoria Grubbs. As fate would have it, I first met Dr. Grubbs during another kind of ensemble performance. Enlisted as members of the artist Dread Scott's *Army of the Enslaved*, we found each other on a procession through Louisiana's Cancer Alley. We had both been drawn to the drums. Soon this configuration of players would dub ourselves "The Slave Rebellion Freedom Choir" and improvise chants, songs, and dance circles that brought life, and distinctly Black vernacular flavor, to Scott's overly aestheticized art project.⁹⁶

Once musical rebels in slave drag, now here, together, in a different configuration, Dr. Grubbs and I carried a kind of kinship. But even that familiarity failed to prepare me for the way her public program "GAG|RE|FLEX: when life gives you xxxxxxxx" would lay out the terms of everything I've been struggling to write down.

Conceptualized and embodied by the New York-based performance artist Osh Nine, "In light of the ongoing repression of queer Black liberation movements by police states worldwide," GAG|RE|FLEX was a conspiracy against the State. As described by the artists and organizers "under the relentless pressure of the fist of empire, we clear our throats in chorus. Around the gag, we flick our tongues in ecstasy and defense" (Osh Nine and Grubbs 2022). An exegesis of 'fugitive faith,' the immersive, experiential song-and-dance, reminded me of the work of kai lumumba barrow and Gallery of the Streets. The aesthetics of the happening were abolitionist free jazz funky. It was a mess of the

⁹⁴ Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. 1 edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.

⁹⁵ Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Cultural Critique*, no. 6 (1987): 51–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354255>.

⁹⁶ I have written at-length about my experience in Dread Scott's Slave Rebellion Reenactment both publicly and in a co-authored journal article. See Imhotep, Ra Malika, SJ Zhang, and C. Riley Snorton. "Hell You Talmbout? Sighting Confusion in the Performance of Black Revolt." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 331–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2020.1907687>.

highest order. Performing as THE LAW, Osh Nine articulated the absurdities of their own sentencing hearing that had taken place a few weeks prior: their Black queer life hung in the balance as an act of “general deterrence” for the crime of destroying a literal vessel of The Police State during the summer blaze of 2020s converging pandemics.

GAG|RE|FLEX was another articulation of *being-in-blackfeminineflesh* that refused to be cleaned up. Each technical glitch, an opening for dirty possibility. Here, we were all witness to the liminal space between sentence and capture.

The event was intentionally live with no virtual component. I’m not supposed to tell you everything that went down, and I won’t. But you must know that sitting there in Downtown Oakland, listening to Osh Nine&Dr. Grubbs&Miss Abolition. I felt like all this laborious reading and writing might be bringing me towards the Truth. Miss Abolition, a black woman of trans-experience who we had seen footage of being arrested and assaulted by police, explicitly called for care as a necessary means for advancing Black autonomy. Osh Nine declared abolition to be a creative act. And shared how, for them, the experience of waiting for federal sentencing pulled them toward an art practice, a clearing of mind, a sense of peace. In the whirlwind of performance and truth telling they offered, I couldn’t help but think of the testimonies of historical Black feminine figures like Tituba of Salem and Lucy Hicks Anderson.⁹⁷ These perplexing black women who turned moments of aggressive State interpolation into performances of direct address. It struck me that testimony might be one of the most enduring Black feminist abolitionist tactics. Through acts of testimonial performance, Black feminine flesh signals an awareness of its own significations and makes use of its materiality for purposes that serve a broader coalition.

And maybe a dissertation can be a testimony, a *calling in of the ancestors*, an indictment of the oppressors, a cathartic release, a gesture towards the *Truth and Reconciliation* of disparate ideas.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ In the historical record of the 1692 Salem Witch trials, an enslaved woman named Tituba is the first to be accused of witchcraft and in her confession implicates several young white women who were caught dancing in what resembled an occult circle. Here the record connects hysteria to theories on exorcism. The girls hysteria is linked to the belief that they are possessed, clearly under the influence of some ~~black~~ dark magic to have moved against the puritanical restraint of the time. After the proceedings of a 1945 trial in which Hicks-Anderson and all the women who lived and worked in the boarding house/brothel she ran were required to undergo a medical examination, she became one of the first documented Black transwomen in American history. What matters to me is not that the courts of Ventura County violated her privacy and ultimately convicted her and her husband for fraud and perjury. What matters is that when tried for perjury on account of her self-determined identity as a Black woman Hicks-Anderson said, “I defy any doctor in the world to prove that I am not a woman...I have lived, dressed, and acted just what I am, a woman.” And in this declaration Hicks-Anderson echoes the calls issued by Sojourner Truth in 1863. Rather than turn towards ambivalence, Hicks-Anderson stands certain in the truth of her identity. In this certainty, Hicks-Anderson forces the historical record to account for the ways that both legal and illicit labors of social reproduction necessitate the creative genius of Black feminine figures. Breslaw, Elaine G. *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies*. NYU Press, 1995; Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. U of Minnesota Press, 2017, 181.

⁹⁸ Italicized phrases are pulled from the transcript of OshNine’s court testimony that was reproduced on the walls throughout the duration of their performance.

The Truth is that all Black feminist thought was forged in a crucible full of the devastating realities and transgressive pleasures through which Black feminine figures mark out their lives. The Truth is that it is really hard to read and write and think with the world on fire, the air unsafe, daily life besieged by rapidly mutating viral variants, and aging parents. The Truth is that writing a dissertation in which I, my self, was deeply imbricated was harder than I thought it would be but honestly the only approach that felt worth my time. The Truth is I found my way back to writing through the pull of a Black feminist practice of *concernful care for other human beings* that couldn't help but exceed the confines of academic legibility.⁹⁹

This choral gesture towards conclusion recognizes that there are no discreet 'end results' for the research activities undertaken throughout these pages.

At the end of it all, the Black feminist creative intellectual – marked by the Dirty South – is left with a more thoroughly informed resolve to shape a world around the practices of care that Black feminist labors, refusals, and genius make possible.

⁹⁹ Spillers, Hortense J. "The Scholarly Journey of Hortense Spillers." BrandeisNOW, February 1, 2019. <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2019/february/hortense-spillers-qa.html>.

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