VISUALIZING EROTIC FREEDOM IN BLACK FEMINIST FICTION AND TV, 1973-2020

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Division of Graduate Studies of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2022

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Title: Visualizing Erotic Freedom in Black Feminist Fiction and TV, 1973-2020

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Degree awarded June 2022

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2022

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"Visualizing Erotic Freedom" shows how contemporary Black comedic TV draws on the aesthetic legacy of the Black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s to re-envision Black sexualities on their own terms. This project unfolds in two parts. Part 1 shows that texts from the Black women's literary renaissance offer nonrealist visual vocabularies as innovative strategies for cultivating intimacy in the face of structural anti-Blackness and misogyny. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) provides a revised theory of the gaze, establishing looking together as a technique of relational plenitude that is erotic in Audre Lorde's sense of a shared sensuous or spiritual energy. In *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), Ntozake Shange enacts erotic fullness by employing choreopoetic apposition: nonrealist strategies of critical distance per Bertolt Brecht that range from syntactic objectification (poetic disruptions to syntax that denaturalize subject and object) to vignette structure (loosely related monologues arranged side by side). Part 2 argues that contemporary Black TV creators redeploy these aesthetic principles to build Black erotic worlds independent of entrenched sexual discourses. Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-) uses puppets – and a puppet version of Shange's *for colored girls* – to destabilize the stuff of the self, spoofing realist interpretive assumptions that condition the reception of Black women's art in the

post-Civil Rights era. Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018-) provides its own historiographical critique in vignette form, arguing that the critical gendering of abstraction since the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s has resulted in a failure to read Afrosurrealism and Black feminism together. Issa Rae's i*nsecure* (2016) similarly puts critical distance to generative effect, using the nonrealist excesses of the ratchet to refuse easy incorporation into linear narratives of empowerment. Gazing askew at political realities during two periods of amplified conservatism and social services defunding (the rise of the New Right in the 1970s and the 2017-2021 presidential administration of Donald J. Trump), my texts of focus display a Black feminist commitment to denaturalizing historically contingent expressions of anti-Blackness and misogyny while enacting alternative worlds of erotic freedom through popular art.

This dissertation includes previously published and unpublished material.

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Ohman, Carmel. "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's i*nsecure*." *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 2 (2020): 5-15.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This degree has been about finding community, often in times of crisis. To my dissertation committee members, Courtney Thorsson, Dayna Chatman, Mary E. Wood, and Faith Barter, I want to extend my sincere thanks for all your labor these past few years. Prof. Thorsson, I mean it when I say that my proudest milestone is having earned your steadfast support as an advisor. Our conversations challenge my thinking in the most generative ways, and I am so pleased that this dissertation reflects some of that learning. Prof. Chatman, your intellectual generosity has helped bring this project to another level and I know I will continue to think with your work for years to come. Prof. Wood, I am especially grateful to you for providing essential support when I decided to change fields and pursue additional coursework in Black studies and women's, gender, and sexuality studies. Prof. Barter, I quite simply could not have written this dissertation without your incisive feedback and generous support.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Shoniqua Roach. Prof. Roach, thank you for modeling what it means to be "in community and conversation" (a phrase that you used in one of our first email exchanges back in 2018 and that has stayed with me as a refrain for thinking and being differently in institutional spaces). Community grows up around you wherever you go, and I am so grateful to count among those you continue to challenge and inspire.

Thank you to the many friends and colleagues I have had the pleasure of thinking and being with at the University of Oregon, including (but not limited to): Kate Huber, Gina Filo, Jiesha Stephens, Jalen Thompson, Susan Weeber, David Vázquez, Liz Curry, Margaret Bostrom, Kathy Furrer, Josie Mulkins, Martha Ndakalako-Bannikov, V Varun

Chaudhry, Ulrick Casimir, Michelle McKinley, Yvette Saavedra, Kemi Balogun, Christina Lujin, Melissa Bowers, Kali Simmons, Camisha Russell, Christy Hoffmann, Erma Halili, Amy Cox, Jason Schreiner, Robert Voelker-Morris, Lee Rumbarger, Priscilla Ovalle, Avinnash P. Tiwari, Helen Huang, Sabrina Sherman, Lisa Fink, Jamie Bufalino, Leslie Selcer, Reese Haller, Irene Awino, Priscilla Yamin, Sangita Gopal, Paul Peppis, Sharon Luk, Kirby Brown, Mark Whalan, Lara Bovilsky, Sarah Wald, Tara Fickle, Teresa Hernández, Caela Fenton, Emalydia Flenory, Celeste Reeb, Cassie Galentine, Sarah Preston, Hayley Brazier, Bethany Jacobs, Angie Rovak, Stephanie Mastrostefano, Jenée Wilde, Carolyn Bergquist, Miriam Gershow, Emily Simnitt, Mike Copperman, Kara Clevinger, Nick Recktenwald, Michael Hames-García, Joe Lowndes, and Daniel HoSang.

Thanks also to the many folks I have connected with through conferences, journal submissions, and interviews who have shaped my thinking in meaningful ways, including (but not limited to): Justin Mann, Maia Gil'Adí, Kirin Wachter-Grene, Louise Chude-Sokei, Dell Marie Hamilton, Sequoia Maner, Heather Raquel Phillips, Michelle Robinson, GerShun Avilez, Sharon P. Holland, Jennifer C. Nash, Cynthia Young, Erica R. Edwards, Shirley Moody-Turner, Jamie K. Taylor, Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, Lia T. Bascomb, Darius Bost, Faith Smith, ChaeRan Freeze, and Matthew Kumar.

Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (fellowship 752-2014-2382) and the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon for supporting my research.

Finally, thank you to my families: my dad, my late mom, my husband Jeremy, the Andersons, the Whitakers, the Hubers, the Carsons, "the girls" Ashley and Sam, and the best dog in the world Walli.

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I

INTRODUCTION

A Historiographical Provocation, with Puppets

Robin Thede's sketch comedy series *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-) uses puppets to intervene in realist ways of reading Black women's creative texts since the 1970s. The recurring title sequence for Season 1 features puppets modeled after each cast member, one of whom, puppet Gabrielle Dennis, sits reading in a busy hair salon under a domed blow dryer. Her choice of book? *for (stuffed) colored puppets who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*. Complete with multicolor graffiti font and puppet likeness of Ntozake Shange, here is a dedicated puppet version of the choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) – an iconic text from the Black women's literary renaissance.[1]

While referencing real-world people (Gabrielle Dennis, Ntozake Shange) and texts (Shange's choreopoem in print and performance), the title sequence puppets add a layer of mediation, comedically denaturalizing audience assumptions about creative texts by and about Black women. The puppets undercut the assumption of a psychologically realist individual subject by using materials external to the human body (including rolled-up t-shirts and felt) to approximate, and substitute for, each cast member's likeness

[1] Shameless Hussy Press first published *for colored girls* as a poetry chapbook in 1975. The well-known choreopoem version of *for colored girls* to which I refer came out in 1976. Regarding the term "renaissance," see Washington, Mary Helen. "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies." *College English*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1981, p. 2, doi:10.2307/377306. While Washington originally used the label "renaissance" to describe the late 1970s, I use the term, following Erica Edwards and others, to refer to a broader movement of writers spanning the 1970s and 1980s, including: Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Sherley Anne Williams, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade Bambara.

(Radish n.p.). Interrogating the relationship between self as subject and self as object, the puppets constitute a formal strategy of self-externalization that complicates ideas of subjectivity, selfhood, and character hinging on realism. Indeed, the "*(stuffed) colored puppets*" of the title sequence specifically satirize the idea that Black women's inner lives are visible or legible to audiences.

In the title sequence, puppet Gabrielle Dennis holds her book open (implying accessibility and legibility), but it obscures most of her face (practicing concealment). Her eyes also peek out from between the top of the book cover and the rim of the hair dryer. Looking directly at the camera, her puppet gaze mimics the kind of performer-to-audience eye contact that often lends access to a character's innermost feelings or thoughts. But the puppet's gaze is necessarily *a*ppositional rather than oppositional.[2] Promising but never delivering on eye contact between Gabrielle Dennis and the audience behind the camera, the nonhuman material or stuff of the puppet makes satirical fodder of realist presumptions to character transparency.

Close-ups of the puppet choreopoem evince a yet deeper skepticism of the critical discourse surrounding Shange's *for colored girls* in particular, establishing stuff as a comedic metaphor for embodied erotic resources that exceed the terms of normative racial and gender identity categories. The back cover copy reads:

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[2] I would like to thank Justin Mann for using the concept of appositionality to redescribe my argument about Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) during our 2021 Modern Language Association panel, "Strategic Gazes: Black Women Watchers in the Abolitionist Uprising" (virtual, January 7). Appositionality in this dissertation signals visual strategies that sidestep, mediate, or otherwise disrupt entrenched ways of knowing, categorizing, and understanding in the wake of colonialism. For a more capacious understanding of appositionality engaging sound studies, see also Moten, Fred. "Visible Music." *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003, pp. 172-231. Related concepts include but are not limited to: Afro-alienation (Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Illustrated edition, Duke University Press Books, 2006); opacity and obscurity (Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Michigan Press, 1997); and dissemblance (Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 912–20).

> A revolutionary award-winning play by a lauded playwright and poet about the experiences of stuffed women of color.
>
> Passionate and fearless, these words reveal what it is to be of color, stuffed and female in the twentieth century. First published in 1975 when it was praised for 'encompassing … every feeling and experience a stuffed woman has ever had,' For (Stuffed) Colored Puppets Who Have Considered Suicide / when the Rainbow is Enuf will be read and performed for generations to come. (2:59)

While the back cover copy could easily be misinterpreted as spoofing *for colored girls* itself, it actually takes aim at the choreopoem's critical reception.[3] It reproduces much of the Scribner print version verbatim, with one conspicuous exception: these women of color are stuffed, and quadruply so ("stuffed women of color;" "of color, stuffed and female;" "stuffed woman"; and "For (Stuffed) Colored Puppets"). When crammed between parentheses, the descriptor "(Stuffed)" amasses yet another grammatical layer of stuffing. Recalling the lady in green's famous vignette "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" from *for colored girls*, stuff serves as an amorphous descriptor of embodied erotic resources.[4] Presenting the quality of being "stuffed" as if it were an identity marker such as "of color" or female," the language on the back cover has the effect of denaturalizing racial and gender identity markers, undermining critical presumptions of a one-to-one correspondence to real-world social formations. At the

[3] Thede also satirized critical responses to *for colored girls* in a 2010 sketch, spoofing the much-maligned Tyler Perry film adaptation by restaging a puppet version of it. The sketch's voiceover narration revises portions of the choreopoem itself, including: the lady in orange's reflections in "no more love poems #1" ("ever since i realized there waz someone callt / bein stuffed or a puppet / i been tryin not to be that" [00:00:54]) and the lady in yellow's reflections in "no more love poems #4" ("bein stuffed is a metaphysical dilemma/ i haven't conquered yet" ([00:01:07]). Thede, Robin, writer. "For (Stuffed) Colored Girls." *Funny or Die*, 2010, https://www.funnyordie.com/2010/11/4/17710856/for-stuffed-colored-girls.

[4] See chapter 2. The lady in green renders her "own self," in its holistic multiplicity, as "alla my stuff" (63). The speaker externalizes this "package[] of me" (64) as a way of claiming erotic stewardship of her body, art, and spiritual practices.

same time, the back cover clarifies and maintains *A Black Lady Sketch Show*'s focus on Black femmes.[5] Whereas the front cover replaces the feminine signifier "*girls*" from Shange's real-world choreopoem with language unmarked by gender ("*(stuffed) colored puppets*"), the back cover adds the "stuffed" descriptor to existing vocabularies of femininity ("women," "female," "woman"). If the back cover copy promises to "reveal," at the level of content, totalizing narratives about "what it is to be of color" and "female," then stuff exceeds this ontological fixity at the level of form.

Offering a strategic vision of self-externalization and formal excess, the stuffed puppet and her choreopoem allow cast members to evade subjective capture in a Black feminist semantic move similar to that of Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith in the title of their landmark feminist anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982).[6] As Kevin Quashie shows, the "*Brave*" descriptor in the anthology's main title undermines narrow identitarian logics ("To Be" 68). The editors opt not to combine the categories of "*Women*" and "*Blacks*" in this main title, a refusal underscored by the negative preposition "*But*." Instead, they articulate an adjectival quality, in this case "*Brave*," that conveys a singularity not afforded by conjoining existing gender and racial signifiers. Without being especially interested in the sincerity of bravery, Thede too chooses a quality through which to express her series' unabashed reveling in collective

---

[5] I use the term "Black femmes" in my dissertation to signify Black women and girls, cis and trans. The term is one attempt to upset the "customary lexis" of gender and sexuality as Hortense Spillers articulates it ("Mama's" 76).

[6] On symbolic capture through Western constructions of subjectivity, see Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997. See also DeCristo, Jemma. "Music Against the Subject." *Theory & Event*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2018, pp. 169-190.

joy and absurdity at the limits of normative identity: But Some of Us, she suggests, Are (Stuffed).

By complicating narrow identitarian logics and their attendant reading practices, stuff here serves as an unlikely technology of erotic fullness or plenitude – a technology of Black feminist erotic intimacy embedded in a capitalist visual space. Following Audre Lorde, I use "erotic" to describe a force irreducible to the physical that, even amidst systemic anti-Blackness and misogyny, encompasses creative possibilities for Black femme sensuality, sexuality, pleasure, humor, desire, and intimate relationships ("Uses of the Erotic" 53). The absurdly humorous incursions of stuff support erotic fullness by comedically reiterating and thereby undermining public structures of literary and theatrical recognition (signaled by adjectives including "revolutionary," "award-winning," and "lauded") that depend on grammatically and analytically passive patterns of reception ("was praised"). Epitomized by the real 1975 *New Yorker* review that celebrated the choreopoem for "'encompassing … every feeling and experience a woman has ever had,'" the patterns of reception spoofed here posit an easy equivalence between art and reality ("these words reveal what it is to be"). They display an eagerness to foreclose further conversation about the complex inner lives of women (altogether erasing the qualifier "of color") by celebrating a definitive and comprehensive account in need of no further questioning.

Making public discourse about Shange and *for colored girls* available for critique, Thede's excesses of stuff make a historiographical argument: psychologically realist conditions of reception surrounding post-Civil Rights era Black women's literary and visual texts constitute an ongoing barrier to erotic freedom. If erotic possibilities for

Black femmes flourish in what Hortense Spillers describes as “private and particular space” (“Mama’s” 67) – pockets of “profound intimacy” that exceed the violences of the normative gaze and thereby point the way to alternative erotic grammars (67) – then public misnamings tied to the literary establishment routinely circumscribe these possibilities. The stuff of Robin Thede’s *A Black Lady Sketch Show* thus satirizes conditions of creative reception that themselves repeat across “generations,” repackaging complex “feeling[s],” “experience[s],” and artworks into totalizing narratives.

My dissertation takes the stuffed puppets of Robin Thede’s title sequence up on their historiographical provocation. Working at the intersections of African American literature, visual culture, Black feminism, and sexuality studies, this project rereads iconic Black women’s literature through the lens of contemporary comedic TV. Bookended by what Brittney Cooper describes as two “sunbursts” of Black women’s cultural production (“Foreword” x), this interdisciplinary project examines well-known texts from the Black women’s literary renaissance (Toni Morrison’s *Sula* [1973], Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* [1976]) and traces their surprising afterlives in comedic TV of the 2010s by and about Black femmes (Issa Rae’s i*nsecure* [2016-], Terence Nance’s *Random Acts of Flyness* [2018-], Robin Thede’s *A Black Lady Sketch Show* [2019-]). The alternative genealogy established here shows that, while scholars including Stephen Best cast the aesthetic legacy of the Black women’s literary renaissance as one of representational, realist trauma and melancholy, the aesthetic legacy of authors including Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange is in many ways nonrepresentational, routinely and deliberately exceeding the terms of psychologically realist selfhood and feeling. Indeed, Morrison and

Shange's aesthetic strategies of self-externalization, formal excess, polyopticism, counter-empathy, and nonrealist vignette formats find new and contradictory expression in comedic TV with Black feminist commitments. Gazing askew at political realities during two periods of amplified conservatism and social services defunding (the rise of the New Right in the 1970s and the 2017-2021 presidential administration of Donald J. Trump), my texts of focus contribute to Black feminist thought not by reacting directly against anti-Black and misogynist terror – instead, they interrogate assumptions at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality through oblique visual and erotic vocabularies.[7] While Phillip Brian Harper argues that the visual field is overdetermined and unconducive to denaturalizing terms of analysis linked to Blackness (10), I argue that the televisual interrogation of literary historiography through nonrealist formal devices generatively disrupts entrenched analytical practices that would crowd out "private and particular space" (Spillers, "Mama's" 67) in favor of totalizing narratives about Black womanhood.

Ways of Reading, Revisited

Interrogating ways of reading Black literature in the post-Civil Rights era is by no means new. In *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014), Anthony Reed shows how "racialized reading" – which "locates texts within a

[7] This project analyzes Black-created texts that do the Black feminist work of questioning assumptions behind race, gender, and sexuality in the interests of valuing Black femme lives. Some writers considered here have a fraught relationship to the "Black feminist" label. For example, Toni Morrison expressed concern about the implications of feminist separatism (see "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. 65). Yet Patricia Hill Collins argues that "[t]o look for Black feminism by searching for U.S. Black women who self-identify as 'Black feminists' misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates" (*Black Feminist Thought* 34). While rigorously engaging the intellectual genealogies and political commitments of self-identified Black feminists remains crucial, Black feminist knowledge production also takes many forms that may or may not align with a particular practitioner's articulation of their politics.

presumptive black tradition or black social location" (7) – treats literary texts as sociological records, a practice producing both exclusions of formally experimental texts from the canon and misreadings of canonized texts. In *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (2015), Phillip Brian Harper argues that realist demands on Black literary and visual texts produce narrow reading practices fated to relitigate art's utility for racial politics.

My dissertation joins a subset of debates about the extent to which post-Civil Rights era fiction ushered in a melancholic relationship to history in African American Studies (Aida Levy-Hussen, Stephen Best), foregrounding "feelings and experiences" of intergenerational trauma in the wake of Civil Rights retrenchment (Richard Iton). In *How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation* (2016), Aida Levy-Hussen argues that the turn in the 1970s and 1980s to what Arlene Keizer terms "contemporary narratives of slavery" demonstrates the historical desire of African American literature to reckon with the profound inadequacies of Civil Rights legislative gains and ongoing systemic assaults on Black liberation efforts (13). Levy-Hussen in turn establishes therapeutic reading as one interpretive pattern surrounding contemporary narratives of slavery in particular. Indebted to Eve Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, therapeutic reading operates on the assumption that reading about the slave past has moral value and can yield some level of collective healing.

For Stephen Best, the reparative or therapeutic impulse is troubling in that it locates a presumed Black collectivity in the "slave past," treating said past as "a ready prism for apprehending the black political present" (63). As Best argues in *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (2018), the "primacy" (63) of the slave past has

produced an interpretive gridlock in African American Studies between the totalizing, intergenerational impacts of slavery and the quest for creative voice or agency. This perceived gridlock finds current expression in heated debates about Afropessimism and the extent to which asserting a historical continuum of violence (between transatlantic slavery and contemporary institutional practices such as policing, mass incarceration, and healthcare discrimination that put Black people at a higher risk of premature death) forecloses Black futurities and Black creative world-building (101).

Of particular relevance here is that Best's statement on the impasse in African American Studies identifies the "literary model of historiography" as a primary vehicle for the post-Civil Rights era recovery impulse. Characterized by a persistent attachment to the slave past, the literary model of historiography consists, in his telling, of critical discourses of historical loss that derived unprecedented momentum from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) – from both the text's encoded melancholy and from the text's popularity. Best thus joins Levy-Hussen in registering the preponderance of contemporary narratives of slavery in the 1970s and 1980s, but, whereas Levy-Hussen foregrounds texts by a host of Black men and women including David Bradley, Randall Keenan, Toni Morrison, Andrea Lee, and Gayl Jones, Best places remarkable emphasis on Morrison. This has the effect of implying a totalizing narrative about the relationship between history, feeling, and Black women's literature. After citing *Beloved*'s 1988 Pulitzer Prize, Best writes:

> It would not be going too far to add that [Morrison's] winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 positioned *Beloved* to go on to shape the way an entire generation of scholars conceived its ethical relationship to the past. For a distinctive, if not singular, moment in the history of the interpretive disciplines, a

> novel managed to set the terms of the political and historiographical agenda. The rise of *Beloved* moved the entire field of literary studies to a central place within African American studies[.] … With Morrisonian poetics as a guide, the black Atlantic provided a way to make history for those who had lost it and thus secured the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism. (68)

That Morrison's recognition for *Beloved* was and remains legitimated by public award structures surely deepens the work's impacts on scholarly and public discourse. Nevertheless, Best's emphasis on public structures of recognition risks obscuring the specific literary features of Morrison's "poetics." Framing the relationship to the past in *Beloved* as one of melancholic attachment understates Morrison's use of nonrealist disruptions to convey the impossibility of the past's transmission. It suggests that the past in the novel is readily available to those in the narrative present, when, as Levy-Hussen has shown, a character such as Denver finds herself deeply alienated from Sethe and Beloved's closed loop of relation (26). Best also offers quotations from interviews with Morrison as key evidence of the novel's "melancholic historicism" (68), blurring the lines between Morrison's authorial intentions and the text itself. Does the novel indeed advocate melancholy as "a persistent identification with the lost object" (68), or is this Best displacing Sethe's link to Beloved onto both the novel and the discourse surrounding it?

Most importantly, the literary model of historiography that Best establishes in relation to *Beloved* is at once feminine (involving women) and feminized (aligned with excesses of melancholic feeling and attachment and thereby denigrated). *Beloved*'s focus on three Black women characters (Sethe, Beloved, and Denver) and its well-documented

literary reimagining of Margaret Garner's 1856 forced choice to kill her child locates the novel in a web of racial-sexual forces specific to Black women with perceived or actual reproductive capacities.[8] This focus suggests that Black women's forced reproductive labor, especially between 1808 and 1865, inform the melancholic turn that Best describes.[9] I raise this point not to collapse historical and novelistic events but rather to observe that the melancholy with which Best takes issue is marked as feminine in ways that go relatively unexamined, despite Best's commitment to analyzing intersecting structures of power including race and sexuality. For example, he grounds his skepticism of Black studies' logic of intergenerational Black belonging partly in his and James Baldwin's distinct yet overlapping experiences of affective disconnection from their fathers (3-8). Paternal disconnection seems, to Best, a more viable and nuanced site from which to theorize the complexities of Black relation than the melancholic attachments ostensibly prescribed by Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. These contrasting case studies pit masculinized detachment against feminized attachment. Best's literary model of historiography understates conditions specific to Black women while drawing on such conditions to produce an inadvertently gendered (or ungendered, in Spillers' sense) argument about the state of interpretation in African American Studies.

In this way, Best's line of argumentation helps to name (while inadvertently replicating elements of) the double bind attending representations of Black women: critical erasures of specific material conditions, including systemic threats of rape, exist

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[8] See Morgan, Jennifer L. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

[9] The 1808 Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves exacerbated the violent demands on enslaved Black women to reproduce a slave labor population. For more on the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, see Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

alongside a flattening fetishization of Black women's "feelings and experiences."[10] The symbolic fetishization of Black womanhood has taken acute and contradictory forms in the post-Civil Rights era. As Ann duCille explains, the "explosion of interest in black women as literary and historical subjects" (596) in the late-twentieth century raised Black women's literature and Black feminist inquiry to an "occult status" (596), the results of which have been white institutional cooptation and the systematic demeaning of Black feminist work (615). For Michele Wallace, the renewed literary interest in Zora Neale Hurston following Alice Walker's 1975 publication in *Ms*. magazine produced a critical "traffic jam" – a "mostly ill-mannered stampede to have some memento of the black woman" (174). Positioned at the nexus of erasure and hypervisibility, Black women's bodies and stories in the post-Civil Rights era have faced multifarious interpretive demands ranging from academic program-building to imperialist nation-building.[11] It is small wonder, then, that intimacy, opacity, privacy, and what Darlene Clark Hine calls dissemblance constitute essential strategies for Black women's survival and aesthetic lives.[12] Such strategies are preconditions to erotic freedom in an anti-Black and misogynist society bent on putting Black women to public use.

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[10] See Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 912–20.

[11] See Nash, Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Duke University Press, 2019; duCille, Ann. "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 591–629; and Edwards, Erica R. "Sex after the Black Normal." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141–67, doi:10.1215/10407391-2880636.

[12] The "culture of dissemblance" is a historiographical concept that Hine put forward in positing threats of sexual violence as one significant motivation behind Black women's northward migrations in the twentieth century. As Hine puts it in "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women," "The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle" (915). For a recent discussion of Hine's work, see Roach, Shoniqua. "(Re)turning to 'Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women': A Black Feminist Forum on the Culture of Dissemblance." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2020, pp. 515-

Small wonder, too, that while the unprecedented visibility of Black women's literature in the 1970s and 1980s amplified debates about the representational uses of Blackness and Black womanhood, such debates were active well before this period. During the heyday of the Black protest novel, epitomized by Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Hurston faced backlash for her deep skepticism of literature as sociology. Synonymous, for our purposes, with psychologically realist approaches, sociological approaches to the reading of Black literature purvey a too-easy equivalence between fiction and reality that risks both reproducing structures of white supremacy and denying the independence of Black thought. Such approaches furthermore presume a transparency and legibility of Black knowledge, experience, and inner life that lends itself to intellectual appropriation and violence. Mounting sharp critiques of psychological realism and its attendant assumptions, Black women writers in Hurston's tradition have long contested ways of reading that operate on fixed assumptions about race and belonging.[13]

Best is thus far from alone in his skepticism of historical recovery and the realist premises on which it rests, engaging in the very historiographical inquiry that preoccupies writers of the Black women's literary renaissance (Morrison, Shange) together with a surprising number of contemporary Black TV writers (Thede, Nance, Rae). Thede's puppet title sequence, for example, spoofs a flat version of the literary model of historiography assuming that iconic Black women's literature illuminates stable, transcendent ontological realities about race and belonging – that "these words" can "reveal what it is to be of color." Without replicating the implicit denigration of

519, doi:10.1086/706429.

[13] See Gates, Henry Louis. "Afterword: Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying'." *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, by Zora Neale Hurston, Illustrated edition, Amistad, 2009.

feeling that undergirds Best's analysis by elevating an implicitly masculine form of critical distance, I want to register how the feminization of melancholy has overdetermined ways of reading Black women's literature, such that conspicuous, insistent, and indeed well-established (Madhu Dubey, Courtney Thorsson) uses of formal alienation by such authors as Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange remain subordinate to themes of melancholy and trauma in the critical discourse. When read through the comedic TV of Thede, Terence Nance, and Issa Rae, the literary model of historiography that one might more accurately attribute to Morrison and Shange emerges as one of complex detachment rather than attachment. Whereas Best only identifies aesthetic detachment strategies, what he calls the *aesthetics of intransmissibility*, in Toni Morrison's later work (specifically *A Mercy* [2008]), such aesthetic practices are very much at the core of the Black women's literary renaissance – a fact that the movement's televisual afterlives make abundantly clear.

Visualizing a Private and Particular Space

Before turning to chapter summaries, it bears emphasizing that the critical gridlock that Best describes between totality and creativity becomes far less rigid under the pen of many Black feminist theorists. Black feminists have long shown that visual fixations on Black femme bodies are a mainstay of dominant sexual vocabularies, from scientifically racist displays of Sarah Baartman in the nineteenth century, to stereotypes of the welfare queen and jezebel in modern American politics and culture.[14] Yet diagnosing injury in the visual field and envisioning otherwise frequently emerge in

[14] See Collins, Patricia Hill. "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images." 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge Classics, 2009, pp. 76-106.

Black feminist thought as mutually animating tools for liberation. As Joan Morgan puts it, "irrevocably twinned with [Black women's] pain" are "complex, messy, sticky, and even joyous negotiations of agency and desire" (36). Similarly holding pain and desire in careful (care-full) proximity, Shoniqua Roach argues that "apprehend[ing] the gendered and sexual specificities of antiblack violence while shielding black (female) subjects from the inevitable harm of the white (institutional) gaze, embodies a black feminist care ethic" ("(Re)turning" 515-516). Registering and opting out of anti-Black and misogynist ways of seeing that define Black people as outside, in excess, of normative gender and sexuality, Black feminist theorists clear the way for alternative visions that are a vector for the erotic as Audre Lorde defines it.

Take, for example, Hortense Spillers' articulation of pornotroping in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: an American Grammar Book" (1987). In this landmark account of the dehumanizing logics that structure the visual field in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, Spillers establishes visions of enslaved Africans under transatlantic slavery as a site of meaning construction. Alienated from gender integrity and specificity under the political economy of slavery, the ungendered "captive body" becomes a "territory of cultural and political maneuver" through a process that Spillers calls "pornotroping" (67):

> 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness" 2) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides

> into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (67)

From the captor's point of view, the "captive body" becomes the ultimate expression of both embodied excess ("irresistible, destructive sensuality") and negation ("*being for* the captor"; "absence *from* a subject position"; "expression" and "category" of "otherness"). Through this violent and contradictory process of sexual objectification, the "captive body" "translates" into prime material for American sense-making. Indeed, the captor's visions render the "captive body" as "pornotrop[e]" – as site and source of co-constitutively racist and misogynist logics. Spillers thus posits pornotroping as an origin story for the American Grammar Book. She exposes a national ("American") system of meaning ("Grammar") that uses the "captive body" as a racial-sexual reference text ("Book") to negatively define normative sex and gender. In naming and defamiliarizing the American Grammar Book, Spillers throws the "customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire'" into "unrelieved crisis" (76). Spillers demonstrates that sexual vocabularies hold no "symbolic integrity" (66) for Black subjects; thinking Black sex and gender means recognizing that the dominant discourse is rigged.

Spillers goes on to distinguish between "body" and "flesh," holding out possibility for liberatory enactments of "flesh" from "the point of view of the captive community" (67). The captor may instrumentalize the "captive body" materially and discursively, but the captor's gaze of course never permeates nor defines all "private and particular space" (67). Spillers' theorization of "flesh" thus accounts for spaces of "profound intimacy" that exceed the violent visions and desires of the captor (67). In

throwing the “customary lexis of sexuality” into “unrelieved crisis” (76), Spillers points the way towards alternative erotic grammars.

Chapter Summaries

From Toni Morrison to Robin Thede, Black feminist creative writers in the post-Civil Rights era visualize “private and particular space” (67) through critical distancing strategies that denaturalize the “customary lexis” (76) of sex and self. Toni Morrison’s second novel *Sula* (1973) provides a powerful example of nonrealist visual vocabularies and forms the basis of my first chapter, “Sister Spectators: Shared Strategic Gazes in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *Love*.” Contributing to debates in surveillance studies (Simone Browne) and Black feminist literary criticism (bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Hortense Spillers, Kevin Quashie), this chapter argues that characters Nel and Sula cultivate strategies for perceiving their world that are decidedly polyoptic, relational, and appositional. Using looking together as an erotic strategy to assert autonomy in conditions of segregation, girlhood friends Nel and Sula creatively re-“arrang[e]” (55) the visual field to suit their shared desire. Polyoptic excesses of form foster expressions of erotic plenitude that destabilize psychologically realist attachments to historical loss – quite unlike the melancholic excesses of feeling that Best explicitly ascribes to *Beloved* and implicitly associates with Morrison’s twentieth-century oeuvre. Having located a polyoptic theory of the Black femme gaze in *Sula*, this chapter then traces the implications of this alternative gaze in *Love* (2003). *Love* contextualizes shared Black femme looks within anti-Black surveillance in the eras of Jim Crow, post-Civil Rights, and post-9/11, serving as a narrative of girlhood intelligence gathering that protests Black femmes’ simultaneous erasure and hypervisibility in feminist and Black freedom

struggles.

Sula and *Love* provide a narrative theory of how relational Black femme looking can facilitate Black erotic fullness. In *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), Ntozake Shange uses appositional strategies of poetry and performance to literalize Black erotic fullness as the reclaimed stuff of the self. Whereas Morrison's shared looks as discussed in Chapter 1 privilege intersubjective pairings, Shange's account of stuff brings self into relation with self. In Chapter 2, "Erotic Resourcefulness in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls* and Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show*," I show that *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* externalizes the looking self by employing choreopoetic apposition – nonrealist strategies of critical distance per Bertolt Brecht that range from syntactic objectification (poetic disruptions to syntax that denaturalize subject and object) to vignette structure (loosely related monologues arranged side by side). In the poetic monologue titled "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," the lady in green specifically renders her "own self," in its holistic multiplicity, as "alla my stuff" (63), externalizing a "package[] of me" (64) as a way of claiming erotic stewardship of her body, art, and spiritual practices.[15] Having established Shange's complex treatment of stuff and self as part of a long African American tradition of using critical distance to navigate anti-Blackness and misogyny (Daphne Brooks, Darlene Clark Hine), this chapter then turns to *for colored girls*' afterlife in contemporary sketch TV. Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-) uses stuffed puppets – and the puppet version of Shange's choreopoem discussed above – to satirize realist presumptions to character

[15] Since Shange frequently uses slashes as part of her orthography, sometimes but not always indicating a line break, I use "[]" here to indicate a line break. This follows Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's citational practice (81).

transparency that condition the reception of Black women's art in the post-Civil Rights era. Redeploying Shange's strategies of choreopoetic apposition, Thede's comedic vignettes reclaim the stuff of the self to practice erotic resourcefulness in the face of historically contingent disaster.

Chapter 3, titled "The Afrofeminist Surreal in Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness*," examines Terence Nance's darkly comedic late-night anthology TV series as a radical example of nonrealist televisual vignettes serving Black feminist ends. Debunking the assumption that a text must be woman-created to do feminist work, *Random Acts of Flyness* re-envisions and revises narrowly masculinist historiographies of the Black Arts Movement that do not grapple with the movement's gender and sexual diversity. The series suggests that the critical gendering of abstraction has foreclosed Black feminist freedom dreams by failing to think Afrosurrealism and Black feminism together.[16] Inspired by the Black world-building strategies of Shange, Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Faith Ringgold, strategies that self-consciously span Afrosurrealism and Black feminism, *Random Acts of Flyness* specifically retheorizes Black light as a post-Civil Rights era tool for aesthetic and spiritual self-definition. What emerges is an Afrofeminist surreal envisioning of Black gender and sexual freedom that puts excesses of form (such as multilayered time, litany, and ecstatic performance) to satirical and sensuous uses. Illustrative vignettes including "The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community" and "Sleep Little Baby" ultimately demonstrate that naming injury and enacting pleasure are not mutually exclusive practices but in fact survival and flourishing strategies at work within Afrosurrealist and Black feminist art.

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[16] On freedom dreams, see Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002.

My fourth chapter turns to Issa Rae's dramedy TV series i*nsecure* as exemplar of the nonrealist formal strategies that make up Morrison and Shange's literary legacy. "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's i*nsecure*" argues that the early seasons in particular revel in the use of ratchet excess to name and subvert the positioning of heterosexually identified Black women as scapegoats on what Cathy Cohen calls the "(out)side of heteronormativity" ("Punks" 452).[17] Borrowing from the show's web series precursor *Awkward Black Girl* (2011), protagonist Issa Dee practices nonrealist self-externalization through vignettes in which she delivers halting, unwieldy raps to her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. Issa's "mirror bitch" vignettes rupture the narrative flow, facilitating a scene in which Issa teasingly diagnoses her Black best friend Molly with a "broken pussy" ("Insecure as Fuck" 7:33). Coined as a playful diagnosis of sexual and romantic woes between Black best friends, the show's device of broken Black pussy provides a "counter normative framewor[k] by which to judge behavior" (Cohen, "Deviance" 30), refusing the disciplining mechanisms of respectability politics exercised from within and outside Black communities. Critiquing the tendency for American sociologists to scapegoat Black women while violently regulating their bodies and relationships, the show's ratchet forays take profane pleasure in denaturalizing anti-Black and misogynist ideas of sexual pathology.

Conclusion

That the use of critical distancing strategies among Black women writers remains subordinate to themes of melancholy in the critical discourse has crucial stakes for reading and teaching texts by and about Black women in the post-Civil Rights era. In a

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[17] Sections of this chapter were previously published in volume 50, number 2 of the journal *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* in 2020.

nation prepared, at every turn, to coopt visions of Black suffering into myths of exceptionalism and consensus, the erotic complexities and contradictions of Black art matter deeply.[18] Toni Morrison's theory of shared looking in *Sula* uses nonrealist forms of characterization to exceed the boundaries of normative feeling, including normative feeling about history. Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls* uses relentless appositional distancing at the levels of syntax and genre, evading historical and subjective fixity in ways that critics underacknowledge in favor of a focus on the work's emotional impacts. TV by Thede, Rae, and Nance uses inherited nonrealist devices to remedy historiographical misnamings of Black women's art in the post-Civil Rights era. Despite occupying hypercapitalist spaces, contemporary Black comedic TV puts critical distance to generative effect, resisting easy incorporation into linear narratives of empowerment that contribute to the disciplining of Black feminism in popular culture (Edwards, "Tuning" 76).

[18] See Bradley, Rizvana. "Picturing Catastrophe: The Visual Politics of Racial Reckoning." *The Yale Review*, 25 May 2021, https://yalereview.org/article/picturing-catastrophe.

II

SISTER SPECTATORS: SHARED STRATEGIC GAZES IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA* AND *LOVE*

Introduction

Toni Morrison's oeuvre is rich with examples of Black femmes negotiating the co-constitutive anti-Blackness, misogyny, and heterosexism of the visual field through acts of strategic spectatorship. Scholars have noted the presence of Black femme spectators in Morrison's novels in preliminary ways – for example, bell hooks famously reads *The Bluest Eye*'s Pauline Breedlove as a Black female filmic spectator in the landmark essay "The Oppositional Gaze" (115). Yet Morrison's novels theorize Black femme strategies of looking in ways that exceed literal filmic spectatorship, oppositional binary frameworks, and psychologically realist models of the Western seeing subject. Specifically, Black femme friends in Morrison's fiction – from Sula and Nel in *Sula* (1973), to Violet and Alice in *Jazz* (1992), to Christine and Heed in *Love* (2003) – cultivate shared modes of looking that illuminate the relational and erotic dimensions of Black strategic gazes. "Relational" here describes interpersonal connections that evade the universalizing and instrumentalizing logics of the social.[19] Following Audre Lorde, the "erotic" describes a creative force far exceeding sex and sexuality that encompasses generative possibilities for Black femme desire, sensuality, and intimate relationships (53). Working at the intersections of Black feminist erotics, visual cultural studies, and

[19] See DeCristo, Jemma. "Music Against the Subject." *Theory & Event*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2018, p. 184; and Quashie, Kevin. "To Be (a) One: Notes on Coupling and Black Female Audacity." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2018, p. 68.

surveillance studies, this chapter examines two instances from Morrison's oeuvre of Black femme friends *looking together* to enact relational forms of autonomy and mitigate harm in the visual field. In the novels *Sula* (1973) and *Love* (2003), anchoring scenarios of shared looking generate erotic intimacies while refusing historically specific modes of anti-Black, misogynist, and heterosexist surveillance. These episodes of sister spectatorship position Morrison as a robust yet underexamined theorist of Black femme visuality.

This chapter takes up and expands Simone Browne's work in *Dark Matters: on the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) – specifically her concept of "dark sousveillance." Dark sousveillance is the Black strategy of asserting autonomy in conditions of unfreedom by watching ("veilling") from below ("sous") (21). It involves gathering visual intelligence on anti-Black surveillance mechanisms, including search and seizure (Kelly Ross), that form part of slavery's afterlives (Saidiya Hartman). Browne introduces dark sousveillance along with a corollary concept of "racialized surveillance," which defines a process that circumscribes boundaries of belonging with the consequence of subjecting a particular group to forms of social control and oppression (16). With both dark sousveillance and racialized surveillance, Browne holds in tension the recognition of group-differentiated oppression, on the one hand, and the recognition, on the other hand, that contemporary surveillance operates along what surveillance theorist Gary T. Marx analogizes as a maximum-security model (15). This is where surveillance is distributed widely across time and space (15). It is where people opt into their own surveillance through mechanisms like fitness tracking, and where the constant possibility of surveillance, verified and intentional or not, structures the living environment (15-16).

Among the chief contributions of dark sousveillance is that it revises Steve Mann's theory of sousveillance to account for racialized vulnerability to premature death (18). As Browne notes, while surveillance studies has begun to superficially engage "race," there has yet to be sustained engagement with the formative anti-Blackness of surveillance (9). Browne's concept furthermore disrupts the primacy of the panopticon model in surveillance studies even as it posits the slave ship as the precursor to Jeremy Bentham's theory (32). Finally, dark sousveillance and racialized surveillance help Browne problematize Michel Foucault's color-blind theory of post-sovereign power. Browne refutes Foucault's argument in *Discipline & Punish* (1975) that with the decline of sovereign power came a decline in spectacular forms of punishment (35-36). When the person being punished is Black, she argues, spectacular forms of punishment persist through and beyond *de jure* slavery. She specifically invokes the example of enslaved Black woman of Portuguese descent Marie-Joseph Angelique, who in 1734 was dragged through the streets of Montreal, burned, and had her ashes thrown to the wind after being accused of arson (36-37).

As much as Browne's concept of dark sousveillance primarily intervenes in surveillance studies, it is also meaningfully rooted in Black feminist visual cultural studies. These two distinct yet consonant intellectual genealogies are important for our purposes because they pervade Morrison's visual vocabulary and thus provide analytical tools necessary for engaging it. Browne draws on Patricia Hill Collins to name Black women's simultaneous burden of invisibility and hypervisibility (57) and to emphasize the importance of analyzing multiple interlocking systems of oppression and surveillance

(9). In specifically theorizing Black "looks" in the face of intersecting surveillance practices, Browne draws on bell hooks's theory of the "oppositional gaze" (33, 58).

It is worth noting that, while following a discussion of Black women's labor, Browne's gloss on the oppositional gaze understates that gaze's specific relationship to "black female spectators" in hooks' 1992 essay. Browne's focus is on Black people's development of, in hooks' words, "'an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire'" in the context of racial terror in the Jim Crow South (qtd. in 58). Save her reference to the mammy stereotype in the films *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Help* (2011), Browne does little critical work to contextualize hooks' concept as an emphatically Black female strategy for navigating the formal (not just representational) anti-Blackness and misogyny of mainstream cultural production (115). Browne's understatement of Black femme specificity – for it is more understatement than elision – highlights a need to interrogate conceptualizations of the Black gaze stemming from Black feminist visual cultural studies together with those stemming from sociology and surveillance studies. How would surveillance studies benefit from Black feminist insights into the constitutive anti-Blackness, misogyny, and heterosexism of the visual field (Nicole Fleetwood)?[20] Conversely, what can analyses of what Browne calls "intersecting surveillances" (9) lend to Black feminist literary and visual cultural criticism? By

[20] While outside the scope of this chapter, theories of Black women audiences and fan communities are primed to contribute to work at the intersections of surveillance studies and Black feminist cultural studies. See Chatman, Dayna. "Black Twitter and the Politics of Viewing Scandal." *Fandom, Second Edition*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, New York University Press, 2017, pp. 299-314; Wanzo, Rebecca. "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2015, doi: https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699; and Warner, Kristen J. "(Black Female) Fans Strike Back: The Emergence of the Iris West Defense Squad." *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, Routledge, 2018, pp. 253-261. Future studies might ask: how do Black feminist theories of fandom expand the concept of dark sousveillance to honor complex Black femme negotiations of hypervisibility and invisibility across modalities?

attending to the specificities of the Black femme gaze across fields, the present study aims to register material conditions of Black hypervisibility on screen and off while maintaining an emphasis on Black femme strategies of survival.

This chapter reads *Sula* (1973) and *Love* (2003) as post-Civil Rights and post-9/11 novels, respectively. State-enacted and state-sanctioned surveillance mechanisms provide insight into social and material conditions contemporaneous with the publication of both novels. Spanning 1956 to 1971, the FBI's notorious Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) enacted covert extralegal surveillance of and violence against Black liberation leaders, artists, writers, and cultural figures, Assata Shakur and Angela Y. Davis among them.[21] The shifting domestic surveillance landscape under the War on Crime and the War on Drugs made unapologetic uses of monitoring Black women and their bodies. These uses included exploiting the stereotype of the hypervisible welfare queen to justify the gutting of social services (Collins 86). Legislation including The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, which Bill Clinton signed into law, made Black women's access to social security contingent on marriage status and family size (Roberts xvi). As Dorothy Roberts has shown, such legislation continued the long American tradition of foreclosing Black women's reproductive freedoms in the interests of shoring up dominance for the white elite.

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[21] See Haley, Sarah, Shoniqua Roach, Emily Owens, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. "Confinement, Interiority, Black Feminist Study." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2021, pp. 3–19, doi:10.1080/00064246.2020.1855091. While incarcerated in 1971, Davis published an enduring takedown of the matriarchy thesis (the idea, purveyed by such figures as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, that castrating Black matriarchs were to blame for systemic problems in Black communities). Establishing that transatlantic slavery specifically alienated Black women from normative kinship frameworks, Davis's missive demonstrated that then-prevalent claims of a rigid Black matriarchal family structure had no historical basis. See Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, vol. 12, no. 6 [reprinted from vol. 3, no. 4 (1971)], 1981, pp. 2–15, doi:10.1080/00064246.1981.11414214.

Developing out of the War on Drugs, the War on Terror ushered in a new regime of anti-Black and misogynist social control.[22] This post-9/11 regime promiscuously coopted popular depictions of Black women for nation-building as part of what Erica Edwards terms the "imperial grammars of Blackness" – "the structures of communication that translate Black pain and thriving into the speech of US empire: not just words and phrases but gestures of affirmation and empowerment that weave Black aspiration into national delusions of domination" (*Other Side* 309). Edwards demonstrates how post-9/11 images of Black women, from photographs of Condoleezza Rice to *Scandal*'s TV depictions of Kerry Washington, produce Black femme sexualities as the very stuff of national normativity in a rewriting of longstanding scripts pathologizing Black women as deviant ("Sex After" 144). Extending the logics of fungibility (Saidiya Hartman) that treat Black women's bodies as a "territory of cultural and political maneuver" (Spillers, "Mama's" 67), this post-9/11 phenomenon traffics in the violences of hypervisibility while cloaking itself, during Barack Obama's administration especially, in insidious rhetorics of post-racial progress. For Morrison to theorize Black femmes' strategic gazes in the 1970s and 2000s as times of amplified hypervisibility for Black people constitutes a form of creative insurgency in need of sustained critical attention.

Part I: Looking Together in *Sula*: Shared Black Femme Delight in the Visual Field

In *Sula*, Morrison introduces a theory of *looking together* by establishing the "Pig meat" (50) scene as a narrative anchor – a pivotal moment whose formal and thematic features recur elsewhere and structure the experiences of multiple characters. Looking together emerges, for Nel and Sula, as a generative erotic strategy that structures their

[22] See Mann, Justin. "The 'Vigilante Spirit': Bernhard Goetz, Batman, and Racial Violence in 1980s New York." *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, p. 66.

conceptions of sex and self. Contributing to ongoing Black feminist efforts to name the complexities of Black femme desire in *Sula* and beyond, Nel and Sula's shared strategy also illuminates underexplored possibilities for Black femme delight in practices of dark sousveillance.

An Anchoring Memory, a Shared Erotic Gaze

It is 1922 in Medallion, Ohio and twelve-year-old Nel and Sula are walking to Edna Finch's Mellow House even though it is "too cool for ice cream" (49). Their walk, at once strategic and "delight[ful]" (50), initiates the reader to the "intens[ity]" of their sister-like friendship (53) at this time in their lives. In this period, "they f[ind] in each other's eyes the intimacy they [are] looking for" (52). Indeed, as Sula later remembers it, they experience life as "two throats one eye" (147). They wield their "one eye" or shared gaze in the pursuit of complex erotic pleasures, a strategic practice that Morrison analogizes through cinematic spectatorship:

> Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement. The new theme they were now discovering was men. So they met regularly, without even planning it, to walk down the road to Edna Finch's Mellow House, even though it was too cool for ice cream. (55-56)

Morrison's analogy cues the reader to the scene's linked preoccupations with visual culture ("movie"), spectatorship ("watched"), pleasure ("amusement"), and intimacy and subjectivity ("Joined in mutual admiration"). In the first sentence, the simple past "they watched" establishes Nel and Sula as plural subject spectators whose acts of watching are intimately connected. Even the opening clause of the first sentence, conspicuously lacking a comma, is "Joined" to their watching. Together Nel and Sula possess ("their")

one "amusement," one movie-like day "arranged" to suit their shared desire. The move from simile ("as though it were a movie") to metaphor ("men" are a movie "theme") in the second sentence narrows the gap between art and life and suggests their further immersion in the shared "movie" they are viewing.

With the third sentence in the passage above, Morrison underscores the strategic character of Nel and Sula's shared watching. Most conspicuous is the repetition of "too cool for ice cream," which also appears in the opening sentence of the chapter. Counting among the narrator's multiple references to reasons for going – and not going – to Edna Finch's Mellow House (49, 50, 55-56), "too cool for ice cream" is a sentiment that Morrison conveys as "regularly" as Nel and Sula undertake their chilly walk. The subordinating conjunction "So" that begins the third sentence also establishes shared purpose between Nel and Sula, shared purpose that is only amplified by the gently humorous idea that their regular meetings require no "planning." They meet "without even planning it" precisely because they are "Joined" in purpose and reasoning; as girls experiencing personal and sexual development, they may still be "unshaped, formless things" (53), but they have strategically directed their "one eye" (147) towards the "theme" of "men."

Not only a vehicle to illustrate the depth of friendship between two young Black femmes, Nel and Sula's shared looking offers its own intimate and insurgent subtheory of dark sousveillance – Black strategic watching from a position of compromised power or intersecting vulnerabilities (Browne 21). In the "Pig meat" (50) scene, Nel and Sula specifically gaze back at Black men who are gazing at them:

> Nel and Sula walked through this valley of eyes chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares.… Pig meat. … [O]ne of the young ones, said it aloud. … His name was Ajax[.] ... [W]hen he said 'pig meat' as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight …. Years later their own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles, the squatting haunches, the track-rail legs straddling broken chairs. The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them. They moved toward the ice cream parlor like tight rope walkers, as thrilled by the possibility of a slip as by the maintenance of tension and balance. The least sideways glance, the merest toe stub, could pitch them into those creamy haunches spread wide with welcome. Somewhere beneath all of that daintiness, chambered in all that neatness, lay the thing that clotted their dreams. (50-51)

Here is a powerful example of Morrison's multi-layered visual vocabulary. The "appraising stares" of Ajax and the other men – taken together with Nel and Sula's strategic "guard[ing of] their eyes" on their purposeful, "chill[y]," and "thrill[ing]" "tight rope" walk – establish this scenario as one of ecstatic ("heated") Black visual intelligence gathering from multiple vantage points. While primarily intramural, this erotic scene registers the terms of an anti-Black and misogynist visual field by naming the "stares" as part of a "valley of eyes." With this phrase, the "valley of eyes," Morrison calls upon, without centering, the intersecting surveillances that structure the geography of fictional Medallion. Medallion's mythological origin story is that white former slaveowners

manipulated their way into occupying the fertile lands of the “valley,” relegating the now-free Black folks to the hills above (ironically called the “Bottom”) where planting was far more difficult (5). That the origin story is fictional is of course beside the point, because dictating the terms of space is a potent weapon of whiteness, inextricable from the horrors of lynching, redlining, and sexual violence that attend the novel’s time frame of 1919 to 1965. The “valley of eyes” underscores the stakes of Black looks in a nation structured by slavery and its afterlives – a nation where Daniel Patrick Moynihan could blame Black women in 1965 for causing a so-called “tangle of pathology” in Black families, where cuts to social services produce group-differentiated premature death, a key part of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes as “organized abandonment” (*Solidarity*), and where federal agencies surveil, incarcerate, and kill Black community members with impunity (Simone Browne, Saidiya Hartman). The “valley of eyes” is a portal to material conditions thematized within, and leading up to, the 1973 publication of, Morrison’s novel.

Yet Morrison’s predominantly Black world enables her to depict different kinds of Black visual intelligence gathering, from multiple Black vantage points that exceed any oppositional framework. Rather than suggesting that the Black men’s “stares” inherit the terms, or inhabit the space, of hegemonic white masculine vision, the “valley of eyes” reference sees community members in the “Bottom” collectively dictating the terms of the scopic terrain. This language ultimately underscores Nel and Sula’s complex negotiations of power, metaphorically locating the “appraising stares” of Ajax and the other men *below* Nel and Sula. Nel and Sula may be multiply vulnerable young Black femmes, but they nevertheless claim, as if from above and not below, the

"arrange[ments]" of each movie-like day. Brimming with visual detail that the girls collect ("cream-colored trousers," "smooth vanilla crotches," "lemon-yellow gabardines," "creamy haunches"), this passage indeed goes a step further than recentering Black (masculine) spectatorship as a rejoinder to the valley's white supremacist ordering of space. It quietly, assuredly centers Nel and Sula's specifically Black femme "thril[l]" and "delight" in wielding their shared gaze. Ajax's "Pig meat" "apprais[al]" becomes part of the girls' cinematic "amusement" (55), the ecstatic possibility of which Morrison underscores through the repeated use of grammatical intensifiers ("mere seam," "least sideways glance," "merest toe stub").

This passage furthermore reflects on its own role as narrative anchor – as organizing refrain for Nel and Sula's shared visual experiences. It previews how "[y]ears later [Nel and Sula's] own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance." Such acts of remembrance find narrative expression, pre-betrayal, when Sula returns to the Bottom after ten years away. Focalizing through Nel, the third-person narrator here describes Nel and Sula's bond as "a constant sharing of perceptions" (95), in yet another testament to the "one eye" (147) or shared gaze that characterizes their most intense periods of erotic intimacy. Such acts of remembrance find expression, too, once Sula has slept with Nel's husband Jude. In the midst of Nel's struggle to process Sula's betrayal and Jude's absence, Nel gives what Barbara Christian describes as her (third-person) "soliloquy about her pain" ("Contemporary Fables" 170):

> Now [Nel's] thighs were really empty. And it was then that what those women said about never looking at another man made some sense to her, for the real point, the heart of what they said, was the word *looked*. Not to promise never to

> make love to another man, not to refuse to marry another man, but to promise and know that she could never afford to look again, to see and accept the way in which their heads cut the air or see moons and tree limbs framed by their necks and shoulders… never to look, for now she could not risk looking – and anyway, so what? For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away. (110-111, emphasis original)

Nel can never look at another man because, for her, gazing at men hinges on "a constant sharing of [specifically visual] perceptions" (95) with Sula. That the verb "look" appears six times in this short passage underscores what Nel herself realizes in reflecting on the sense-making of "those" unspecified "women": that "the real point, the heart of what they said, was the word *looked.*" Just as, on the final page of the novel, Nel realizes that the real substance of her "sorrow" is that she and Sula, now apart, were "girls together" (174), Nel here registers (but cannot "afford" to confront more explicitly) that she and Sula "*looked*" together. Nel reasons that Sula has "taken the life from [her thighs]" because, as the anchoring "Pig meat" (50) scene makes clear, her thighs came to know plenitude by "see[ing]," with Sula, "the way in which [men's] heads cut the air." Irreducible to "mak[ing] love" and to "marr[iage]," the fullness of intimacy and desire that Nel mourns is erotic in Audre Lorde's most capacious and wide-ranging sense of a generative and shared femme energy, in this case animating the visual plane. Nel's soliloquy enacts the loss of this creative force formally and thematically, with the flurry of grammatical negation ("never, "Not to," "not to," "never," "never," "not," "no," "no")

culminating not just in "really," "truly" "empty" or "dead" thighs but in the very absence of Nel's "thighs" and "heart."

Given the narrative ripples of Nel and Sula's coming-of-age walks for ice cream, it is all too apt that Nel's final errand for Sula in 1940 is to return to the former site of Edna Finch's Mellow House (140). Now a pharmacy, this place of girlhood memory holds the pain medication that will ease Sula's passage into the next phase of being.

Sex, Self, and Black Feminist Debate

Morrison's theory of the shared Black femme gaze makes important inroads into longstanding Black feminist debates about *Sula*, suggesting that *looking together* might be one way of more precisely naming Sula and Nel's complex pleasures and relational intimacies without recourse to entrenched sexual vocabularies. Critics have long debated Nel and Sula's coming-of-age friendship and its implications for Black femme selfhood. What to make of a bond so intense that, as Nel puts it, "[t]alking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself" (95)? In 1977, the challenge of clarifying Morrison's vocabularies of Black femme connection led Barbara Smith to read Nel and Sula's bond as "lesbian" in making the case for a Black feminist literary criticism. Taking up Bertha Harris's capacious use of the second-wave feminist term, Smith argued that *Sula* is "lesbian" by Harris's definition because it portrays meaningful relationships between women characters in a novelistic format where sentences "refus[e] to do what [they are] supposed to do" (23).

Smith's interpretation of *Sula* has elicited much controversy, with scholars including Hazel Carby arguing that Smith's manifesto essentializes Black women's writing in positing a coherent Black women's literary tradition with discernible linguistic

features (16). The search for a shared Black female language, in Carby's view, is necessarily ahistorical and essentializing (9). Carby also draws on writings by Alice Walker to critique Smith's use of subjective lived experience as the metric of expertise, furthermore underscoring the ironies of Smith seeking intellectual and creative autonomy via academic institutionalization (8-11). Like Carby, Deborah McDowell critiques Smith's generalizations about Black women's experiences, her broad use of the second-wave feminist term lesbian, and her positioning of Black feminist criticism as a partner to a Black feminist political movement (155).[23] Barbara Christian also takes issue with Smith's interpretation, arguing that Black feminist criticism should be wary of reductive conflations of scholarship and politics (*Black Feminist Criticism*). Morrison herself refused the lesbian reading, claiming instead that "'[w]hat was valued was [Nel and Sula's] friendship... it was spiritual, of first order priority'" (qtd in Russell 45-46). In spite of these critiques, Smith's call for Black feminist literary criticism by way of a lesbian reading of *Sula* leaves an important legacy of engagement. The 1982 anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* – edited by Akasha (Gloria T.) Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith herself – specifically responds to the 1977 call with an influential program for Black women's studies. More recently, Roderick Ferguson has positioned Smith's reading as foundational for queer of color critique, feeling the need to reiterate what Smith herself was very explicit about: that her use of "lesbian" meant to challenge narrow identitarian definitions tied to intragender sexual relations (Ferguson 125).

[23] Note that McDowell later revises this last statement. See Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2007, p. 492.

This chapter does not seek to re-litigate the question of whether second-wave vocabularies of sexuality are ideal for interpreting *Sula*. Nor does it seek an essential Black female language. It nevertheless aims to honor the impetus behind the above debates at the intersections of Black studies and sexuality studies. It participates in the ongoing quest to name and value Black women's complex intimacies, at the margins of dominant sexual vocabularies that are anti-Black, heterosexist, and misogynist.

Even amidst robust debate about sex and self in *Sula*, critics have yet to interrogate what it means for this novel to specifically and relentlessly locate shared intimacies in the visual field.[24] Barbara Christian's 1980 reading of the novel centers what she describes as Sula's "distinctive vision" ("Contemporary Fables" 177) literalized in Sula's "birthmark that spread[s] from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow" (Morrison 52). Through Sula's distinctive vision, Christian argues, the novel unfolds its mythological account of tensions between characters' lived experiences of Black girlhood and womanhood and the expectations and norms of their communities (137). Yet the singular emphasis on Sula risks understating the extent to which Sula and Nel cultivate modes of looking in relation to one another. It risks obscuring the ways that Nel can, in her own way, lay claim to the "[m]ark" of distinctive vision – a mark whose reach across "the lid toward the eyebrow" Morrison tellingly describes using not possessive, but rather indefinite, pronouns. Sula's dynamic birthmark in part signals a unique outlook, and yet

[24] Generative readings of visuality in Toni Morrison's other novels include Kimberly Juanita Brown's analysis of *Beloved*. Using the text as anchoring device and recurring refrain, Brown shows that the novel's cross-generational uptake of Margaret Garner's protective killing of her three-year-old child results in a proliferation of embodied Black women's vulnerabilities, from Sethe's cherry tree scar, to Beloved herself as re-memory made flesh (4). See Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. Duke University Press, 2015.

Sula sharing "one eye" (147) with Nel in their girlhood asks critics to also sit with the complexities of interpersonally connected viewing.

Similarly, in 1983, Hortense Spillers foregrounds Sula's unique outlook and efforts at self-realization in ways that understate aspects of shared Black femme visuality. Contrasting Sula's character with Vyry Ware from Margaret Walker's 1966 novel *Jubilee* and Janie Starks from Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Spillers argues that Sula emerges as a "stunning" (119), rebel (93) idea because she commits to enacting her own individual self in ways that her literary predecessors do not. Yet there is a moment when Spillers roots her claim in the narrator's comment about Sula's lack of ego, attributing the comment to inaccuracy and misunderstanding on the narrator's part (115). Here Spillers departs momentarily from the terms of Morrison's text in ways that flatten the complexities of Sula's relationship to herself and others. As Kevin Quashie has since productively shown, the novel complicates Western models of ego. It theorizes a relational oneness that accounts for shared sense of self *and* the audacious claiming of Black femme singularity. As Quashie puts it, "*Sula* is a quintessential study of the dynamics of black female relation" ("To Be" 77). Sula's undeniable oneness is itself relational and dynamic, an insight that yet enriches debates about the novel's depictions of Black femme sex and self.

Inspired by and departing from the critics above, I would go so far as to claim that Nel and Sula's wielding of their shared gaze constitutes a generative erotic practice. Morrison conveys the significance of this practice for sex and self by encoding Nel and Sula's mourning for its loss. As established, Nel's soliloquy is an elegy for the lost erotic plenitude that came from looking together at men with Sula (110). Sula too registers the

loss of this shared erotic gaze, not only by remembering the time of "two throats one eye" (147), but also by, as the narrator puts it, "bec[oming] dangerous" at the absence of shared strategic looking-as-"art form" (121). Understood as an art form or creative force at the intersections of art and sex, *looking together* carries with it the generative capacity for sensual fullness that constitutes the erotic by Lorde's definition. It is no mistake that Morrison marks the art form's lack for Sula after her betrayal of Nel. Sula remains akin to an "artist" (121) during this time but finds herself without the art form of "watch[ing] each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement" (55). Nel and Sula as intimate co-watchers miss the shared leveraging of the gaze that once brought them such "delight" (50). Acknowledging as much asks critics to question disciplinary boundaries between sex, art, and life and to sit with the specificities and complex pleasures of shared Black femme strategies of spectatorship.

In identifying the "Pig meat" (50) scene as an anchoring memory for Sula and Nel, I also expand Ashraf Rushdy's claim that Sula's defining (re)memory, or "primal scene," is the drowning death of Chicken Little (Rushdy 305-306), with Nel's equivalent being witnessing her mother Helene smile at the racist white conductor in 1920 (307). Rushdy defines the "primal scene" as "the critical event (or events) whose the significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled" (303). Rushdy thus cites narrative traces of the primal scenes he identifies as evidence of their significance – for example, he cites Nel's 1937 third-person soliloquy as evidence of the primacy of Helene's accommodationist smile (307). What then of this same soliloquy's preconscious preoccupation with the erotic dimensions of shared looking? What of the Chicken Little

scene for Nel, for whom the memory of Sula "swinging Chicken Little around and around. … before the hand-slip" (169-170) shapes itself into a cry of "circles and circles of sorrow" (174) on the last page of the novel? Primal events proliferate, and their consequences are shared. Recognizing Chicken Little's death as a formative moment for Sula requires a relational attention to Nel and Sula's "constant sharing of perceptions" (95).

Occurring in the summer of 1922, "Pig meat" (50) and Chicken Little's death emerge together as building blocks of "that summer, the summer of [Nel and Sula's] twelfth year, the summer of the beautiful black boys, [during which] they became skittish, frightened and bold – all at the same time" (56). Morrison's repetition of "summer" in the first three clauses of this sentence underscores the summer months of 1922 as a formative touchstone while mimicking the recursive movements of memory. Morever, for Nel and Sula to "bec[o]me," rather than experience mediated feelings of, "skittish, frightened and bold" underscores the scenes' impact on their developing senses of being and self, while the simultaneity and contradiction of fear and boldness demands a reading practice at the limits of normative feeling.

"Pig meat" (50) and Chicken Little's death as interlinked summer moments become the novel's primary archive for theorizing Nel and Sula's many acts of looking, their strategic and at times unnerving leveragings of the "one eye" they share (147). For example, Eva Peace invokes Chicken Little's accidental death when she appears to accusatorially mistake Nel for Sula: "You watched, didn't you?" (168). Eva's comment prompts Nel to distinguish between (a passive) seeing and (an active) watching. Nel must reckon for the first time with "[t]he good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands

slipped" (170). In the way that Eva's comment forces Nel to grapple with Sula's earlier question "About who was good" (146), Morrison's multivalent accounts of looking and watching force readers to think pain, pleasure, and power in radical proximity – to think them "all at the same time" (56).

For Morrison to depict Nel and Sula as Black femme spectators is to theorize a form of counterwatching, an insurgent girlhood gaze, that constitutes but also revises dark sousveillance as Simone Browne describes it. What distinguishes Nel and Sula's looking from both Browne's concept and discussions of *Sula* in contemporary African American literary scholarship is its relational, shared qualities together with its complex eroticism. The anchoring "Pig meat" (50) scenario and its narrative ripples show that, in *Sula*, "a constant sharing of perceptions" (95) and the cultivation of "one eye" (147) facilitate an erotic fullness that exceeds common vocabularies of intimacy. Reading for Nel and Sula's shared distinctive vision might begin to do justice to the strategic delights and possibilities of Black femme looks.

Part II: Watched Intimacies and Black Femme Sousveillance in *Love*

Nel and Sula's shared looks provide a narrative template for instances of Black femme friends *looking together* in Morrison's later novels. *Love* (2003) radicalizes the Black femme relational spectatorship at work in *Sula* through yet more explicit engagement with discourses and histories of surveillance. Written in the context of the unprecedented ramping up of national security efforts following 9/11, Morrison's eighth novel presents layers of watching – multiple scales of surveillance fixated especially though not exclusively on Black femme bodies. Christine Cosey and Heed the Night

Cosey (née Johnson) watch from below to nourish private intimacies in a hostile visual field.

Between Sisters, a Secret Language

As with Nel and Sula, Christine and Heed share a sister-like bond at key moments in their lives – a point that bears emphasizing given that their estrangement occupies the bulk of the novel. Their estrangement itself troubles the boundaries between hate and intimacy, for, as the third-person narrator says, "hatred" is "[l]ike friendship" in that "it want[s] creativity and hard work to sustain itself" (74). Hatred also "[b]urns off everything but itself, so whatever your grievance is, your face looks just like your enemy's" (34). Even in this adult estrangement, Christine and Heed are further twinned at the level of form in their respective losses of unborn children – Christine with her seventh abortion, "unsentimental" but narrated at length (163), and Heed with the loss of an imagined boy child, the product of her affair with Knox Sinclair (175).

It is in their early friendship, though, that Christine and Heed emerge as radically relational in their perceptions, in spite of starkly different upbringings and social positions. Christine's mother May sabotages their friendship because she cannot bear the prospect of them "behaving like sisters" (136), given that Heed is working class and of the scapegoated Johnson family. Of the two girls' childhood intimacies, Christine remembers: "They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's" (132). Stomachache laughter is an indicator of Black femme intimacies across Morrison's novels, from Sula making Nel laugh so hard that she almost pees herself (97), to *Jazz*'s Violet and Alice bursting out laughing over the ironing board (110). For Christine and Heed to

furthermore trust in their shared “dreaming” calls on *Sula*’s “Pig meat” scenario, which reveals how Nel and Sula first met – and shared a gaze – in the world of dreams (their “[t]echnicolored visions … always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. … [A]lways, watching the dream along with [Nel], were some smiling sympathetic eyes” [51]). Morrison inflects Christine and Heed’s interior gazes with the language of Nel and Sula’s movie-like day – sister spectators all.

Most important for our purposes is Christine’s reference to the “secret language” that she and Heed “shared.” Christine and Heed share a language that they call “idagay” – a form of Pig Latin that involves moving the initial consonant(s) of a word to the end, and then adding “idagay” as a suffix. Made up of “words they had invented for secrets” (188), idagay is Christine and Heed’s generative (“invented”) carving out of girlhood joy in a highly “monitored” environment (147). It is their “most private code” (followed by their appropriation of a “Hey, Celestial” to mean “a particularly bold, smart, risky thing” [188]). Designed specifically “for intimacy, gossip, telling jokes on grown-ups” (188), Christine and Heed’s shared language is the novel’s quiet evidence of their strategic Black femme efforts to thwart surveillance and hold what Spillers calls “private and particular space” (67) through the use of alternative vocabularies. Idagay is an erotic archive of Christine and Heed looking and relating together amidst the eyes of powerful adults.

The adults in *Love* are relentlessly engaged in visual intelligence gathering – a defining feature of this post-9/11 novel. The Cosey family, “the first colored family in Silk” (124), indeed owes its fortune and its years of success with the southern East Coast

resort to spying on fellow Black citizens; Bill Cosey's father Daniel Robert Cosey (DRC, or "Dark") served as a court house informer for southern whites (67-68). As narrator L puts it, Dark was "*The one police could count on to know where a certain colored boy was hiding, who sold liquor, who had an eye on what property, what was said at church meetings, who was agitating to vote, collecting money for a school - all sorts of things Dixie law was interested in*" (68). Dark indoctrinated his son into spying early, deputizing him "[e]very dawn" to "watch" and "repor[t]" on the neighbors' activities, with brutal and fatal consequences (44). While the narrator does not specify Bill Cosey's age at the time of this spying, we can deduce that he is approximately ten years of age, old enough to carry out a directive and young enough to hide in places adults cannot. Since Cosey was born in 1890 (which the reader knows because he is fifty-two when he marries Heed in 1942 [147]), his childhood spying would have happened around 1900. The timeline is important because it places Bill Cosey's childhood spying squarely in the historical period of the Nadir. For Bill Cosey to be watching and reporting on fellow African Americans in this period makes him complicit, albeit by way of his father's directive, in the fallout from the failed project of Reconstruction. His spying furthermore anticipates the FBI's surveillance campaign against Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association in the 1920s (Browne 10). While Bill Cosey seeks to distinguish himself from his father, his learned wielding of his gaze against other Black community members in Silk, Oceanside, and Up Beach, taken together with his refusal to sell land at their request, makes him a "bourgeois traitor" (Morrison 163) whose uses of power and resources further Dark's commitments.

Bearing down most conspicuously upon Christine and Heed is Bill Cosey's relentless surveying of the Black women and girls in his life – from the way he "gaze[s] out from the portrait" in the One Monarch Street mansion even in death (45); to how he gazes at Christine (and not Heed) in his wedding photo (60, 131); to how he describes his "steady, up-close observation" of Heed and the "pleasure" of "watch[ing] her grow" (148) to his friend Sandler Gibbons; to how his marriage to Heed sends the Cosey house, as May puts it, "throbbing with girl flesh made sexy" (139). Bill Cosey's gaze in many ways dictates the terms of the novel's visual field, a field in which Black women and girls must heed "intersecting surveillances" and vulnerabilities (Browne 9).

While Bill Cosey's gaze is the most conspicuous in the novel, it would be a mistake to replicate its dominance in the scholarly criticism by interrogating it over the gazes of Christine and Heed. Morrison's experiment in *Love* is to depict layers of Black patriarchal power dynamics while telling a story about Black women's relationships. Underscoring the novel's commitments to Black femme perspectives is its partial narration by Bill Cosey's chef and deceased killer, L (201). As L indicates in the preface, she is cognizant of the elements of this male-dominated narrative that, like "*an old folks' tale*," could serve the longstanding purpose of "*scar[ing] wicked females and correct[ing] unruly children*" (10) – of disciplining those at the margins. Just as L "*need[s] something else[, s]omething better*" to "*hum to*," however, critical readings of *Love* should ask the better question of "*how brazen women can take a good man down*" (10).

While L's call refers specifically to Bill Cosey, the novel also invites historically contingent interrogations of Black femmes working to bring about "*[s]omething better*"

under multiscalar regimes of surveillance. Christine's time as a member of an unspecified Black liberation organization in the late 1960s is illustrative (163). Morrison offers a scathing portrait of the internecine, intraracial disciplining of Black women within the broader context of the state-enacted anti-Black surveillance campaigns of COINTELPRO, which subject Christine and her fellow organization members to the dangers of "informants galore" (163). Upon terminating her seventh pregnancy, Christine births an imagined, sousveilling eye that lends her Black femme clarity into the multiscalar scapegoating and control of Black women's labor, sexualities, and reproductive capacities:

> There, in a blur of congealed red, she thought she saw a profile. For less then a second that completely impossible image surfaced. … Although she realized she had conjured up the unborn eye that had disappeared in a cloud of raspberry red, still, on occasion, she wondered who it was who looked up at her with such quiet interest. (164)

With this fleeting and "impossible" image in "red," Christine begins to find clarity to counter the dogma-cloaked-as-clarity that Christine's Black revolutionary boyfriend Fruit (163) and her mother May offer (97). The presence of the "unborn eye" structures the remainder of the narrative episode, only closing when Christine and Fruit part ways (167). In this episode, readers learn of Christine's growing grievances with Black men in her organization – Fruit in particular, who refuses to hold a comrade accountable for the rape of a student volunteer (166). Accompanied by the "unborn eye," whose "interest[s]" are her own, Christine comes to recognize that the organization demands of Black women a contradictory combination of "civil disobedience and personal obedience" (167). She

gains insight into the inscribed hypervisibility of her body and the inscribed invisibility of her lived experiences at the intersection of multiple oppressions. She, like Fruit, is a Black target of state-sanctioned surveillance, but she is also specifically a Black woman. Her erotic resources are devalued and exploited by her masculine peers while also being "carefully studied" (and here grammatically objectified through passive verb construction) by the Supreme Court (167). Yet as a watcher from below ("looked up at her" [164]) that Christine herself generates (births and "conjure[s] up" [164]) and that helps her gather information about her social positioning, the "unborn eye" counts among the novel's "quiet" (164) Black femme tools for counterintelligence gathering.

"It bears watching, if you can stand to look at it":

An Anchoring Memory at the Limits of Pain and Pleasure

As in *Sula*, *Love* anchors itself in a complex coming-of-age scenario that brings the pleasures of girlhood intimacy into unnerving proximity with irrevocable ruptures in sex and self: in 1940, a beach picnic turns "wrong" when nine-year-old Heed is privately assaulted by "the handsome giant who owns the hotel" Bill Cosey, and when ten-year-old Christine thereafter looks up to see him, her grandfather, masturbating in her own bedroom window (190-192). This formative scenario evades coherent narrative exposition until the final ten pages of the novel, when readers learn of the depth of Christine and Heed's early friendship. Until these final pages, the scenario makes itself known only in recurring splashes of peach and textures of sand, emerging unevenly as the narrator shifts focalization between Christine and Heed (22).

Katrina Harack has aptly adapted Ashraf Rushdy's definition of the "primal scene" to read this scenario. I join Harack in asserting the scene's central formal and

thematic role. Harack centers trauma theory, however, furthermore introducing a binary of productive and non-productive relationships to formative memories that needs more explanation. Harack also inadvertently flattens the novel's nonlinear approach to time by championing forward momentum and a teleological model of healing. To be clear, I agree that this scenario depicts sexual violence against multiply vulnerable young Black femmes. I purposefully distance myself from trauma theory, however, because its uses in African American literary criticism risk rehearsing narrowly sociological assumptions fixated on injury. More specifically, uses of trauma theory too often foreclose any discussion of Black femme sex and self by equating the very representation of Black sexuality, sensuality, eroticism, or desire with harm (Jennifer Nash). In what follows, I closely read the scenario of the picnic turned wrong as an anchoring memory at the limits of pain and pleasure whose uneasy depiction of Black femme sousveillance "*bears watching, if you can stand to look at it*" (Morrison, *Love* 199).

Morrison bookends this scenario with Christine and Heed's cultivated intimacies. These intimacies constitute a form of erotic girlhood insurgency especially in the context of the Up Beach resort community, "where people lived on top of one another and every cough, every sidelong look, was monitored" (147). Morrison's formal choice to bookend violence with girlhood intimacy invites a reading practice attentive to the systems of words and gestures the girls have "invented" for their private joy (188):

> It is 1940 and they are going by themselves to play at the beach. L has packed a picnic lunch for them and as always they will eat it in the shade and privacy of Celestial Palace: a keeled-over rowboat long abandoned to sea grass. They have cleaned it, furnished it, and named it. It contains a blanket, a driftwood table, two

> broken saucers, and emergency food: canned peaches, sardines, a jar of apple jelly, peanut butter, soda crackers. (190)

Like Christine and Heed themselves, this passage is definitive in its purpose ("to play"), privacy ("by themselves," "shade and privacy"), and destination ("at the beach"). "They" are the grammatical and thematic subjects of this excursion, and they are the stewards of its well-stocked palace. Their care and planning comes through in the confidence of the "as always," inserted without pause, and in the simple future tense "they will." The list of supplies signals a desire for self-sufficiency and uninterrupted play and a demonstrated pattern of "going" off "by themselves."

The details of the beach excursions are important because they position Christine and Heed as strategic watchers who use the resources available to them to adapt the visual field to their pleasures, needs, and interests. The unnerving events that follow clarify the girls' necessarily sousveillant and multiply vulnerable positions. First is Heed, who "bumps into her friend's grandfather. He looks at her. Embarrassed – did he see her wiggle her hips? – and in awe. He is the handsome giant who owns the hotel and who nobody sasses" (190). This interaction spatializes Cosey's relative power by showing how he figures as a "giant" in Heed's eyes. Financial assets ("owns the hotel") and cultural capital ("handsome," "nobody sasses") exacerbate the power differential between them. The uneven focalization of the third sentence – with "Embarrassed" and "in awe" seeming to grammatically modify the Cosey of the previous sentence ("He"), but with the interjected question about "wiggl[ing] … hips" stemming from Heed – complicates the field of power by suggesting that "look[ing]" at Heed has had an emotional impact on Cosey that surprises and in this way disempowers him. The ambiguities of this sentence

taken together with Heed's internal question pulse with the misogynist and anti-Black implications of the "*old folks' tale*" that L specifically seeks to avoid telling in this novel – the tale designed to "*scare wicked females and correct unruly children*" (10) by blaming the violences of others on the ostensibly innate "dirtiness" (192) of Black women and girls. The victim-blaming narratives undergirding the third sentence threaten to, but cannot, condone the violence that Cosey commits immediately thereafter, when he "casually" "touches" "the place under [Heed's] swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes" (191).

When Heed does not return as expected, Christine goes searching for her at the hotel service entrance. "Christine looks up toward the window of her own bedroom" to see her grandfather masturbating – to see him "standing there, in her bedroom window, his trousers open, his wrist moving with the same speed L used to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess" (192). Christine becomes an unwilling witness from below, with the architecture of the scene literalizing her sousveillant posture. In a shocked effort to process violations that she cannot yet name, Christine draws on egg-beating as a frenzied analog from her vocabulary of understanding. The repetition of "her own bedroom" and "in her bedroom window" condemns Cosey's invasion of a private space Christine thought she possessed.

Whereas Christine and Heed's negotiations of the visual had been a site of girlhood intimacies forged in words and gestures, Bill Cosey's violations from his relative position *above* re-entrench the visual field as a site of fracture. While the girls try to go about their picnic and "fall into the routine" (190) they have crafted, each harbors a private, and decidedly not a "twin" (190), shame. As the narrator establishes, the shame

they feel independently "could not tolerate speech – not even in the language they had invented for secrets" (192). Christine and Heed's "secret language" (132) – a key aspect of their mutual efforts to evade surveillance and discipline – thus becomes a primary site of rupture. Their tool of shared intelligence comes to mark the before and after of their respective unwanted encounters. It ushers in their fifty-year period of alienation, in which Christine once even uses idagay "to draw friendly blood" when she calls Heed a slave after her marriage to Bill Cosey at eleven years old: "Ou-yidagay a ave-slidagay! E-hidagay ought-bidagay ou-yidagay ith-widagay a ear's-yidagay ent-ridagay an-didagay a andy-cidagay ar-bidagay!" [You a slave! He bought you with a year's rent and a candy bar!] (188).

Despite the role of shared language in Christine and Heed's estrangement, shared language also reasserts itself at the end of the novel as a vector of sisterly intimacy at the limits of psychological realism. In the darkness of the now-abandoned Up Beach resort, Christine and Heed engage in consciousness-sharing dialogue that exceeds the boundaries of life and death and underscores their bond. After Heed's assistant Junior literally pulls the rug out from under her, sending her on a fall that will soon kill her (177), Christine and Heed lay in each other's arms, reconciled as friends after fifty years. Together in this "unlit plac[e]" (194), the two of them find some "[r]elief from looking out for and away from," some "escape from watching and watchers" (194). Their connection in these moments is such that the third-person narration renders them as indistinguishable from one another. For example, when Christine and Heed's employee Romen arrives on the scene to help them, his perceptions conflate the two women even though he is well acquainted with both of them: "[b]oth look asleep but only one is breathing. One is lying

on her back, left arm akimbo; the other has wrapped the right arm of the dead one around her own neck and is snoring into the other's shoulder" (195). The indefinite pronoun "One" and the repetition of "the other" strategically obscure who has died. Like the positions of the women's bodies, this suggests an interweaving of their fates. In a final exchange unbeholden to binaries of life and death, the surviving woman "speaks to the friend of her life waiting to be driven to the morgue" (198):

> You okay?
>
> Middling. You?
>
> Hazy.
>
> It'll pass. […]
>
> She [Junior] knows how to make trouble.
>
> So do we.
>
> Hey, Celestial. (198)

Quotation marks, which indicate where one person's speech ends and another person's speech begins, have no place in a conversation with oneself. Christine and Heed's consciousness-sharing dialogue is a grammatical testament to the immediacy of Christine and Heed's friendship. Recalling Nel's reflections on her talks with Sula ("[t]alking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself" [*Sula* 95]), the inquiring "You"s express mutual care without clarifying who is who. The adjectives "Middling" and "Hazy" – both synonyms for indistinguishable – maintain a strategic ambiguity that the indefinite pronoun "It" only amplifies (*Love* 198). With the collective assertion that "we" too "kno[w] how to make trouble," Christine and Heed's exchange ends with "Hey Celestial" as their secret code to describe "a particularly bold, smart, risky thing" (188).

Love registers and deepens *Sula's* theory of shared Black femme strategic gazes by explicitly locating girlhood friends' shared looks in relation to amplified anti-Black surveillance in the eras of Jim Crow, post-Civil Rights, and post-9/11. It emerges as a narrative of girlhood intelligence gathering that puts Black feminist rejoinders to ongoing erasures of Black femmes from feminist and Black freedom struggles. As sister-like spectators, Christine and Heed register multigenerational intrigue and historically contingent modes of racial-sexual control while nurturing the unique intimacies that accompany their early friendship.

Conclusion

In both *Sula* and *Love*, the shared Black femme gaze is an agent of complex, non-oppositional intimacies that constitute the erotic as Audre Lorde defines it. Reading for Black femmes *looking together* in these texts provides insight into the shifting terrain of anti-Black and misogynist surveillance while maintaining an emphasis on Black femmes' strategic negotiations of the visual field. Revising and deepening Simone Browne's concept of "dark sousveillance," Morrison's theory of the shared Black femme gaze illuminates the need for more and deeper dialogue between Black feminist visual cultural studies and surveillance studies. The stakes of such dialogue for contemporary media and politics are high. Historically contingent social realities demand capacious ways of theorizing the visual field – from the proliferation of screens under coronavirus quarantine, to the rise of African American mobile journalism and its prominence in the ongoing abolitionist uprising (Allissa Richardson), to the proliferation of surveillance technologies including facial recognition (Ruja Benjamin), to strategic uses of social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok among communities of

protesters and media watchers. Toni Morrison's novels provide one important archive in the critical quest to name and honor forms of Black femme witnessing, watching, and spectating across modalities.

III

EROTIC RESOURCEFULNESS IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *FOR COLORED GIRLS* AND ROBIN THEDE'S *A BLACK LADY SKETCH SHOW*

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novels *Sula* and *Love* provide a narrative theory of how appositional (relational, non-oppositional) Black femme looking can facilitate Black erotic fullness. In *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), Ntozake Shange uses appositional strategies of poetry and performance to literalize Black erotic fullness as the reclaimed stuff of the self. Whereas Morrison's shared looks as discussed in the previous chapter privilege intersubjective pairings, Shange's account of stuff brings self into relation with self. The lady in green's poetic monologue titled "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" externalizes the looking self by employing what I term choreopoetic apposition. Choreopoetic apposition encompasses nonrealist strategies of critical distance that range from syntactic objectification (poetic disruptions to syntax that denaturalize subject and object) to vignette structure (loosely related monologues arranged side by side). The first part of this chapter establishes Shange's complex treatment of stuff and self in the vignette form as part of a long African American tradition of using critical distance to navigate anti-Blackness and misogyny. The second part of this chapter traces *for colored girls*' surprising afterlife in contemporary sketch TV. Turning to Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, I argue that this all-Black femme comedic enterprise redeploys Shange's

strategies of choreopoetic apposition to practice erotic resourcefulness in the face of historically contingent disaster. At the same time, the show displays amplified anxiety about entrenched ways of reading "*colored girl[hood]*" since the Black women's literary renaissance, spoofing a critical landscape that would put Black women's art to narrowly sentimental uses.

Part I: Choreopoetic Apposition in *for colored girls*

Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* uses choreopoetic apposition at the scales of both syntax and genre to assert Black women's autonomy over their erotic resources. In the dramatic monologue titled "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," the lady in green uses grammatical objectification to establish an externalized version of her self that she can then reclaim. By using syntactic distancing to assert erotic autonomy, this monologue participates in African American aesthetic strategies of alienation that reconfigure the visual field to affirm Black life on its own terms.

In *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (2021), Kevin Quashie establishes syntactic distancing as a powerful aesthetic tool for Black world-building.[25] Quashie shows how Lucille Clifton's poem "reply" uses grammatical distancing to construct a rich and varied Black world that exceeds the terms, and visual politics, of anti-Blackness. Published in her 1991 collection *Quilting*, "reply" addresses itself obliquely to a virulently racist letter from sociology graduate student Alvin Borgquest to W. E. B. Du Bois asking whether Black people cry. In the poem, the speaker's opening lines "he do / she do" yield to a third-person plural litany of Black actions. This litany of verbs

[25] See also Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Illustrated edition, Duke University Press, 2006.

culminates in the final trio: "they do / they do / they do" (qtd. in 2-3). Attending to the anaphoric use of the third-person plural pronoun "they," Quashie makes the arguably counterintuitive claim that Clifton's grammatical objectification refuses objectification. For the speaker to use the third-person to observe Black people in various states of being is less objectifying than if the speaker were to "reply" to Borgquest on behalf of a coherent Black "we." By "casting the speaker awry from and as observant of black collectivity," Quashie explains, the speaker in Clifton's poem opts out of the oppositional terms of an anti-Black world (*Black Aliveness* 3). Clifton's "syntax invites the reader to *behold* the other, and in this way, the poem refuses the specular as a site of black abjection; rather, it instantiates looking as a shared relationality" (3). Here is appositional looking akin to that of Sula and Nel, working to "reorganize" the "gaze" (4) at the level of sentence structure.

Shange employs similar principles in *for colored girls*, but with a difference: in the lady in green's monologue, the speaker specifically *self*-objectifies in order to claim her own being all the more fully. The speaker is, to borrow Quashie's words, "cas[t]" "awry from and as observant of" her very own self (3) in an example of self-apposition. The speaker accomplishes this self-reflexive move by rendering her "own self," in its holistic multiplicity, as "alla my stuff":

> somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
> not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street
> but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
> like a kleptomaniac workin hard & forgettin while stealin
> this is mine/ this aint yr stuff/

now why dont you put me back & let me hang out in my own self

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff

& didnt care enuf to send a note home sayin

i waz late for my solo conversation

or two sizes too small for my own tacky skirts

what can anybody do wit somethin of no value on

a open market/ did you getta dime for my things/

hey man/ where are you goin wid alla my stuff/

this is a woman's trip & i need my stuff/

to ohh and ahh abt/ daddy/ i gotta mainline number

from my own shit/ now wontchu put me back[/] (63)

The beginning of the monologue introduces "alla my stuff" as a sweeping ("alla") set of personal belongings ("my") with material implications ("stuff"). Bookended by the repetition of "alla my stuff" in the first and third lines, the second line begins to clarify that "alla my stuff" must be more than the sum of its parts; this sweeping collection is "not" reducible to "my poems or a dance i gave up in the street," even though both poetry and dance are parts of the whole. Further emphasizing in line five that this "stuff" is "mine" (and that "somebody" "almost walk[ing] off wid" it amounts to "stealin"), the speaker adopts the imperative mood in line six to deliver the knockout phrase: "now why dont you put me back & let me hang out in my own self." This line is the most conspicuous evidence thus far that the speaker is using "alla my stuff" as a way of materializing and objectifying the collection of resources that is the self. The speaker's imperative to "put me back" (which appears again in line sixteen) makes it clear that the

"my stuff" at risk of theft is in part a grammatically objectified "me." That this "me" can be spatially separated from the speaker (can be "walked off wid" and "put" "back") does the work of "casting the speaker awry from and as observant of" her very own self (Quashie 3). The speaker uses this self-distancing in order to emphatically direct the second-person "you" (the unnamed "somebody") to "let me hang out in my own self." With this image, the speaker still allows for critical distance between "me" and "my own self," but the familiarity of the verb "hang out" and the reflexivity of "own self" also suggests that "me," "my own self," and "alla my stuff" together make a complex being whose various parts are in relation with one another.

The speaker thus uses a grammatically objectified "me" to both signal the risk of "somebody" coopting her personal resources and to dramatize the embodied reclamation of these resources. The "me" is vulnerable to "hav[ing]" (64) and taking but its near-theft also becomes an avenue for the lady in green to name and assert the terms of her bodily autonomy. The final third of the poetic monologue stages this process by figuring "me" as material stuff:

> [d]id you know somebody almost got away with me/
> me in a plastic bag under their arm/ me
> danglin on a string of personal carelessness/ i'm spattered wit
> mud & city rain/ & no i didnt get a chance to take a douche/
> hey man/ this is not your perogative/ i gotta have me in my
> pocket/ to get round like a good woman shd/ & make the poem
> in the pot or the chicken in the dance/ what i got to do/
> i gotta have my stuff to do it to/

> why dont ya find yr own things/ & leave this package
>
> of me for my destiny/ what ya got to get from me/
>
> i'll give it to ya/ yeh/ i'll give it to ya/
>
> round 5:00 in the winter/ when the sky is blue-red/
>
> & Dew City is gettin pressed/ if it's really my stuff/
>
> ya gotta give it to me/ if ya really want it/ i'm
>
> the only one/ can handle it (64-65)

Repeating "me" over the first line break, this passage renders "me" as material stuff that weighs down the "careless[ly]" held "plastic bag" and "dangl[es] on a string." With the line "i'm spattered wit," the lady in green again blurs the boundaries of self and externalized stuff, as the "me" in the bag and on the string becomes a statement of being ("i'm"). Indeed, the "me" in the bag morphs into the speaker herself being "spattered" with "mud & city rain" as visceral indicators of the "stealin" "somebody['s]" lack of "car[e]." Having transformed the grammatically objectified "me" into a broader statement of being, the speaker goes on to recast "me" as a "package," suggesting a collection of resources – "alla my stuff" wrapped up for personal transport. The line break between "package" and "of me" maintains critical self-distancing even as the lack of slash after "package" maintains continuity and reinforces the idea that the externalized collection of resources is "of" the self.

The externalized "package[] of me" also firmly establishes the speaker as steward of her own erotic resources.[26] Appearing in the final third of the monologue, it epitomizes ("package[s]" up) the formal and thematic emphasis on bodily autonomy that

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[26] Following Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, I use "[]" here to indicate a line break free of a slash, since Shange makes frequent use of slashes in her orthography (81).

characterizes the entire vignette. This emphasis comes through earlier on in the lady in green's use of possessive pronouns: "my" appears 45 times in the 65 lines of the lady in green's monologue. She repeatedly verbalizes desire for the various flawed parts of her body, which she names in sequence, singling them out in order to claim them as part of a whole.[27] For example, "i want my arm wit the hot iron scar/ & my leg wit the flea bite/ i want my calloused feet" (64). Through such expressions of personal desire ("i want"), the lady in green refuses the terms of anti-Blackness and misogyny that would objectify and coopt her constituent parts for "somebody" else's wants. Calling out the logic of the capitalist "market[place]," the lady in green revises its terms of property and ownership to assert bodily autonomy. In the final line of the monologue, she proclaims: "i'm the only one/ can handle it" (65) ("this package[] of me" [65]), recalling the incantatory phrases from the choreopoem's opening vignette "dark phrases": "let her be born/ let her be born/ & handled warmly" (19). Taking precedence over having, taking, owning, or walking off with, the verb "handl[ing]" suggests sensuous care as opposed to "carelessness" (65). Positioning herself as the sole possible "handl[er]" of this externalized package, the lady in green ends her monologue as singular steward of her erotic resources.

Even in her singularity, the lady in green contains multitudes. Her "package[] of me" (65) – her collection of "alla my stuff" – is at odds with Western conceptions of the sovereign subject. Indeed, her syntactic self-externalization is part of the choreopoem's

[27] See Mahurin, Sarah. "'Speakin Arms' and Dancing Bodies in Ntozake Shange." *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 2–3, 2013, p. 334. See also Waxman, Barbara Frey. "Dancing out of Form, Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange, and Walker." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, p. 100.

broader generic efforts to disrupt ideas of subjectivity, selfhood, and character that hinge on realism. The choreopoem's use of syntactic defamiliarization as well as its use of vignettes cycling between multiple characters depart from realist depictions that scholars associate with the novel form. In *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994), Madhu Dubey offers Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) as an example of a text from the Black women's literary renaissance whose storytelling arc ultimately reinforces realist assumptions about character (Dubey 4). The bildungsroman structure of Walker's novel (however oblique and multi-generational) invites the reader's investment in Grange's life and psychological growth. In reading such a novel, a practice that a single reader undertakes in isolation over multiple hours (Thorsson 5), the reader develops sustained affective attachments to Grange as an individual. The shifts in his behavior over the duration of the novel, most especially his ultimate self-sacrifice to protect his granddaughter Ruth from Brownfield's machinations, allow the reader to draw conclusions about who he has become – about his regrets, his hopes, and his moral commitments. By contrast, the choreopoetic form throws such affective attachments and presumptions to transparent knowledge about a character's interiority into crisis. The vignettes cycling between each of "the seven ladies in their simple colored dresses" (Shange, *for colored girls* 10) revel in formal multiplicity and polyvocality. Even as the vignettes raise deeply personal questions of embodied experience including abortion, rape, and domestic abuse, the sheer plurality of stories in quick succession prevents sustained assumptions about any one character's interiority. In this way, *for colored girls* formally extends and radicalizes the work of nonrealist characterization that Madhu Dubey attributes to Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

In *for colored girls*' vignette "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," realist characterization becomes untenable even at the scale of the monologue itself. This happens not only through the lady in green's self-distancing (her coming into relation with herself), but also through disruptions of the presumed single speaking subject. By definition, a monologue is an extended speech in the first-person delivered by one character. Yet in the middle of this monologue, the character of the lady in green (played by Paula Moss in the 1976 Booth Theatre Broadway production) appears to speak on behalf of Shange herself (who is also on stage but is playing the character of the lady in orange) ("Inside Playbill" n.p.). "[T]his is mine," says the lady in green, "ntozake 'her own things'/ that's my name/" (64). The lady in green speaks the possessive pronouns "mine" and "my," but these pronouns belong more accurately to the real-world Shange, who, in 1971, changed her name from Paulette Williams to the Zulu "Ntozake" ("she who comes with her own things") and "Shange" ("who walks like a lion") (Franklin n.p.). For Shange to write her own Africanized first name, her own first-person perspective, and "'her own things'" into the middle of the lady in green's monologue upends assumptions about the monologue form. Even as the lady in green's monologue stages a dramatic reclamation of personal erotic resources, this reclamation nevertheless departs from realist conceptions of the personal.

Shange's use of nonrealist characterization is important for our purposes because it constitutes an appositional strategy that facilitates Black world-building by evading the visual politics of white supremacy. In the way that Lucille Clifton uses a critically distant observer and third-person pronouns to affirm Black being and action outside the terms of Alvin Borgquest's dehumanizing letter, so too does Shange employ critical distance in

"somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" to affirm Black women's being at the limits of normative vocabularies and discourses of identity.

In this context, the lady in green's directive to "leave this package[] of me for my destiny" is also a directive about audience reception and ways of reading. The lady in green's "package[] of me" is not to be coopted for uses other than those specific to her "destiny" – even under the auspices of empathy.[28] Empathetic reception too often belongs to a world of anti-Blackness and misogyny, reinscribing a white viewer or reader as the default and presuming Black abjection – part of the legacy of sentimentalism's role in the abolition of chattel slavery.[29] Today this dynamic is embedded in what Joel Best terms a "social problems" marketplace, where literal and figurative investment in a project, political or otherwise, hinge on whether the project is legible as a sentimental story of real-world suffering and victimization (*Threatened Children* 15). On an "open market," the demand or condition of reception is for "somethin of no value" to tell a story of social suffering (Shange, *for colored girls* 63). Such stories in turn help construct consumable narratives of the nation, as both Rebecca Wanzo's work African American women's television and Lauren Berlant's trilogy on "national sentimentality" attest.[30] "[S]omethin

[28] Empathetic reception in African American literature overlaps with what Aida Levy-Hussen describes as therapeutic reading, a reading practice surrounding post-Civil Rights era narratives of slavery that operates on the assumption that reading about the slave past has moral value and can yield some level of healing. See Levy-Hussen, Aida. *How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation*. New York University Press, 2016. Following Levy-Hussen, my intention is not to dismiss particular habits of reading out of hand, but rather to draw out assumptions embedded in normative interpretive frameworks.

[29] See Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." 1949. *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 149-155.

[30] See Wanzo, Rebecca. *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling*. Illustrated edition, State University of New York Press, 2009; and Berlant, Lauren. *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. University of Chicago Press, 1991; *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Illustrated edition, Duke University Press Books, 2008; and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Duke University Press, 1997.

of no value" is valuable in its negated value and, as in any process of valuation, violence is the precondition.[31] In her 1978 essay "takin a solo/a poetic possibility/a poetic imperative" from *Nappy Edges*, Shange explains the violence of having one's multiplicity as a creator, and the multiplicity of one's creation, flattened for common consumption: "if you are … female & black in the u.s.a./ … you have one solitary voice/ though you number 3 million/ no nuance exists for you/ you have been sequestered in the monolith/ the common denominator as persona" (*Nappy Edges* 3). Using the second-person singular to mimic the reduction of "3 million" in "number" to "one solitary" "monolith," Shange takes issue with the conditions of reception that delineate "female & black in the u.s.a." as a "persona" – that is, a bundle of public perceptions devoid of complex interiority and "nuance." Shange's strategies of critical distancing in *for colored girls* reclaim Black sex and self from empathy's many violences.

In *The Poetics of Difference: Queer Feminist Forms in the African Diaspora*, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan argues that Shange's use of dress color to distinguish between the characters in *for colored girls* specifically enables a recognition of "nuance" and difference among those who share the gender and racial identifications of "female & black." The dresses form part of a visual vocabulary that registers what Shange describes as the "redundan[cy]" of "bein sorry & colored at the same time" – the "metaphysical dilemma" of "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored" – while also, in Sullivan's words, "us[ing] color to paint heteroglossias of difference on the stage, making visible

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[31] See Bost, Darius. *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*. University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 33. See also Barrett, Lindon. *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*. Cambridge University Press, 1998; Williamson, Terrion. "In The Life: Black Women and Serial Murder." *Social Text*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015, pp. 95-114; Cacho, Lisa Marie. "'You Just Don't Know How Much He Meant': Deviancy, Death, and Devaluation." *Latino Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2007, pp. 182-208.

the inexhaustible nuance of blackwoman subjectivity" (115).[32] The dresses help to prevent audience members from interpreting the characters as "identical members of a single identity group," demanding reading practices that attend to the "mutable, performative, and polysemous" workings of identification, embodiment, and difference (114).

In using formal distancing to thwart easy audience empathy and identification with any single character, Shange self-consciously enacts Bertolt Brecht's theory of alienation. Alienation operates on the premise that theatre should defamiliarize historical conditions by mobilizing disbelief and aesthetic entertainment (Brecht 189-190). As Brecht explains in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1948), this prescriptive dramaturgical approach purposefully departs from theatre of the "scientific age," which takes realism as its primary goal. Presuming a one-to-one equivalency between art and reality, it measures impact according to the cultivation of empathy among audience members (182-188). According to Brecht, the theatre of alienation departs from such passive modes of reception. Rather than representing people's lives "crudely and carelessly" (183), the theatre of alienation is "more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more productive of results" (180-181). Seeking "to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (192), the theatre of alienation invites deep reflection on social issues while eliciting complex aesthetic pleasures. With his theory of alienation, Brecht advocates and

[32] Sullivan draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's formalist concept of heteroglossia to indicate polyvocality and polysemy within African diasporic cultural productions. Sullivan also uses "blackwoman" as a capacious term to encompass people of a wide range of gender identifications, with the goal of "invok[ing] an adjective-form descriptor of aspects of black womanhood that does not rely on the potentially cisnormative, transphobic, body-normative, and conceptually imprecise languages of 'black female' experience and subjectivity" (8).

celebrates "the higher pleasure felt when the rules emerging from this life in society are treated as imperfect and provisional" (205).

As Sandra L. Richards argues in "Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange" (1983), Shange employs Brechtian alienation through the use of vignettes – or, more specifically, poetic monologues placed side by side (in apposition) that together produce an "episodic structure":

> By constructing most of her plays as a series of poetic monologues, occasionally interrupted by conventional dialogue, she takes advantage of the telegraphic, elusive quality of poetry to encourage audiences to listen with close, critical attention; the resultant episodic structure diminishes the audience's empathetic tendencies by denying them the opportunity to gain a more rounded sense of character. (75)

According to Richards, Shange amplifies and revises the Brechtian alienation effect by imbuing her vignettes with two "conflicting impulses" – first, Frantz Fanon's principle of "combat breath" (73), and second, what Richards calls the "will to divinity" (74). Combat breath, which Frantz Fanon coins in *A Dying Colonialism* (1968) and Shange discusses in the preface to *Three Pieces* (1981), is a concrete hyperawareness of material conditions and constraints in the wake of colonialism. By contrast, the "will to divinity" (74) seeks to transcend the material, evoking African cosmologies and also revising contemporaneous theories of the Black aesthetic by Amiri Baraka and others (76). Holding these two impulses in tension, Shange's vignettes defamiliarize historically contingent social conditions, placing significant "critical" demands on the audience's "attention" through poetry's "elusive," fleeting, and nonrealist engagements with

character. Having cultivated a dual attention to colonialism's ongoing material impacts and to a divine plane free of its violence, spectators are primed to, as Richards puts it, "initiate a process of change in the world outside the theatre" (75).

Even as Shange's formal alienations denaturalize entrenched ideas about racialized and gendered selfhood both within and beyond any one vignette, this insight has been lost on many reviewers.[33] For example, Robert Staples – who had previously displayed critical engagement with racialized and gendered assumptions by seeking to debunk the matriarchy thesis (1970) – ended up relying on naturalized categories of gender and sexuality to interpret the choreopoem in his notorious article in *The Black Scholar* "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" (1979). While conceding that "[r]eports that a black male is offered as a sacrificial lamb at the end of [Shange's] play are greatly over-exaggerated" (25), Staples nevertheless argued that *for colored girls* along with Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) unjustly scapegoated Black men by failing to consider how an exploitative capitalist system oppresses and emasculates them (26). In making this claim, Staples ironically revised and redeployed the very terms of the matriarchy thesis that he had earlier sought to discredit by positioning Black women as instruments of a castrating capitalist system (31). Staples effectively joined Daniel Patrick Moynihan in blaming Black women for causing a "tangle of pathology" (30) within the Black community – only Staples was pathologizing her ostensible depiction of Black pathology. In a statement that Audre Lorde promptly took to task in an anti-sexist essay titled "The Great

[33] For a discussion of the Black masculinist reception to Shange's *for colored girls* as well as works by other Black women writers in the period including Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, see: McDowell, Deborah E. "Reading Family Matters." *The "Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 118-137.

American Disease" (1979), Staples furthermore naturalized Black women's subordination in Black liberation struggles by positing that Black women get "fulfillment" (26) from bearing and raising children and by suggesting that Black women had "consen[ted]" to the idea that Black men should "hold the leadership positions" (27). That Staples drew such conclusions about Black womanhood from "the seven ladies in their simple colored dresses" suggests a reading practice at odds with the complexity and spirit of the choreopoetic form itself (Shange, *for colored girls* 10).

To the extent that Staples responds to Shange's aesthetic denaturalizations with a series of naturalizations, Staples replicates the violences of empathetic interpretation. This is not to suggest that he responds with empathy in the sense of compassion, but rather that he relies on assumptions that, by the logic of Brecht's theatre of alienation, undergird empathetic reception. One such assumption is that the identity categories of "Black," "woman," and "man" – which would count among what Brecht would term "socially-conditioned phenomena" (192) – are coherent. Taking these categories as a given rather than "free[ing] them from that stamp of familiarity" (192) represents what Brecht would describe as a "passive" audience impulse associated with empathy and realism (182).

Staples similarly assumes that entrenched narratives of Black womanhood obtain. He perpetuates at least two examples of what Patricia Hill Collins describes as "controlling images" of Black womanhood: the angry Black woman (in his titular address to "Angry Black Feminists" in particular) and the mammy (in his claim that Black women get "fulfillment" [26] from having and raising children) (85, 80). In positing an equivalency between stereotype and lived reality, Staples furthermore presumes access to

the interior life of Black women. He extends this assumption to Black women audience members in the theater when he writes: “Watching a performance [of *for colored girls*] one sees a collective appetite for black male blood” (26). Assuming transparent access to another’s private “appetite[s]” (thoughts, desires, motivations, feelings) is a mainstay of realist characterization and empathetic interpretation. That Staples posits a specifically *collective* appetite (from the vantage point of an unspecified “one”) speaks to the workings of stereotype to create sweeping images that erase complexity within groups of people and also dampen the observer’s critical faculties (what Brecht would call “critical attitude” [190]).

By perpetuating ingrained assumptions about identity and character on stage and off, Staples perhaps most egregiously abstracts from the material conditions surrounding Shange’s choreopoem. He overlooks her creative use of Fanon’s “combat breath” to bring awareness to material conditions in the wake of colonialism, including the capitalist divisions of labor that seek to reduce Black women to “somethin of no value on/ an open market.” Furthermore speculating that Black women actually “threaten to overtake [Black men], in terms of education, occupation and income by the next century” (25), Staples ends up proclaiming Black women’s ostensible systemic advantage at the historical onset of neoliberal austerity politics – what would become a 50-year period broadly dubbed the New Gilded Age of inequality (HoSang and Lowndes 4). Corporate deregulation, privatization, free trade, and labor outsourcing would exacerbate existing inequalities and bring the wealth gap to unprecedented levels. Controlling images of Black women, specifically that of the welfare queen, would play a central role in justifying the defunding of social services in this period. Hindsight renders the irony of

Staples' prediction all too stark. In all the concern for Shange's ostensible pathologizing, Staples was among those who actively produced narratives of pathology in the public discourse by failing to engage Shange's complex denaturalizations.

Staples' response is a reminder that, just as modes of characterization matter, so too do ways of reading. For our purposes, it serves as one example of how Black women's cultural production has been misnamed and misread since the late-twentieth century literary renaissance of which *for colored girls* was a part. Black feminist practitioners have long emphasized that reading Black women's cultural production necessitates a paired attention to shared experiences and complex multiplicity among Black women (Dubey 3). Yet holding complexity in view has never ceased to be a challenge, particularly in the face of the Black masculine backlash. While repeating the contents of such backlash has limited utility (potentially re-entrenching linked anti-Black and misogynist ideas), I engage selected critiques here because they have had an outsized impact on public discourse about Black women's art. As Deborah McDowell argues, sometimes it is necessary to address even the more absurd masculine critiques from the 1970s because these "judgments help[ed] influence the masses of readers largely untutored in Afro-American literature" ("Reading Family Matters" 119). Contributing to a Black nationalist discourse that used aesthetics to construct and circulate the idea of "a unified black cultural consciousness," such judgments had a role in establishing post-Civil Rights era expectations and modes of interpretation for Black art (Dubey 32).

Fraught with contradictions, these interpretive expectations include realist tragedy, but they also include a readiness to circumscribe what counts as real, true, valuable, or universal suffering – often at the expense of Black women. For example,

Stanley Crouch's essay "Aunt Medea" famously accuses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) of a kind of irredeemable sentimentality that fails to convey a "true sense of the tragic" (209). For Crouch, Morrison fails to represent Black people as self-determining subjects capable of transcending violent histories of anti-Blackness. Her depictions of violence against women are excessive and capitulate to self-pity. She furthermore indulges in tropes of "transcendent female identity" and "women facing the harsh world alone" (205-209) that contribute to the white feminist pathologization of Black men. It is of course paradoxical that Crouch bemoans the absence of transcendent racial identity in Morrison's work while critiquing the presence of "transcendent female identity." To understand femaleness as antithetical or ancillary to Blackness is at once illogical, because it does not account for Black women, and misogynist, because it denigrates femininity using a familiar vocabulary of indulgent excess. Rebecca Wanzo notes that "[h]aranguing Crouch for misogyny … is almost too easy" (*Suffering* 95), and indeed what is relevant and worth discussing for our purposes is how Black women creators in the tradition of Shange and Morrison take up, reconfigure, and create art at the limits of, this post-Civil Rights era interpretive landscape.

Enter sketch comedy writer and performer Robin Thede, whose sketch comedy series *A Black Lady Sketch Show* self-consciously employs Shange's visual vocabularies in an unflinching, unapologetic satire of "women facing the harsh world alone." Drawing on critical distancing strategies such as nonrealist characterization and vignette formats, this show, with an all-Black woman cast and writer's room, follows a group of resourceful Black women who emerge as sole survivors of a harsh world made harsher by

a fiery apocalypse.[34] Self-consciously fashioning itself as a comedic descendant of the Black women's literary renaissance, Thede's show remixes Shange's call for self-stewardship for the Trump era. In a post-Civil Rights media environment ever-prepared to put Black women's erotic resources to public use, Thede reclaims Black lady "persona[s]" (*Nappy Edges* 3) and Black lady time, registering anti-Black and misogynist conditions while using comedy as a bulwark against the critical tendency to "sequeste[r]" Black women "in the monolith."

Part II: The Fire Next, This, and Last Time: Puppets and Apocalypse in *A Black Lady Sketch Show*

Directed by Robin Thede and set to Megan Thee Stallion's song "Hot Girl" (2018), the season 1 title sequence of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* establishes Shange's strategies of choreopoetic apposition as Black feminist tools for times of crisis. Denaturalizing the relationship between self as subject and self as object like the lady in green in "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," the title sequence literally figures cast members as puppets – "*(stuffed) colored puppets*" that mimic each cast member's likeness with materials such as felt and rolled-up t-shirts (Radish n.p.). The title sequence assigns each cast member a "package[] of me" (65) that serves to disrupt realist reading practices that demand access to interiority. Reimagining Thede's 2010 skit spoofing Tyler Perry's film adaptation of *for colored girls*, the title sequence depicts the puppet versions of the cast members engaged in outrageous antics (Funny or Die). Puppet Robin Thede steals potato chips from two young girls selling lemonade on a sunny LA

[34] Season 1 features performances by Gabrielle Dennis, Robin Thede, Ashley Nicole Black, and Quinta Brunson. Season 2 features performances by Gabrielle Dennis, Robin Thede, Ashley Nicole Black, Laci Mosley, and Skye Townsend.

street. Puppet Quinta Brunson makes out with a stranger at a nightclub bar. Puppet Ashley Nicole Black taunts a convenience store clerk who is quick to retaliate. And, in the moments before her hair catches fire, puppet Gabrielle Dennis sits under a hair salon blow dryer reading a puppet version of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem. The title? *for (stuffed) colored puppets who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*.

Gabrielle Dennis's title sequence vignette establishes an externalized puppet self as appositional observer. A medium camera shot of a hair salon depicts a symmetrical mise-en-scène. On either side of the frame, two Black women customers in royal blue smocks sit reading under domed hair dryers, framed by beige plastic hairdresser carts in the foreground and shelves of bewigged mannequin heads in the background. While the symmetry of the shot primes the viewer to expect similarities between the two customers, a few elements rupture the "stamp of familiarity" (Brecht 192) of this otherwise banal scene: on the right is the puppet version of Gabrielle Dennis, her too-short legs sticking straight out from under her blue smock. She holds in her hands the puppet version of Shange's choreopoem, which boasts its own puppet facsimile of Shange in her trademark orange head scarf. Puppet Dennis holds the text open so that it covers most of her face, but her eyes peek out from between the top of the book cover and the rim of the hair dryer. Looking directly at the camera, her gaze breaks the fourth wall and provides a humorous contrast to her human counterpart on the left, whose eyes rest on the open copy of *TIME* magazine that she is reading. For this "package[] of [Dennis]" to stare directly back at the camera marks a highly mediated gaze. Puppet Dennis is cast "awry from" cast member Dennis (Quashie 3), like personal stuff in the hands of the lady in green.

The mise-en-scène in this symmetrical camera shot also invites viewers to interpret the series as a whole through the states of emergency surrounding both hair salon customers' reading material. It posits a visual and thematic link between an impending apocalypse in the show's narrative present of 2019 and the 1976 crises including anti-Black and misogynist scapegoating that led Ntozake Shange's *colored girls* to "*conside[r] suicide*." The customer on the left of the frame sits reading a *TIME* magazine, the cover of which conveys more plot information in a single image than do all the season's vignettes combined. The *TIME* cover image features a fiery mushroom cloud ripping through the atmosphere with the caption "APOCALYPSE NIGH?" Even though the image is predictive rather than summative, it is the closest viewers get to a depiction of the catastrophic yet unexplained *Event* that structures the entire season. The "APOCALYPSE NIGH?" of the cover image indeed serves as an oblique reference to what Thede elsewhere describes as the "Trumpocalypse" (*The Rundown*, "Episode 5" 9:48). On the back cover of the *TIME* magazine, an advertisement for bananas that are "100% OHIO GROWN" indicates – in a likely shot at the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2017 – that at least part of the impending apocalypse involves radical changes in climate.

That puppet Dennis's hair actually catches fire while reading *for (stuffed) colored puppets* amplifies the visual and thematic connections to the *TIME* magazine cover. When Dennis's puppet lowers the choreopoem, exposing her made-up face of bright coral lipstick and green eyeshadow, a plume of white smoke emerges from the dome of the hair dryer (3:00). Dennis's initially blissfully ignorant expression gives way to an exploratory upward sniff (her fellow customer looking toward her with detached

questioning [3:01]), and finally to a look of panicked realization (3:02). Mouth open with shock, and tongue exposed, a wide-eyed puppet Dennis realizes that the blow dryer has set her hair on fire. The *TIME* magazine cover's fiery vision has been transposed onto her head. Below this close-up of puppet Dennis appears the cast credit "GABRIELLE DENNIS" in yet another reminder that the viewer is looking at a stuffed facsimile. With puppet Dennis's crown of flames staying put even after this vignette has ended, the title sequence emphasizes that season 1 of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* draws heavily on both the *TIME* magazine cover and *for colored girls* as source material. Faced with the historically contingent crises of the Trump administration and ongoing assaults on Black women's bodily autonomy, the "*(stuffed) colored puppets*" of the title sequence bring self into relation with self in an unlikely redeployment of Shange's choreopoetic strategies.

The fiery *TIME* magazine cover image in the season 1 title sequence is also deeply intertextual, establishing *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as a Black feminist contributor to African American writing about ongoing anti-Black disaster. The cover image invokes James Baldwin's famous letter to his nephew on the centenary of the Emancipation Proclamation from *The Fire Next Time* (1963), which takes its name from a Biblical prophecy in the spiritual "Mary Don't You Weep" ("*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" [106]), *The Fire Next Time* famously intones "great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become" (10). The *TIME* cover image's intertextual reference to Baldwin throws the accomplishments of "great men" into question, critiquing the historiographical tendency to circumscribe the nation's "we." This has intraracial implications, suggesting, as Erica Edwards shows, that African American

social movements have often operated under a narrative regime of charisma positing that only masculine leaders are capable of “great things.”[35] The *TIME* cover image’s intertextual reference to Baldwin also serves as critique of the racist and misogynist principles behind, and uses of, Donald Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” itself a rebranding of Ronald Reagan’s campaign slogan from 1980 (Glaude Jr. xx). Like Eddie S. Glaude Jr. in *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (2020), Thede posits a continuum between key moments of reckoning in American history: the Civil War and Reconstruction, mid- to late-twentieth century Black liberation struggles (sometimes called the second Reconstruction), and twenty-first century Black liberation struggles following the Obama administration (xix). In this way, Thede does not so much exceptionalize Trump as the sole agent of a “Trumpocalypse” (*The Rundown*, “Episode 5” 9:48) as she does establish Trump as one of many hostilities that structure the relationship between Blackness and Western constructions of time and history. She joins Tavia Nyong’o, for example, who draws on Amiri Baraka’s concept of the “changing same” to make the philosophical argument that Blackness has a “tenseless” relationship to temporality (10). Institutionalized anti-Blackness means that the past is never past – that novel expressions of it might be “NIGH?” at any given point, but that they derive momentum and logic from, and thus must be contextualized in relation to, previous expressions. In a twenty-first century political landscape shot through with competing claims about what “America must become” and who “can make” it that way, Thede’s fiery *TIME* magazine cover makes it clear: whether it is the fire this, next, or last time, the Black ladies of this sketch show are

[35] See Edwards, Erica R. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

using nonrealistic characterization and comedic vignettes to, like representative Maxine Waters, "reclai[m] my time" (qtd. in Harris, *Black Feminist* 194). Linking the 1970s and the 2010s as modern periods (*TIME*s, if you will) of amplified anti-Black and misogynist violence, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* borrows from Shange's aesthetic toolkit to practice erotic resourcefulness in the face of historically contingent disaster.

The *TIME* cover image also invokes Ta-Nehisi Coates's contemporary re-envisioning of Baldwin's letter, *Between the World and Me* (2015), as a letter to his own son following the failure to indict Darren Wilson for Michael Brown's 2014 murder. And the cover image invokes these interlocutors much more intentionally than one might assume given the radical differences in genre between the Baldwinian/Coatesian jeremiad and the Thedeian comedy sketch. Thede conspicuously incorporates Coates's *Between the World and Me* into multiple projects. Her acclaimed 2017-2018 political comedy show *The Rundown* on BET opens with a fictional sketch featuring Thede reading Coates's *Between the World and Me* alone in a café ("Episode 1"). Raising her right hand as if in righteous assent, Thede thinks, in the form of a voiceover, "My white friends are *right*. Ta-Nehisi *gets* it" ("Episode 1," 0:06-0:08). *The Rundown*'s use of Coates spoofs the appeal to white readers as a longstanding strategy of sentimental political storytelling for social change, notably encompassing antebellum slave narratives (with their authenticating white prefatory materials and northern white women readers) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) (with its reliance on racist tropes and empathetic identification via a light-skinned heroine to make a case for abolition). For Thede, Coates's text offers valuable insight into the "it" of how the world works ("*gets* it") and constitutes, as Morrison put it in her book blurb, "required reading." Yet Coates's

text also speaks directly to white people in a way that neither *The Rundown* nor *A Black Lady Sketch Show* seek to do. Without opting into debates about what constitutes a sentimental text (James Baldwin, himself accused of sentimentality by Stanley Crouch [Wanzo, *The Suffering* 94-95], described sentimentality as 'the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion'" [qtd. in Wanzo, "Sentimental Solidarities" (90)]), Thede registers some of the complexities and contradictions surrounding texts that amass value based on their capacity to provide an oppositional critique of real-world violences and to cultivate empathy among the structurally privileged in the interests of social change.

Coates's text also figures prominently in the second season of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*. Cast member Ashley, played by Ashley Nicole Black, reads *Between the World and Me* in the apocalypse-proof warehouse that serves as the main setting for the season's action ("Sister, May I Call You Oshun?"). In the final episode of season 2, Ashley identifies *Between the World and Me* as a resource that is more important than food ("Way to Ruin the Party, Soya!"). At this time, Ashley is preparing to move from the apocalypse-proof warehouse to the apocalypse-proof regular house. The women have realized that they are the only people alive on earth ("My Booty Look Juicy, Don't It?") and Ashley has given them a rousing, "Shonda-level speec[h]," stating: "We have a world to rebuild – in our own image" ("If I'm Paying These Chili's Prices" 5:20-5:27). Anticipating what one might call a third Reconstruction (Glaude Jr. xix-xx), Ashley reasons that she cannot possibly leave the Coates text behind because "[t]he new world will have critical race theory and beautiful prose" ("Way to Ruin the Party, Soya!" 16:25). Ashley's reference to critical race theory invites viewers to contextualize the

contemporary moral panic about something called Critical Race Theory within broader struggles over American democracy during defining historical moments spanning the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and contemporary movements for Black lives in the face of conservative backlash.

Understood alongside the puppet version of *for colored girls* as a lens through which to interpret *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as a whole, the *TIME* magazine cover establishes deferral of *The Event* as an animating principle for the show. As discussed, the series depicts four friends quarantined within an apocalypse-proof house following a fiery, world-ending disaster that the intertitles (titles appearing onscreen to indicate a change in time or setting) describe enigmatically as *The Event*. The show never depicts the moment of the disaster itself – instead, season 1 documents the women's actions in the twelve hours immediately afterward, while also cycling between seemingly unrelated vignettes featuring the same cast members playing an array of characters. Each episode seems to promise but never deliver on a direct representation of *The Event* itself. For example, the portions of episode 1 set in the apocalypse-proof house occur between 7-7:15pm - 12 hours, an intertitle tells us, after *The Event* ("Angela Bassett Is the Baddest B***h"). Episode 2 takes us closest to the event, offering glimpses of the action in the apocalypse-proof house from approximately 8am to 8:10am – about 20 minutes after the event ("Your Boss Knows You Don't Have Eyebrows"). Just when a knock at the door in Season 1 Episode 6 primes the audience to expect answers, the Season ends on a cliffhanger ("Born at Night, But Not Last Night"). The cast members all face the camera, as if to position the audience as the unexpected visitors knocking at the door, demanding access to the house's (and the writers') interior. Season 2 yet radicalizes this deferral by

exposing the previous season's apocalypse-proof house scenario as merely a dream, a fabrication from the depths of Robin's mind ("But the Tilapias Are Fine Though, Right?"). Also culminating in a cliffhanger, the implication is that perhaps Season 2 was only a dream as well ("Way to Ruin the Party, Soya!"). The structuring device of deferral in both seasons teases the viewer with access to the inner workings of the all-Black writers room and the cast members on and off screen, much like puppet Gabrielle Dennis gazing directly at the camera in the Season 1 title sequence. Like the vignette structure in *for colored girls*, this formal choice specifically undercuts realist assumptions about character and subjectivity. Frustrating the types of affective audience attachments that accompany a legible character arc (an arc that involves gathering reliable emotional and plot information about a character over a sustained amount of time), this formal choice remixes Shange's work of critical alienation for a shifting media environment.

Conclusion

Amidst the "many fires" of the present, to borrow the words of Shana Redmond, *A Black Lady Sketch Show* reasserts the utility of appositional creative strategies as tools of illegibility and Black femme erotic joy.[36] As Robin Thede puts it, "nothing speaks louder than a black woman not wastin her breath" (*The Rundown*, "Episode 3" 7:04), and the relentless mediations and deferrals of A Black Lady Sketch Show are prime examples of refusing to "wast[e] … breath" on cataloguing the anti-Black and misogynist harms of the "Trumpocalypse" (*The Rundown*, "Episode 5" 9:48). With *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, Thede self-consciously joins a line of Black feminist creators including Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, and Lucille Clifton who employ nonrealist visual

[36] See Redmond, Shana. "The Roof Is on Fire." *American Studies Association*, 2021, theasa.net/annual-meeting/years-meeting/years-theme.

vocabularies to negotiate the "politics of looking" (Quashie 3) during American states of emergency. Depicting the antics of *(stuffed) colored puppets* in a burning world, Thede also furthers Shange's work of reclaiming Black femme resources ("alla my stuff"). Erotic resources (such as interiority and time) risk misnaming on a social and literary marketplace invested in constructions of good citizenship and national sentimentality. Sidestepping claims that Black women's art, as the lady in blue puts it in "no more love poems #3," "deal[s] wit emotion too much" (63), Shange and Thede employ formal excesses in a multilayered critique of anti-Black and misogynist conditions of legibility.

IV

THE AFROFEMINIST SURREAL IN TERENCE NANCE'S *RANDOM ACTS OF FLYNESS*

Introduction

If Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* spoofs the conditions of reception surrounding *for colored girls*, then Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* revisits and re-envisions selected Black Arts Movement ideas that helped to produce those conditions in the 1960s and 1970s. It offers a Black feminist revision of the Black Arts Movement premise that Blackness provides its own fire and light. Explicitly enacting the Ghanaian proverb "se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi" ("Ain't no shame in going back to retrieve what may have been forgotten" 27:06), *Random Acts of Flyness* critically remembers Black women as theorists of Black light whose nonrealist formal innovations have long offered artistic survival strategies for future generations. Self-consciously influenced by Black Arts Movement creators of marginalized genders and sexualities including Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, and Faith Ringgold, *Random Acts of Flyness* combines key principles of Black feminism (a politic that interrogates assumptions behind gender, sexuality, and race in the interests of Black women's freedom) with Afrosurrealism (an anti-imperialist poetic, musical, and artistic movement that denaturalizes linked power structures from African diasporic perspectives).[37] It experiments with form to denaturalize the beauty and violence of the

[37] First formalized in 1932 with the Martinican anticolonial student publication *Légitime Défense*, and emerging in intercultural conversation with white European surrealists including André Breton, Afrosurrealism has found prominent expression through such leaders in the Négritude movement as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Post-WWII American practitioners range from Amiri Baraka to D.

everyday from African diasporic perspectives, animating the televisual field with what Terri Francis describes as an "electric mash-up of folklore, history, (sub)consciousness and location" (209). Through key sketches including "The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community" and "Sleep Little Baby," *Random Acts of Flyness* uses mutually animating principles from Black feminism and Afrosurrealism to retheorize Black light for Black feminist freedom dreams in the twenty-first century.[38]

White Light, Black Light

From Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don L. Lee) and Gwendolyn Brooks to Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Faith Ringgold, and Larry Neal, Black creators in the 1960s and 1970s turned to black light as a metaphor for the Black Arts Movement's key goals of Black political and cultural self-determination (Crawford, "Black Light on the *Wall of Respect*" 30). In "The Negro" (1968), Madhubuti imagined "a black light trying to penetrate that whiteness called mr. clean" (qtd in Crawford, "Black Light on the *Wall of Respect*" 30). In "An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire" (1971), Gwendolyn Brooks depicted dark-skinned Blackness as "Afrikan velvet" that emits a "physical light in the room" (479). In *In Our Terribleness* (1970) Amiri Baraka imagines dark-skinned Black people as "eatin sun" (17), their dark skin radiating light from within. In her *Black Light Series* (1967), Faith Ringgold literalizes a Black is Beautiful aesthetic by strategically using a "darker palette" that contrasts the ubiquity of "white and light" in Western visual art (Cameron et al. 162). And in the Black Arts Movement anthology *Black Fire* (1968), which reconfigures a Black cultural emphasis on fire from the Harlem

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Scot Miller to Jayne Cortez. Offering incisive artistic critiques of the ongoing impacts of Western colonialism, Afrosurrealism has long exposed multiple interlocking realities of oppression.

[38] See Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002.

Renaissance (through the African American little magazine *Fire!!* [1926]), Larry Neal refuses the idea that Black people are "Kafkaesque creatures stumbling through a white light of confusion and absurdity" (652). For Neal, "The light is black (now, get that!)" (652).

Envisioning Blackness as its own light source was a tool of self-definition that both registered and departed from the inherited socio-psychological concept of double consciousness. Double consciousness as W. E. B. Du Bois theorizes it is that "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (8). Refusing white American metrics that would cast Blackness in the negative, Black Arts Movement creators sought to affirm an indigenously Black energy and luminosity.

Amiri Baraka framed this Black Arts Movement goal partly in relation to American TV, which he famously described as a "steady deadly whiteness beaming forth" ("Work Notes" 12). Baraka's striking characterization of American TV in 1966 anticipates what the federally funded Kerner Commission would find in its analysis of the uprisings that took place across the country during the summer of 1967. In its final report published in 1968, the Kerner Commission established the American media as among a constellation of social forces (including education, employment, and housing) contributing to the emergence of "two societies, separate and unequal," one Black and one white (qtd. in Pollard and Bernard, "Two Societies" 52:00). That a generally reformist commission came to this conclusion underscores the significance of media (mis)representation as an ideological instrument, with both historically specific and lingering implications. In *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*

(1995), Herman Gray elaborates on the ideological power of television in the decades to follow. News broadcasts in particular would play a central role in the political formation of the New Right, trafficking in ideas of personal responsibility and patriotism as well as stereotypes of Black criminality to justify the gutting of social services. As Gray puts it, "[r]ace and television were at the very core of the new right's largely successful efforts to establish a rightward shift in the political, cultural and social discourse" (15).

Like Baraka, *Random Acts of Flyness* registers TV as a "steady deadly whiteness beaming forth" (12), locating this medium in a long line of American visual media that reflect and produce ideas of race by fetishizing what Richard Dyer calls a "culture of light" (103). For example, one recurring segment in *Random Acts of Flyness* features a voiceover that repeats the words "black face" as the camera cycles quickly between medium shots of Black people of different ages, genders, and skin tones. The camera cuts periodically to racist minstrel images, with the corresponding voiceover "not black face." Invoking blackface minstrelsy as an egregiously racist and ubiquitous part of American music, performance, and film, this recurring segment helps to establish American visual media as structurally anti-Black even as it centers an affirmative Blackness by depicting a multiplicity of actual Black people's faces. The black face theme permeates other sketches as well, including the scathingly satirical "White Thoughts" sketch, which features John Hamm promoting an "All Purpose Awareness Cream" called White Be Gone ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?"). When applied directly to the temples, this black ointment helps white people "un-have" (10:40) "white thoughts" – thoughts including "Violence isn't the answer" and "But don't… all lives matter?" (11:13-11:32) that justify and perpetuate existing power relations.

In the fifth episode, *Random Acts of Flyness* also mounts a critical-creative argument in the tradition of Herman Gray and Richard Dyer, arguing that post-Obama TV has helped fuel white supremacy. The episode argues that American media have trafficked heavily in two related tropes or archetypes (frequently recurring character types with distinguishing features): the white angel and the white devil. The white angel has many manifestations, but the general pattern is that a white character emerges as a moral savior figure who makes sacrifices for the benefit of others, especially indigenous people and people of color. *Random Acts of Flyness* offers the fictional example of a white masculine director whose Oscar-winning film depicts a white masculine American soldier in the Congo martyring himself for the local children. In a stark scene at the margins of the main narrative, one of the child actors, a dark-skinned Black girl, reaches for Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a Black Arts Movement novel renowned for its exploration of internalized racism and sexism (Crawford, *Dilution Anxiety* 90). The example of the director and the child actor underscore that, while the white savior trope might seem innocuous because it features white characters being kind to people who are different from them, it is profoundly violent because it obscures historical and ongoing oppressions (such as America's imperialist complicity in destabilizing central Africa ["Four More Ways"]), it maintains existing representational hierarchies and divisions of wealth (the director wins an Oscar), and it presumes whiteness as a default subject position (with white beauty standards undergirding Pecola Breedlove's desire for blue eyes in Morrison's novel).

The fifth episode goes on to establish the white devil as a related figure – a typically masculine character who embraces immorality or amorality in the process of

securing power for himself. Walter White from Breaking Bad emerges as a paradigmatic example, with other examples include Don Draper from *Mad Men* and Derek Vinyard from *American History X*. To what degree, the voiceover asks, are these shows "intentionally inspiring white men to reestablish their social and cultural dominance?" ("I Tried to Tell My Therapist About My Dreams/MARTIN HAD A DREEEEAAAAM" 27:30). Citing the well-documented role of "America's first box office hit" D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) in reigniting Ku Klux Klan membership in the first quarter of the twentieth century, *Random Acts of Flyness* suggests that the white devil trope, too, has had real-world consequences ("I Tried to Tell My Therapist About My Dreams/MARTIN HAD A DREEEEAAAAM"). In a post-Obama era, the white devil trope has fueled white supremacist aggrievement, as evidenced by the alt-right's anti-Semitic and racist rhetoric ("Jews will not replace us") and physical violence (the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville). Interweaving clips of real-world events, *Random Acts of Flyness* conveys this sense of American television as "a steady deadly whiteness beaming forth" – as an ideological tool with material implications – to establish the anti-Black, misogynist, and heterosexist conditions that structure the visual field.

Yet *Random Acts of Flyness* ultimately reconfigures the medium of TV in the interests of "beaming forth" affirmative Black aesthetics. Like Black Arts Movement creators, it seeks to measure Black art, being, and consciousness by a metric other than the "tape" of an anti-Black "world." Having posed the question "have you ever had a thought that you wish you could un-have?," *Random Acts of Flyness* proceeds to un-have thoughts of whiteness ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?" 10:40).

In the pilot episode, following John Hamm's "White Thoughts" sketch, an iMessage banner appears in the top right corner. Annalise Lockhart, who is first assistant director on the episode, shares a critique with Terence: "Just watched the cut, it's good but..." "Between this one and the white angel / white devil piece - it seems to me that as ARTISTS we should be addressing whiteness less…. and affirming Blackness more" ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?" 16:51). Nance replies "You right..." (17:03). As a conspicuous, self-reflexive interruption, this exchange serves as a formal reset. While this formal reset does not fully negate or erase the sketches that center whiteness, it makes plain the show's commitment to Afrofeminist surreal revision, to a process of "going back to retrieve what may have been forgotten" ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?" 27:06). In doing so, it ruminates on experimental TV as a site of historiographical critique whose expressive capacities (which include litany, multilayered time, and ecstatic performance) can do the work of "consciousness shift[ing]" and "recentering [Black people]" through TV ("I Tried to Tell My Therapist About My Dreams/MARTIN HAD A DREEEEAAAAM" 32:00).[39]

Afrosurrealism Meets Black Feminism

Through its jarring sketch structure and use of repetition, *Random Acts of Flyness* implements the Black aesthetic principle of litany, drawing simultaneously on Amiri Baraka's description of the Afro-surreal and Audre Lorde's Black feminist uses of the form. Litany, which Terence Nance explicitly identifies as "fundamental to Black

[39] The show at one point describes itself as a hypersigil, which is comic book writer Grant Morrison's term for "a story consciously constructed to create a change in both Morrison's life and the readers [sic]" (Meaney 11). Near the beginning of *Random Acts of Flyness*'s second episode, Najja (Dominique Fishback) addresses the camera, saying: "What you're about to witness is a hypersigil whose existence will provoke a profound shift in consciousness" ("Two Piece and a Biscuit" 2:44). Akin to an incantation or spell, the show as hypersigil is a powerful expression of spiritual-aesthetic promise.

expressive practice" (Reich n.p.), is a spiritual and aesthetic method steeped in Black vernacular forms. In its antebellum religious sense, litany is "a call to action to be recited by a congregation of believers" (Sorett 122). Shaped by call and response between preacher and congregation, it has also morphed into a wider tool for expressing and theorizing what Josef Sorett calls Black racial aesthetics. *Of* but not always *in* the church (Sorett xii), litany is one dynamic vehicle for asserting the inextricability of spirituality and aesthetics through iteration, incantation, resonance, and multitude. From its place in the syncretic spiritualism that Ishmael Reed articulates in his 1970 "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" ("Neo-HooDoo is a litany seeking its text" [25]), to its titular role in Audre Lorde's 1978 prayer for those "never meant to survive" ("A Litany for Survival"), litany is a flexible yet culturally specific form with roots in Black collectivities and consciousness.

As a self-identified Afrosurrealist, Amiri Baraka practices litany in his Black Arts Movement-era "Afro-Surreal" manifesto, reflecting on Black diasporic lives and aesthetics in their "unbelievably complex" and "dialectical" forms. According to Baraka, "Afro-Surreal" art:

> unfolds the Black Aesthetic – form and content – in its actual contemporary and lived life. MUSIC (drum – polyrhythm, percussive – song as laughter or tears), preacher and congregation, call and response, the frenzy! The color is the polyrhythm, refracted light!….
>
> The very broken quality, almost to abstraction, is a function of change and transition. It is as though the whole world we inhabit rests on the bottom of the

ocean, harnessed by memory, language, image to that 'railroad of human bones' at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

But in this genre the most violently antagonistic of contradictions, colors, shapes animates the personalities, settings, language of the work. (165-166)

Through a series of disorienting linguistic features, Baraka "animates" this passage's "form and content" with the "very broken quality" that he theorizes as central to the "Afro-Surreal": the all-caps declaration of "MUSIC"; the percussive parenthetical; the indefinite object of "The very broken quality"; the indefinite pronoun "It is as though"; the contradictory image of "the whole world" at a distance and "submerged" yet multiply tethered and "inhabit[ed]"; the one-sentence paragraph beginning with a negation ("But") that formally enacts such "antagonistic" "contradictions." Baraka thereby "unfolds the Black Aesthetic" in a preacherly poetic performance. He enacts multitudes bordering on "abstraction" in a manifesto at once disjointed and resonant.

Staging synesthetic incursions (the crafted spontaneity of "MUSIC"; the multisensory statement "The *color* is the polyrhythm"; the jolting exclamations "frenzy!" and "light!"), Baraka enacts an ecstatic immediacy that defamiliarizes and demands presence. Such immediacy paired with the "'railroad of human bones'" at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean theorizes Black time as a paradox of the "changing same."[40] Like Tavia Nyong'o, who makes the philosophical argument that Blackness has a "tenseless" relationship to temporality (10), and like Christina Sharpe, who puts forward "residence time" to think the material legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, specifically the *Zong* massacre of 1781, through the persistence of sodium in the water (19), Baraka posits a

[40] See Baraka, Amiri. "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)." *Black Music* [first published in 1968 by William Morrow & Co., Inc]. Akashic Books, 2010.

continuum between the horrors of transatlantic slavery and contemporary Black thought. The "Afro-Surreal" emerges for Baraka as a tool to redescribe historical and ongoing violences while also creating imagined distance and alternative creative modes of "inhabit[ation]."

As a text that "flourishes," in the words of Black film scholars Racquel Gates and Michael B. Gillespie, "on formal experimentation and collectivity" (14), *Random Acts of Flyness* specifically realizes the "very broken quality" of Afrosurreal litany through its "absurdist cycling across formats and modalities" (14). A quick critical cycling through selected sketches only begins to convey the show's litanous scope of form and feeling: there is the sketch featuring the darkly satirical children's show *Everybody Dies!* hosted by beleaguered guide to the afterlife Ripa the Reaper ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?"). There is the recurring segment "Worry No. ___ of 1000 that a Black Person Should Not Have to Worry About," where each worry exemplifies an aspect of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "state sanctioned vulnerability to premature death" (*Golden Gulag* 28) ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?"). There are the recurring, gravity-defying scenes of Nance ascending into, and descending from, the air over the New York skyline – a literalization of the show's title "flyness" ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?"; "Two Piece and a Biscuit"). There is the spoof product launch for "Bitch Better Have My Money," a mobile app for Reparations allowing African American users to locate the nearest white person who owes them money (generational wealth) ("They Got Some S**t That'll Blow Out Our Back"). There is the story of Najja, who interrogates the constraints of mono-normative society in literal conversation with her exorcized personal haints ("They Won't Go When

I Go"). There is the story of Aisha Freeman, who has to physically turn over her "damaged" "pussy" to police when reporting her experience of sexual assault ("Items Outside the Shelter But Within Reach"). There is an unnamed New York service worker's hours-long subway commute to her underwater studio apartment, which is soon to be overwhelmed by an impending hurricane ("They Won't Go When I Go"). "All I see is water," we hear, in a culminating scene starkly reminiscent of Amiri Baraka's "Afro-surreal" "world" submerged ("They Won't Go When I Go"). By turns dystopian, journalistic, and speculative; hilarious, tender, and devastating, *Random Acts of Flyness* offers up a dizzying range of genre and affect.

Emerging alongside this jarring multiplicity is recitation – that feature of litany steeped in repetition and response and replete with the possibility of worlds beyond this one. Despite a contemporary critical landscape that tends to reduce the show's themes to the subject position of its Black masculine creator, *Random Acts of Flyness* organizes itself overwhelmingly around the perspectives of Black people of marginalized genders, especially women.[41] As a voiceover in the first episode puts it, "A lot of times Black women feel like we have to say things over and over and over" ("What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?" 6:39). The structure of the first season makes this sentiment plain, turning again and again, multiple times per episode, to conditions of

[41] Critical discussions of *Random Acts of Flyness* tend to emphasize the theme of anti-Black racism while presuming a Black masculine subject of racist harm. Reggie Ugwu's *New York Times* article invites audience members into the "mind of Terence Nance," characterizing the show as a foray into "what it's like to be young and black in the United States" before describing Nance's reaction to the 2018 police murder of Antwon Rose (n.p.). Lanre Bakare's 2018 article in *The Guardian* locates Terence Nance among other "black artists" who "are expressing the absurdity of life in a racist society by embracing the disturbing and bizarre" (n.p.). In the *New Yorker*, Emily Nussbaum sums up *Random Acts of Flyness* as "[e]xamining black male vulnerability through experimental lenses" (n.p.). Historiographically speaking, this common rhetorical move both narrows the field of interpretive possibility for Afrosurrealist media and risks bolstering progressive logics that see representation of *Black* + *racism* as an easy formula for social change (Gates and Gillespie 13). Reading for racism alone, and understanding racism apart from sexuality, operates on an additive model of Black representation that reinscribes the presumed whiteness of the televisual field, erasing the historical complexities of race-making in the process.

Black child-bearing (the role of medical racism in producing high maternal morbidity rates [“What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?”]); Black women’s experiences of harassment (the anti-harassment video game Kekubian Assassin as a tool to train “an army of black women” [“Two Piece and a Biscuit”]); Black women’s surveillance, criminalization, and incarceration (hair discrimination and state-sanctioned violence [“They Got Some Shit That’ll Blow Out Our Back”]); Black women’s experiences of sexual violence (the story of reporting a rape, told in reverse [“Items Outside the Shelter But Within Reach”]); and Black women’s labor (Black women serving as puppeteers [“I Tried to Tell My Therapist About My Dreams/MARTIN HAD A DREEEEAAAAM”], diversity workers, and emotional laborers [“They Won’t Go When I Go”]). Four out of six episodes also end with spotlights on Black women creative contributors: Mariama Diallo, Nuotama Frances Bodomo, Diamond Stingly, and Theresa Chromati. And that conceit of Nance flying up into and emerging from the sky above the cityscape of New York? It is almost certainly an homage to *Tar Beach 2* (1990), an iconic quilt by Black Arts Movement artist Faith Ringgold that depicts young African American girl Cassie Louise Lightfoot, in multiple frames, defying gravity and flying above Harlem. As the award-winning children’s book version of Cassie’s story puts it, “All you need is somewhere to go you can’t get to any other way. The next thing you know, you’re flying among the stars” (29). Like the quilt that provides the show’s memorable, gravity-defying image, *Random Acts of Flyness* interweaves Afrosurrealist and Black feminist principles to imagine Black people as luminous celestial bodies in their own right.

“The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community”

The pilot episode’s show-within-a-show, titled “the Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community,” offers a study in Afrofeminist surreal light and eroticism (“What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children” 18:22-25:07). Hosted by “Aunty Doreeny” (Doreen Garner) and “Tea Nasty” (Terence Nance), this spoof talk show delivers on Annalise Lockhart’s iMessage call to “affir[m] Blackness more” (16:51), discussing Black sex with such emphatic intensity that its fictional website uses the grammatical intensifier “super”: superblacksextalk.com **(**“What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children”**)**. What Gates and Gillespie describe as an “alternative sense of anthology television seriality” (14) is on full display in this show-within-a-show, which self-consciously reimagines late-night programming in a litanous combo of sex advice, spoof advertisements, guest interviews, claymation, and lush frames of four nude Black people embracing. Drawing liberally on Afrosurrealist devices in conversation with Black Arts Movement principles, “The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community” exposes the anti-Blackness, misogyny, and heterosexism of common sexual vocabularies while also locating what Hortense Spillers calls “profound intimacy” (“Mama’s” 67) in dark-skinned Black people’s luminous enactments of flesh.

Modeling how Afrosurrealist art uses “the most violently antagonistic of contradictions” to “animat[e] the personalities, settings, language of the work” (Baraka 166), “The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community” specifically restages the Black Arts Movement dialectic between “Black is Beautiful” narratives that assert psychological and aesthetic self-determination and structural conditions of unfreedom that include the pseudo-scientific scapegoating of Black genders and sexualities. The title

frame sets the words “the Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community” in all-caps serif font against an erotic depiction of two dark-skinned female-presenting Black people embracing. Angular in shape and caution-sign yellow in color, the static letters cut against the Black femmes’ softly lit curves and dynamic, sensuous movements, as if in an effort to censor, label, or bring linear order to the women’s actions. The language of “sexual proclivities” (which suggests moral failure, sexual deviance, and unrestrained desire on the part of a monolithic group) recalls how nineteenth-century colonial pseudo-science pathologized the flesh of enslaved Khoikhoi woman Saartije Baartman (the so-called Hottentot Venus), holding her body up as hypervisible evidence of Black sexual excess.[42] The pathologizing diction also specifically invokes sociology’s role in the historically contingent disciplining of Black women at the onset of the Black Arts Movement. In 1965, the same year that Amiri Baraka and others founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS), Daniel Patrick Moynihan released his infamous sociological report scapegoating Black women for causing a presumed “tangle of pathology” in Black families (30). Carrying with it immense ideological and material implications, the Moynihan Report would justify cuts to social services on the grounds that Black women’s ostensible flouting of normative gender roles and irresponsible procreation were to blame for structurally inequitable distributions of risk and opportunity. It would contribute to the circulation of what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” of Black womanhood (72), dehumanizing fodder for the American Grammar Book’s relentless misnaming[s]” (Spillers 66). A pseudo-scientific tool of the

[42] See Gilman, Sander. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 204-242; Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Duke University Press, 1999; Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2018.

normative gaze, the Moynihan Report primed the country to further "anticipat[e] [the black female body's] rehearsed performance of abjection" (Fleetwood 112). The title frame for "The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community" makes it clear that blaming Black women and their erotic resources is a mainstay of normative gender and sexual vocabularies, conspicuously invoking and subverting the pseudo-scientific tradition of pathologizing Black sexualities for perceived social ills.

At the same time as it satirically encodes anti-Black narratives of deviance, this title frame also revels in visions of Black embodied beauty that refuse the disciplining gaze of mainstream American sociology and politics. The bottom line of yellow font stages Black cultural production's contemporary ("MMXVII" or 2017) incursions into dominant discourses with the reference to Nance's production company ("MVMT"). It is beneath the uppermost layer of font, though, that the frame does its most urgent and intimate work: it re-presents and revises (in the sense of presenting again, with a difference) a Black Arts Movement "Black is Beautiful" aesthetic that affirmatively celebrates the radiance of dark-skinned Blackness. As Margo Natalie Crawford argues, the quest to understand Blackness as its own source of radiance and light – and ultimately as its own metaphysical frame of reference – is central to "Black is Beautiful" ideology. Crawford holds up Margaret Danner's 1960 poem "The Convert" from *Impressions of African Art Forms* as an early example. In contemplating the "ebony face" of an African sculpture, Danner sees not the "shellacked shine" of blackface minstrel figurations but rather "a radiance, gleaming as though a small light / had flashed internally" (qtd in Crawford, "Black Light" 41).

The "interna[l]" Black light and "radiance" that Danner describes permeates the title frame above, softly emanating from the upper arm of the woman on the right, delineating the clavicle of the woman on the left, and gently illuminating the curves of both women's breasts. That the women's faces do not appear in the frame could suggest a dehumanizing and objectifying normative gaze. And yet, elbows bent in close caress, "gleaming" bodies filling and exceeding much of the camera frame, their faces momentarily evading view, these femmes engage in intimate queer touching that seems of a different world entirely than that dictated by the hard lines and pejorative language of all-caps "sexual proclivities." Intervening in ways of seeing that expect Black deviance, this title frame bursting with Black femme flesh joins Black feminist visual reclamations of presumed excess that flip the script on long-standing racist and misogynist sexual vocabularies.

Host Aunty Doreeny's introduction amplifies the critique of pseudo-scientific scapegoating through an insistence on Black multiplicity. "Welcome," she says, to "The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community" – "the show where we explore in-depth the deepest depths of the nuanced proclivities of sex amongst the African Diasporan peoples and cultures of planet. Motherfucking. Earth." Doreeny's facial expressions and tone change radically in the span of this one sentence, as she moves from a smiling, sing-song preface ("the show where we explore"), to a formal enactment of sexualized difference through linguistic repetition and plurality ("in-depth the deepest depths"; "nuanced proclivities"; "peoples"), to a sternly delivered, deep-voiced, and staccato assertion of Black global diasporic multiplicity ("planet. Motherfucking. Earth"). Racist pseudo-

science may traffic in politically expedient caricatures of "the Black Community," but African Diasporic multiplicity will resist and exceed.

Aunty Doreeny's introduction culminates in her reading a message from the show's sponsor: the personal lubricant "Plenty Slippery." In yet another example of the show's litanous use of mixed-media, this animated, brightly-colored advertisement is an explicit depiction of multiple Black and Brown couples of various gender expressions having sex in a two-dimensional pastoral landscape. The spoof ad's intragender sexual forays enact queer incursions into flattening (two-, if not one-, dimensional) depictions of the "Black Community." Countering Moynihan's "tangle of pathology" with an ecstatic tangle of bodies, the ad refuses the sweeping slipperiness of homogenizing anti-Black discourses with a reassertion of Black embodied pleasures. Here is a boldly comedic reminder that "explor[ing] in-depth the deepest depths" is an intimate and material enterprise – and so always best to lubricate. Aunty Doreeny's introduction thus satirically redeploys normative logics that mobilize categories of sexuality and gender to scapegoat Black people.

Whereas the pathologizing language of "sexual proclivities" primes viewers for a discursive reenactment of the American Grammar Book (complete with dominant kinship system, entrenched gender roles, and condemnations of presumed Black sexual deviance and excess), what the remainder of this show-within-a-show delivers visually is a luxuriant homage to Black erotic and aesthetic pleasures. It offers a deep dive into the embodied eroticisms of the title frame, this time unobscured by angular letters with their attendant anti-Black, misogynist, and heterosexist logics. The setting is a modestly furnished room containing a bed, an old wooden chair, and walls patterned with deep

green leaves. Encircling the performers with images of rich, warm foliage, the green leaves on the wallpaper signify on a defining feature of "Black is Beautiful" narratives: the frequent and self-conscious redefinition of what Crawford identifies as discourses of Black primitivism. Refusing biologically racist uses of "primitive" to claim the ostensible "backwardness of black people," Black Arts Movement-era artists often invoked ideas of Black primitivism to, in Crawford's words, "revel in an imagined original state of blackness" (166-167). For example, Amiri Baraka's poem "Black People: This Is Our Destiny" (1966) celebrates "the primitives the first men who evolve again to civilize the world" (qtd in Crawford, "Natural" 166). The above scene in *Random Acts of Flyness* reclaims anti-Black primitivist ideas by "revel[ing]" in dark-skinned Black people embracing one another in an ironic jungle of wallpaper leaves. However, this "Black is Beautiful" display also revises Baraka's male-centered framework ("the first men") to make it gender diverse. With two masculine-presenting and two feminine-presenting people embracing on the bed in myriad positions and partner combinations, this scene troubles the more masculinist and heterosexist contours of Baraka's Afrosurrealist vision. Further underscoring the scene's aesthetic gestures to originary Blackness, two of the four figures also have shimmering gold symbols painted on their chests. These symbols could evoke the African American cultural tradition, at work during both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, of reimagining Egyptian iconography in the construction of syncretic cosmologies (Crawford, "Natural" 168). Shimmering gold in radiant Black skin, these symbols also underscore the idea of inner Black light that Crawford locates at the core of "Black is Beautiful" narratives (Crawford, "Black Light" 41).

As the editing of the camera shots begins to mimic the alternating, repetitive rhythms of sex (slow, fast, slow, faster), the shimmering performers' movements pervade all dimensions of the diagetic space. Form literalizes content as the sketch produces an ecstatic immediacy. Teasing the viewer with the prospect of frenzied participation, "The Sexual Proclivities of the Black Community" refuses the longstanding pathologization of Black women's bodies through ecstatic enactments of Black flesh.

"Sleep Little Baby"

A culminating scene from Season 1's final episode drives home the stakes of *Random Acts of Flyness* as an Afrofeminist surreal project committed to naming multiple Black realities of oppression, pleasure, and survival ("They Won't Go When I Go" 0:28-2:40). "Sleep Little Baby" uses multilayered time to destabilize entrenched vocabularies of Black sex and gender. Taking place at the beginning of the Season 1 finale, this sketch is a spectral, mythological vision set to a contemporary rewrite of the lullaby "Hush Little Baby." In a mash-up of 400+ years of anti-Black state-sanctioned violence, this scene evokes the originary violence of the Middle Passage while honoring the possibility of Black erotic intimacies at the limits of the American Grammar Book.

The temporal markers in this scene establish a vision both in and out of time – a vision reflecting the material and historical conditions of the African slave trade, but also the slippery processes of myth-making that "resonat[e] through various centers of human and social meaning" (Spillers, "Mama's" 67). Specifically working to disorient the viewer in time and space are the cinematography (zoom), sound (a cappella nursery rhyme), and mise-en-scène (the shallow set). The scene opens with a slow zoom on what seems like a night sky dotted with stars. In an Afrosurrealist sleight of hand, the stars

reveal themselves to be disembodied, minstrelsy-reminiscent grins illuminated by a Black light and wiggling like primordial organisms. Resonating again with Margaret Danner's contrast between the "shellacked shine" of blackface minstrel figures and an originary Black "radiance, gleaming as though a small light / had flashed internally" (qtd in Crawford, "Black Light" 41), this scene restages the Black Arts Movement's divestment from white metrics in favor of the idea of an originary Blackness. That the camera zoom transforms primordial organisms into nineteenth-century minstrel symbols both establishes and subverts a sense of historical grounding. Suggesting continuity between primordial organisms and minstrel symbols denaturalizes biologically essentialist arguments that sought to re-entrench and justify racial hierarchies after the *de jure* abolition of chattel slavery. A woman's a cappella singing voice cuts through the quiet, making the space sound far more expansive and vast than the shallow set and the immediacy of the medium camera shot will allow: "Sleep little baby, don't stay woke / Mama don't want you to lose all hope" (1:17). And later: "You might end up enslaved by the state / And mama can't see you end up that way" (1:42). Original versions of the "Hush Little Baby" cradle song, thought to be first collected in 1918 in Virginia and North Carolina (Cass-Beggs 24), here take on a satirically modern air, with the twenty-first century descriptor "woke" ushering in yet another layer of past-in-present.

Two figures emerge in the center of the frame, situated "among the stars" (29) like Cassie Louise Lightfoot in Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* children's book. They sit rocking gently together as the lullaby's lyric positions them as Black mother, and Black baby. But these figures are cast in uneasy relationship to the dominant terms of gender, sexuality, and family, not in the least because, in the place of human facial specificity,

they display mask-like features. Evoking something between folkloric trickster and racist Jim Crow caricature, these layers of masking signify further on the Black Arts Movement's simultaneous refusal of blackface minstrel figurations and reclamation of indigenous dark-skinned Blackness. These layers of masking locate the scene within longstanding African American uses of vernacular forms to enact subversive performances of the self (Blount 590). Registering while refusing the demands of the normative gaze, *Random Acts of Flyness* crafts a relationship with history similar to that of visual artist Kara Walker, for whom, as Zadie Smith writes, "[c]aricature and stereotype" serve as part of the "DNA of history" – "building blocks of [Black] social reality" (n.p.). In this scene from *Random Acts of* Flyness, around the central figures, a slow, downward pan soon reveals what looks like an ocean-scape of intertwined Black people, their teeth and eyes glowing under the Black light. Steeped in the eerie resonance of the masked mother's lullaby, multiple Black bodies undulate in fluid closeness as if to evoke the waves of a Black Atlantic.

The lyrics of the a cappella lullaby in this scene perform a Black feminist denaturalization of the "customary lexis of sexuality" (Spillers, "Mama's" 76) by showing mother and child to be alienated from the benefits of normative kinship structures. Under conditions of enslavement and their aftermath, dominant understandings of "reproduction" and "motherhood" do not obtain. Even though the mother figure in this scene cannot bear to "see" her child "end up" "enslaved by the state," the conditional construction "might end up" suggests that she cannot guarantee protection from an outcome of enslavement. This devastating reality calls upon the pilot episode of the season, titled "What Are Your Thoughts Raising Free Black Children?"

further establishing institutionalized assaults on Black families as an organizing theme for the series. Indeed, the pilot episode similarly employs a nursery rhyme device in the sketch *Everybody Dies!*, staging Black children's state-sanctioned vulnerability to premature death to the tune of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" (3:28-8:17). Furthermore, in the third episode of the season titled "They Got Some Shit That'll Blow Out Our Back," voiceover narration outlines the stark contradiction that, while the "family is a functional unit designed for one primary purpose: the protection of the young" (11:10), structural violences routinely prevent "the Black family" from this "most essential function" (11:58). With the lullaby's directive "Sleep" (a directive of rest, and not hushed silence), the mother figure in "Sleep Little Baby" thus counsels strategies of self-preservation given the exhausting level of awareness ("woke[ness]") that Black families must maintain in an effort to stay free.

This sketch's temporally layered vision of Black mother figure and child ultimately literalizes pornotroping as a process that makes ideas of Blackness on Black women's bodies, reclaiming pornotroping as part of a fraught mythological relationship to originary Blackness. In the sketch's final moments, the ocean-scape of rolling bodies becomes a turbulent Black and gray swirl centered on the mother figure, who turns to stare directly at the camera. Her smile edges into deviousness as a voiceover states "I am the Black" in an ancient Kemetic language. The first-person statement of being ("I am") recalls the antebellum slave narrative convention of claiming one's own humanity ("I was born" [Olney 50]). Yet "the Black," with its definite article and monolithic Blackness delivered by a disembodied voice, undercuts individual specificity, positioning the camera and viewers as agents of dehumanization and objectification. The mother's

swirling objectification mimics the process of pornotroping, with normative ideas of sex, gender, and Blackness cohering around a Black feminine figure before then "resonating through various centers of human and social meaning" (Spillers, "Mama's" 67). As Saidiya Hartman writes, "Blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation. It is a contested figure at the very center of social struggle" (56-57). Here the formal centering of the mother in an ocean of strange intimacies helps to denaturalize hundreds of years of state-sanctioned onslaughts against Black gender and familial integrity enacted on Black women's bodies. The material and discursive implications of these onslaughts churn like so much water and wind to craft the elements of a sexual discourse.

The rubbing, sensuous, and eerie movements of Black bodies-as-waves also help to make specifically Black queer sexualities thinkable at the limits of the Middle Passage archive. To be clear, these movements call strongly upon the devastating materiality of the Atlantic's "railroad of human bones," and on the unspeakably dehumanizing traumas of the slave hold. As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley writes, "[t]ightly or loosely packed in sex-segregated holds — men chained together at the ankles while women were sometimes left unchained — surrounded by churning, unseen waters, these brutalized bodies themselves became liquid, oozing" (198). Yet in the context of Black feminist excesses of flesh, these bodies-made-fluid also open up interpretive possibility for Black queer desires and erotic bonds. As in Tinsley's etymology of the Surinamese Creole word *mati*, meaning shipmate or same-sex lover, homing in on these oscillating movements can honor the ways in which enslaved Africans "resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships" (192,

emphasis original). Black feminist analysis can thus allow for the mapping of violence while holding open space for connected intimacies that press at the normative logic designed to use Black women, and ungendered Black people, for pleasure and profit.

The “Sleep Little Baby” sketch is a Black feminist homage to Black flesh as a site of both injury and erotic possibility of mythological proportions. It offers up terror and intimacy in radical proximity, staging irresolvable tensions between the violences of the normative gaze and myriad Black efforts to seize “private and particular space” (Spillers, “Mama’s” 67). At once unnerving, titillating, and tender, “Sleep Little Baby” floods the visual field with excesses of violence and eroticism – with the inescapable and constitutive elements of a multilayered history.

Conclusion

Random Acts of Flyness distinguishes itself from other contemporary surrealist texts by enacting Afrosurrealism and Black feminism’s commitments to denaturalizing linked social structures. This work is not incidental, and nor is it based in an additive logic that adds gender analysis to racial analysis. Rather, it delivers on the core principles of Afrosurrealism itself, joining the likes of Jayne Cortez, Ted Joans, and Bob Kaufman in its pursuit of what Nuotama Frances Bodomo describes as “knotted, complex questions” (“Items Outside the Shelter But Within Reach” 31:14). Afrosurrealist poetry, music, and visual culture have consistently sought to register and historicize multiple workings of power in its creative renderings of the “extra *real*” (qtd. in Bakare n.p.).

By way of contrast, consider Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*, which is a study in jarring formal devices that nevertheless miss the mark on feminist consciousness as a powerful component of holistic anti-imperialist critique. *Sorry to Bother You* follows

protagonist Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield) as he climbs the ranks at Regal View telemarketing in Oakland (00:00:48), strategically deploying a "white voice" (voiced by David Cross) to improve his sales. Self-consciously enacting the "very broken quality" of Afrosurrealist art to jarring effect, the film fractures its own narrative world when Cash discovers that Regal View is complicit in turning employees into literal work horses. The film does thoughtfully upend selected scripts of Black masculinity – as in Cash's emphatically polite public argument with his friend Salvador (48:00), which spoofs stereotypes of Black hypermasculine aggression steeped in Jim Crow era justifications for lynching (Davis 173). However, *Sorry to Bother You* flattens Black femme sex and self by instrumentalizing Cash's girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson) as a camp caricature of Black revolutionary feminist politics (Searles n.p.).

Detroit is a sign spinner (18:45) and performance artist (1:03:20) whose anti-capitalist political commitments conflict with Cash's meteoric rise as a Powercaller. Of Detroit's figurations in the film, perhaps most politically substantive is her art opening, during which she appears on stage naked but for a helmet, aviator sunglasses, and three black leather hands covering her breasts and genitals. Inviting audience members to throw sheep's blood and cell phones at her, she repeats the following phrase in a dramatic crescendo amidst audience noise and the percussive sounds of projectiles hitting her body: "I wanted to talk about a life shaped by exploitation, about fighting for a say in our own lives; about how beauty, love, and laughter thrive and flourish under almost any circumstances. How capitalism basically started by stealing labor from Africans" (1:03:20). Detroit here calls out racialized labor exploitation and intersecting institutional assaults on Black lives while articulating a desire to center Black flourishing. Yet the past

tense caveat "I wanted to" grammatically mirrors the ways that the film distances viewers from, and fails to deliver on, the substance of Detroit's embodied Black femme critique. Detroit may regularly vocalize her politics, but the film teaches viewers not to listen. As Jourdain Searles has noted, the film literalizes this silencing for comic effect (n.p.). In an earlier scene, when Cash asks about her art show, he tunes her out. The cinematography and sound editing align themselves with Cash's perspective, and so viewers experience her words as increasingly muddled and inaudible (Searles n.p.). Similarly, the film's opening scene delegitimizes Detroit by portraying her as a vacuous object who responds to Cash's ruminations on death and posterity with sing-song whispers and kisses (4:55). While *Sorry to Bother You* enacts its own forays into the formal excesses of Afrosurrealist visual culture, it is comparatively superficial in its critical interrogation of Black genders and sexualities.

Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* reclaims Black light for the emancipation of Black thought and desire at the limits of gender and sexual normativity. It uses Afrosurrealism and Black feminism to denaturalize dominant discursive regimes made and remade through intersecting assaults on Black humanity. Bookending Season 1, the two scenes of fraught Black eroticism examined in this chapter vividly reimagine the American Grammar Book's built-in crises of Black sex and self. Through strategies of formal excess including multilayered time, litany, and ecstatic performance, these sketches expose the anti-Black and misogynist mechanisms of the normative gaze. They invoke while satirically refusing ideas of Blackness that ungender, homogenize, and disproportionately kill Black people through acts of violence that are state-sanctioned – and so decidedly non-random. Through ecstatic re-visions of Black light, flesh, and

excess, *Random Acts of Flyness* models the Afrofeminist surreal as a powerful mode of aesthetic and political critique – as a shared tool for enacting Black feminist freedom dreams.

V

UNDISCIPLINING THE BLACK PUSSY: PLEASURE, BLACK FEMINISM, AND SEXUALITY IN ISSA RAE'S I*NSECURE*[43]

Introduction: Black Feminist Pussy Theorizing

Like Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness*, Issa Rae's i*nsecure* joins a dynamic cohort of Black feminist practitioners in embracing the "nooks and crannies," both discursive and material, of Black sexual cultures (Stallings, "Hip Hop" 135). Mireille Miller-Young's scholarship on pornography has documented Black women's embodied self-expression in a marginalized and relentlessly moralized visual archive.[44] Amber Musser, Jennifer Nash, and LaMonda Horton-Stallings have delved into the recesses of Black sexual being, showing the antirespectable contours of Black flesh, vulvas, anality, and funk.[45] Shoniqua Roach has "open[ed] up" the "distinctly black" pussy, claiming that a Black pussy power untethered from the normative conflation of female genitalia and womanhood can yield meaningful pleasures and freedoms ("Black Pussy Power" 7, 11). Furthering Cathy Cohen's call to locate Black political resistance in acts of transgression from white middle-class heteropatriarchal norms, Black feminist and queer thinkers are enacting an unprecedented turn to bodily insides and their taboo

[43] Sections of this chapter were previously published in volume 50, number 2 of the journal *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* in 2020.

[44] Miller-Young, Mireille. *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. Duke University Press, 2014. See also Cruz, Ariane. *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*. New York University Press, 2016.

[45] See Musser, Amber J. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York University Press, 2014 as well as *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*. New York University Press, 2018; Nash, Jennifer C. "Black Anality." *GLQ*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2014, pp. 439-460; and Stallings, LaMonda Horton. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures.* University of Illinois Press, 2015. See also Nicole Fleetwood's theorization of flesh in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness.* University of Chicago Press, 2011.

discourses.[46] The goal? Wresting outsider sexual cultures from the terms of the dominant sexual discourse.

Yet more and deeper theorizing is necessary to account for the ubiquity and specificity of the Black pussy in contemporary Black visual culture – particularly surreal and comedic TV. In a darkly humorous spoof of the interlocking burdens that Black women face in the justice system, Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* (2018-) sees character Aisha Freeman having to physically turn over her "damage[d]" "pussy" to the police when reporting her experience of sexual assault ("Items Outside the Shelter But Within Reach"). In Robin Thede's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019-), the pussy-centric refrain from Khia's hit single "My Neck, My Back (Lick It)" serves as the recurring soundtrack to a surreal vignette in which two Black women at a "lesbian party" literally have their dance moves stolen by a shapeshifting alien ("Angela Bassett"). In Donald Glover's *Atlanta* (2018-), the concept of "pussy relevance" facilitates improvisatory pleasures between rapper Paper Boi and his manager Earn as they brainstorm how to gain traction in the Atlanta hip hop scene ("The Streisand Effect"). And in Issa Rae's dramatic comedy series i*nsecure* (2016-), protagonist Issa Dee memorably diagnoses her Black best friend Molly with a case of "broken pussy" before leveraging that same term in an amateur rap performance that goes viral ("Insecure as Fuck"). To invoke Issa Dee, Black "pussies" seem to be "everywhere," demanding the kind of sense-making that Black feminist and queer thought can provide ("Insecure as Fuck").

This chapter makes Black feminist and queer sense of the Black pussy in comedic TV. It specifically contributes to Black feminist pussy theory – the critical and creative

[46] See Cohen, Cathy J. "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." *Du Bois Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2004, pp. 27-45.

tradition of considering how Black women and their parts figure into interlocking discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. Black feminist pussy theory ranges from landmark twentieth-century theorizations of Black female sexuality, to canonical Black feminist criticism, to Black feminist and queer pleasure praxes at the limits of respectability. It has its roots in scholarship that historicizes the dehumanizing colonial grammars that have cohered around – and scapegoated – Black female genitalia. Sander Gilman, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Janell Hobson have shown how nineteenth-century colonial pseudoscience pathologized the genitalia of Saartjie Baartman (the so-called Hottentot Venus), holding her body up as hypervisible evidence of Black sexual excess and deviance.[47] Evelynn Hammonds has contextualized such narratives in a dominant white sexual "geometry" or logic, which understands Black women's sexuality through a "black hole" of discourse that negatively defines what counts as normal (n.p.). Even Black women who identify as heterosexual are coded as non-normative because Black women's sexual resources tend to signify deviance within this reigning logic (Cohen, "Punks" 455). Black feminist pussy theory thus counts among its primary tasks the interrogation of longstanding uses of Black female flesh as a site of meaning making, or what Hortense Spillers describes as a "territory of cultural and political maneuver" ("Mama's Baby" 67).[48] This is true too of bell hooks' contribution to the field, which argues that pop cultural representations of Black female sexuality replicate violent

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[47] Gilman, Sander. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 204-242; Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Duke University Press, 1999; Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture.* Routledge, 2018.

[48] Per Spillers, discourses of deviance themselves hinge on the ungendering of Black women. See also fungibility in Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford UP, 1997), 67. For how U.S. imperialism has deployed Black women's sexuality post 9/11 as a normative (non-deviant) tool, see Edwards, Erica. "Sex after the Black Normal." *differences*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141-167.

histories of commodification.[49] Patricia Hill Collins has also expressed skepticism about the viability of Black women reclaiming power through performance, citing the risk of reproducing harmful stereotypes of Black sexual excess.[50]

But in a critical landscape since transformed by hip hop feminism and pleasure politics, Black feminist pussy theorists are taking up Joan Morgan's call to explore "the complex, messy, sticky, and even joyous negotiations of agency and desire that are irrevocably twinned with [Black women's] pain" (36). For Brittney Cooper, this means decoupling "pussy" from the narrow equation of genitalia and gender, and recognizing that such Black feminist work is "queer as fuck" both "because desire is fluid and because the boundaries and labels matter so much less when you get down to the real work of what it means to love Black women in a world that hates us all" (*Eloquent Rage* 20-22).[51] Delving into Black feminist reclamations of pussy also means turning to the creative sense-making of hip hop – particularly the ratchet.[52] Ratchet is a hip hop aesthetic whose profane exaggerations and excesses riff on the queerness of Blackness in the dominant field of vision.[53] Hip hop artists including Lil' Kim, Missy Elliott, Nicki

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[49] hooks, bell. "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace." *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* Turnaround, 1992, pp. 61–78.
[50] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* Routledge, 2004.
[51] See also "Pussy Don't Fail Me Now: The Place of Vaginas in Black Feminist Theory & Organizing." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 23 January 2017, crunkfeministcollective.com/2017/01/23/pussy-dont-fail-me-now-the-place-of-vaginas-in-black-feminist-theory-organizing/. In defining queerness as a capacious concept encompassing but not limited to sexual orientation, Cooper joins intellectual genealogies critical of single-oppression frameworks spanning Black lesbian feminisms (Barbara Smith, Cathy Cohen), Black queer studies (E. Patrick Johnson), and queer of color critique (José Esteban Muñoz, Roderick Ferguson).
[52] See Lindsey, Treva B. "Let Me Blow Your Mind: Hip Hop Feminist Futures in Theory and Praxis." *Urban Education*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2015, pp. 52-77; Bradley, Regina. "I Been On (Ratchet): Conceptualizing a Sonic Ratchet Aesthetic in Beyoncé's 'Bow Down.'" *Red Clay Scholar Blog*, 19 March 2013, redclayscholar.blogspot.com/2013/03/i-been-on-ratchet-conceptualizing-sonic.html.
[53] For genealogies of the ratchet, see Warner, Kristen J. "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (88), 2015, p. 131; and Pickens, Therí A. "Shoving Aside the Politics of Respectability: Black Women, Reality TV, and the Ratchet Performance." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2015, p. 44. For the queerness of ratchet hip hop, see Stallings,

Minaj, and Cakes Da Killa constitute preeminent Black pussy theorists, self-consciously wielding their diverse parts and personas as sources of complex self-expression. Armed with the deliberately profane excesses of ratchet form, these rappers bring to the Black pussy an unabashed willingness to "probe for its pleasures, dangers, and potentialities" (Roach, "Black Pussy Power" 11). Ratchet hip hop artists thus join Black feminist scholars in forging embodied pleasure praxes at the outer margins of respectability– one profane lyric, pose, and pussy at a time.[54]

It is with such Black feminist queer pleasure praxes in mind that I turn to Issa Rae's comedic HBO TV show i*nsecure* as an as yet overlooked piece of Black feminist pussy theory.[55] i*nsecure* offers a rich case study for new ways of reading the Black pussy and its pleasures.[56] Pleasure here can mean sexual pleasure as well as interpersonal and

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"Hip Hop," 137-139. For more on the queerness of Blackness, see Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004; Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Duke University Press, 2003; and Scott, Darieck. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination.* New York University Press, 2010.

[54] The profane is also sacred. See Stallings, *Funk*, 176; Lindsey, Treva B. "A Love Letter to Black Feminism." *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1–6; and Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. First edition, University of Missouri, 2001.

[55] Few critics have addressed Black feminisms in i*nsecure*, instead emphasizing its contributions to Black or women's TV: Christian, Aymar. *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*. New York University Press, 2018, pp. 116-132; Cheers, Imani. *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs, and Mistresses.* Routledge, 2018, p. 19, p. 28; Dobson, Amy Shields and Akane Kanai, "'From 'Can-Do' Girls to Insecure and Angry: Affective Dissonances in Young Women's Post-Recessional Media." *Feminist Media* Studies, vol. 19, no. 6, 2019, pp. 771-786; Francis, Terri. "Structural Laughter and Constructed Intimacies." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2018, pp. 45-54; Gould, Gaylene. "A Lesson in Awkward." *Sight & Sound*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2017, pp. 28–30; Landau, Neil. *TV Writing on Demand: Creating Great Content in the Digital Era*. Routledge, 2018, p. 295. For a Black feminist reading of i*nsecure* without the "pussy," see Tounsel, Timeka N. "Productive Vulnerability: Black Women Writers and Narratives of Humanity in Contemporary Cable Television." *Souls*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, p. 306. For a woman-of-color feminist reading, see Benson-Allott, Caitlin. "'No Such Thing Not Yet: Questioning Television's Female Gaze," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 65-71.

[56] For pieces that use Black feminist and queer lenses to critique elements of Issa Rae's oeuvre, see Wisseh, Assatu. "Mapping Mammy 2.0: *Insecure* and the Middle-Class Black Woman's Burden." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2019, pp. 391-410; Crunk Feminist Collective, "Open Letter to Our Friends @awkwardblkgirl." *Crunk Feminist Collective*, 3 December 2011, crunkfeministcollective.tumblr.com/post/ 13668840994/openletter-to-our-friends-awkwardblkgrl. For analyses of i*nsecure*'s web-based precursor *Awkward Black Girl*, see Havas, Julia, and Maria Sulimma.

erotic intimacies irreducible to the physical.[57] Following Jennifer Nash, pleasure can also encompass "political pleasures, humorous pleasures, pleasures in transgressing, pleasures in making use of and then upending racial fictions" ("Black Anality" 452). Protagonist Issa Dee uses pussy-based dialogue and performance as a paradigm-shifting tool to elicit complex pleasures for characters and critics alike. Indeed, out of Issa's performative pussy profanity emerges a powerful if unlikely metaphor: broken Black pussy. Coined as a playful diagnosis of sexual and romantic woes between Black best friends, broken Black pussy revels in the use of ratchet excess to name and subvert the positioning of heterosexually identified Black women as scapegoats on the "(out)side of heteronormativity" (Cohen, "Punks" 452).[58] It provides what Cohen calls a "counter normative framewor[k] by which to judge behavior," refusing the disciplining mechanisms of respectability politics exercised from within and outside Black communities ("Deviance" 30). In the early seasons of i*nsecure*, the metaphor of broken Black pussy serves to satirize pussy-blaming narratives – narratives that blame Black women and their body parts for systemic injustices ranging from wage discrimination to institutionalized rape. It specifically animates two recurring performances whose ratchet

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"Through the Gaps of My Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television." *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2020, pp. 75–94; Stallings, "Hip Hop," 135–139; Pickens, "Shoving Aside," 41-58; Wanzo, Rebecca. "Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics." *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (92), 2016, pp. 27–59, doi.org/10.1215/02705346-3592565; Warner, "They Gon' Think," 129-153.

[57] Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power." 1978 and 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Revised ed., Crossing Press, 2007, p. 53; Holland, Sharon Patricia. *The Erotic Life of Racism.* Duke University Press, 2012, p. 9.

[58] In offering a Black feminist queer reading of a text centering heterosexually identified Black women friends, I follow Barbara Smith in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." 1977. *The Radical Teacher*, no. 7, 1978, pp. 20-27. Smith famously interprets Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a "lesbian" text irreducible to sexual identification because its "strong images of women" register/complicate the framing of Black women as nonheteronormative (23). i*nsecure* seems to be, as Roderick Ferguson says in relaying Smith's reading of *Sula*, "populated with interests that [the author] could not imagine" (128), demanding frameworks that exceed the "intergender relations" of the plot (20-21). Thanks to Sequoia Maner for helping me arrive at this observation.

nonrealism ruptures the linear plot progression: Issa Dee's "broken pussy" rap from season 1, and the show-within-a-show *Due North* from season 2. In both instances, broken Black pussy denaturalizes dominant sexual metrics derived from Black women's systemic exploitation. It thus adds to a growing Black feminist and queer vocabulary for registering how *naming injury* and *enacting pleasure* can mutually animate in the quest to imagine alternative Black sexual worlds.[59]

The Diagnosis

Early in i*nsecure*'s pilot episode, the camera cuts to LA's Merkato Ethiopian Restaurant, where posh lawyer Molly Carter (Yvonne Orji) is treating her best friend Issa Dee (Issa Rae) to dinner in celebration of her twenty-ninth birthday. In this warmly lit space of diasporic foods, scents, and spices, Issa and Molly sit across from each other in engaged conversation. Molly is sexually and romantically frustrated. She has, she feels, exhausted all possible strategies for earning a man's attention:

> Feels like it doesn't matter what I do, Issa. If I'm into them, then I'm too smothering. If I take my time and try to give them space, "oh I didn't think you were into me." Fine, sex right away. Lose interest. Wait to have sex, lose interest. ("Insecure as Fuck")

Molly's list of failed strategies for achieving sexual and romantic success reveals her belief in an ostensibly merit-based economy of heterosexual intimacy that expects Black women to curtail their desires in accordance with men's "interest" and behavioral metrics. Molly specifically subscribes to the politics of respectability as an instrument of heteronormative regulation. First theorized by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,

[59] The complex interanimation of naming injury and practicing pleasure is one crucial takeaway from *TBS*'s two-part special issue on New Directions in Black Feminisms (volumes 45 no. 4 and 46 no. 2).

respectability politics represents one strategy that Black women have cultivated to minimize harm and maximize opportunities in a racist and misogynist society.[60] Respectability politics promises relative social success for Black women who adhere to norms including heterosexual marriage and feminine modes of dress. Molly's litany of frustrations shows that the logic of respectability has made her an unwilling keeper of meritocratic myths, leaving the structural contexts for her pain unnamed and unsolved.

Issa has a ratchet diagnosis for that. As a precariously employed, housing-i*nsecure*, and unhappily coupled Black woman in L.A., Issa is primed to lovingly debunk Molly's merit-based uplift mentality by showing that respectable adherence to white heteropatriarchal norms hardly guarantees sexual and romantic success – especially not for Black women.[61] After a dramatic pause, Issa issues the diagnosis: "I think your pussy's broken." "*What?*" Molly says, momentarily aghast. "Nah I read about it," Issa explains. "It's like pussies breakin' everywhere. I think your pussy's sad. It's had enough. If it could talk it would make that sad Marge Simpson groan." Molly begins to play along. She furrows her brow and mimics the fed-up groan of *The Simpsons*' famously beleaguered housewife. "Yes that's it! That's your pussy!" Issa replies gleefully, her inappropriately loud voice creating an audience of annoyed restaurant

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[60] Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Harvard University Press, 1993. Respectability politics are not to be confused with the survival strategy of dissemblance: Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 912-920.

[61] On Black women's perceived and real alienation from privileges of heteronormativity including heterosexual marriage, monogamy, and educational and socioeconomic relationship parity, see: Erigha, Maryann. "Black Women Having It All The Rise of Professional Women in African American Romance Films." *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2018, pp. 20–30, doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2018.1402253; Chatman, Dayna. "Pregnancy, Then It's 'Back To Business': Beyoncé, Black Femininity, and the Politics of a Post-Feminist Gender Regime." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2015, pp. 926–941.

patrons. Stifling a chuckle, Molly checks her friend with a congenial "fuck you" before settling in to read her menu ("Insecure as Fuck").

Issa draws on the counter normative powers of the ratchet to loudly proclaim what respectability prefers to voice obliquely.[62] Molly's closed-mouth groan replicates the politely voiced disenchantment of Marge as iconic embodiment of white middle-class and/or working-class post-WWII heteropatriarchal domesticity.[63] Yet Molly's mimicry also bespeaks the double bind of indoctrination and alienation that Black women face in regards to sexual and gender norms, literalizing Roderick Ferguson's observation that "heteronormativity is not simply articulated through intergender relations, but also through the racialized body" (20-21). Molly's groan gives fraught resonance to white middle-class behavioral standards that, on the one hand, recruit her as an arbiter of normativity and, on the other hand, deny Black women structural protection and opportunity – often on the grounds of their presumed moral deviance. By contrast, Issa's diagnosis revels in Black women's ostensible "too muchness" through ratchet excess. Broken Black pussy disrupts the whiter, more heteronormative tendencies of much dramatic comedy through the conspicuous intertextual reference to K. Michelle's broken "hot pocket" from *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta* ("Baggage").[64]

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[62] Here I hope to emphasize patterns in Issa's and Molly's personal philosophies without reifying the dichotomy of silence/loudness in Black feminist theory. See Roach, Shoniqua. "Black Sex in the Quiet." *differences*, vol. 30, no. 1, Duke University Press, 2019, pp. 126–147.

[63] The framing of broken Black pussy in relation to *The Simpsons* is apt in gesturing towards the white heteropatriarchal formation of much TV. As Herman Gray argues, "television representations of blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about 'whiteness' as well as the historic racialization of the social order" (9). He continues: "That is to say, black representations in commercial network television are situated within the existing material and institutional hierarchies of privilege and power based on class (middle class), race (whiteness), gender (patriarchal), and sexual (heterosexual) differences" (10).

[64] For more on dramatic comedy's white girl problem, see Rae, Issa. *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl. Simon & Schuster*, 2015, p. 46. See also *Living Single* (Fox, 1993-1998) and *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000-2006; The CW, 2006-2008) as among i*nsecure*'s generic forerunners. For *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta* context, see Warner, Kristen J. "[Home] Girls: Insecure and HBO's Risky Racial Politics." *Los Angeles*

Drawing on "hyperexcessive performance" and the "knowledge" of its own "ridiculousness" (Warner, "They Gon' Think" 131-132), the ratchet is increasingly defined by its relationship to Black reality TV – a genre of TV itself characterized by nonrealist excesses (such as public screaming matches) that would be risky for most Black women to undertake in everyday life (141, 145-146). On the etymology of ratchet, Therí Pickens explains: "it is widely speculated that ratchet is a sonic derivation of 'wretched' within Southern speech, a sonic transformation that appears out of the desire to say 'wretched' through clenched teeth and pursed lips" (43). While "'ratchet' did not originate as a way to describe reality-TV stars," then, "it seems to have evolved to account for their presence" (Pickens 43).[65] In her web series *Ratchetpiece Theatre* (2012), Rae defines the ratchet as "if 'ghetto' and 'hot shitty mess' had a baby. And, that baby had no father and became a stripper, then made a sex tape with an athlete and then became a reality star" ("Rasheeda"). Rae's analogy uses racialized and gendered language to re-produce stereotypes of Black nonnormativity culminating in reality stardom, modeling how the ratchet gains momentum and definition from repetitions of its exaggerated content (Warner, "They Gon' Think" 133). Importing *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*-style ratchetness into the Merkato scene, the broken Black pussy diagnosis establishes Issa as an ironic educator who is decidedly more invested in unlearning respectable behavior than in reproducing it.

Issa's diagnosis counters pussy-blaming narratives of Black sexual pathology by redeploying and enjoying them in ratchet terms. Broken Black pussy thus serves an undisciplining function. In her book *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (2016),

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Review of Books, 21 October 2016, lareviewofbooks.org/article/home-girls-insecure-and-hbos-risky-racial-politics/.

[65] See Palmer, Tamara. 2012. "Who You Calling Ratchet?" The Root, October 16, www.theroot.com.

Christina Sharpe puts forward the idea of the "undiscipline" as a critical posture and praxis resistant to the processes of institutionalization and categorization that accompany the theorization of Black life in university spaces (33). S. Tay Glover and Julian Kevon Glover specifically attest to the anti-respectable potentials of undisciplining, describing it as "a process by which scholars develop new approaches, methods, and modes of inquiry that productively challenge disciplinary biases," especially those moral biases routinely levied against eroticism, sex, and pleasure (171). Anthony Reed similarly employs an idea of dedisciplining in unpacking the critical potential of Black experimental poetry. As he puts it,

> The political value of black experimental writing … does not lie in its advocacy or its themes but its commitment to the "aesthetic break" where consensus breaks away and new thinking breaks through. Consensus names a certain way of being together that can become unconscious, unthought, and simply procedural. The moment of dissensus is a moment of desubjection, of dedisciplining knowledge and promoting thinking as radical unlearning. (22)

In the way that Sharpe and Reed's concepts interrogate dominant modes of inquiry that cohere around Blackness, undisciplining as a component of Black feminist queer pleasure praxis aesthetically denaturalizes entrenched stories, feelings, and policies around Black sex and social ills.

Issa's diagnosis disrupts the common sense behind pussy-blaming narratives that perpetuate Black women's structural alienation from the privileges of heteronormativity while simultaneously enabling state-sanctioned control over Black women's bodies. Pussy-blaming narratives have long justified the disciplining of Black women understood

as heterosexual through the regulation of intergender relationships and procreation (Cohen, “Punks” 454-457). From the violent instrumentalization of Black women’s flesh for colonial-capitalist pleasure and profit under transatlantic slavery (which I will discuss later in relation to i*nsecure*’s show-within-a-show *Due North*), to the 1965 Moynihan Report scapegoating Black women for causing a “tangle of pathology” in heterosexual Black family structures (29-45); from miscegenation law, to the construction of the extravagant “welfare queen” stereotype that masked the privatization of social services in the 1970s-1980s (Cohen, “Punks” 454-455) – Black women and their presumed nonnormative excesses are fodder in the dominant discourse’s upholding of human hierarchy. i*nsecure* engages these narratives both ironically and unironically. In an unironic repetition of the matriarchy thesis that Moynihan popularized, a friend of Issa’s ex-boyfriend Lawrence, Fast Mike, complains: “These new black bitches man, they be on some bullshit.... you know what it is? These women today, they wanna be the woman and the man in the relationship. That’s why they ass is never satisfied” (“Broken as Fuck” 17:15-19). Black women, here denigrated as “black bitches” with unreasonable desires (“bullshit,” “wanna,” “never satisfied”), amass blame (“That’s why”) for ostensibly emasculating their partners and transgressing heteropatriarchal norms (“wanna be the woman and the man in the relationship”). Such statements show that, when it comes to discourses of gender and sexuality, racist ideas about Black women provide the metrics for imagining what is broken or normal, making the pathologization of Black women the precondition to “pussies breakin’ everywhere” (“Insecure as Fuck”). Molly feels like she “did not sign up for that shit” precisely because she did not – but the system is designed to make her cast a critical eye inward rather than toward this country’s long tradition of

devaluing Black women ("Insecure as Fuck"). Issa's diagnosis thus invites self-reflexive chuckles into the very pocket that society reserves for personal blame.

Emerging out of an intimate conversational practice of "pussy talkin'" between Black best friends, broken Black pussy sheds light on, and creatively intervenes in, the social, economic, and political power systems responsible for making Molly's "puss[y] sad" in the first place ("Insecure as Fuck"). While it could easily be misread as holding Molly individually accountable for remaining out-of-step with normative imperatives to keep a man's "interest" and marry, it ultimately finds fault not with Molly's pussy but with the social structures designed to make her feel broken ("Insecure as Fuck"). Broken Black pussy thus joins critical and creative efforts to *break with* the dominant sexual logic. Providing a fraught entry point for historicizing the absences, silences, and power relations that shape conceptions of Black women's sexualities, broken Black pussy is an unlikely vehicle of embodied pleasure – a disruptive refrain supporting Black women's sexual self-expression through complex articulations of the pleasurably profane.

The Rap

i*nsecure*'s protagonist leverages "broken pussy" in an attempt to wrest Molly from her white heteropatriarchy-induced sadness. She also explicitly mobilizes it in conjunction with the antirespectable pleasures of ratchet hip hop to create a Black sexual universe less structured by the dominant discourse's critical and moral demands. During an open-mic night at the South LA bar Maverick's Flat, Issa redeploys her "broken pussy" diagnosis in an impromptu rap performance ("Insecure as Fuck"). "Broken pussy" becomes a literal ratchet refrain – one so consequential as to produce key plot developments including Issa's first fight with Molly in this episode, Issa's affair with

Daniel in episode four, and Issa's culminating breakup with her long-time boyfriend Lawrence in the first season's finale, titled "Broken as Fuck." Critics have only briefly touched on Issa's open-mic rap, describing it as a "painfully honest" moment (Tounsel 317), an act of interpersonal cruelty (Landau 139), or a fleeting instant of humor (Warner, "[Home] Girls" n.p.). I understand it as an organizing formal and thematic device for the series, which is intentional about maintaining an "anti rom-com" aesthetic (qtd. in McKay n.p.) through its use of anti-climax, awkwardness, and dissensus.[66] By enacting the concept of broken Black pussy, Issa becomes something of an anti-pedagogue, disrupting the typical affective and discursive terrain used to regulate Black women's sexualities. Issa teaches viewers to read not for static stereotypes, not for what needs fixing in her individual behavior, but for how she gleans fleeting pleasures from the terms of race, gender, and sexuality available to her. Lending her self-reflexive voice to post-1990s hip hop feminisms, Issa joins the diverse ranks of Black feminist pussy practitioners.[67]

Issa is nervous when she takes the open-mic stage at Maverick's Flat. The white stage lights playing off the sparkling green of her dress, she sucks her teeth and stares out into the packed club. Issa wants to prove to her long-time crush Daniel that she can "still write" and "flow" like she did when the two of them were in high school together ("Insecure as Fuck"). At first, though, she clutches the mic with both hands, holding her shoulders and arms close to her body. She lags behind the beat as she delivers the

[66] The nonlinear fits-and-starts that characterize the early seasons wane in seasons 3 and 4 as Issa gains personal and professional traction. The fifth and final season begins by conspicuously recentering the nonrealist "mirror bitch" device and reasserting the nonlinearity of Issa's trajectory.
[67] See Pough, Gwendolyn D. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. Northeastern University Press, 2004; and Love, Bettina. "A Ratchet Lens: Black Queer Youth, Agency, Hip Hop, and the Black Ratchet Imagination." *Educational Researcher*, vol. 46, no. 9, 2017, pp. 539-547.

opening lyrics, which depict Molly as a "Love rookie" engaged in indiscriminate ("loosey") use of her sexual resources ("cookies") ("Insecure as Fuck"). Apparently critiquing the inexpert "girl['s]" failure to secure a husband, Issa offers up a playful pathologization of her friend's "heartbreak" by mimicking the white heteropatriarchal capitalist logics of devaluation that inspired groans in the earlier restaurant scene ("Insecure as Fuck"). Gesturing towards how Black women's sexualities fit into larger political and economic processes, Issa spoofs a system in which even the men with the ostensible buying power are caught in cycles of capitalist desire and buyer's remorse ("Insecure as Fuck"). The ratchet conspires with larger social forces to make and unmake stereotypes about Blackness as the rap's transgressive material arouses the excitement of both audience and performer.

Spurred on by the crowd's open-mouthed delight, Issa's initially halting delivery yields to a more confident display in verse two. Issa's rap goes straight off the rails in a ratchet refusal of respectability. Delivering the line "blame it on the pussy," Issa makes plain the longstanding practice of disciplining Black women through sexual logics designed to scapegoat ("Insecure as Fuck"). Significantly, when Issa speaks the words "broken pussy," she begins to own the beat with rhythmic arm movements, a gleeful facial expression, and a raised chin ("Insecure as Fuck"). Her eyes twinkle, she puts her shoulders back, and she more confidently inhabits her body, illuminated by the stage lights. Here is the hackneyed narrative pastime of blaming Black women's flesh, but here too is Issa's illicit smile as she points a playfully accusatory finger out towards the audience. Here is a spectacle of self-conscious pleasure at performing the very narratives that place the responsibility for social ills squarely on Black women's pussies. Broken

Black pussy reclaims non-respectability through the prime site of "corporeal difference" used to cast African American culture as nonheteronormative (Ferguson 21).

In these moments, Issa enacts a taboo truth: that making and unmaking racial and sexual meaning in visual media can titillate, excite, and please in uncomfortable ways.[68] In a revision, and Black queer grounding, of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Nash argues that performances of pleasure are sites where "race is constituted, at least in part, by a 'stylized repetition of acts'" (*The Black Body* 5). In these displays, "race can be entrenched, undone, and rendered hypervisible through repetition," producing excitement "for subjects on all sides of the proverbial color line" (Nash, *The Black Body* 5). Issa's rap is replete with replicated logics and ratchet mimicry that disrupt and delight. When a cellphone video of this very performance goes viral beginning in episode four, the repetition reaches new heights with each new viewer ("Thirsty as Fuck"). Sasha Go Hard's real-world remix of Issa's rap, titled "Golden Pussy," produces yet more repetition outside the constraints of the TV series itself.[69] Issa's rap stages the (de)construction of racist and misogynist narratives of Black excess *via* the excess of ratchet replay. Issa formally enacts Black women's discursive burden while inhabiting a pocket of profane refusal.

In doing so, Issa specifically "revel[s] in fleshiness" (Musser, *Sensual Excess* 3). Seguing from the smelly simile of a used dish rag, Issa offers up a chorus that promises to make what Hammonds calls the "black hole" of Black women's sexualities "dense and full" (n.p.). The chorus turns with funky vigor to the tactile and olfactory in its

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[68] See Pickens, "Shoving Aside," 44.

[69] Sasha Go Hard, "Golden Pussy." *Insecure: Music from the HBO Original Series, Season 3*, 97.9 The Box, 2018, theboxhouston.com/9817042/insecure-season-three-finale-playlist/4/.

description of the "broken pussy" ("Insecure as Fuck").[70] The adjectives (dry, rough, broken), verbs (smells, had enough), and grammatical intensifiers (as hell, really) create a veritable pussy sensorium out of this outlandish refrain ("Insecure as Fuck"). They show that, at the taboo margins of the dominant racial and sexual paradigm, the Black pussy is brimming with substance. Helping to crowd out any notion of empty Black holes, Issa's chorus mobilizes the iterative potential of the ratchet together with the iterative (un)making of race as Nash articulates it. Reaching for new saturation points of multisensory experience, the chorus culminates by imagining the myriad ways in which "pussies" have "had enough" ("Insecure as Fuck"). Indeed, with the pronouncement "Maybe it's had enough," Issa gives the Black pussy a meaningful compound verb of its own ("Insecure as Fuck").[71] The expression of exasperation drowning out the objectifying pronoun "it," this fraught Black pussy demands new ways of being thought, heard, and seen ("Insecure as Fuck").

The Show-within-a-Show

i*nsecure*'s ratchet repetition of pussy-blaming narratives complicates its relationship to Black feminism. For example, Assata N. Wisseh argues that the show reinforces anti-Black and misogynist stereotypes that have long been the subject of Black feminist critique. In "Mapping Mammy 2.0: *Insecure* and the Middle-Class Black Woman's Burden" (2019), Wisseh claims that Molly's character in particular replicates the "controlling images" of the "Black lady" and the "jezebel" as Patricia Hill Collins

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[70] See Stallings, *Funk*.

[71] See Spillers, Hortense. "Interstices: a Small Drama of Words." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carole Vance. Routledge, 1984, pp. 74-80. Spillers writes: "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (74).

theorizes them.[72] Yet within Wisseh's critique lies a key paradox: to critique Black women's creative content for rehearsing harmful stereotypes is also to give credence to the dominant meanings of race and sexuality. Positioning Issa Rae as a "purveyor of negative images" reinscribes interpretive assumptions and forecloses discussion about the text's potential Black feminist commitments (Tounsel 306). Reading for negative images indeed conforms to what Rebecca Wanzo calls "just syntax" – a way of reading that reduces a particular representation to merely ("just") a stereotype and in doing so often neglects other meanings and contributions of the work (such as distributional equity in the hiring of Black actors) ("Beyond a 'Just' Syntax" 135). The imperative to assess whether a given representation is harmful or emancipatory enacts a kind of analytic control that, like the "controlling images" themselves, places conceptual, moral, and affective limits on Black women's self-expression.

For Kristen Warner, such analytic control belongs to the domain of respectability politics. She calls on critics to adopt an alternative approach – one that mines the gray areas between positive and negative representations as part of a "ratchet responsibility" ("Ratchet Responsibility" 315). Modeling this critical responsibility, Warner gives the case study of the BET Awards, showing that this notoriously slapdash event creates a Black family reunion sensibility whose cultural contributions necessarily exceed the narrow terms of representational politics.

Scholars of African American literature have taken up this call to antirespectability as well. For Darryl Dickson-Carr, moving beyond a good/bad

[72] Wisseh, Assatu. "Mapping Mammy 2.0: *Insecure* and the Middle-Class Black Woman's Burden." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2019, pp. 391-410. For Patricia Hill Collins' theorization of controlling images, see "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images." 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge Classics, 2009, pp. 76-106.

representational binary is as urgent as moving beyond the "restrictive designation" of "social protest literature," a designation that he considers "dangerous" because it devalues and minoritizes even when it praises (2). African American writers have long employed satirical excess and exaggeration not in the service of didacticism, moralism, discipline, or pedagogy but rather in the service of degeneration or undisciplining. Indeed, Dickson-Carr shows that African American satire often models the degenerative mode, which Steven Weisenburger defines as "'a means of exposing modalities of terror and of *doing violence* to cultural forms that are overtly or covertly dedicated to terror'" (qtd. in 18).[73] Such satirical undisciplining is less about oppositional struggle than it is about reveling in a complex range of "political pleasures, humorous pleasures, pleasures in transgressing, [and] pleasures in making use of and then upending racial fictions" (Nash, "Black Anality" 452).

In i*nsecure*, there is perhaps no better example of unruly satirical pleasure than season 2's recurring show-within-a-show *Due North*, which brings ratchet nonrealism to the realm of antebellum slavery. Co-written by Natasha Rothwell (who stars as Issa Dee's friend Kelli Prenny in i*nsecure*) and Ben Cory Jones, *Due North* is an absurd antebellum melodrama centering on a sexual affair between slaveowner Turnfellow (Scott Foley) and houseslave Ninny (Regina Hall). *Due North* interweaves the plantation setting and themes of the TV show *Underground* (Misha Green and Joe Pokaski, 2016-2017) with the political drama and dedicated fan communities of *Scandal* (Shonda Rhimes, 2012-2018) and the screaming fights and fisticuffs of reality shows such as *The Real*

[73] On the distinction between moralistic Juvenalian satire and degenerative Menippean satire, see Dickson-Carr, Darryl. *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*. First edition, University of Missouri, 2001.

Housewives franchise.[74] Of particular importance for our purposes is that *Due North* takes to task a paradigmatic pussy-blaming narrative: Jeffersonian romance. As a pervasive cultural form and racial fiction, Jeffersonian romance implicitly or explicitly perpetuates the idea that the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was one of consensual love, sex, and desire, failing to account for intersecting vulnerabilities including Hemings' age and enslavement.[75] It epitomizes anti-Black and misogynist terror because it recasts enslaver-enslaved rape as romance, thereby providing a justification for institutionalized violence and exploitation. Exposing and upending such narratives, the show-within-a-show *Due North* stages a ratchet viewing scenario that, like the "broken pussy" rap, gazes askew at visual legacies of slavery that scapegoat Black women and their bodies.

Appearing again and again in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Jeffersonian romance carries symbolic weight in the making of American modernity. As Kimberly Juanita Brown writes, "[i]n her present incarnation, Sally Hemings is not simply the property of Thomas Jefferson but symbolizes the nation's incestuous enslaved/free intermingling, as well as our continued fascination with political figures" (29).[76] Symbolic uses of Hemings take the form of novels such as Barbara Chase-

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[74] See Drysdale, Jennifer. "'Insecure': Natasha Rothwell on How 'Looking for LaToya' Became This Season's Show-Within-a-Show." *etonline*, 19 April 2020, etonline.com/insecure-natasha-rothwell-on-how-looking-for-latoya-became-this-seasons-show-within-a-show?amp.

[75] Other contemporary Black feminist comedians have taken this Jefferson-Hemings romance narrative to task. During the *2 Dope Queens* HBO special premiere in 2018, Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams call out Jefferson himself and people who gush about his ostensible love for Sally. "Sally Hemings was not a lover," Robinson states, implying that Sally's enslavement foreclosed this possibility. See Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams, *2 Dope Queens*, "New York," directed by Tig Notario, HBO, 2018. Katelyn Hale Wood argues that Robinson and Williams are engaged in the strategic practice of "cracking up," or comedically exposing, racist and misogynist power structures (4-5). See Wood, Katelyn Hale. *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century United States*. 1st edition, University Of Iowa Press, 2021.

[76] In *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015), Brown locates visualizations (and misnamings) of Black women at the very core of transatlantic slavery's material and

Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), Stephen O'Connor's *Thomas Jefferson Dreams of Sally Hemings* (2016); films such as Merchant-Ivory Productions's *Jefferson in Paris* (1995); and poems such as Cyrus Cassell's "Sally Hemings to Thomas Jefferson" (1983). They also take the form of promotional materials such as book covers and movie posters and, indeed, Brown establishes such materials as a telling archive for anti-Black and misogynist scapegoating. The book cover for Chase-Riboud's 1979 novel places the onus for the so-called affair on Hemings herself by providing a zoomed-in image of her neck and cleavage. Around her neck is a locket of Jefferson as her supposed beloved. Brown explains that "[t]he locket represents an intense love on Hemings's part, while the cleavage is a window into the slave woman's sexual capabilities and appetite. The neckline, taut and inviting, makes visual an eagerness already assumed in the historical memory" (30). In the American promotional poster for *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), Hemings similarly bears the responsibility for the affair, positioned as a physical barrier between Jefferson and Maria Cosway and gazing longingly at Jefferson (33-34).

The title frame of i*nsecure*'s show-within-a-show *Due North* satirically reenacts such visual scapegoating of Hemings. That the writers of i*nsecure* have the Jefferson-Hemings story in mind is clear from the series' beginning: the opening scene of the pilot episode takes place in Thomas Jefferson Middle School, an institution where the educational and life outcomes of its predominantly Black and Brown students give the lie to the founding fathers' promises of equality, as 40% will not graduate high school and

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ideological legacies. Visions of Black women's bodies appear repeatedly as a contested, originary site of racialization and sexualization. Brown specifically shows that, in the hands of Black women writers and artists from Gayl Jones to Carrie Mae Weems, iterative visions of Black women's bodies can register complex vulnerabilities and subjective contestations at the limits of the archive. As a paradigmatic example of what Brown calls the repeating body, Hemings as contested symbol repeats across the cultural and historical memory.

20% will become teen parents ("Insecure as Fuck" 10:35). In the title frame of *Due North*, the character Ninny adopts two main profile positions in which she appears to gaze seductively at Turnfellow. If there were any ambiguity in Ninny's first profile position (in which she smiles coyly with a demure, lowered head), then such ambiguity disappears with her second profile position (in which she raises her chin, keeping her eyes fixed on Turnfellow to deliver a yet more conspicuous, self-assured, and calculated smile). The title frame is a visual retelling of the assumed eagerness of Hemings and enslaved Black women for whom she has come to stand in as a symbol.

The plot of *Due North* radicalizes the anti-Black and misogynist blame by establishing Ninny as a character with unsympathetic and absurd motives. In the season finale of the show-within-a-show, it comes to light that Ninny attempted to poison Turnfellow's now deceased wife – not out of an attempt to escape, but out of her lust for Turnfellow. This is in contrast to *Underground*'s Amirah Vann (on whom Ninny is partly based), who makes strategic use of sex with her enslaver Tom Macon in a bid to protect her children. This is in contrast, too, to Sally Hemings herself, who bargained with Thomas Jefferson for her children's freedom (Gordon-Reed 31). In these real and fictional scenarios, structurally vulnerable women of African descent make use of the limited tools available to them for a greater purpose of freedom. For Ninny, freedom is simply not the incentive. Ninny even goes so far as to have her enslavers cut off her husband Zeke's foot, possibly due to his affair with fellow houseslave Nessa. Recognizing, as Brown does, that scapegoating representations of salacious antebellum Black womanhood constitute "an illusory power play of tremendous proportion" (31), *Due North* satirizes the assumption that enslaved Black women were responsible for the

most egregious physical violations under chattel slavery. *Due North* thereby makes plain the asymmetrical power relations of enslaver-enslaved that characterize the Jeffersonian romance narrative.

Due North's formal excesses also enable communal ratchet viewing experiences for characters on i*nsecure*. Amassing communities of fans and hate watchers (Issa Dee and her friends, Issa's ex-boyfriend Lawrence and his friends), *Due North* is brimming with self-consciously "hyperexcessive" (Warner, "They Gon' Think" 131) antics that create affective links to and among viewers. Warner demonstrates that these performances serve a cathartic function for Black women viewers whose behavior faces intense scrutiny and discipline both within and outside Black communities (Warner, "They Gon' Think" 141, 145-146). As Therí Pickens argues, "[t]he relationship between the ratchet performer and the audience rests on an implied contract in which both parties are aware that the ratchet violates norms of respectable behavior" (43). *Due North* brings this implied contract to the antebellum south, staging a dramatic rivalry between enslaved women Ninny and Nessa, who both claim ironic sexual ownership of (their legal owner) Turnfellow. Their rivalry elicits verbal reactions from characters in i*nsecure*, ranging from Daniel's chuckling assessment that "this show is so stupid" ("Hella Shook" 3:36) to Issa's exclamation "oooh Nessa about to get *got* messin' with Ninny's man!" ("Hella Shook" 3:33). Despite Issa's use of the possessive apostrophe + s, Ninny cannot legally own property – and indeed, Ninny's man is Ninny's owner. What could be more self-consciously ridiculous than an interracial antebellum love triangle between two enslaved women and their enslaver? Culminating in a physical fight between Ninny and Nessa in the season finale of the show-within-a-show, *Due North* might as well be billed as *The*

Real Houseslaves of the Antebellum South for how it mobilizes communities of watchers for the purposes of nonrealist pleasure.

The fellatio scene between Ninny and Turnfellow provides a final, and especially vivid, example of *Due North*'s ratchet nonrealism, epitomizing what Glenda R. Carpio calls "laughing fit to kill." Taking up this phrase that Charles Chestnutt often uses in his short fiction, Carpio argues that Chestnutt and William Wells Brown established a template for fraught comedic retellings of chattel slavery and its structural legacies. These retellings deliberately mobilize racist stereotypes to make anti-racist commentaries for Black insiders. They produce what Luigi Pirandello calls a tragicomic "'feeling of the opposite'" (qtd. in Carpio 36), bringing violence and pleasure into uncomfortable proximity. The fellatio scene between Ninny and Turnfellow remobilizes the racist and misogynist image of the eager, lustful enslaved Black woman that circulates in the cultural memory often through explicit or implicit references to Sally Hemings. In keeping with Chestnutt's comedic template, the scene "focus[es] on what is paradoxically both a great source of comedy and a major principle underlying slavery – the inability to control one's body" (Carpio 37). As an enslaved woman, Ninny has a structurally compromised ability to determine what she does with her body – specifically her sexual resources. The "'feeling of the opposite'" in this scene stems in part from Ninny feeling entitled to Turnfellow's body (she is upset that he "let Nessa share [him]" ["Hella Shook" 3:22]) when he is legally the owner of hers. The scene spoofs the idea that enslaved women could autonomously pursue and enjoy sexual relationships with their enslavers using the terms of ownership that uphold anti-Black and misogynist capture.

Turnfellow's dialogue during the fellatio scene throws such contradictions into stark relief. "You may only be three-fifths of a person," he says breathily as she kneels before him and undoes his pants, "but you are all woman" ("Hella Perspective" 44:05-44:06). Turnfellow's joke does not make it to the air (HBO simply screens *Due North* after the credits of i*nsecure*'s season 2 finale), but the image of Ninny kneeling before Turnfellow's crotch plays on Daniel's TV during a flirty post-coital exchange between him and Issa in episode 5. In true parodic fashion, Turnfellow's dialogue explicitly references article 1.2 of the American constitution, filtering the fellatio he is about to receive through the dehumanizing legal-political compromise aimed at increasing congressional representation for slaveholdings southern states. Turnfellow, as a beneficiary of the three-fifths clause, alienates Ninny from personhood, underscoring her compromised ability "to control [her] body" under the law (a law that only recognizes personhood for enslaved people if convenient – for example, when assigning culpability [Hartman 94]).

With the second half of Turnfellow's sentence (which functions as the comedic punch line), he positions "all woman" as the opposite of "only three-fifths of a person." This binary enacts a kind of mathematical gaslighting, reasoning that being deemed a fraction of a human under the law is inconsequential so long as one's sexual resources satisfy a white masculine beneficiary. Ninny can be satisfied with the holes in her personhood so long as her bodily holes satisfy (add up to a whole or total woman: "all woman"). As an assessment of her sexual resources, Turnfellow's description of Ninny as "all woman" epitomizes pornotroping's translation of Black femme being ("You may only be," "you are") into an object for the captor's pleasure and profit. As Spillers puts it,

"1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction – the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor" ("Mama's" 67). The contradiction at the root of this racial fiction is indeed stunning: to be ostensibly powerful in one's sensuality yet powerless to exist for oneself. In the fellatio scene, Ninny satirically inhabits the pornotrope, making its assumptions and logics available for critique.[77] Through its absurdity and exaggerations, *Due North* lays bare the pernicious cultural work of scapegoating: the implicit justification of chattel slavery through the retroactive absolving of enslavers and the relentless blaming of Black women for their own structural harm.

Ninny performing fellatio on Turnfellow in episode 5 ("Hella Shook") furthermore translates into Issa performing fellatio on Daniel (and Daniel ejaculating on Issa's face without her consent) in episode 6 ("Hella Blows"). For a series so deeply conscious of Black women's burden of representation, this is a surprising and significant formal resonance. Swapping out one Black woman for another is not in keeping with the show's assertion of Black women's heterogeneity and individuality. That this conflation accompanies the only sexual violation that Issa experiences over the duration of five seasons is significant. Black women are individual, yet anti-Black and misogynist vulnerabilities are shared. *Due North*'s incursion on the narrative present suggests a continuum between antebellum interracial and contemporary intraracial infringements on Black women's bodily autonomy, and i*nsecure* pairs pleasure and pain in conveying this continuum.

[77] See Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 7.

Conclusion

Self-consciously employing the excesses of the ratchet, i*nsecure* satirically registers and redeploys pussy-blaming narratives that scapegoat Black women for structural harm. It models a bold approach to Black feminist pussy theorizing, using the unlikely metaphor of broken Black pussy to *break with* structures of normativity that hinge on Black women's pathologization. Contributing to efforts to rethink modes of interpretation about Blackness, gender, and sexuality, i*nsecure* uses ratchet repetition to disrupt disciplining mechanisms like respectability, joining Black feminist pussy practitioners in developing counter normative frameworks. It also furthers the important project of naming how contemporary Black TV is shifting the terms of Black visuality and performance by comedically redeploying narratives of Black sexual excess. What is at stake is no less than a life-affirming commitment to Black sexual freedom, and the imagination of new Black sexual worlds.

VI

CONCLUSION

This project has traced a specific call and response relationship between the Black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s and Black comedic sketch TV of the 2010s. In periods of devastating right-wing radicalization, Black writers with feminist commitments have turned to popular creative forms to enact ideas of selfhood and erotic intimacy independent of a normative white gaze. Writers of the Black women's literary renaissance including Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Naylor turned to literature to reimagine Black relation and aesthetics, a polysemous project that involved rendering conditions of anti-Blackness, misogyny, and heterosexism in their myriad consequences for Black women. Far from treating literary texts as sociological treatises, however, these writers frequently employed nonrealist devices that enabled them to both register and sidestep subjective and erotic capture under conditions of hypervisibility and surveillance. Their innovative visual vocabularies of nonrealist characterization, self-externalization, and vignette formats demanded reading practices at the limits of normative sexual discourse, grounded not in liberal empathy but in multiplicity, contradiction, and "nuance" (Shange, *Nappy Edges* 3).

The unprecedented visibility and consumption of Black women's literature in the 1970s and 1980s together with Black masculine backlash, a shifting TV media landscape, the rise of the New Right, and the historical turn in literary criticism produced a heightened scrutiny surrounding Black women's art in the post-Civil Rights era that

continues to inform debates about historical memory, feeling, and aesthetics. Faced with what Joel Best calls a "social problems" marketplace eager to hinge the value of Black women's art on its presumed psychologically realist subjectivity and commodifiable harm (*Threatened Children* 15), Black women artists and Black artists with feminist commitments continue to reckon with post-Civil Rights era conditions of reception that circumscribe Black sexual and subjective complexity.

Contemporary Black TV writers are among those who self-consciously draw on – and clarify – the legacy of the Black women's literary renaissance as one of innovative visual negotiation. Writers including Robin Thede, Issa Rae, and Terence Nance build on Morrison and Shange's efforts to carve out "private and particular space" (Spillers, "Mama's" 67) in a visual field structured by anti-Blackness, misogyny, and heterosexism. In doing so, they sketch possibilities for American TV outside the terms of what Amiri Baraka theorized as a "steady deadly whiteness beaming forth" ("Work Notes" 12). Relentlessly and self-consciously employing critical distancing strategies including nonrealist characterization and vignette formats, these writers prioritize intraracial pleasure and intimacy as key aspects of what Audre Lorde calls the erotic. Their expressive efforts cast TV as a site of Black knowledge-making and historiographical critique – as a site where creators and audiences alike renegotiate ways of thinking and feeling about art and history.

The alternative genealogy that emerges out of creative dialogue between these two archives has stakes for ways of reading Black feminist texts across modalities in a post-Trump America. Amidst national moral panics about Critical Race Theory and activist counterefforts such as the African American Policy Forum's #TruthBeTold

campaign, Black feminist writers are interrogating patterns of truth-making and their consequences for Black women in America. Michaela Coel, Zakiya Dalila Harris, and Danielle Evans pursue such questions as: how do realist and nonrealist representation figure into historical and cultural memory in a national context characterized not only by polarized politics but polarized realities? In a nation divided, which stories will persist? To invoke Toni Morrison's famously ambiguous phrasing, which stories will "pass on" (*Beloved* 323-324), whether in the sense of perishing or transmitting to future generations? In both Coel's TV show *I May Destroy You* (2020) and Harris's novel *The Other Black Girl* (2021), publishing houses serve as contested institutional sites where competing stories of reality vie for legitimation and legacy. In Evans's titular novella *The Office of Historical Corrections* (2020), an underfunded government Institute for Public History serves as bureaucratic evidence of institutionalized right-wing assaults on historical accountability.

A shared commitment to nonrealist devices runs through Coel's nonlinear visual retelling of protagonist Arabella's experience of sexual assault, Harris's figuring of hair grease as a hostile assimilationist tool, and Evans's depiction of protagonist Cassie as devalued bureaucrat charged with correcting historical facts amidst white supremacist terror. The pairing of Black women in each of these texts (Suzy Henny and Arabella; Nella and Hazel/Eva; Cassie and Genevieve) also demands a nonrealist and relational way of thinking Black women in the visual field. The nonrealist pairing of Black women characters resonates with Morrison's depiction of Nel and Sula as well as Shange's depiction of the lady in green with her externalized "package[] of me" (*for colored girls* 65) – a strategy of nonrealist characterization that, per Madhu Dubey and Kevin Quashie,

circumvents Western sovereign subjectivity and demands different ways of reading selfhood and sexuality.

Yet these texts also combine the use of critical distance with a renewed wariness about sidestepping realist feeling. They ask: what horrors attend anti-Black and misogynist sites of knowledge making (publishing houses and government institutes) that pit Black women against each other? Their emphasis on pressing psychological and physical terror departs even from *Random Acts of Flyness* in its Afrofeminist surreal commentary on state-sanctioned violence. Future studies might historicize the particular pairing of nonrealism and realism in texts by Coel, Harris, and Evans, recognizing how it both takes up and departs from the strategies of critical distancing explored in this dissertation. Are post-Trump Black feminist literatures turning with renewed energy to psychological interiority as part of a creative vocabulary for processing immense collective harm? If so, what critical demeanors do such strategic combinations of nonrealist alienation and socially located realism demand?

In tracing the innovative visual vocabularies of Morrison and Shange and their afterlives in a shifting contemporary media environment, this project has sketched preliminary strategies for registering Black feminist witnessing, watching, and spectating across modalities without simply relitigating art's utility for racial politics. This work remains urgent as the United States continues to grapple with linked anti-Black, misogynist, and heterosexist oppressions, too often by coopting images of such harm into narratives of American exceptionalism and liberal multiculturalism. Writing on the one-year anniversary of Derek Chauvin's 2020 murder of George Floyd, Rizvana Bradley scathingly critiques "the manner in which the liberal face of empire has scrambled to

exploit the politics of representation this past year," and the manner in which it has demanded that Americans "look, again and again, upon the brutalized flesh of blackness" as part of a nominal, rather than substantive, project of racial reckoning (n.p.). Bradley's call is to "reinvent what it means to see" outside the extractive and self-serving logics of American liberalism. In all their fraught intermingling with liberal capitalist media, contemporary Black comedic TV creators share this very goal, questioning hegemonic ways of seeing and forging indigenously Black metrics that resist easy cooptation into American nation-building myths. Offering complex and contradictory visions of Black intimacy, texts by Morrison, Shange, Thede, Rae, and Nance wrest Black sexualities from the terms of an anti-Black world in the interests of erotic freedom.

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