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by

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The Art of Ugly: Southern Black Women and Violent Intimacies

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The Art of Ugly: Southern Black Women and Violent Intimacies

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Report

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my distant cousin Fannie Lou Hamer. May your spirit forever flow through me. May I continue your important work.

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Abstract

The Art of Ugly: Southern Black Women and Violent Intimacies

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Through a close reading of the lyrics, music videos and interviews of Bbymutha and Janelle Monáe, I will show how these artists' creative labor and performances expose southern Black women's strategic utilization of objecthood in the digital sphere, highlighting southern, queer Black women's investment in Black futures. Ultimately, I intend to disrupt the linear myth of progress that casts the U.S. South as culturally and temporally static, and deconstruct and reconfigure the meaning of this space in the country's imaginary, from the vantage point of Blackness and queerness.

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Introduction

"What are your hopes for Black futures?" asks Jazmine Walker, "King of da South," and co-host of the popular news and politics podcast *The Black Joy Mixtape*. Her fellow host Amber J. Philips, the "High Priestess of Black Joy," and guest host Sesali Bowen, @badfatblackgirl, respond in accordance with the episode's theme, offering thoughts and commentary from the interstices of Blackness, queerness, southerness and womanhood. Walker's Mississippi drawl drips through the speaker, arresting the listener, and serving as the perfect backdrop for the podcast's intense conversations about social policies and their impact on Black America and the global south. I first encountered the quote when my friend and colleague Madyson Crawford texted me the question soon after the episode aired. I was stumped. The experience was similar to another earlier in the semester, when a professor requested we submit a one-page response to the question "What is the human condition?" On both occasions my tongues were tied, and my fingers were inflexible, refusing to give way to the pen. These moments are pregnant with consideration, like the pause taken before embarking on a complicated maze. Both questions structure the maze and underline its complexity. For the hosts of *The Black Joy Mixtape*, this author, and scores of Black creatives, intellectuals, and activists have been alienated from the condition of humanity. For us. the future is fraught. Rest assured, the complicated relationship to this language offers unique qualifications, opening another space from which to refigure these concepts in light of slavery and its afterlives.

In this paper, I am interested in the interventions of southern Black women artists, their creative works, and the rich wisdom they offer in considering the stakes of Black

futures. I understand Black futures as encompassing our methods of disrupting linear time and imagining ourselves as making it to the future we have been written out of in American popular media. While the idea of Black futures rings almost oxymoronic juxtaposed to the reality of a sustained, global campaign of genocide against Black people, our moment is characterized by an explosion of art that insists on its visual representation. The hosts of *The Black Joy Mixtape* harness the power of community-oriented commentary, the legacies of southern Black women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, and the intrinsic connections between Black America and the global South to provide material from which we can piece together our imagination of Black futures. The creative works of the people most adjacent to such dystopian realities demand a revaluation of our potential to imagine and bring Black futures to fruition.

Violent Intimacies

In her reading of visual artist Kara Walker's silhouettes, Riché Richardson asserts that the organizing principles of race and sex coalesce in the U.S. South and are thus disseminated globally. Richardson understands Walker's work as magnifying Black pain in order to unearth the "...white southern masculine pornographic consciousness" (53), which originates within slavery, as a function of the brutality leveraged against Black bodies. What is of most interest to me here is Richardson's keen take on the white gaze and how it illuminates the centrality of the U.S. South, and specifically the violence done to feminine Black bodies in this space, in the creation and exportation of Blackness. We understand Black people to be outside of or somewhat extracted from the condition of

humanity. Slavery catalyzes a chemical response to the condition of humanity through the distortion of violence and intimacy. I name this interaction chemical because when these forces come into contact with each other, and with Black bodies, they are fundamentally altered. The slave becomes through violence and brutality, an axiom around which writers such Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, and Frank B. Wilderson have spun brilliant, thoughtful webs,[1] and I would suggest that in the post-plantation period, the Black feminine body is made object directly through aberrant experiences of violence and intimacy. Slavery articulates itself in the present moment through this aberration, but as Fred Moten notes from the outset of *In the Break* "The history of Blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist...While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses" (1).

This can be as equally said for violence as it can for its source. As violence is imparted onto the Black body, it itself changes form. Violence looks different on Black flesh; it becomes close to impossible to recognize, and second nature to ignore. Violence looks different *in* Black flesh; it becomes intimate, and thus intimacy is also distorted. There is no privacy for Black women—our private has been made public. An

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[1] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982.
Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010.
These texts serve as the foundation of a strain of Black social and cultural theory known as Afro-Pessimism.

environment where sexual subjugation is an adamant, bitter reality, where even relationships with children are near impossible to foster due to white dependence on Black women's nurture labor, creates the conditions under which the chemistry of intimacy and violence is fundamentally altered. It is not enough to say that violence is brutal, or that intimacy is difficult to locate in the experience of the enslaved. When these forces come into contact with Black flesh they themselves change, and the flesh, being connected to the body, if only tenuously, in turn reacts with these forces. The slave in turn is altered through the primal scene of violence, the Black individual, in turn, is altered through the communal memory of slavery, and the concrete experiences of slavery's afterlives. What these changes mean and how they are represented is what I will be thinking through in the rest of this essay.

This meditation on violence and intimacy, themes that are central within much of the art southern black women produce, informs a strategy I will utilize to read specific artists, their interventions, and their work. The leading cause of death for Black women age 15-45 is intimate ~~partner~~ violence.[2] While the concepts of violence and intimacy immediately seem alien to one another, my examination is predicated on the notion that for Black women, the two ideas are inseparable, chemically bonded and thus mark the slippages that occur between Black women's self-representation and what the public gaze understands as the glorification of pathology. *Violent intimacies* maps moments within the artistic production of southern Black women, particularly Tennessee rapper

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[2] West, Carolyn M. "Black Women and Intimate Partner Violence: New Directions for Research." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 19, no. 12 (December 2004): 1487–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260504269700. Carolyn M. West discusses the confluence of racism and socioeconomic oppression that maps this troubling statistic.

Bbymutha and Atlanta based multi-hyphenate Janelle Monáe, where evidence of this chemical reaction with the Black feminine body is brought into the light.

The internet in its current form is responsible for much of the democratization that allows for raw and complex work, the likes of which has always been excluded from U.S. popular cultural memory, to bubble to the surface. Keeping in mind Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome, I want to consider the implications of the internet for reading the work of southern Black women. Inherent within the rhizome is the opportunity to challenge hierarchical categorization, and to thoughtfully consider the lives and artwork of southern Black women is to accept the terms on which we encounter it—as necessarily countercultural and counter-historical, and as an exposition of the flawed nature of structural approaches to knowledge. Even if one does not always encounter such work through the internet, its pervasive nature automatically links such work within the growing multiplicities of the online world. When we come across artists in the "real world," we seek out twitter and Instagram handles, websites, SoundCloud pages and the like as a method of staying current. As big as the internet is, it is important to note that what it often does is capture the most miniscule, most hidden moments, places them under full exposure and magnifies them x1000. It is not my intention to debate whether this is negative or positive (it is both and neither), but to ascertain how southern Black women take advantage of this.

Violent intimacies have been hidden and often remain so as full exposure leads to overexposure, and mis-readings and misrepresentations of Black women's experiences abound. This paper is about the southern Black women who have managed to control for

such under- and overexposure, producing some of the sharpest images yet of Black people's role and investment in the future, in our futures. Violent intimacies trace the instances within our counter-archive of Instagram posts, music videos, interviews, and online presences that southern Black women have utilized our overexposure, our alterity, our magnificence to expose the Great American Scandal, i.e. the undertheorized relationship between Black women and white men in the plantation south. Black folks have endured, internalized and passed down violence through the generations. Assata Shakur's biography and the work of Frantz Fanon highlights the necessity of violence in the deconstruction of state power; I would suggest that to exist under the brutality of the state is to have violence be as much a part of the colonized mind, body and soul as resistance is. But it is not Black people who walk into nightclubs, or movie theaters, or schools, guns blazing. It was not a Black person sending bombs in packages to residents in Austin, Texas[3]. As Cedric Robinson notes, Black people historically have opted out of using violence the way it has been used against us, even when given the opportunity. On the one hand, we have turned it on ourselves and each other as an unfortunate by-product of the white masculine pornographic consciousness Richardson theorizes. On the other, we have metabolized it into a new kind of energy. I want to very carefully invoke the phrase "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger," so as not to exacerbate the strong black woman myth. At its core the phrase refers to human ability to adapt itself to conditions that may be harmful but not lethal. As I will show, the ability to imagine and build Black

[3] This essay was in progress during the Austin Bombings in March 2018. See also the Pulse Nightclub shooting, Stoneman Douglas, Aurora, Colorado, etc. There are too many examples of irrational violence to count.

futures is key to how southern Black women metabolize violence into new expressions of intimacy, love, pleasure, and notions of the Self.

A Note on Method

In order to achieve this, I will draw from Black social and cultural theory, Black feminism and media studies to do a close reading of interviews, music videos and music lyrics from Bbymutha and Janelle Monáe whose products I believe offer a rich summation of southern Black women's artistic intervention. It is primarily through these formats that the southern, Black, futuristic consciousness is coalescing, and I desire to capture these instances. In the spirit of Hershini Bhana Young's *Illegible Will*, which argues that holes and erasures within the archive are also of analytical import, my goal is to read such material as much for what it does not say as for what it does, that which violent intimacies has rendered invisible.[4] I will show how the space of the south triggers certain motivations for the artists and within their work that are both consistent with and depart from mainstream constructions of the space in the popular U.S. (and global) imaginary. In future iterations of this project, I hope to include oral histories and the ethnographic material of the scholar Zora Neale Hurston in order to place this project in a genealogy of southern Black women's artistic and intellectual labor. It is also important to me that I center creative work in this discussion of art, so a more sophisticated version of this project is likely to employ my unique adaptation of Hartman's critical fabulation

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[4] Young, Hershini Bhana. *Illegible Will: Coercive Spectacles of Labor in South Africa and the Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

theory. Furthermore, I will ground my discussion of violent intimacies in a close reading of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave* Girl in order to illuminate the chemistry of Black women's flesh. Finally, I'd like to note that I am insisting on a reconsideration of language in this essay, and when referring to southern Black womanhood, I am including and centering queer Black women. I believe queerness is inherent within southern Black womanhood even if it does not concretize in ways that are obvious or can be directly labeled[5].

The Dirty South

The globalized logic of Blackness may have come to be in the plantation South, but U.S. popular memory has attempted in vain to scrub itself clean of such an affiliation. According to Riché Richardson,

> ...In many ways the south continues to function as America's dirty linen, or as a place that it even borders on being taboo to mention. As numerous scholars have observed, the South's racialist ideological conservatism has long shaped the national identity of the United States, to the point of constituting major political and social agendas, even as the South has been paradoxically stigmatized and viewed as a 'problem' in the nation due to its spectral legacies of slavery and Jim Crow" (555-556).

If the South is America's dirty linen, then, in the words of Kelly Rowland, it's time to do this dirty laundry[6]. Discussion of the American South immediately conjures up the mystical imagery of swamps, Spanish moss, lush green fields, bayous, plantation homes

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[5] Here I am invoking Rod Ferguson's concept of queer in *Aberrations in Black.*

[6] Atlanta-born, Houston raised Kelly Rowland's 2013 single "Dirty Laundry" is a meditation on the abuse she faced from an unnamed boyfriend following the global success of Destiny's Child.

and cotton fields. The spectral legacies of slavery are still very much present in the region despite a century and a half of migrations and industrialization. The allure of the South remains in its taboo nature, its otherworldly affect and its proximity to the sexually deviant, or more precisely, sexually nonconformist. What we claim to know about the American South is organized around the interplay between race and sex. We need only to take a look at the laws inscribed during and in the afterlife of chattel slavery to see the way that sex, and the anxieties surrounding it, were forces powerful enough that they needed to be regulated through legal doctrine. Terms such as *miscegenation* were used primarily to describe the sexual liaisons between white men and Black women, and the children of such unions were subject to further categorization and regulation.

It was hardly through the lonely efforts of southern lawmakers that the portrait of southern licentiousness begins to take form as an organizing logic of American popular memory. The industrialized North contributed to painting the picture through a slew of textual and somewhat voyeuristic representations of the South as a land of "sexual license" and moral bankruptcy. It is interesting to note that in its efforts to draw the sharpest of boundaries between white and Black, between sexual propriety and deviance, the South actually reinforced its mixed origins, exposing itself as the product of the clash between race and sex.

The legacies of such sullied representations of the South still hold clout contemporarily even with the organizing logic of race hidden beneath romantic, pastoral

reproductions found in popular films such as *Gone With The Wind*[7]. The ghosts of the enslaved Black women whose bodies were intercepted and commandeered in the creation of the slave state still haunt the post-racial Pinterest fantasy of plantation weddings, the comments under The Shaderoom's Instagram posts about Serena Williams and her mixed-race daughter Olympia[8], the dialogue of Blanche Devereaux from "The Golden Girls" [9], and the exclusive reputations of strip clubs in Atlanta, Georgia and Houston, Texas[10]. Southern rap culture has embraced the term "Dirty South" and has repurposed it to describe everything from dances and musical styles to socio-cultural positions. Inherent in such a repurposing is an acknowledgement of that dirt, and an awareness that dirty is not necessarily negative. As we will see a little later, it is in embracing what we have been taught is soiled and disgraced that southern Black women have been able to refract the magnifying gaze. The Dirty South comes to connote a recognition of the complicated history of Black folks in the South, a hidden history that has steadily bubbled to the surface and colored our imagination.

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[7] Selznick, David and Sidney Howard. *Gone With the Wind.* DVD. Directed by Victor Fleming. New York City: Loew's Inc., 1939.

[8] Popular gossip site @theshaderoom makes 200+ posts in a 24 hour period, but under any picture of Serena Williams and her husband (Alexis Ohanian Sr.) or daughter (Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr.) you will find a slew of comments that invoke and abstract the history of Black women's relationship to white men on the plantation.

[9] Blanche Deveraux is a character on the hit 1980's tv series *The Golden Girls.* She is from Georgia and serves as a caricature of old southern sensibilities and sensuality. Though problematic she is my favorite character on the show.

[10] Hip Hop culture has embraced the southern strip club (Magic City in Atlanta, V-Live in Houston and Atlanta, Kind of Diamonds in Miami, Treasure's in Houston, etc.) as sites that reproduce hip hop culture and Black gendered relations.

The Refill

There is the notion that Black bodies have been emptied through the process of slavery. In her landmark text *Scenes of Subjection,* Hartman refers to the fungibility of the Black body, the many uses for it in maintaining the white supremacist power structure, as evidencing the denigrated status of the slave and refers to the impossibility of imagining Black sentience. The universality of the white subject becomes possible because there is the fungible slave to compare it to. Both enslavement and white efforts to empathize with the experience of the enslaved transmogrifies the Black body into a kind of vessel. The violence that magically disappears into Black flesh renders it usable in a particular kind of way, which Tavia Nyong'o takes up with his conversation on instatement in *The Amalgamation Waltz*. Referring to the way that the instated body, the Black body, becomes captured for use as a mirror projection of race, sex, class, and national fantasy, Nyong'o examines the myriad uses to which the body of Crispus Attucks was put to following his death in the creation of national myth. If, as Hartman understands it, the Black body is fungible then it is also elastic—it can be kneaded and stretched to conform to the purposes of the user. The instatement Nyong'o refers to is possible because of such elasticity. To put it simplistically, the Black body has been rendered a marionette with the longest strings, a microcosm of society, a reflection of the fears and anxieties of the nation. I cannot help but think of the cover this provides. Both Hartman and Nyong'o refer to the impossibility that the Black individual can ever be truly known outside of their own subjectivity. Additionally, the notion of the mask as a model of understanding Black experience holds much weight in Black American and

Afro-Diasporic thought and literature, because of the complex interplay between its usefulness and its necessity. I argue that the ambivalence, the non-concrete nature of the Black body provides a mask that southern Black women have strategically utilized. But to what end?

Achille Mbembe highlights the never-been-fixed nature of Blackness and the modern generalization of a subaltern consciousness that has heretofore been experienced singularly by the descendants of enslaved Africans. He echoes Nyongo's sentiment of the financial stakes that catalyzed the creation of Blackness. *Human money. Human capital.* Well it has often been repeated that money makes the world go 'round. Capital, both material and human, has been imbued with its own power, its own dispossesive force, and the intricate role that capital and the system of capitalism holds in maintaining white supremacy leaves me curious as to who is really in charge here. Mbembe lays out practices for restoring or refilling what has been stolen through slavery. Understanding that race and racism serve as the scaffolding upon which modernity was built, he actually cites the revolutionary action of Black diasporic people as part and parcel to the creation of race itself. This is also evident in the work that Blackness as a construction is able to do:

"In a spectacular reversal, it becomes the symbol of a conscious desire for life, a force springing forth, buoyant and plastic, fully engaged in the act of creation and capable of living in the midst of several times and several histories at once. Its capacity for sorcery and its ability to incite hallucination, multiplies tenfold," (7).

We may either choose to hide within these spaces of confusion or abstraction, or we may embrace them and learn to use them strategically. Violent intimacies allow us to take a peek into these open spaces of imagination and creation. So, come along and ride on a fantastic voyage.[11]

Turning B(l)ack...Turning Forward

In *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South,* sociologist Zandria Robinson, contends with the academy's turning back toward the American South for the first time since the post WWII period. One of her interlocutors, Ruth Ann, recites a popular conception of southern Black identity formed by Black southerners themselves,

"We just do things better down here, you know. Bigger. Better. Better hair. Better loving. Better singing. Better churching. Better cooking. We look better. Just better. We just all around better black folks..." (1).

Robinson goes on to state:

"This notion that the South, and in particular southern cities, represents a best-of-both-worlds-blackness, or even a better blackness, is not confined to black southerners' backyard barbecue or kitchen chatter. Claims of black southern superiority are also framed and articulated in a powerful segment of popular culture co-authored by competing and intersecting black, white, corporate and national interest...the South has risen again as the geographic epicenter of authentic black identity,"(1).

[11] In 1980 Ohio-based funk group Lakeside released the track "Fantastic Voyage" from the album of the same name. The album as well as its art invokes Black imagination and centers Black pleasure and musical traditions. Just go listen to it and get your life.

As a Black southerner myself, Ruth Ann's quote never fails to make me chuckle. No I do not believe there is a "better" Blackness, what fascinates me are the circumstances by which Black southerners' self-conceptualization comes to take shape in this manner. Robinson acknowledges that an inquiry into Black southern regional identity cannot be divorced from popular representations of the Black South. Popular American media has taken hold of the nation's imagination of the South and bestowed upon it the value to reflect and refract authenticating racial, sexual and gendered experience. This requires that we view Black southern women's identity formation as a dynamic force adapted to this tendency, as well as Black women's need to reckon with abandonment, and the past's role in making and remaking the contemporary south. I argue that Southern Black Superiority is no different than the activist work that groups such as the Black Panthers did in Black communities to foster racial pride and integrity, itself almost destroyed by chattel slavery and unrelenting white supremacy. Southern Black Superiority is a recovery project, a method, an analytic and a pedagogy employed by Black southerners to navigate tensions between their experiences in the space, and what media portrays about the space's meaning in America's imagination. I aim to foreground how Black women cultural producers utilize American media to problematize representations of southern Black womanhood.

American popular media depends on the South's legacies of violence and brutality in order to spin the myths of American progress, and concretize the notion of time as linear, cause and effect, progressive. The majority of Black artistic representations and renderings of the South *also* depend on such a construction, as a consequence of the

Great Migrations and their attending myths of mobility and escape. Southern Black women's artistic interventions serve to problematize and deconstruct linear time, which the rhetoric of the Great Migrations and racial progress are both symptoms of. What does it mean when these creative labors are just as invested in challenging hierarchical approaches to knowledge production as the format on which they have become visible in their sharpest form yet? I am in no way under the delusion that the internet is a space free of the forces of racism, sexism and misogynoir—on the contrary the internet brings these forces into a stark reality, and evidence the impossibility of escape from them. What I know to be true though is that art is how the Black world has always spoken its minds, no matter the platform it has been exhibited on. What the rise of the internet has shifted however are the terms of engagement. In our current moment, and this very well may change, the alterity of southern Black womanhood is enjoying an unceasing spotlight, an unceasing accessibility for those to whom, as Mbembe suggests, are becoming more the wiser to its universality.

Black Quare South, Black Quare Futures

Scholars of Blackness and queerness in the South recognize the potential of the space and have worn away at the popular construction of the region as culturally and temporally static. In "Quare Studies," E. Patrick Johnson critiques the tendency within queer studies to exclude Blackness as a point of analysis. Invoking his southern grandmother's play on words, he argues that the crosscurrents of Blackness and queerness are absent within the growing field of queer studies and that Blackness, particularly his

grandmother's brand of southern Blackness, holds the potential for "... an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience," (126). So the elasticity of southern Blackness is put to use, making space for what is already there, and has just gone under recognized. Southern Blackness and queerness is futuristic precisely because it exists unprotected and precarious in the reality of imminent violence. Speaking of E. Patrick Johnson's grandmother, it is fascinating to note the importance of the intergenerational knowledge she represents in future making processes[12]. In Black families and kinship networks, which I often read as queer, the grandmother's role is often integral to the endurance of the multiple generations that follow her. These practices of survival coalesced in the plantation South, and for the majority of us queer was and continues to be the way out of destruction, even as death is immanent.

Regina Bradley's discussion of how hip hop annotates southern Blackness offers some insight into how the Black South literally opens up space to consider the future. Discussing the opening scene to the series premiere of WGN's *Underground,* which finds a character attempting self-liberation, Bradley illuminates paths for escape by drawing attention to the way hip hop, particularly Kanye West's "Black Skinhead" illustrate a continuum between the historically rooted experience of slavery and contemporary expressions of Blackness. In the tradition of Fred Moten, Bradley reads the scene for the way that it is situated in contemporary renderings of slavery in the South *and* in how the music aurally situates the scene, improvising and disrupting the oft reproduced story.

[12] My colleague Madyson Crawford, examines this in her work.

"The use of 'Black Skinhead' and other hip-hop in the *Underground* series is unexpected and jarring to the ear because of the immediate recognition of a contemporary sound to sonically annotate an otherwise historically entrenched moment of black life...The large temporal chasm between the historical time periods of nineteenth century and twenty-first century black experiences is bridged by hip-hop. The inclusion of twentieth and twenty-first century black music to follow Noah and his group's attempt to escape slavery moves beyond being a mere way to engage a younger generation of viewers. Rather, hip-hop serves as an entry point for witnessing the horrors and complexities of enslaved black persons trying to maneuver the white supremacist power structures historically documented in the American imagination while plotting their own sense of freedom and agency," (4-5).

The violence of slavery contradicts linear time, not just literally, as Sharpe and Hartman have theorized we are in the afterlife of slavery, but figuratively as well. Why is it we can almost effortlessly conjoin cultural moments in two distinct time periods and understand that they parallel? That is the reality of Black existence—the past is never quite past and is always intimately tied to the future. It is almost if through art, we are able to loosen the experience of slavery from the constraints of linear time and narratives of progression. The art becomes like a time machine in its delicate but discernable hold on moments we would immediately assume are out of reach.

Conclusion

The creative labors of the hosts of the Black Joy Mixtape, Tennessee based rapper Bbymutha, Janelle Monáe and others are representative of the shape and form the South imparts within Black art. I cannot speak too much on what the artists are intending with their work, but what they make available to us are methods for imagining the deprecated and maligned Black woman's body as carrying the future, as carrying hopes and dreams, and for that potential not to be circumscribed by the dirtiness or ugliness of a Bad

Reputation. In my close readings of these artists and their interventions, I will show how southern Black womanhood is reconceived as the future. I believe that my purpose is to do more than critique, so I also create. I am inspired by these writers, artists and performers, and I incorporate their lessons and considerations in my own work, both academic and artistic. In ruminating on the question that structured the beginning of my argument, I decided that my hopes for Black futures simply need be that we have everything we need to create them right now, in this very moment.

Chapter One

"You can't give yo pussy to a nigga
who not used to getting pussy
cause that pussy gon'
be everybody business...
You can't break bread with these niggas,
give head to these niggas
They ungrateful lil' mama,
That's bad for business"

Trill Epistemologies

Chattanooga based, Tennessee rapstress and mother of four Bbymutha's slick, infectious track "Rules" plays on the SoundCloud app. Even with a hook as catchy as this, it's hard not to do a double take at the chosen cover art for the single: a portrait of Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen from the cover of *USA Weekend* Magazine. When speaking to *Fader* magazine, the artist was quoted as saying, "He's the voice of absolutely nothing, so he might as well be the face of what I'm doing. I feel like that's what he should get up in the pulpit and tell y'all asses. He should tell y'all not to *give your pussy to a nigga who not used to gettin' pussy*...." "Rules" is the lead track off of Bbymutha's *Glow Kit* EP and is also the song that landed her an interview with *The Fader*, as well as a lively set at the 2018 Fader Fort showcase during SXSW. The lyrical content of the song reflects what I refer to as *trill epistemologies*, or the particular methods of receiving and sharing knowledge among Black women in the south that prioritizes cultural and interpersonal authenticity, i.e. keeping it one-hunnid. Indeed, "Rules" is an apt name for this track, as Bbymutha spells out the guidelines for all the "lil' mama's" on how to assess the qualifications of a potential hookup before providing

access to her body. Very much in the tradition of Blues women such as Bessie Smith (who was also born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894, and who passed away at age 43 in Clarksdale, Mississippi) and the legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, collector of southern Black folklore, the song is a cautionary tale that stems from the artists' own experience with a gentleman caller who gets a bit too big for his britches. Invoking the oral traditions of her predecessors, Bbymutha weaves a tale of underwhelming sex, street gossip, and transactional mishaps that motivates her to spell out the rules for the girls. However, her advice is not limited to choosing sexual partners, as she offers guidelines for the proper conductions of illicit transactions that occur in the trap houses or *bandos* of the deep south[13]. Her rules do not just apply to sex, but one's financial health as well, highlighting the ever-present connection between sex and capital.

According to Bbymutha, government name Brittnee Moore, she has not always had a good relationship to rules. Her experiences in the racist atmosphere of the Florida school system, to which she was transferred at age 11 following her mother's pregnancy, mirrors that of many Black girls. Following an incident where a racist teacher physically assaulted her and she reacted, Brittnee was facing a future in juvenile detention when she concocted a story of mental illness that landed her in psychiatric care. In the following years she faced abuse from boyfriends and her father, as well as two pregnancies each resulting in a set of fraternal twins. As a young Black woman with dark skin, a country accent, four children, and a history of violence and dislocation, Bbymutha's central

[13] While it is unknown who started the term *bando* it has been popularized through the music of Atlanta based trap artists Gucci Mane and Migos. The term refers to an a*bando*ned house that young Black entrepreneurs commandeer in the preparation and dissemination of narcotics.

tension with the rules is that her very existence is predicated on breaking them. More precisely, when the rules of white feminine propriety, chastity and domesticity come into contact with her, they are exposed as a farce and shattered. This history spurs Bbymutha's reconceptualization of rules, what they should be for and how they should be imparted. While her lyrics convey the necessity for a moral and ethical code of conduct for Black women, she eschews white supremacist, patriarchal standards by prioritizing her own pleasure and financial safety rather than upholding the very systems that attend to her destruction. Furthermore, Bbymutha's candid, put-it-all-out-there persona opens the floodgates for criticism of her life and decisions while simultaneously exposing the anxieties and tensions of American culture that surface always with the bodies of racialized, gendered individuals, specifically poor and working-class Black women. Completely aware that her body serves a particular function, Bbymutha takes it upon herself to sketch out the rules of engaging her and her music; the baggage that has been heaped upon her imparts a certain power that forces listeners, viewers and followers to reckon with the contradictions of a cultural atmosphere that simultaneously depends on the corporeal and creative labor of Black women and the physical and mental destruction of Black women. The track does more than provide a guide to women on how to avoid the unfortunate mishaps that come part and parcel to life in southern Black communities—it provides a model of Black women's responses to the suffocating forces of whiteness and patriarchy.

Joel Osteen's role in Bbymutha's artistry is as an empty vessel, which is incredible and hilarious on multiple levels. This is precisely because in the U.S. racial logic, Osteen

occupies the position of master and Bbymutha, marked by the violence of state, occupies the position of the enslaved woman. They do indeed appear to be in direct opposition to one another, Osteen being white, cis, straight, christian, male and extremely wealthy and Bbymutha just being. For all that validates Osteen's humanity and his social position, there is an undercurrent of sordid legacies of brutality and extraction that surface through the televangelist's actions in the contemporary moment. Osteen is the embodiment of the white masculine pornographic consciousness in all of the obvious ways, the most ridiculous being his shameless accumulation of capital. With a net worth estimated between $40-60 million and business ventures that seem to grow on top of one another like mold, Osteen is the ultimate, modern capitalist subject. It is impossible to amass such capital without exploiting a host of people along the way. Osteen's sheep flock to him because of his optimistic sermons filled with hopes and promises of financial comfort through cultivating a relationship with God, paying tithes and offerings, and buying his book, on sale at his website and in a LifeWay Christian Store near you. The pastor has consistently been a target for critics, from his unabashed pursuit of financial gain through the Church, and most recently and notoriously, for not extending the Christian spirit and opening the doors of his 606,000 sq. ft. church to families in need of shelter in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, which devastated Houston, Texas in late August 2017. A representative for Lakewood posted a message to social media relaying that the church was closed due to flooding, however later investigation confirmed that the church was "bone dry." Osteen was heavily criticized and sounded off in the days following that it

had all been a misunderstanding, insisting that the doors of his church were always open. Sure, Jan.

I took an advanced screenwriting class with his rather privileged son in undergrad. I have always been fascinated by him as a public figure, the benign soul he impersonates and the legacy of brutality he invokes. I see in Bbymutha's choice to use him, to render him object if only for a fleeting moment, a strategic, artistic move that takes advantage of the digital space and transforms it into a space of possibility. Violent intimacies highlight the tensions between these two figures—it is by the will of white men that such degradation was visited upon Black women's flesh; it is directly a result of white men's actions that Black women's pain becomes ambiguous. Uri McMillan explains that the genealogy of Black women in performance art reveals an ability to make use of the objecthood of the Black body, avatar production, for strategic purposes such, as escape from slavery. Bbymutha's artistic sensibilities are indicative of what Moten calls the object's disposessive force; she is able to read in the figure a certain objecthood, a dispossessing, and this is made possible through Osteen's own inability to define himself outside of his relationship to capital. Black people are human money, and wealthy whites are primarily defined by their relationship to money, and the two are in a constant tug of war. I will venture as far as to say that white men's utter dependence on capital and the process of gendering and racialization capital depends upon serves as an interrogation of their power, and opportunity to challenge and maybe minimize such power. Even if the margin is microscopic, it stands to be exposed under the magnifying gaze of the digital sphere. This is not at all to say that the internet gives Black women power over white

men, it is simply to point out that southern Black women artists, fully reared in the context of southern violence, possess the ability to illuminate new angles of the history of this dysfunctional relationship. The use of the Osteen cover also relays a message to stans and future fans of the artist. In full awareness of the contradictions and hypocrisies her body exposes, Bbymutha's skillful puppetry is an invocation of the sanitized white masculine body as a mere vessel for preaching her own gospel. It is no coincidence that she chose a figure like Osteen as opposed to other televangelists, say, Paula White, or even T.D. Jakes. The artist is taking advantage of the racialized and gendered dynamics (or the absence of such) Osteen offers that a white woman or a Black man are still partially closed off to.

Trippy synthesizers, winding bass lines, and trap drums all coalesce to provide the atmosphere for "Rules." Bbymutha's ice cold voice masters the beat, allowing it to frame her trap tale. The track is firmly ensconced in the genealogy of southern hip hop, specifically trap music (hence, trap tale) the musical outgrowth of the informal markets controlled by Black youth in Atlanta and surrounding areas. The video provides additional complicating layers—Bbymutha spits her bars in the halls of a school surrounded by several "students" whose dynamic performances of Blackness and queerness implies that they have as little use for white supremacy's rules as Bbymutha. In one scene, the artist stands assertively in front of the room, writing on the chalkboard in multicolor chalk and learning the chirren'. This entire scene looks like the most lit detention ever, and as students pass blunts, moisturize with shea butter, read pornographic materials and strum guitars, Bbymutha imparts her valuable lessons, and I

envision myself there, front and center, rapt with attention and taking notes as fervently as I would in any graduate seminar.

Q.U.E.E.N.

"They drained us of our dirt, and all the things that made us special. And then you were lost. Sleeping. And you didn't remember anything at all."

These words decorate the trailer to *Dirty Computer*, billed by artist Janelle Monáe as an "emotion picture" foreshadowing the release of her third full-length album of the same name. The trailer's scenes flash, offering quick glimpses of Black queer utopias intercut with nightmarish visions of state violence against Black queer people. Nothing short of an intense reckoning with Black imagination and Black queer futures can be expected from Monáe, whose artistic legacy is steeped within such examinations. Raised in Kansas City, Kansas, Monáe's music career began in earnest when she moved to Atlanta in 2001 and began the Wondaland Arts Society with other artists in the city.[14] One of her first musical connections in the city was Big Boi of iconic rap duo OutKast, whose musical legacy is also heavily marked by Afrofuturism's influence. By Afrofuturism, I am referring the body of science fiction, scholarly literature and music created by Black artists that disrupt linear time and imagine Black existence/resistance in the future. George Clinton, Sun Ra and Nnedi Okuwifor are just a few Black diasporic subjects that have produced work under this umbrella. Monaé's artistry is steeped in this tradition, and in concerns of southern Black womanhood, and this extends beyond just

[14] Wondaland Arts Society is now Monáe's imprint to which she is signed through Atlantic Records.

geography. I argue that due to legacies of internal and transnational movements and migrations of Black folks, the work of most Black artists can be anchored in the artistic traditions of the Black South, both U. S. and global, a lá E. Patrick Johnson. This is something I intend to explore further in future iterations of this project.

As the last phrase of dialogue ("And you didn't remember anything at all.") plays in the *Dirty Computer* trailer, we see a hand stroking a tattoo on Monáe's left forearm, a rendering of Jesus Christ being crucified on the cross. *And you didn't remember anything at all.* The visual compounded with the artists words presents a powerful reference to the Maafa, the great disaster responsible for the looting of the African continent, and of enslaved Africans' consciousness. Writers such as Hartman, Moten, Mbembe and others have grappled with the objecthood of Black people, the question hanging in the air of whether descendants of enslaved Africans can ever be refilled, whether we can ever recognize or reclaim what was stolen. I want to put Monáe's art in conversation with these thinkers, as it deals with this question directly. The artist's work has represented to the public the necessity of a reinterpretation of the Black feminine body, as a site of joy and pleasure not *despite* the legacy of slavery and oppression but also not necessarily because of it. In her work, Monáe takes into consideration that the Black body is a technology altered by enslavement, and she interrogates what possibilities and alternatives this offers in lieu of The Refill. I will show how the continuum of Monáe's art represents Blackness in response to what Mbembe posits as "the symbol of a conscious desire for life." The artists' moves, since the beginning of her career, convey an intentionality in carrying out her visions for Black womanhood and Black existence, even

while recognizing that it may not always be possible to delineate exactly what such an existence means. Monáe plays in this ambiguity, using it as cover to experiment with multiple forms of Black womanhood, Black queerness, and Black (im)possibility. Across her large body of work, from albums, film appearances, performances and videos, Monáe complicates perceptions of Black femininity, employing it for revolutionary purposes. This is centered primarily in her invocation of science fiction and technology, particularly her inquiries into how Black individuals relate to technological advancement, as we will see through her use of the ArchAndroid figure. Indirectly, Monáe's artistic production critiques formulations of Black futures that deny credence and validity to the Black south and to Black femininity.

Recently, the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies here at the University of Texas at Austin hosted a conversation on the film *Black Panther* and what it means in thinking about Black futures. Panel discussants included the writer of the Black Panther comics Evan Narcisse, Dr. Christen Smith, Dr. Stephen Marshall and Dr. Abimbola Adunni Adelakun. During her talk, Dr. Smith expressed both joy and appreciation for this film, and a curiosity about why Black femininity gets lost in conversations about Black revolution. She critiqued the tendency in Afrofuturist thought to present revolutionary Black womanhood, futuristic Black womanhood, as a negation of the feminine. It is this contradiction that I believe Monáe makes her most important contributions. Through an assessment of the artists' overall Afrofuturist vision and a close reading of her newest visuals and lyrics, I will show that Monáe understands Black femininity as not just integral for Black futures, but responsible for bringing them about.

ArchAndroid Orchestrated

From her first album *The ArchAndroid* all the way to her upcoming effort *Dirty Computer,* Monáe has utilized the figure of the cyborg to theorize about existing as Black, queer and *here.* The consistency of this figure across the genres of her work illustrates the seamless nature of Blackness and queerness, which is most readily visible in the South. Dr. Omise'eke Tinsley's " Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" theorizes the coming together of these crosscurrents of Blackness and queerness, understanding the Atlantic as a geographical and cultural site where these forces bleed into each other. She understands this oceanic site as an archive that dissolves linearity. Similarly, in this paper I am considering the South in the sense of the circum-Atlantic; the lands touched by the waters that brought enslaved Africans to the Americas. Keeping this in mind, along with Johnson's formulation of the "quare" Black south, I want to consider the shape and form Blackness and queerness take together in southern space. In an op-ed titled "Queerness Looks Different in the South" on community blog Blavity (that seems to now have been mysteriously deleted), one of the writers for the site claimed that the stifling oppression of the South makes it next to impossible for queer Black folks to be true to themselves without fear. The author does (did?) not claim any expertise besides a mid-west upbringing and 4 years spent at an HBCU in the Mississippi Delta, but her assertions are in line with national and global misconceptions of the South and its unique oppressions. What happens when we understand the south's conservative, violence legacies as drawing Blackness and queerness into each other instead of dividing them? What possibilities

become available when we theorize from this space, not necessarily as an origin, but as the location of our archives of memory?

The centrality of the crosscurrents of Blackness and queerness in Monáe's work root her art in the Black South and belie the spatial-cultural site's investment in Black futures. During the Great Migrations, scores of Black folks moved and relocated to urban centers in the Northeast, Mid-west and West coast. Though she has not explicitly detailed how her family ended up in Kansas City, this history characterizes her geographic relationships to her hometown and the space to which she re-relocated in a process of reverse migration to make music. Such movements have always been understood by Black people as containing temporal elements; for instance, Isabelle Wilkerson's journalistic account of The Great Migration *The Warmth of Other Suns* finds many of its interlocutors recollections of escaping from the deep south motivated by a desire to leave the past behind. What does this mean for the scores of Black folks that stayed "behind", embroiled so deep in the south's cruel violence that it becomes almost normal? Are we stuck in the past, or have we inhabited an entirely different temporal position out of necessity? The nation's "turns" back to the south for cultural authenticity, in everything from music, to film (*Moonlight*), and television (*Atlanta, Queen Sugar*), reveal an exciting potential to challenge the convenient narratives that have buried the South as backwards and behind the times. This flies in the face of Black southerners' cultural labor which has consistently proven our experience in this geographic space as non-linear. Take, for instance, the national myth of American progress which conveniently shifts the onus onto the South to represent the archaic institutions of slavery and Jim Crow, from

which the rest of the nation has progressed and built a true colorblind society. This myth is destroyed when considering that upon arrival in the North, West, and Midwest's cultural centers, Black migrants were still subjugated by the racism that had characterized these spaces since European feet first made contact with the soil.

Pieces of the puzzle. I argue that Monáe's art gathers these histories and brings them all in cooperation for her larger project of theorizing Black futures. Beyond her focus on technology, there are multiple threads to her work that challenge her Black audience to reconstitute how they understand Blackness in relation to queerness. In an interview she describes her use of the ArchAndroid as a metaphor for the experience of being an "other" in Western society, and the artist has consistently challenged gendered and sexual norms in her dress, and the way she utilizes her body onstage. As easy as it is for Black people to recognize her talent and value (and it is indeed much easier than it is in the case of Bbymutha) we also register resistance to her non-traditional depictions of Blackness. Janelle Monáe gives us freedom to resist, though why anyone would want to I cannot fathom in my queer Black girl fantasies. The world she has created with her art beckons to us with promises for the future—love, acceptance, joy and liberation. And it is entirely consensual.

On February 22nd, 2018 Janelle Monáe published the video for "Make Me Feel" on YouTube. The video opens with a heavy swinging door, and two glittery figures entering a space, their faces hidden until they come under full exposure of the red light. As they peep the club scene, co-star Tessa Thompson's face registers excitement, while Monáe's registers, well, caution. This caution begins to make sense when Thompson's

character strikes up a con-flirtation in the following scene with another individual—*oh, they're there together. Like…together together.* You better believe it. The video's B-storyline centers on an incredibly dressed Monáe, rocking your favorite aunty's blonde short cut and cutting a rug like your drunk but highly coordinated uncle after he just won the family spades tournament. Behind her a bevy of brown-skinned beauties bust their moves, dressed like the sexiest Black panthers you or I have ever seen. "Make Me Feel" plays in color and light and costuming, illustrating the safety and pleasure in Black queer spaces. The video portrays the inundation of pleasure the artist is drawing from multiple lovers, who may present as feminine or masculine individuals, and this is further compounded by the way the music pulls her body in several directions, towards both her male and female lovers, and even toward her own self at one point. This particular track is the first cut off her upcoming *Dirty Computer*, the trailer which was discussed at the top of the section. In this mediation on "the dirt" and "all the things that made us special," Monáe is suggesting that all may not be lost. The lyrics of the song convey the artist's apathy with her lover's (ultimately the public's) refusal the to accept her love as is, demanding that she repeatedly qualify and label her feelings. For the entirety of Monáe's career, she has been subject to inquiries about her sexuality and has steadfastly refused to answer to demands that she label herself. This refusal is acted out by the artist in the visual. She acquiesces to the desires of her body and her soul in queer ecstasy–it is revolutionary precisely because Monáe prioritizes her feelings and her natural inclination to follow her desires even if they run counter to those of her lover-as-the-viewing-public

Monáe' dropped the second visual in the *Dirty Computer* saga at the same time as "Make Me Feel." "Django Jane" has the viewer step through a pair of large doors and right into Monáe's divine presence as she sits in her "palace" which looks to be a laboratory dressed with African-inspired décor, surrounded by those sexy Black Panther dancers. The entire visual is very in your face, with Monáe and company's sharp, full bodied movements as she spits:

> And we gon' start a mothafuckin' pussy riot/ or put the motherfuckas on a pussy diet/look at me I guarantee I got 'em quiet/ look at that I guarantee they all inspired!

She continues:

> Running outta space on my damn bandwagon/ and remember when they used to say I looked too mannish!/Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it/y'all can't ban it, made out like a bandit/they been trying hard just to make us all vanish/ I suggest they put a flag on a whole 'nother planet!/ Jane Bond, never Jane Doe/and I Django, never Sambo/Black and white man that's always been my camo/It's looking like y'all gon' need some mo' ammo!

All the while Monáe is moving and rhyming, she is sporadically bathed in red light. This red has a multitude of connotations: sex, blood, violence, and power. I want to take all these meanings into consideration in theorizing the *red-light district* and its appearances in southern Black women's art. If violent intimacies attune us to how the hidden nature of the historical rape of Black women appears in contemporary work, the red-light district, traditionally designated as geographic locations where women sell sex, provides a site within which to powerfully and cautiously situate such work. Because of this history, it has been posited that Black women are, in some ways, always doing sex work or representing sex labor. Monáe's use of the red light brings the pain, the violence and the danger of this history to the forefront of her representation of her body, resituating the red

light as uniquely feminine and invoking a certain power. The red-light district can be understood as a place where women's power is recognized. Remembering back to our conversation about the dispossesive force objects assert on the subject, these power dynamics are thrown into chaos when Black women, cis, queer and trans, claim the power imbued into us by the utter dependence on *our sex*. Monáe is powerful in her video, her costume straddling the lines between masculine and feminine, African and European, relaying a particular militaristic authority. This is women's revolution, the claiming of femininity and the deployment of it for purposes normally considered alien. To feel powerful, to feel in control, to feel anything at all.

Monáe dropped *Dirty Computer* on April 26th, 2018. The same day, *Rolling Stone* published her cover story, where the artist comes out as pansexual. The story was disseminated through the online space, and several new sites reported a large spike in online searches for the definition of the term. This is a watershed moment in both Black diasporic culture and U.S. popular culture for representation of queer Black women. About two weeks prior to the completion of this report, I told my mother, who has been a huge fan of Monáe since the beginning of her career, that I was not straight; that I in fact identified as queer, and that I rejected traditional norms of gender and sexuality. After a short, tense discussion and some tears, the two of us moved on from the subject. Two days ago, after coming across the Monáe story, my mother texted me asking what pansexual meant. We are Black southerners, and queerness takes shape in our family in multiple ways, even though it is ignored on the surface. Inherent within southern Blackness is an inclination to "go with the flow." My mother exemplifies this, and as I,

her only child, has changed, she has changed with me, slowly but surely. This is the Black future. Dealing with the myth of being stuck in the past, Black southerners have managed to carve out an entirely different cultural-temporal space. If you want to find Blackness, queerness and the future, then go back down South. Because what does taboo do but bring us closer to what we fear we might find?

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This report was typed by La'Kayla C. Williams.