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Imagining the Black Feminine: Radical Performances in Rap Music

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Abstract

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Canonical scholarship on rap music (i.e. Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*) assumes a link between female sex and gender. This gendered conversation limits the scope of analysis and often renders rap as, simply, misogynistic. It is often the Black feminine that is silenced, misread, and ignored in these analyses. In this thesis, I seek to reevaluate the influence of Black feminine performances in rap music. I apply black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers' concept of the flesh, explicated in her landmark text "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," to theorize a radical practice of imagination. I define imagination as the ability to conceive of that which is not immediately present and argue that performances of imagination break from all dualities, particularly man/woman/ and male/female. Through close readings of OutKast's "Elevators (Me & You)" and "Jazzy Belle" from the album *ATLiens* and Missy Elliott's "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]" and "Work It," I read for the flesh expressed as imagination to explore the ways in which rap musical and visual productions are used to imagine and create alternative selves, identities, and realities. I conclude that Outkast interrogates the alienation and outkasting of Black populations in America and imagines the endless possibilities of that which is outside of the norm. Further, though Jazzy Belle is critiqued for failing to adhere to the patriarchal construction of women as pure and chaste, I read her failure as a demand to imagine non-normative femininities. In the case of "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]," I posit that imagination is expressed through the theatrical depictions of Elliott's imagined body. The iconic plastic bag suit and the manipulations of her proportions through special effects combine to make a body which is not legible within gendered discourses. Additionally, her subversion of language in "Work It" is an example of the ways in which performance imagines possibilities for expression that language alone cannot sufficiently provide.

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Forward

Imagination: The ability to foresee, visualize, and create your idea in your mind is the most powerful resource you have. -George Washington Carver

Hip-Hop is lauded as a revolutionary Black aesthetic, a genre, lifestyle, and set of practices that work on and against dominant aesthetics. KRS-One lays out the nine elements that make up the hip-hop aesthetic in “9 Elements”: breaking or breakdancing, MC’ing and rap, graffiti art, DJ’ing, beatboxing, street fashion, street language, and street entrepreneurship. Rap is music that stems from this hip-hop aesthetic. However, in canonical scholarship, the analysis of rap music and visual culture is plagued by the constraints of heteronormativity. This gendered conversation limits the scope of analysis and often renders rap as, simply, misogynistic. The analysis often entraps the genre into constraining dialectics and binaries which misses the radical potential of the genre.

It is often the Black feminine that is silenced, misread, and ignored in these analyses. In this thesis, I seek to excavate the influence of Black feminine performances in rap music. Upon the performances of the Black feminine, I theorize a radical practice of imagination through performances of alterity. I argue that performances of imagination break from all dualities, particularly man/woman/ and male/female. By excavating these moments of imagination in rap music, I follow a tradition of queer hip-hop scholarship (i.e., articles found in “All Hail the Queenz:” *Women and Performance*) which highlight the moments in which rap music breaks from the constraints of dialectic thought and disarticulates the link between female sex and gender.

Chapter one of this paper lays out my theoretical framework. I analyze and explicate Hortense Spillers concepts of the flesh, body, and the ungendered upon which my argument

builds. Further, I explain my use of the Black feminine and of performance. Chiefly, I explicate my concept of imagination. Chapter two explores OutKast's "Elevators (Me & You)" and "Jazzy Belle" from their album *ATLiens*. In this section, I examine the process by which a population is produced as alien as well as the possibility of the performance of the alien and outkast. Through "Jazzy Belle", I examine the parameters of imagination and contend with the effects of a patriarchy. Lastly, Chapter three explores how imagination interrogates concepts of the (human) body and humanity through Missy Elliott's "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]." Further, Elliott's single "Work It" highlights the way in which she employs language to disassemble and break from conventional language practices as a performance of imagination.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Hip hop is a terrain upon which feminist and non-feminist defenders and critics have mapped gender. Canonical scholarship on rap music, such as Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (1999) and Tricia Rose's *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop--and Why It Matters* (2008), assumes a link between female sex and gender. However, I apply Hortense Spiller's concept of the flesh to hip hop studies to further explore the scope of black feminine performance in rap music beyond this binary. Spillers asserts that the language we have within the purview of heteronormative gender and sexuality is not sufficient to properly describe the scope of the black feminine.

I draw on Spillers's alternative theorization of the *ungendered female*, one who is not legible within the scope of the traditional gender paradigm due to the history of violence that her body has sustained in slavery, rendering her simply as flesh. This thesis considers the function and content of Spillers's ungendered flesh that is present in rap music with an analysis of iterations of the flesh in rap videos and lyrics. The distinction that Spillers makes between the flesh and body as well as her concept of the ungendered foreground my conceptualization of imagination because they theorize subversion of those mechanisms that seek to contain and capture potential (i.e., binaries and the body). I read for the flesh as an expression of imagination through which alternative selves and realities are possible. Using the videos and lyrics of OutKast's "Elevators (Me & You)" and "Jazzy Belle" as well as Missy Elliot's "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]" and "Work It," I employ the imagination as an analytic to explore the ways in which hip-hop is used by artists to imagine and create selves, identities, and realities that are alternative

to those presented in dominant discourses. This imagination interrogates and reconsiders concepts of gender, the body, and the function of black feminine performance in rap music.

Imagination, which I define not as unreal or impossible but as the creative ability to conceive of that which is not immediately present, operates in rap videos and lyrics as an expression the flesh. The distinction between the flesh and the body distinguishes between liberated and captive positions respectively. Consequently, I foreground my concept of imagination upon the flesh and not the body as to break from mechanisms of capture that ensnare the possibilities of the flesh. Further, Spillers' concept of ungendering interrogates and destabilizes the concepts of gender and humanity.. Imagination advances the concept of the ungendered flesh in naming the practices and performances of alterity that result from the subversion of gender, humanity, and the body.

The concept of the flesh is anchored in the context of racialized slavery in America and hinges upon the violence (whipping, branding, burning, and torture) inflicted by the slave master to the literal skin of the captive body. Nevertheless, for Alexander Weheliye who takes up Spillers' conception of the flesh in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), the flesh comes to signify a space of survival and possibility in which the interrogation and reconceptualization of humanity is imaginable (Weheliye 2014). Further, Spillers' conception of the flesh is ungendered because it does not ascribe to normative conceptions of gender and therefore cannot be considered male or female by the traditional definition (Spillers 1987). Thus, female sex and gender are delinked and the expansive possibilities of black feminine performance is uncovered. It is upon this concept of an ungendered flesh that I build my concept of imagination.

In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Black feminist theorist Hortense Spillers distinguishes between the flesh and the body. This distinction leads to a discussion about the violent process through which slaves are racialized and gendered. She encapsulates this process in the term ungendering. Dr. Alexander Weheliye excavates in Spillers conception of ungendering a potential for freedom and argues that the violence used to reduce the slave to flesh, or in other words to reduce the slave to the level of subhuman, occasions an interrogation of the term humanity. Through this interrogation, he identifies a potential for slaves transcend the limited conceptions of the (White and male) human. It is upon this potential that I foreground a discussion of imagination, the creative ability to conceive of that which is not immediately apparent. I argue that employing Black feminine flesh as a framework affords a theory and praxis of escape that highlights liberation in visual, literary, and sonic productions of rap music.

Employing the framework of the Black feminine (reduced to flesh and ungendered) allows the excavation of liberation with the genre. While there are lyrics and videos that are complicit to and participate in violence against Black women, what has been ignored by critics of hip hop is the generative analysis that stems from reading ALL, not just some (conscious rap, rap by cis women, or by queer artist) rap through a Black feminist framework. The “ungendered” flesh framework allows us to delink black feminine performances from female sex and realize that the scope of the black feminine includes limitless iterations outside of the gender performance of cis-gendered black women. Thus, I choose cases in which artists use imagination, either in lyrics or in video, to posit alterity and not simply by sex, sexuality, or gender. The feminine as I use it refers to performances that draw from the embodied history/knowledge/ information and power of the body reduced to flesh. While the term speaks

to “femaleness” on a certain level, I intend it to diverge from normative conceptions of gender in the breadth of its application.

Flesh/Body Distinction

Spillers argues that there is a distinction between the flesh and the body due to the violence (whipping, branding, chaining, and torture inflicted to discipline the slave) inflicted on the flesh by the slave owner during enslavement. The theory of the flesh and the captive body are not only relevant in the historical context of racialized slavery in America. The violence that Black people in America continue to face because the disciplining mechanisms of the police state reproduce the violence of the initial historical moment. Thus, the theory is relevant throughout the span of Black history in America (a few points of this history being the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights era, and the current genocide of black people).

The distinction between the body and the flesh serves to discursively distinguish between captive and liberated positions. Spillers asserts that "before the 'body' there is 'flesh'" (*Ibid.*) The flesh is the free space that one occupies before capture while the body is a mechanism of capture comprised of social constructions that are imposed on the slave after capture. By this description, flesh takes on a level of inherence that, in comparison, renders the body a mere conception. The flesh, thus is an unlimited space in which it is possible to explore alternative modes of being and knowing. On the other hand, the body is a mechanism of capture comprised of social constructions that are imposed on the flesh after the capture of the slave. The body is not tangible material, rather a system of concepts, meanings, and names that are imposed to bind the free space of the flesh to identify it and make it legible. The imposition of white American social conceptions that occur through the body gives slaves the opportunity to be recognized by the socio-cultural organization of the American context. Without the body, the flesh would otherwise

be unbounded, impossible to identify. However, legibility is necessary for subjugation. For example, it was necessary for slave masters to strip slaves of their names and culture and rename them by western standards to understand and subsequently subjugate them. Understanding, naming, and containing the black body consequently was necessary for racialized slavery and racist institutions.

I build upon the concept of the flesh to develop imagination as antithetical to the discourse of the body. The flesh allows for self-identification and expression as opposed to imposed meanings and over determined tropes. The potential of this space is the ability to exist within a system without being bound to it, the ability to imagine alterity. This alterity lends to identification and imagination for those who have historically been reduced to flesh. Employing the flesh as an analytic for rap music uncovers this space of alterity in the genre and I argue that flesh manifests as imagination. I apply the imagination as an analytic to uncover the way Black rap artists resist and transcend limited discourses. Reading for imagination in lyrics and videos expose the moments that “break” from normative discourses. I come to the concept of imagination through the figure of the Black female slave who “provide[s] a physical and biological expression of “otherness” (67) and occasions a theorization of alternatives to gendered hegemonic discourses which cannot properly account for her “monstrosity”.

The Ungendered Quality of the Flesh

The ungendered quality of the flesh is the means through which the Black feminine flaws the logic of gender and the modern sovereign subject. Spillers coins the term “ungendering” which is a term that refers to the non-traditional way in which black female subjects must be considered due to the indiscriminate way in which violence was used against enslaved men and women. Specifically, “ungendering” is the process that occurs through black experiences which

eliminates gender differentiation because these experiences diverge from normative gendered experiences. Thus, the “ungendered” subject is the socio-cultural consequence that emerges from the paradox of being at once subjected to the body and reduced to flesh. Spillers formulates this trait of the flesh by analyzing the slave experience from capture to the Middle Passage to working in the U.S economies.

The “ungendering” process can be seen in two crucial moments: in the Middle Passage where one’s complete identity is liminal and undifferentiated; and through the undiscerning violence done to both female and male flesh during slavery. First, during the Middle Passage one’s identity is in a suspended state wherein the “human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’/ ‘accounted,’ or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure” (72). In this state, one cannot exist as male or female, only as thing, object, or quantity. Secondly, in working in captivity, the female slave was not treated better or more delicately than the male. The female slave did not do less work nor was she subject to less violence. Rather, it is specifically the flesh that was mutilated by the slaveholder, “this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh--of female flesh ‘ungendered’--[that] offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying” (68). What emerges in the flesh instead is the insurgent, ungendered female subject which is distinct from the gendered female. Citing this assertion, Weheliye expands that “[i]n this context, ‘gendered femaleness’ denotes gender as a ‘purely natural’ and sovereign modality of difference while the revolt of ‘female social subject’ articulates gender as an integral component in the abolition of the human as Man” (23). Therefore, novel conceptions of gender and humanity become possible through the ungendered female subject.

In the context of slavery, the mutilated, marred, and disfigured female flesh is evidence of the faulty logic of white womanhood as pure, sacred, and that which should be protected. We see the logics of white womanhood most clearly deconstructed in Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech at the Convention for Women's Rights in Akron Ohio. Her refrain asks "Aint I a Woman?" as her experiences as a slave starkly differ from the treatment given to white women. Truth contends with the statement "dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar" (Truth 1851). In her experience no one ever extended these presumed privileges to her, which begs the question: "ar'n't I a woman?" Also Truth asserts "Nobody eber halps me into carriages, or ober mudpuddles, or gibs me any best place!" From this quote, it can be extrapolated that to be feminine is to be docile, vulnerable, virtuous, and relegated to the realm of the domestic. These are the characteristics that dictate how women were treated and regarded and the characteristics that were presumed to necessitate second-class citizenship. However, only white women were regarded in this way. Her statements both highlight what constitutes the feminine and the ways in which black women's narratives do not align with these conceptions. Further Truth asserts that:

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when—I could get it -- and bear de lash as well! And ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos' all sold off the slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ar'n't I a woman? (Truth 1851)

Thus, Truth's contention is not only highlighting that the feminine holds nothing for her but is also describing that the requirements of her condition were no different than that of a man's. However, this passage also highlights the female sex's unique condition of giving birth. Spillers accounts for this particularity, stating that "gender...sustained elsewhere in culture, does not emerge for the African-American female in this historic instances, except indirectly, except

as a way to reinforce through the process of birthing... ‘the reproduction of the values and behavior patterns necessary to maintain the system of hierarchy in its various aspects of gender, class, and race or ethnicity’” (79). Thus, in being barred from the feminine, except for the purpose of reproducing to sustain racial and gendered hierarchies, and in suffering indiscriminately, Truth is ungendered. Applying the theory of the ungendered flesh to rap music warrants a departure from the discourse of gendered femaleness and explores the potential of black feminine performances of alterity in rap music.

In contrast to perceived and constructed fragility of white womanhood, the brutal treatment of the Black female shows futility in the logic of gender and humanity. It is the racialization that happens by way of the Black feminine flesh that makes her the quintessential “Other” as “this absence *from* a subject position... provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness” (67). However, her flesh is also the key to transgressing these categories. The Black female slave occasions the theorizing of alternative genres of the human. As non-human, as the racial *and* gendered other, Black female flesh particularly facilitates the transgression of the limitations of (White and male) human.

Bridge on Imagination

W.E.B Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, coined in the *The Souls of Black Folk*, helps to develop the concept of imagination further. Double consciousness refers to the “two-ness” that Black people feel due to the division most exemplified by the term African-American: “In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.” (2) While exemplary of a multiplicity of self, reality or mindset,

imagination refers to a dimension not quite accounted for by Du Bois. Imagination refers to the dimension of what could be, a space of possibility that may be informed by reality but is not exclusively tethered to it. It allows us to theorize and conceive of a world in which “a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (2-3). Therefore, imagination at once speaks to the negotiation of norms that Black people must do within White spaces, while existing in and reading these norms against often incongruent Black cultures and realities, *and* a creative dimension—an imaginative dimension where one can negotiate a new reality altogether. Imagination lends to a space of freedom that is fundamentally incongruent with material or “real” conditions of oppression. Therefore, the significance of imagination lies in the ability to visualize and conceptualize liberation.

To glean the ways imagination is expressed, I look to Mayra Rivera’s concept of poetics. In *Poetics of the Flesh*, Mayra Rivera argues that the interaction between the flesh and the body is discursive. She uses the idea of poetics to discuss the ways in which the flesh ties us to the world and how social discourse and arrangements are written onto the body. She states that “the poetic approach is indispensable for addressing histories marked by disruptions, displacement, and irrevocable loss--such as those of Caribbean peoples, whose very existence emerged from the obliteration of African and indigenous cultures, religions, and languages... Poetics aims at expressing in style this stance toward knowledge by being attentive to loss and opacity, interruption and silence” (2). Opacity speaks to the inability to understand or capture the essence of a thing, that there are somethings that are not transparent to us or things we can render comprehensible. The impetus to make knowledge transparent is also the impetus to homogenize and destroy the other. Rendering something comprehensible is the solution to opacity as those

populations that are opaque present obstacles to the way that the dominant sees and understands the world. Thus, others/ the unknowable must be rendered transparent and capable of assimilation. Transparency is the result of the inability and unwillingness to register difference and ultimately tends towards sameness and universality. Opacity on the other hand is open to difference, not knowing and exploration, alterity and imagination.

Poetics are attentive to the “creative potential of words” (3). Being attentive to poetics in this analysis allows me to maintain the artistic choices of the artists as well as let the words speak for themselves. For example, in a later section, I will maintain the use of “outkast” not only to name the group but also to describe a performance. Rather than changing to outcast, I maintain the “k” in order to hone in on performances and practices of the alien. Manipulation of language is an example of how the alien pushes back against normative discourse and practices. Making language alien in this way is important especially when thinking about language as a colonial tool deployed to other the alien and further then imposed on the other to manage and control (i.e. imposing English on African slaves). Being attentive to poetics thus adds an extra level of analysis needed when analyzing art and music. A poetic approach also leaves space for interpretation, that the artists’ intent, my interpretation, and that of another can diverge without contestation. Lastly, the poetic approach accounts for that which is not knowable, that which is opaque. This approach understands that words in and of themselves may not be able to account for a phenomenon. It understands that the essence of a thing may forever escape us. This approach, thus, facilitates endless questions and exploration and does not concern itself with the search for concrete universals whose finding would bring exploration to an end and stifle the possibilities presented by the art. Ultimately, this approach allows the creative and poetic dimension of the work I analyze to shine through the exegesis.

Black Feminine

Why do I theorize alterity upon the figure of the Black feminine? I do not at all mean for the Black feminine to become an essentialism or reducible to fixed and predetermined characteristics. Nor am I referring to “Black” or “feminine” as identities designated by phenotype or biology, far from it. Rather, I intend the term to refer to an ontological category, a mode of being a knowing, that can be ascribed to and applied broadly. Black as I use it here, refers to both an embodied and shared history marked by theft of the body, diaspora, and deprivation and depravation, and an ontological disposition to fight oppressive structure. It is in this marked history that those who have been marked Black across all time and geography are most equip to end oppressive structures and/or theorize the alternative to these structures. Feminine, in this paper also diverges from sexed and gendered essentialisms. Referring to ‘insurgent ground,’ the term points to the alterity possible outside of male/female/man/woman paradigm. Together, the term then points to those BOTH ontologically Black marked by theft of the body AND feminine breaking from gendered and sexed essentialism. In this way then, Black feminine becomes a space of theorizing that not only focuses on the oppression of a particular group, rather uses a shared and embodied history and disposition to posit alterity. It is precisely and the history of oppression and Othering that makes it possible for imagination, for if everyone or thing fit into that which is normative and dominant there would be no Other.

There is a long history which links alterity to the feminine exemplified by Plato’s concept of khora. Khora is translated to have multiple meanings as a noun and verb, two of which being: 1) The space lying *between* two places or limits; 2) to go forward, advance, proceed. The feminine is not the limit itself but what lies between. Further, khora is presented as a dark and bottomless “abyss,” the womb empty and capable of creation. While khora is described as a

womb, it is not an essentially a female space. At the same time, the womb is important as a space of creation, a space through which the possible becomes impossible. Similarly, Edouard Glissant refers to the womb abyss of the ships making the Middle Passage. The womb abyss experienced by those captured birthed unanimity. It is the “unconscious memory of the abyss” (Glissant 7) which lends to metamorphoses (in his argument, the possibility that cultures could blend and multiply). Again, the womb is employed as a metaphor for creation and possibility and does not refer to the biological action of birth only, but rather as a poetic for creation. I use Black feminine as a poetic in the same way, to highlight the possibility birthed through the Other. When thinking about the alterity possible by peoples who are both Black and feminine, I find that there is unending possibility.

Performance

The performative act is one that allows the performer to constitute themselves, fashion themselves into being. Judith Butler first applies the concept of performativity to bodily acts, a concept which was only previously applied to speech acts by J.L Austin. A subject may be interpellated by various authorities and institutions in society such as gender (think of a cat call as a way women are interpellated) However, performance allows for the possibility of resisting interpellation by discipline forces from institutions to gender binaries.

I use performance in my framework because it allows us to excavate the ways in which subjects resist and renegotiate societal categories. Performance reveals why statements such as “you act Black” or “boys do not cry” constitute the demands of a subject. It is not the category itself that defines you but how your actions, performance, adhere or fail to adhere to the sets of actions designated for “Black” or “boy”. A boy can be constituted in refusing to cry or by wearing a dress and makeup. Or the category of “boy” can be denied all together by a bodily or

speech act that declares otherwise. Performance, in fact, is the means through which we can question and destabilize these categories, the means through which “boy” and “girl” are not necessarily diametrically opposed. Thus, performance obliterates binaries and neat categories and opens up a realm of duplicitous possibility. This becomes important for me especially as I consider that gangsta rap does not have to be in tension with, and can in fact be consistent with, Black Feminist Theory (it is possible that the “macho” thug is dismantling the patriarchy) Additionally, the outcome a performance always exceeds the performer/performance itself, so the question is not one of intentionality (was the performer aware of the impact?) rather a question of outcomes (who/what is constituted or not? What does failure to constitute yield?) Lastly, regardless of the way performances are dismembered and consumed by neoliberal, white heterosexual, cis-gendered patriarchy, they exceed this mutilation. It is in the break from the coherent liberal subject that we find the potential of imagination.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I develop the concept of imagination which I intend to refer to performances of alterity which allow us to conceive of what is not immediately present. Imagination hinges upon the figure of the Black female slave, ungendered and reduced to flesh through violence. Her marred and mutilated flesh prompts us to interrogate gender, humanity, and the body and occasions theorizing about the possibilities of non-normative performances. As such, I refer to these performances of imagination as Black feminine performances not to evoke gender but to extrapolate a potential for liberation in this history. I use imagination as an analytic for rap music to the same end, uncovering the potential and possibility in Black feminine performances. In the following sections, I analyze OutKast’s “Elevators (Me & You)” and “Jazzy Belle” as well as Missy Elliott’s “The Rain [Supa Duper Fly]” and “Work It” through this framework.

Chapter 2- Outkast: From Alienation to Alien-nations

ATLiens is the second studio album released by OutKast in 1996, a southern duo made up of Andre 3000 and Big Boi. The album addresses a wide range of the economic, social, and political aspects of life in Atlanta. The album's title combines "ATL", a shorthand term for Atlanta, and "alien" and is emblematic of Afrofuturistic musings of the album. "Elevators (Me and You)" is the first single from the album. In this section, I compare "Elevators (Me and You)" to "Jazzy Belle," another single off the album. "Jazzy Belle" imagines the Black feminine through the jezebel trope and leads me to consider the tensions in imagination: when and how does patriarchy interfere? What is the effect?

Afrofuturism is a literary genre and movement that is useful to unpack the concept of alienation in "Elevators (Me and You)" which I excavate as imagination in this example. Afrofuturism is a category of science fiction/speculative fiction (SF) but is unique in that it centers Black people in a genre that is pervaded by white writers and stories. Afrofuturism denotes "a literary and cultural aesthetic which encompasses historical fiction, fantasy and myth, magical realism and draws upon non-Western cosmologies" (Jackson and Freeman 3). Further, by engaging experiences of loss, deprivation and deprivatization, and alienation artists "turn the project of recuperating the past into a futuristic venture" (Mayer 555). This liminality however becomes the grounds upon which contemporary artists muse, being able to link the past, present, and future through an embodied, performed, and ontological liminality. Therefore, alienation as a theme in contemporary art points to both abduction, forced relocation, violation, and enslavement, and estrangement.

The figure of the alien/outkast is a reoccurring figure in OutKast's work and speaks to the condition of being in a place where one does not belong and of being produced as strange. The alien or "outkast" as an imagined figure not only highlights the production of the foreign and the

strange in society but also speaks to the subsequent discarding or exile of those deemed alien. As a trope in *ATLiens* and in the performances of OutKast/the outkast, the group plays with, considers, and comments on the mechanisms through which populations are made foreign and ultimately exiled (outkasted). It is this concept of alienation that is helpful in mining the futuristic and imaginative project of OutKast's "Elevators (Me and You)." I maintain use of the "k" in outkast as the artists do because I wonder, what are the implications when this alienation is reflected back onto society, law, political strategies through art? In other words, in the face of these mechanisms (society, law, political and rhetorical strategies) that produce the strange of society and then subsequently exile them, how does the performance of the alien speak back? What does the Afrofuturism imagining of the alien do for those that have been ousted and estranged?

The video for "Elevators (Me and You)" opens with a shot of a planet in space. This planet looks like Earth but is mostly a reddish brown and white with faint blue patches. Immediately, we are oriented within the futuristic theme of the video. The video is a compilation of scenes that make up a comic book named *ATLiens: The OutKast Encounter*. As a young boy reads the comic, the scenes come to life. The first scene depicts an exodus of a large group through a jungle on the strange planet depicted in the beginning. Subsequently, we are taken to a scene in a classroom and see Andre 3000 walking in late. He sits down at this desk; however, he appears to be in warped reality as the frame is not clear and the classroom fades in and out of the shot. Then, the viewer is transported to a graduation scene. All other graduates are dressed in blue while Andre, presumably the alien, is dressed in white. As he walks across the stage, the cheering that the other graduates receive ceases. This speaks to the alienation Andre feels within

the classroom and perceivably within the rest of society. He does not belong in this context; however, he appears to be trapped.

Half way through the video, we are transported back into the strange land encountered in the beginning and thrust back into the migration. The viewer sees white men in hazmat suits with some sort of device that helps them trace the migrants' alien footprints and that appears to be helping them catch the migrants. From this we can perceive that the migrants are aliens in a foreign land who are on the run, presumably seeking liberation from some form of enslavement. Men in military gear, with cutlasses, follow the men in hazmat suits, which speaks to the policing state forces and slave catchers that aided in preserving the institution of slavery. This expresses to the abduction and the displacement caused by enslavement and to system of slave catching and patrolling that sought to stop the slaves from escaping.

The video, and comic conclude with the migrants arriving in a land with sand and pyramids, remnant of depictions of Egypt. The children of the group run to join the other aliens walking about the pyramids. We see Andre 3000 and Big Boi's eyes turn green upon setting eyes on this promise land. This is the first time we see alien features on the artists and we can surmise that upon setting their eyes on this new land they have realized/ achieved/ activated a new form. They are no longer aliens in the sense that they don't belong, but rather upon their return home there is an activation and realization of self that was previously stifled. These scenes of "reality" and if the future land are interwoven to speak to the "real" context of Andre 3000 and Big Boi's life, mediated by race, class, and gender. The alienation Andre 3000 feels in the classroom is a product of his identity being incongruent with the school curriculum and the process of education. This accounts for the twoness that Du Bois theorizes. However, in being interwoven with scenes of imagined scenes of migration, this video also speaks to the imagination and the

escape which allows for a “return” home, the alleviation of this sense of alienation and the realization of joy and liberation. It is important that scenes of the real (school and life in Atlanta) and the imaginary (realization of liberation) together comprise the comic book. The ability to imagine this exodus and liberation, alongside oppressive and alienating institutions such as the education system in America, reflects imagination. The video speaks to both a two-ness or liminality as well as another dimension, imagination of liberation.

From Alienation to Alien-nations

What does it mean to create a nation of aliens? Or to be aliens within your own nation? The status of citizenship, who is citizen and who is not, is one method of producing aliens. In the extension of the status to some and denial of others, or in the systematic erosion of certain citizen’s rights aliens are both produced and oukasted: at once produced as strange, rendered a threat, and exiled/detained. America is presented as a melting pot, a place that takes the hungry and poor and provides a home for the homeless. This rhetoric paints a very particular picture about the relationship between the United States, immigration, and citizenship status: a picture best explained through the open arms of the Statue of Liberty. However, immigration and immigration policy, but more precisely citizenship and citizenship policy, are the mechanisms through which aliens are produced. The category of who is a citizen versus who is alien, who is in versus who is not has always been contentious, the parameters expanding or contracting depending on the political moment. The contention of who is citizen and who is not is the premise and promise of liberal theory, that those who are citizens ban together and contract so that there is recognition of certain rights, privileges, immunities, and protections. The citizens or contractors are distinguished from those who did not (or were not allowed to) contract, savages. The distinction of citizen/savage or alien is exemplified in the making of the Constitution during

which time the debate of whether slaves should be counted as citizens. We know the outcome of that debate: slaves are not considered 3/5 of a person and therefore could not qualify as citizens.

Citizenship, even when granted, is a status which can be eroded or expanded depending on the political moment. In this way, even “citizens” can find themselves alienated and outkasted. With the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, Black people were granted citizenship and supposedly extended the full purview of rights and immunities. The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery and guarantees that slavery and involuntary solitude is outlawed in the United States except in the case when one is convicted of a crime. The 14th Amendment primarily states that all those born or naturalized in the United States are citizens and thereby guaranteed the privileges and immunities of citizens: that no State may “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protections of the laws” (U.S Const. amend. XIV, sec.1). The 15th Amendment proports to protect the right of a citizen to vote regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (U.S Const. amend. XV, sec.1). However, as Carol Anderson discusses in her book *White Rage*, these rights are eroded through a series of laws and practices. Anderson states, “[t]he trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship” (3). The erosion of rights produces a paradox wherein African-Americans are at once citizen but produced as alien.

As aliens, Black people are not afforded the privileges and immunities of citizens and further are produced as a criminal through vagrancy laws. Therefore, aliens are not only produced but oukasted and quarantined. The criminalization of Black people as aliens can be seen through vagrancy laws of the Jim Crow South or the stop and frisk laws of today. Those

who are perceived to be out of place can be stopped, and interrogated, and detained. For example, during Jim Crow in the South, Black Codes were instituted to make sure that emancipated Blacks were kept subjugated. If stopped by authorities, Black people were forced to produce documents that proved they worked for and could be accounted for by a plantation or land owner. Failure to produce papers lead to the detainment on the charge of vagrancy. Therefore, through the curtailing of rights and citizenship status, black people are produced as homeless and stateless and subsequently persecuted for this very fact. In this way, being produced as alien also always puts one in violation of the law.

The alien or the production of that which is strange can also be produced by violence. A scene from Dr. Anderson's book, *White Rage*, best exemplifies such violence. Anderson recounts a scene of a woman who is 8 months pregnant being lynched by an angry mob. Adding to the gruesome scene is the act of cutting out her baby and beating the child to death (Anderson 40). How strange is this scene? How strange is this fruit hanging from a Southern tree? Billy Holiday describes this fruit perfectly.¹ Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, bulging eyes and the twisted mouth against the backdrop of a pastoral and gallant South, the strange and bitter crop of the South. Strange fruit, alien fruit. The violence and brutalization done to the Black body produces the strange, the grotesque, the alien. "Strange Fruit" speaks to and protests the inhumane treatment of Black people, the production of the alien through the distorting and dismembering of flesh. In this way, the alien is both not only not a citizen but also not human. This fruit is truly strange and unnatural and the fact of alienation becomes especially stark against the backdrop of the promised protections of US citizenship. It is really from this scene that I think about what it means to reflect the grotesque and the strange onto those who would

¹ "Strange Fruit" is a protest song recorded by Holiday in 1939. The song protests the lynching of Black bodies and is adopted from a poem by Abel Meeropol.

produce you as strange. In making this normalized scene of Black bodies in tension with the “gallant” and the “pastoral,” Holiday reflects the strange back. She highlights that it is the violence against Black bodies, especially when held in tension with Christianity, the Constitution, and the Cult of True Womanhood, that is strange.

What happens when the strange/ the alien/the outkast speak? Through the performance of the alien, the discontinuities, falsities, and binaries (citizen/alien being the most important for this argument) are torn apart, busting with possibility in the tears and fissures of what is considered normal and possible. OutKast particularly takes on this alienage and creates an alienation, an imagined and insurgent reality that acknowledges and reveals the possibility of that which is outside, strange, and distorted. The production of Black people as alien as foreign and criminal status and production of black people as strange and grotesque through offers the possibility to think beyond the here and now. Again, I do not mean to diminish the weight of the all too familiar scene of strange fruit hanging. Rather, I am suggesting that this embodied and shared history informs the performance of the outkast, the projection of that which is strange and foreign. The alien as a figure, in OutKast’s work is the means through which we can posit alterity and futurity. The alien, in its incompatibility with that which is normal, works against that which would contain and discipline (gender, citizenship). The outkast does not seek naturalization.

In the video, we see many moments of Andre 3000 and Big Boi perform as the outkast. Again, with the scene in the classroom that appears to be a warped reality for Andre, the normalized space of the classroom becomes strange and alien. Therefore, it is not only that Andre is outkasted in the classroom, but he is reflecting that back onto the classroom space thus making strange the education system (i.e., the school to prison pipeline becomes strange,

textbooks claiming the Civil War as “The War of Northern Aggression” become strange). The concepts, and narratives we are taught along with the quarantining practices Black students face (i.e., high level of detentions and suspensions, militarization of schools and policing in the classroom²) are thus exposed as strange, making it unfamiliar and foreign. In the graduation scene, the difference in response to Andre walking across the stage and the difference in the color of his graduation gown performs strangeness and perhaps serves to expose, for example, the grave discrepancy between the graduation rates of student and color and white students. Andre’s performance of alienation makes glaring the reality that Black students, particularly black men, do not graduate at the same rate as their racial or gendered counterparts.

Performing the outkast is a practice that Andre 3000 and Big Boi carry throughout their careers:

An OutKast is someone who is not considered to be part of the normal world
 He is looked at differently
 He is not accepted because of his clothes, his hair
 His occupation, his beliefs or his skin color
 Now look at yourself, are you an OutKast? I know I am
 As a matter of fact, fuck being anything else (“True Dat”).

Known for their outlandish costumes, weird styles, and futuristic musings, OutKast was not always accepted as mainstream. However, their style of music and performance caused fissures and tears in the hip-hop aesthetic and gave birth to a sound and style that becomes distinguished as southern and uniquely belonging to Atlanta. While the outkast is seemingly gendered by the “he” pronoun, this is not a performance that is exclusive to those who identify as men. The line, “now look at yourself, are you an OutKast,” recognizes that this is a performance that is can be

² An example of policing in the classroom comes from a video of a young girl being picked up and body slammed by a cop for perceived insubordination. Officer Ben Fields slams and drags the body of a black female student at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, S.C. The video of the interaction was widely circulated in 2015. This incident begs interrogation of the role of police officers in school. In this video, we see that the policing and violence against Black children is facilitated by the school system.

exercised regardless of gender. “Operating under the crooked American system too long” (“True Dat”) the outkast becomes a performance that imagines possibility and liberation in breaking from the homeland and creating alien-nations.

Jazzy Belle

“Jazzy Belle” is another single off *ATLiens*, however the lyrics of this song leads me to wonder if and how imagination can work against the Black feminine. This case forces us to consider that there might be forms of imagining that are harmful. For example, it is an imagination that casts Black people as inherently criminal or animalistic, an imagination that lends to the imagining of the “hypersexual” Black woman. I would be remiss if I did not consider the imagination that is projected onto the Black feminine by those who ascribe to neoliberal, white, capitalist, patriarchal ideals. Thus, I find a tension between imagination as I have previously described it, as the positing or performance of alterity, and an imagination used to produce populations as Other as well as re-inscribe and reinforce the white, patriarchal, capitalist norms. In this section, I examine the jezebel trope through “Jazzy Belle” as an imagination of the Black feminine employed to cast the Black feminine as Other and reinscribe ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood, primarily the concept that women should be chaste. However, the jazzy belle represents a performance of alterity possible through imagination and forces Outkast to contend with the possibilities of femininities that do not conform to normative discourses. Jazzy belle is one iteration of what a liberated woman could look like.

OutKast casts the figure of the jazzy belle, which is a payoff of jezebel. The jazzy belle is described as a gold digger who sleeps with a lot of men. She is also painted as a figure who uses her sexuality to harm Black men, accusing Black men of rape for gain. Big Boi cites the highly contested charge of sexual assault brought against rap artist Tupac to drive this point

home.³ In Big Boi's verse, Jazzy Belle is juxtaposed to the woman he is teaching his daughter to be which he describes as a good girl/ a "natural woman". Additionally, Jazzy Belle is not deemed worthy to be a mother as Andre raps that as mothers, Jazzy Belle will pass down promiscuous attitudes to their daughters. He asserts that this would in turn produce a generation of jazzy belles and cause the downfall of our nation. Andre also comments on what he sees as an incapacity to be good because of her jazziness⁴: "[e]ven Bo knew that you got poked/Like acupuncture patients" ("Jazzy Belle"). In the video, the jazzy belle(s) are dancing as if they were strippers and Andre 3000 is shaking from his discomfort while Big Boi is reveling in the scene, throwing money to prove his acquiesce. I read Andre 3000's discomfort as proof that Jazzy Belle is destabilizing Andre's expectation that women should be pure and chaste.

In this instance imagination seems to be working against the Black feminine. The jazzy belle is an imaginary figure used to launch a critique of Black women, particularly those deemed to be promiscuous. This example reveals a different type of imaginary, those projections informed by patriarchal ideals employed to cast a population as Other (in this case women who have a lot of sex) and reinscribe the preferred norm (women as chaste/sexually subordinate). Through the trope of the jazzy belle, sexually expressive women are demonized and can be juxtaposed against an imagined chaste and pure woman. In so doing, there is an attempt to reproduce the status quo. Thus, imagination can both be projected upon the Black feminine, to fashion and discipline her, or performed by the Black feminine which breaks from this discipline and accesses unbounded possibilities.

³ In 1995, rapper Tupac is accused and convicted of sexually abusing a fan. Tupac maintains that the sex was consensual and that the charge and conviction was the result of his celebrity status; the victim trying to capitalize on his celebrity and the court making an example of him.

⁴ "Coming around my crew looking Jazzy, wanna pretend Like you Ms. Goody Four-Shoes" ("Jazzy Belle")

I have discussed the implication of the jazzy belle used to re-inscribe patriarchal ideals, which is where some hip-hop scholars or feminist scholars might stop. However, I am interested in what the jazzy belle projects back. What is it about the proximity of the jazzy belle that is making Andre 3000 shake with discomfort? At one point in the song, Andre 3000 states that: “I want to earl/Cause most of the girls that we was liking in high school/ Now they dykeing” (“Jazzy Belle”) Jazzy belles are also queer? Queerness is evoked here as an epithet for the jazzy belle and promiscuity. But the jazzy belle’s queerness is precisely the mode through which she speaks back and asserts her imagination of alterity, especially imagining herself operating outside of heterosexual relationships.

Through her imagination jazzy belle here functions as an “insurgent female”, disrupting the status quo through her performance. At the same time she is deployed by the artists to reinscribe gender and heterosexuality, her imagination and jazziness queers and disjoints their expectations and the norm. She is functioning to disrupt, making Andre 300 quake and earl because of it. For this, she is slandered as those who trouble the status quo usually are. She is a “dyke” and she is hyper-sexual and she is casted as a liar, a golddigger. The role that patriarchy plays in the recasting of the Jazzy Belle is glaring. However, what I am interested in is looking at the Jazzy Belle’s function here. To this end, I explore the origins and use of the jezebel trope.

Jezebel is a queen in the Bible that is vilified for bringing heathenism to a Jewish King and the trope is derived from her story. Jezebel is the wife of Ahab, King of Israel and is attributed to influencing her husband to abandon Judaism to worship other deities. She is thus associated with false prophets. Jezebel comes to be associated with prostitutes in sixteenth century England because Jezebel paints her face or wore makeup which was a sign of women with “loose morals” in that context. In the Bible, Jezebel is written as an interloper that must be

stopped. She brings with her the threat of false gods and the threat of “Killing off the prophets of the Lord.” Therefore, Jezebel is a threat to all of Christianity and serves as a cautionary tale warning of the destruction an evil woman could do. As the story goes, Elijah kills Jezebel’s prophets and in response Jezebel proclaims, “If you are Elijah, so I am Jezebel” (Contemporary English Version. 1 Kings. 19:2) Unlike any other wife or concubine in the Bible, Jezebel has a voice and uses it to voice a challenge against a patriarch. Therefore, her will but also her defiant and sinful ways are established in this quote.

I argue that Jezebel’s challenge is a performative action which allows her to name herself instead of be named. In so doing tears open the possibility of the feminine. In the Bible, lineage and identity is patrilineal. Women are named and are identified and established through their fathers, husbands, and brothers and almost never in their own right. For example, Jezebel is described as the wife of Abab and daughter of Ithobaal I officially. Men beget and women are the begotten. Sons eventually go on to be named for the children they beget. However, with this declaration, Jezebel declares her name and establishes herself and therefore destabilizes this system of patrilineal naming. She uses her voice and demands to be recognized. Additionally, she powerfully establishes herself as Elijah’s equal destabilizing all concepts of women as inferior or submissive. Jezebel radically breaks from her “place” and establishes new possibilities for herself, Jezebel not as daughter or wife but Jezebel as an equal, with her performative declaration. Not surprisingly, she is written as a threat to the state and Christianity.

Just as Jezebel breaks from the space and identity that confines her, Jazzy belles destabilize the expectations of chastity and purity placed on women. The jazzy belle forces

Outkast to confront the alternative to the “natural” and pure woman. As such, they must acknowledge women who love other women and women who simply love to have sex. As much as the rap duo expresses a yearning for the opposite of the jazzy belle and try to reinscribe specific conceptions of the feminine, the Jazzy Belle defines the feminine for herself. Her action and declaration may be misread as pathology by dominant discourses, but we should not be distracted by this reading and divert attention from the power in her challenge to heteronormativity. Audre Lorde reminds us of this smoke signal used by the dominant to reduce the power of women. Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” presents a theory of the erotic as power. The erotic is defined as “the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving work, our lives” (55). This view of the erotic as the lifeforce of women is constantly confused and reduced to the sexual, that which is superficially erotic. This is a falsity that arises out of patriarchal models of power - which also mandate that this erotic power be suppressed. Thus, “we have often turned away from the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic” (54). Patriarchy has caused the perversion of the erotic thus the power of the erotic remains untapped by most women. Thus, instead of reading only the misogyny in the description of the jazzy belle, we must listen to the jazzy belle peak, name, and performatively constitute herself.

Conclusion

Outkast muses about the alienation felt by those Othered, made strange, and rendered as non-citizen. However, in the performance and imagination of the ATLien, Outkast takes on the trope of the alien creates and asserts alien-nations, carving out spaces of survival and possibility. The performance of the alien shows the limits of citizenship and protections for particular

subjects, in this case Black men. Additionally, the performance of the alien declares that citizenship, assimilation, and normality is not the goal or the end of the artist's project. The performance of the alien in this way produces citizenship as strange and highlights the strangeness in what we might take for granted as normal (i.e., education). Due to this paradox, the alien does not seek naturalization and instead imagines the endless possibilities of that which is outside of the norm such as the possibility of an alien-nation or the radical potential and power Black spaces and communities.

Further, "Jazzy Belle", a single from the same album puts white patriarchal imaginations in tension with imaginative Black feminine performances. While jazzy belle is critiqued for failing to adhere to the imagined woman who is pure and chaste in this song, I read her failure as a demand to conceptualize non-normative femininities. In this way, I hold the two imaginations in tension with each other, acknowledging that they operate simultaneously, but bringing to the fore imaginative Black feminine performances. It is this aspect of the analysis that is usually missing, obscured by analysis of White patriarchal imaginations which lend only to readings of misogyny and pathology.

Chapter 3- niaR ehT: Missy Elliott and Assemblage

The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly] (1997)

In this section, I will employ assemblage theory to analyze Missy Elliott's "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]" (1997). "The Rain" is Elliott's first single off her first album *Supa Dupa Fly*. In the music video, the manipulations of the body through costume and special effects interrogate the limits of the body. The body is a mechanism of capture and discipline imposed to bind, constrain, and enslave. It is the break from the entrapments of the body that I read as imagination. Assemblage theory presents the possibility that bodies can combine with the space and matter around them. Thus, bodies do not have to be exclusively tethered to the material of the body, such as organs and skin. These imagined bodies register as excess. Consequently, I use assemblage theory, and Jose Gil's application of it, to explain an excess inherent to imagination. Previously, excess has been discussed in terms of sexual promiscuity or physical mass such as in Nicole Fleetwood's theory of excess flesh. However, I mean excess to refer to performances of imagination which present limitless possibilities. I argue that Elliott's performance of imagination breaks from the limiting conceptions of the body and humanity. In her excess, Elliott's performance cannot be explained through any one trope imposed on the body such as Mammy or Jezebel used to describe and render transparent the excess of the Black feminine.

Assemblage theory is useful in this analysis because it: 1) de-privileges humanity and de-exceptionalizes the human body; and 2) privileges performativity over language (Puar 5). Assemblage theory originates with French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1980)*. The term is translated from the French word *agencement* which translates to mean "layout, organization, arrangement, and

relations” (Puar 4). Assemblage prioritizes relations and patterns of relations and attend not to the content of the body (organs, skin, etc.) but to the processes that comprise, are affected by and acted upon, and that affect and act upon the body. In this way, the body is not predicated on humanity as the body can be constituted by or can become various forms of matter (i.e., animal, plant, space). This breaks open room for the interrogation of the limits and parameters of humanity and the human body. Further, assemblages are never fixed, unstable, and do not have an essential form. Relations of exteriority, rather than those of interiority are the modes of exchange in this framework. As an ontological framework, assemblage highlights exchanges and connectivities. Thus, I employ this theory to consider the Black feminine as an assemblage to be considered the product of events, performances, interactions between bodies, and interactions between bodies and objects, rather than simply to signify an identity.

Assemblage de-privileges humanity and de-exceptionalizes the human body

The network of relations that produce the slave as non-human provides a prime example of assemblage which deprivileges humanity. In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Alexander Weheliye takes up Spillers’s conception of flesh and compares it to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life, a human life that is rendered non-human. Weheliye argues that the production of bare life is essential to the creation and maintenance of Man (the western subject), one group must not be fully human for the other to measure himself against. The flesh is the site where the distinction between human and non-human is physically marked through the violence and the crimes against it. The flayed flesh becomes the way in which non-human/quasi-humans are identified. Therefore, the flesh allows for the theorization of bodies and selves beyond the concept of humanity. This interaction is indicative of a racializing assemblage, processes with various actors and power dynamics that

produce lives as non-human. Accordingly, the racializing assemblage allows theorization beyond the concept of humanity.

Assemblage theory de-exceptionalizes the human body so that the possibilities of the body go beyond its physical frame. In his text, *The Paradoxical Body*, Jose Gil asserts that through dancing, the body is radically reconfigured and further interrogates a biological conception of the body. Gil expands the definition of dance to encompass all actions, not just literal dancing, that interrogate the limits of the body. Even quotidian actions can be deployed to interrogate limits of the body. In dance, Gil stresses that the body “has the process of combining so intimately with exterior space that it draws from it a variety of textures” (28). Therefore, for Gil, any action in which the body combines with space is dance. For example, Gil proposes that an archer can be a dancer, “the zen archer and his target are one in the same...[and] a new space emerges. We will call it the space of the body.” Therefore, Gil establishes that there are many actions that push the limit of the body to realize the *space of the body*. In establishing the unbounded space the body accesses, it becomes clear that movement that permeates space and extend the limits of the body.

The *space of the body* emerges is possible from the fact that dance necessitates the projection of the interior space of the body to the exterior so that they become one. The interior of the dancer is simply the internal consciousness. The dancer empties the body through movement, presenting the interior to the exterior and combining them. Through this transition, when the interior space becomes exterior, the body becomes the space around it and what is created is the *space of the body*. Therefore, there is no longer a distinction between the body and the space around it or internal and external consciousness. This lack of distinction furthers Gil to posit that the body dissolves into space that is free to become whatever it pleases, extending the

body's limits beyond its physical delineations. The body as the "space of the body," and as space itself, it has the possibility to become, and in fact is, a series of *becomings*. The body is acknowledged as having the ability to "become animal, become mineral, plant, become atmosphere, hole, ocean, become pure movement" (Gil 28). The body is paradoxical because it is **always** becoming something other than the body. The process of combining with space constitutes and assemblage.

Assemblage theory allows for a theorization of excess which moves beyond excess in appearance or sexuality. In her essay "Excess Flesh," Nicole Fleetwood explores the potential of sexually explicit performances deployed as critique. She is ultimately concerned with the ways in which performances of nudity lead to a reimagining of black women and the black feminine body as active agents in visual culture. Fleetwood's framework, key concept, illustrates how black female artists and cultural producers use nudity and hypervisibility to launch critique against representations of the body, femininity, and capitalism and commodification. Her consideration of the flesh, while useful, is limited in that it only accounts for instances of nude performances. "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]" stands as an example of ways in which performances of excess can be deployed as critique beyond instances of nudity. Assemblage theory lends to a discussion of excess that cannot be reduced to tropes that seek to explain away, or render transparent, excess.

In the music video, the manipulations of Elliott's body through costume and special effects interrogate the limits of the body. The music video opens with a shot of Elliott in the iconic black plastic bag suit which appears in various parts of the video. The suit is big, black, plastic, and blown up with air so that in the suit Elliott is about twice her size. Elliott's body is constantly manipulated in the video. Halfway through her performance, the proportions of

Elliott's body are manipulated through special effects as she sits on a hill. Elliott's body is egg shaped, smaller at the top and wider at the bottom, evoking Humpty Dumpty who sat on the wall⁵. Throughout the video, she also isolates and manipulates different parts of her body through dance, particularly her eyes and fingers. Special effects augment this manipulation and at times her proportions are distorted or features, such as her eyes and lips which widen. These manipulations signal that Elliott is toying with the limits of the body which lends to the interrogation of the (human) body. There are also scenes of other women dancing as well as features from other women MC such as Lil Kim and Da Brat, which displays the wide variance of black feminine performance. I read these appearances as an assemblage constituted by an array of Black feminine performances. This assemblage breaks from tropes that seek to render Black feminine performances as a monolith and showcases the limitless possibilities of imagination.

The manipulations of the body in the video is an articulation of imagination, a performance of alterity in which alternate realities and bodies are articulated, and resist naming through limiting tropes. In the video, the body is distorted (both through the black plastic bag suit and through special effects) deconstructed, and manipulated so that a new body arises. The theatricality of the bag suit and Missy's performance is what I read as imagination. Within the discourse of the gendered female, the black feminine body is over determined and misnamed by tropes that are meant to explain and contain her excess. Popular tropes that pervade gendered discourse include the mammy and the jezebel. The mammy is stereotypically the asexual

⁵ Comically, Elliott cannot stand the rain because it causes her finger waves to fall like Humpty Dumpty. Just like Humpty Dumpty, the egg who fell and could not be put together again, Elliott's hair is ruined. In the same instance that Elliott evokes the nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty through the effects of the video, the lyrics mention Lauryn Hill. Elliott states, "I sit on Hills like Lauryn." Notice the assemblage/interaction between nursery rhyme and hip-hop in the lyrics as well as the visual assemblage of a body becoming egg.

matriarch. Marked as excess by her weight and her dark skin, she is not seen as a sexual subject. The jezebel, on the other hand, is the hypersexual temptress. This trope again registers excess and presents the pathology of black feminine sexuality that is present in the dominant discourse. Neither of these tropes nor any of the grammar of the gendered female can properly describe or capture Elliott's performance. In the flesh, she resists naming and the tropes, such as the mammy and the jezebel, that have been used to explain and nail down the black feminine.

The body is a mechanism of capture through which societal concepts are imposed. Breaking from the body and fundamentally reorganizing it facilitates a break from impositions such as gender. This is precisely wherein the resistance in Elliot's performance lies- in the inability to being nailed down, captured, bounded, and explained. I am not suggesting that the performances of mammies and jezebels do not exceed the stereotype. Rather, it is in naming the performance as such that we fail to see the full power of the performances. Again, we must confront the white patriarchal imaginary which fashions these tropes to signify the Black feminine. Tropes that establish Black women as hypersexual explain the mixed raced babies running around the plantation and hide the more nuanced and often brutal story of miscegenation. The asexual mammy produces the non-threatening Black feminine figure who nurses children, takes care of the family, but ultimately cannot or does not pose the threat of a sexual relationship with the master of the house. Again, the relationships are messier and much more involved. As I demonstrated in the case of jazzy belle, the performance of these tropes expose the inconsistencies in the story. What is interesting in this example, however lies in the break from such impositions altogether such that the performance cannot be completely captured and explained. Corporeality and the control casted by the white patriarchal imaginary is the very means through which women are subordinated. Actions, dress, speech, and comportment of the

body can be controlled and regulated by patriarchal institution and norms. By reorganizing and reconstituting the body facilitates a break from these disciplinary norms. Thus, it is possible to “untangle from these systems, to constitute another body where intensities may be taken to their highest degrees, [and] such is the task of the artist and, in particular, of the dancer” (31). In being able to push the limits of the physical body, the imagined body becomes a space of possibility which is free to change at will. In being free of the physical body, the imagined body is also free of the constraints and meanings placed on the biological body.

This (non-human) body is excessive as it is indistinguishable from the objects and space around it. Assembling with space, bodies, and objects “prolongs the body’s limits beyond its visible contours” (Gil 22) and is constantly becoming, multiplying itself, creating new versions. In Elliott’s performance, we literally see this alternative instantiation of the body. The malleability of the plastic bag suit and the enlargement and shrinking of Elliott’s features push the limits of the body. She imagines a body, one that is malleable, changeable, excessive in its occupation of space. This imagined body is excessive because it cannot be contained by the contours or limits that have been set for the physical body. In exceeding the (human) body, showing its limitations, a space of alterity is made in which Elliot is free to reimagine the body. Her imagined body is unconstrained by systems of meaning and naming. This differs from Fleetwood in the fact that Fleetwood’s paradigm limits excess flesh to performances of nudity, of flesh exposed. Elliott is offering another performance of excess, a body always changing, capable of multiple versions of itself, a body that not only takes up space but is space itself. In her excess of the body. She is rebellious in her destabilization of the body and the tropes to which the gendered female is constrained by. In so doing, she is free to reimagine herself in this space of alterity.

Assemblage Privileges Performativity Over Language

Assemblage theory privileges performativity, not language, as a mode of representation. Elliott's use of the subversion of language, particularly in "Work It", displays a performativity that is in excess of the conventions of English. Her practice of "flipping and reversing" language is an iteration of imagination that is attentive to opacity, the inability to be rendered completely transparent and knowable and by extension co-opted. "Work It" is a single off Elliott's fourth studio album *Under Construction* (2002).

Language is a means through which populations, phenomena, and matter become knowable. Assemblage resists this transparency and instead is opaque in its complex webs of relations because words are not sufficient to explain the assemblage. Performance is similarly attuned to opacity. Karen Barad's theory of performative metaphysics establishes matter as constituted by and existing as action, not as objects that can be signified by words. Simply stated, matter is not a thing but a performance. She argues that "a performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things...performativity is actually a contestation of the excessive power of language to determine what is real" (Barad 802). Assemblage theory then benefits from a poetic approach, one that is attentive to art, action, and performance. Most importantly, performativity is attentive to opacity, that which is not knowable and beyond signification through language. Performativity is disinterested in establishing a universal and fixed sense of what is real.

I read Elliott's subversion of language in "Work It" as a performance of imagination. In the refrain of the song, Elliott reverses the phrase "I put my thing down, flip it and reverse it" and raps it as "Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I." She does this again in the second verse. She raps: "Listen up close while I take it backwards/ Sdrawkcab ti ekat ot ekil yssiM yaw

eht hctaw.” She also employs various sounds and words that are not quite English (i.e., ra-ta-ta Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta/Sex me so good I say blah-blah-blah) and she uses various sound effects as stand ins for words (i.e., an Elephant trumpet in place of the word dick as a substitute in both clean and dirty versions). This construction defies normal constructions of grammar and pronunciation. Therefore, by just looking at the words, one cannot use normal conventions of grammar and syntax to pronounce the phrase. As a matter of fact, no two people can reproduce the same pronunciation of this phrase because of its bizarre construction. English is not meant to be flipped and reversed. As a result, it is the performativity of the act of “flipping and reversing” the phrase that stands out as imagination.

What is the purpose of language if not to designate a specific signification to a word or concept and to allow the reproduction of that signification? In reversing the phrase Elliott breaks from the conventions of language and resists signification through language. Consequently, there is a resistance to language as a mechanism which renders art, experience, or phenomena as transparent or knowable. For example, “ball” signifies a spherical object that can be thrown, kicked, and used in sports. In the same way “jezebel” denotes hypersexuality and “mammy” denotes asexuality. However, in flipping and reversing the phrase, Elliott ensures that the phrase becomes performative. Whereas simply reading or saying the words solicits a certain understanding, one’s inability to say and understand this phrase becomes the task, in this way the performance exceeds language.

Elliott’s performative speech resists knowability and capture. Language and discourse seek to explain and understand experiences, actions, and bodies that are foreign. Language attempts to produce difference as the palatable to and consistent with that which is dominant. However, performativity escapes the grips of language and resists this process. In its subversion,

words fail to produce understanding, fail to designate an object or phenomenon with words. We must instead be attentive to the effects of the performance which unlock unlimited potential for being and alternative modes of knowing or not knowing. Opacity is precisely the promise of imagination.

Conclusion

Elliott's performances in "The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]" and "Work It" break from limiting structures of the normative (human) body and language. The iconic plastic bag suit helps us see that the body and the tropes projected onto bodies are meant to constrict the possibilities of Black feminine performance. Further, the normative body is a mode through which opacity is rendered as knowable. Through its norms, the body is used to account for and name those things which we do not have a name for, do not know, and cannot understand. The tropes then become the means through which the Black feminine is mediated and rationalized. In this way, the tropes do not name the performance as much as they name a specific imagination which renders the Black feminine as that which is explained in its totality by a small collection of archetypes.

Elliott's imagination or performances of alterity break from these structures and assemble endlessly to create new possibilities. Assemblage theory lends to a theorization of a non-human body, one is that is just one part of a larger web of relations, a web that is connected in some places and disconnected in others. Therefore, I ask: how might assemblage theory also help us think through fissures and disconnectivity, interactions in which the assemblage might fail to come together? Further, what do these failures tell us? Can these spaces of disjointedness also reveal something of the assemblage, where the assemblage is inconstant and incoherent? It is upon these spaces that imagination exists, in the breaks and fissures from that which is normative. It is upon these breaks and fissures that the flawed logics of the normative such as

the concept of humanity in the face of populations rendered non-human, that performances of alterity build.

Coda on the Artist

Missy Elliott has been successful in the hip-hop industry since 1997 as an artist, producer, and dancer. Elliott's longtime creative partner and producer, Timberland, has been an integral part Elliott's career. The duo also worked on projects for other artists such as Aaliyah and SWV. Elliott's first album, *Supa Dupa Fly*, debuted at number three on the *Billboards*. Elliott also released four more internationally successful studio albums.

Elliott's music videos are extremely creative and always play with the limits and contours of the body through special effects, dance, fashion, and performance. However, the issue of the Elliott's physical body, particularly her weight, has also been a point of discussion and critique throughout Elliott's career. Elliott reflects on the challenges she faced due to her weight in a Tweet from November 15, 2016: "I wasn't SMALL enough I wasn't LIGHT enough (eye rolling emoji) but my talent UNDENIABLE I ENCOURAGE y'all 2 BE U..." (Twitter.com). Her tweet reveals that she faced obstacles motivated by colorism and discrimination based on her weight. Also, indicated in her reflection is that she was never ashamed of her weight or appearance. The plastic bag suit that she wears in "The Rain" is a direct challenge to those who had something negative comments about her weight. She taunts and breaks from expectations of the record industry that women should be slim or have light skin in order to sell records.

Elliott's weight and body image continued to be a topic of conversation in the media, especially when she loses a large amount of weight in 2002. Between the time of her debut album and video in 1997 and the release of her album *Under Construction (2002)* Elliott was diagnosed with Grave's Disease lost a significant amount of weight. The single from that album

“Gossip Folks” addresses the rumors that ensued about her weight loss. In the introduction of the song, the “gossip folks” can be heard saying: “Girl that is Missy Elliott she lost a lot of weight/ Girl I heard she eats one cracker a day.” Before the knowledge of her disease, rumors stated that Elliott was starving herself.

Therefore, Elliott’s body/body image has had a kind of hyper-visibility throughout her career, at once an obstacle with record companies concerned that her image would not sell and as a topic of gossip after she loses weight. However, as Elliott states in her tweet, her art far surpassed the conversation about her body and image. This sort of hyper-visibility of Elliott’s physicality, the fact that discourse about her music and her weight are simultaneous, strikes me as the impetus for the creative liberties Elliott takes with the body in her music videos. In most of her music videos, she toys with and breaks from the body’s expected form. She constantly assembles with other bodies and objects through her performance and therefore subverts the discourse of her physicality.

Conclusion

Imagination is the practice of Black feminine performances which explore alternative modes of being and knowing. These performances work against normative conceptions of gender, the body, and humanity as I have demonstrated in the work of OutKast and Missy Elliott. This concept of imagination, which builds upon the theory of the ungendered flesh, warrants a departure from the discourse of gendered femaleness and explores the potential of the alternative performances of black femininity in rap music. The visual and sonic elements are the medium for the creative performance of imagination and thus the creation of alternate realities and selves. Attentive to the transgressive power that Black feminine performance affords, I find in the genre a praxis of liberation.

Through “Elevators (Me and You)” and “Jazzy Belle,” I argue that the performance of the outkast is imagination. Alienation is the condition of those produced as non-citizen through the selective application of the rights and immunities promised by the Constitution and produced as strange through the violence that Black people face. The performance of the outkast exposes the selective application of citizenship as strange, poses as unnatural the condition of those who are homeless in their homeland. The alien does not seek naturalization and instead imagines the endless possibilities of that which is outside of the norm. Further, “Jazzy Belle” puts white patriarchal imaginations in tension with imaginative Black feminine performances. While jazzy belle is critiqued for failing to adhere to the imagined woman who is pure and chaste, her failure necessitates conceptualization of non-normative femininities.

In the case of “The Rain [Supa Dupa Fly]” I posit that the flesh is expressed as imagination through the theatrical depictions of Elliott’s body. The iconic plastic bag suit and the manipulations of her proportions through special effects combine to make a “paradoxical body”

which is not legible within the gendered discourse. The names and tropes used in the dominant discourse to describe black women, such as jezebel, mammy, and Sapphire cannot adequately describe Elliott. In her imagination, she exceeds this gendered discourse. Elliott is constituted by an assemblage which comprises of costume, special effect, and the femininities of other MCs. In this way, she far exceeds the parameters of the body. Her subversion of language in “Work It” is an example of the ways in which performance exceeds signification through words.

Performativity therefore takes on an opacity which facilitates limitless iterations and possibilities whereas the conventions of language seek to reproduce and render all signification the same.

In the future, I would be interested in excavating moments of imagination in the work of artists who have been popular from 2010 to today as this thesis has explored artists popular from 1990-2010. For example, I am fascinated by rapper Young Thug and his conceptualization and performance of gender. Young Thug is a rapper from Atlanta best known for his nearly unintelligible vocal style and his unconventional style of dress. Young Thug’s fashion is gender-fluid, he might be pictured wearing pants and a shirt or a dress. On the cover of Thug’s most recent mixtape, *Jeffery*, he dons a couture dress. Further, in a video for Calvin Klein’s Fall 2016 campaign, Thug states that: “In my world, you can be a gangsta with a dress or you can be a gangsta with baggy pants. I feel like there’s no such thing as gender.” If I move forward with this project, I would ask how Thug’s performance reimagines the genre and hip hop culture overall. Further, I wonder how Thug’s lyrics and music videos reflect imagination.

Imagination are performances of alterity that explode binaries, limits, and any mechanism that seeks to capture and constrain possibility. Excavating these performances in rap music serves to highlight these breaks in the genre. Rather than confine the potential of Black feminine performances to the parameters of heterosexuality, gender, the body, and humanity, I argue that

these performances present radical potentials for expression. These potentials have often been overlooked, obscured by patriarchy's smoke signals. However, imagination is always attentive to these instances of art and freedom that are misread and misinterpreted.

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