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Claremont McKenna College

*Can You See Me Now?:
A Critical Examination of the Progression, Reception, and Impact of
Performances of the Body as a Mechanism for Critiquing &
Transcending Social Constructs in the West*

Submitted to
Professor James Morrison

by
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for
Senior Thesis in Media Studies with a Digital Concentration
Spring 2023
April 24, 2023

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Abstract

Beginning with Adolf Loos's famous "Ornament and Crime" essay, I examine the progression, reception and impact of performances of the body using Amelia Jones' framework for distinguishing body art from performance art. As Primitivist Modernism became popular in the West, racialized bodies garnered new attention as subjects of both inspiration and criticism. Through a critical exploration of Black artists, I determine that the use of bodily performances aided in the subversion of the gender, sexual, and racial discrimination perpetuated by Primitivist Modernism and continued into the 21st century. Starting with French icon Josephine Baker and concluding with American legend Janet Jackson, it is made apparent that we have simultaneously progressed and regressed in our perception of Black liberation, Black sexuality and the bodily autonomy of Black women.

Keywords: Modernism, Body Art, Black Art, LGBTQ+ Art

Introduction

In the Fall of 2021, I took my first class dedicated to investigating the history and characteristics of contemporary art. A significant portion of the course centered around Relational Aesthetics in which we critically analyzed the production and reception of works that ignored the boundaries that lie between an artist, their work, and the audience. Two performance artists particularly struck me, Wim Delvoye and Santiago Sierra, who dangerously tested the most unique aspect surrounding tattoos – permanence and permission. Sierra gained consent from his participants to receive tattoos (from a professional artist) through questionable exchanges in which Sierra offered something heavily enticing to each specific participant - including hard drugs. Delvoye, on the other hand, could not and did not obtain consent as he would tattoo pigs either after they had passed or while they were sedated. As with more relational aesthetic performance artists, Sierra and Delvoye both received overwhelming criticism for their work partially due the placement of permanent artwork on the participants' bodies, but primarily because consent was either gained unethically or not at all. Both artists made it strikingly clear to me that tattoos are an art form that vastly differ from the rest. The relationship between the artists, the art, the bodies of their subjects/clients, and the permanence of it all distinguishes it from other mediums and this became my source of inspiration for my senior capstone media project.

The impact of Delvoye and Santiago's work within Relational Aesthetics inspired me to explore themes of permission, permanence, bodily authority, and self-expression within my own college community. Simone Alter-Muri's "The Body as Canvas: Motivations, Meanings, and Therapeutic Implications of Tattoos" investigates discrimination against tattoos within Western

societies from the perspective of college students. To concisely summarize Alter-Muri's findings: the two most common motivations for tattoos were for memorial purposes and means of self-expression (others included aesthetics, personal control of the body, and rebellion), and the majority of students felt their tattoos had symbolic meaning. Growing up in an era where I am seeing myself and the vast majority of my peers own tattoos inspired me to highlight the sacredness and meaningfulness of tattoos for my senior capstone project.

My installation, *Modified*, is a response to being told to cover up my tattoos. It is a response to those who see tattoos as insignificant, and most importantly, in response to those who believe their tattoos as part of their identity (appendix A). *Modified* draws attention to the sacred and intimate process of selecting and receiving a tattoo while emphasizing themes of permission, permanence, identity, and individuality. In an installation that includes immersive visual and audio elements, my work attempts to distance tattoos from the body and into a gallery space, forcing the audience to give tattoos new yet unfamiliar attention. In a gallery space with black walls, I collected images of tattoos of several fellow college students and abstracted them to create enlarged stencils which were used to create white vinyl cutouts which I adhered to the wall (figure 1). At the center of the gallery space, a projection of my own tattoo covers the floor in response to those who previously told me to conceal it. While these alone did allow me to ethically promote tattoos in a gallery space, I felt I needed to contribute another element that would reveal their significance and connect them back to how individuals define themselves via body art/modification. To accompany the visual components, I created a soundscape that included soft noises of tattoo guns layered with excerpts from interviews I conducted with each student whose tattoos were on the wall. The excerpts illuminated each student's candid opinion about their tattoo, their significance (or lack thereof) and several clips explored the cultural

barriers they considered when choosing to receive a tattoo. As the audience explores the vinyl structures, the sounds of the participants beautifully narrating their tattoos and identities are what really make the experience. The audience has no idea whose tattoo they are observing, but because of the audio, they gain a sense of how important they are to whom they belong. In alignment with Alter-Muri's findings, the college students' narration of their tattoos - and their visibility - revealed that their tattoos are significant to them in how they connect with some aspect of their identity despite Western influences.

Eurocentric/Western colonial standards of professionalism and presentation have silenced and discriminated against expression through body modification simultaneously harming generations of non-Western communities who see body modification as liberating and sacred as well as those who find healing, power, and peace within body modification. These enforced prejudices prohibit freedom of bodily autonomy and severely limits the liberty one has to present themselves as they please. The process of researching and constructing *Modified* left me reflecting on my own body and its relationship with my college campus. While some parts of myself I consider to be safe, I noticed that some aspects of how I present my body are diluted or restricted in response to being in a predominately white institution. My confrontation with these thoughts preceded this paper and guided me towards investigating permission, permanence, bodily authority, and self-expression within performances of the body. The presentation of one's body is sacred in and of itself, but after reading Amelia Jones' 1998 book, "Body Art/Performing the Subject", it became clear that while performance art may parallel performances of the body, body art is an entirely separate subcategory that involves artists using their own bodies as vessels for resisting Western and Modernist standardizations of the body.

In Amelia Jones' "Body Art/Performing the Subject", Jones provides a framework for distinguishing performance art from performances of the body, referred to as, body art. Essentially, Jones argues that unlike alternate mediums, social and political implications are forced upon the body making it "visual artwork in a particularly charged and gendered way"¹. Body art not only appears as a more dramatized means of performance because of its implications, but its often theatrical in nature to garner attention from audiences and attract subversive discussions. Jones further clarifies this in her dissection of how body art blurs the relationships between an artist, their artwork, and the audience; "Body art — which projects the body of the artist into the work as a particularized subject, revising, as Ira Licht argued in 1975, 'the relationship among artists subject and public' — encourages us to rethink the very methods by which we fabricate histories of art and to rethink the ways in which we understand meaning to take place. Thus, we will see that it is *body art* rather than performance art that specifically opens out the closed circuits by which the art object was determined to have significance within modernist criticism. Body art proposes the art 'object' as a site where reception and production come together: a site of intersubjectivity... As I view body art here, it does two potentially radical things. By surfacing the desires informing interpretation, it encourages a 'performance of theory' that aims 'to re-plot the relation between perceiver and object between self and other,' illustrating what is at stake in such claims by encouraging acts of interpretation that themselves are performative. And it opens out subjectivity *as* performative, contingent, and always particularized rather than universal, implicating the interpreter (with all of her investedness, biases, and desires) within the meanings and cultural values ascribed to the work of art."². Jones'

¹ Jones, Amelia. "Body Art/Performing the Subject" 1998: 13

² Jones, Amelia. "Body Art/Performing the Subject" 1998: 14

framework informed my exploration of the use of the body not only as art, but as a medium that uniquely critiques societal structures.

In the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism, performances of the body gained popularity amongst communities that suffered for not aligning with Western standards for presenting oneself. Body art became a critical mechanism for self-definition, self-determination, and self-authority for entertainers, artists, and performers alike who wanted to produce work that simultaneously challenged systems of oppression and suppression within the West. This thesis will expand discussions of performativity of the body to transcend discrimination of the racialized body. Chapter 1 investigates the origins of Modernist expectations of “purity” in body presentation through an examination of Adolf Loos’ speech and essay, “Ornament and Crime” that antedated the rise of French icon Josephine Baker who confronted race and nudity in her art. Subsequently in Chapter 2, I explore queer artists Claude Cahun and Vaginal Davis who capitalized on the fluidity of gender and sexuality identities and its intersectionality with political and social conflicts. Finally, Chapter 3 considers the lack of autonomy within Black American sexuality specifically through an evaluation of multimedia artist, Kara Walker, and entertainer, Janet Jackson.

Chapter I

Adolf Loos

“The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his rudder, his oars; in short, everything he can get his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the prisoners are tattooed. Tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder.”³

Architect Adolf Loos’ famous essay and lecture *Ornament and Crime* set the tone for modernist praxis in relation to surface and skin. Loos’ early-1900s diatribe criticized the excess and the glorified under the belief that surfaces are best in their natural state and any additions were unnecessary.

To first understand Loos’ argument, it is imperative to revisit the modernist ideology behind *Ornament and Crime*. Prior to Loos’ essay, Modern Art was in the process of taking a new direction. In an effort to break tradition, Western artists like French Post-Impressionist artist Paul Gauguin and Spanish Surrealist artist Pablo Picasso began to source new “inspiration” from non-Western communities. Artists like Gauguin and Picasso ventured abroad to essentially observe art, beauty, and culture outside of the confines of Europe. Upon returning, Gauguin and Picasso began to incorporate their observations into their art sparking new direction for Modern art; ““...that modern art was ‘becoming other’”⁴. This shift was first noticeable in Gauguin’s incorporation of Tahitian imagery in his artwork. Gauguin left to Polynesia in the late 1800’s and

³ Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime." In *Ornament and Crime*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. United States: Penguin Classics, 2019.

⁴ Foster, Hal. "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art." *October* 34 (1985): 56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

only returned to France once. While on his brief trip back to France, Gauguin answered the questions as to why he began to immerse himself in Tahitian life, “I was captivated by that virgin land and its primitive and simple race; I went back there, and I am going to go there again. In order to produce something new, you have to return to the original source, to the childhood of mankind”⁵. It is essential to take note of Gauguin’s diction. The words “primitive” and “simple race” are synonymous in that Gauguin was emphasizing a group, detached from his own, that were inferior. What began with plants and ecological elements, expanded into people - especially women. Gauguin’s art became entirely influenced by Tahitian/Polynesian land and people and began to attract an inexplicable appetite for observations of the Other from Western audiences.

Just a year prior to *Ornament and Crime*, the introduction of this Other is commonly attributed to *Les Femmes d’Alger*, a 1907 painting by Pablo Picasso (figure 2). Though this piece, at first, was only seen by a few of Picasso’s closest acquaintances it became “a bridge between modernist and premodernist painting, a primal scene of modern primitivism”⁶ for its depiction of both the attraction and repulsion of The Other. In this piece, Picasso strikingly and intentionally illustrates a scene at a brothel in which 1 nude woman holds onto a curtain revealing 4 other nude women. After doing hundreds of sketches to master the look, Picasso painted the women in a very specific way that is contrary to his prior work. The women appear to be three dimensional which was uncommon for that time period - especially in France where Picasso frequented. This alteration in perspective was new within the art scene and though it led Picasso to hide the art due to dramatic criticism from peers, it also allowed him to accentuate the

⁵ Welten, R. B. J. M. “Paul Ganguin and the Complexity of the Primitivist Gaze.” (2015): 2. <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/welten.pdf>

⁶ Foster, Hal. “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art.” *October* 34 (1985): 45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

key features of the painting that led to its popularity decades later. The women in the painting are obviously painted uniquely with facial features that were said to align with those of Asian and Spanish women. Two of the women's faces are covered with what appear to be Picasso's perception of African tribal masks.

While to some, the work of Gauguin, Picasso, and others appeared to be harmless explorations and representations of 'beauty' from other non-European places, the sinister reality of Primitivism as we know it now became more evident as time progressed. Taking a step back, it is imperative to consider what Gauguin and Picasso truly did. Through careful curation, both artists extracted elements from other cultures and placed them at the epicenter of Western Modernism. Not only did this decontextualize the art, but this decontextualization allowed for Western artists to manipulate and thus 'colonize' through their art: "The Primitive is cast into a nebulous past and/or into an idealist realm of primitive essences. (thus the tribal objects, not dated in the show, are still not entirely free of the old evolutionist association with Primal or ancient artifacts, a confusion entertained by the moderns.) In this way, the Primitive/tribal is set a drift from specific reference and coordinates – which thus allows it to be defined in wholly Western terms. And one begins to see that one of the preconditions, if not of primitivism, then certainly of the "Primitivism" show is the mummification of the tribal and the museumification of its objects"⁷. Outside of painting, this is amplified even more when tangible artifacts are considered, "The founding activist for coding is the repositioning of the tribal objects as art. posed against its first uses evolutionist trophy and then as ethnographic evidence, this aestheticization allows the work to be both decontextualized and commodified. It is this currency

⁷ Foster, Hal. "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art." *October* 34 (1985): 52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

of the Primitive among the modern – its currency as sign, its circulation as commodity – but allows for the modern/tribal affinity-effect in the first place.”⁸ It is initially puzzling to understand why Gauguin or Picasso would choose to immerse themselves amongst those they considered to be “less than” but the answer lies in how the West defined their relationship with The Other.

Take, for example, the style in which Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Using Cubistic technique, Picasso deliberately replicated facial features and traditional African objects in a way that startled audiences, hence the initial negative responses Picasso received: ““They were against everything - against unknown threatening spirits...I, too, am against everything. I, too, believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! ... women, children... the whole of it! I understood what the Negroes used in their sculptures for...All fetishes...were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious... they were all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum with the masks... the dusty manikins. *Les Femmes d'Alger* must have been born that day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting - yes absolutely!”⁹ Picasso’s strategic implementation and manipulation of women and African objects speaks precisely to the rigid dichotomy between the West and its relationship with the Other that became the focal point of Modern Primitivism.

Going back to Adolf Loos’ *Ornament and Crime*, many academics traced back the root of Loos’ beliefs. In the introduction to the famed essay/lecture, Loos begins with noting, “The

⁸ Foster, Hal. “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art.” *October* 34 (1985): 52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

⁹ Foster, Hal. “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art.” *October* 34 (1985): 46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778488>.

Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his rudder, his oars; in short, everything he can get his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty per cent of the prisoners are tattooed. Tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder.”¹⁰ This is believed to have derived from the teachings of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s 1876 *The Criminal Man* in which, “Lombroso asserted that there was a clear connection between tattoos and criminality since only criminals and primitive peoples tattooed themselves; criminals, he contended, were “atavists,” or evolutionary throwbacks, who echoed in their personalities the crude instincts of primitive humanity. Tattoos, Lombroso thought, were akin to corporal stigmata betraying the inner, biological nature of the criminal disposition...he writes: ‘Tattooing is one of the striking symptoms of humans in a raw state, in their more primitive form...(he observes that nearly half of the criminals he studied bore tattoos)’”¹¹.

Here we see the early introduction of Loos’ connection between The Other, the body and danger. The Papuan here stands for The Other, the primitive and is identified as those who engage in bodily manipulation, here in the form of tattoos, and thus by contradicting normal Western presentations of the body, the tattoos adorning their bodies become symbols of degeneracy and defiance. In *Ornament and Crime*, Loos reinforces this connection even more by asserting that within non-Western primitive groups, body manipulation (tattoos) is a common practice and thus indicative that only the uncivilized, underdeveloped populations engage in such

¹⁰ Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime." In *Ornament and Crime*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. United States: Penguin Classics, 2019.

¹¹ Long, Christopher. "The Origin and Context of Adolf Loos’s ‘Ornament and Crime’." (2009): 207. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2009.68.2.200>.

behavior. This became the thesis of Loos' argument. As an architect, Loos framed his thoughts around the architecture of the skin (i.e the most observable part of the body): "...Loos writes: "a person of our time, who smears the walls with erotic symbols out of an inner compulsion, is either a criminal or a degenerate....One can measure the cultural level of a country by the degree to which the toilet walls are covered with graffiti." ¹² This comparison of one's body with a brick and mortar building is precisely the connection Loos made in his work as an architect in his earlier 1898 essay, "The Principle of Cladding": "Adolf Loos...attributes the origin of architecture not to structure or solid material...but to mobile surfaces: fabric, even skin...Loos explicitly takes his ideas about the primacy of cladding from the German historian and architect Gottfried Semper, who believed that textile was the primary stimulus for all figuration in both architecture and art considered the first art to be the human adornment of the body on skin, beginning with tattoos and extending to clothing... The preoccupation with primitive cladding, however, will prove to be something of a theoretical conundrum when most develops an allergy to primitive arts, especially the tattoo. In ..."Ornament and Crime", Loos summarily dismisses ornamentation in architectural practice... [comparing] such preferences to 'the [childish and amoral] tattoos of the Papuan'" ¹³. At this point, Loos solidifies his belief that as a surface, it is expected that, with Western culture, the skin remain pure for adorning the skin with ornament and engaging with bodily modification is indicative of a regression in civilization.

The connection between skin as a surface and Modernism becomes even clearer as Loos "echoes [Max] Nordau's essential conservatism, especially his belief that new advances in art and culture had to be based upon previous developments. Nordau vehemently opposed the

¹² Long, Christopher. "The Origin and Context of Adolf Loos's 'Ornament and Crime'." (2009): 208. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2009.68.2.200>.

¹³ Loos, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime." In *Ornament and Crime*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. United States: Penguin Classics, 2019.

‘invention’ of new artistic forms; he was convinced that true culture Evolution had to be the product of ‘disciplined progress’ that was an outcome of a ‘philosophy of self-restraint.’ In “Ornament and Crime,” Loos expresses this idea by drawing a comparison between the culture of aristocrats of urban society - those who were thoroughly modern in outlook - with those who were less developed, and therefore possessed of less restraint...because they have no other means to achieve elevated states of being. We, on the other hand possess the art that has superseded ornament ellipses”¹⁴. This is explicitly enforced when Loos writes, “Lack of ornament has pushed the other arts to unimagined heights. Beethoven's symphonies would never have been written by a man who was obliged to go about in silk, velvet and lace. Those who run around in velvet nowadays are not artists but buffoons or house painters. We have become more refined, more subtle. The herd must distinguish themselves by the use of various colors, modern man uses his clothes like a mask. His individuality is so strong that he does not need to express it any longer by his clothing. Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier and foreign cultures as he thinks fit. He concentrates his own powers of invention on other things.”¹⁵ Loos argues that the absence of ornamentation pushed artists to explore other things, other surfaces. Loos’ advocacy for clean, pure surfaces set a premise for Primitivist Modernism as audiences began to fixate on exploring, analyzing, and studying the skin as surface. As a surface that is easily accessible, the focus on skin naturally acted as a catalyst for the focus on racialized, sexualized skin leading to a whole new chapter within Primitivist Modernism - one that found itself outside of the gallery space and into the body.

¹⁴ Long, Christopher. “The Origin and Context of Adolf Loos’s ‘Ornament and Crime’”. (2009): 209. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jsah.2009.68.2.200>.

¹⁵ Loss, Adolf. "Ornament and Crime." In *Ornament and Crime*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. United States: Penguin Classics, 2019.

Josephine Baker

“For we cannot address the history of modern surfaces without asking after the other history of skin, the violent, dysphoric one – the one about racialized nakedness inherited from the Enlightenment so necessary to Western constructions of humanity and the one that speaks of the objectification, commodification, and fetishization of racialized skin, especially black female skin”¹⁶

Discussions of surface and skin are impossible without one of the most profound and influential talents of all time – Josephine Baker. A Black dancer, singer, and activist, Baker’s bold use of her body in performance was the catalyst for much debate over skin as a surface, a platform for ornamentation, and the racialized body. Though born in the US, Baker spent the majority of her life in France using her body to communicate themes of race, gender, sexuality, and feminism to majority white audiences¹⁷. One of, if not the most, famous performances by Baker took place in her debut at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. In Baker’s October 2, 1925 performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, she performed what appeared to be a two-part dance that challenged European standards of beauty – to a majority, if not all, white audience. In the first part, Baker’s apparel and stage design began with torn clothing and racist paraphernalia while she gave a bodily performance that deviated from “typical” or “professional” choreography. In the second part, the bodily performance lies in the lack of clothing Baker wore while being held by another Black performer. This performance is dissected in examined in Anne Chen’s *Second Skin* in which Chen studies the piece in terms of style, reception, and its impact on modern art: “On the night of October 2nd, 1925, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925,

¹⁶ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Second Skin: Josephine Baker & Modern Surface.” (2000): 6. <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.99.1-2.0136>

¹⁷ Norwood, Arlisha. "Josephine Baker." National Women's History Museum. 2017. www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/josphine-baker.

a [Josephine Baker] entered the stage on all fours, bottom up, head down, wearing a tattered shirt and cut off pants, a strange doll among bales of cotton and bandaned ‘bucks’ and ‘black mummies’. with their hair slick back in a shining armor and her mouth painted in minstrel style, this figure started to dance - and dance like nothing anyone has seen before. with eyes crossed, buttocks quivering, legs going every which way, that slim pulsating body on stage appeared part child, part simeon, part puppet on neurotic strings; then she retreated. But she came back, this time, clad and nothing but copper skin, bright pink feathers around her thighs, ankles, and neck, doing a full split while hanging upside down on the well-oiled shoulders of a black giant: one moment, dead weight; the next, pure kinetic eruption...”¹⁸ It is an understatement to say this performance was ahead of its time. In an authoritative and bold move, Baker challenged European audiences by using her body to perform in a manner that had not been done before. This performance provoked conversations about the body, racialized skin, and surface, but even more, birthed the Baker Myth; “After almost three centuries of European incursion into the ‘Dark Continent’; over six decades since the Emancipation Proclamation in the US; and a quarter of a century into the birth artistic and literary Modernism, which has made much of its attraction for so-called African imports, what we find art this theatrical enactment of two of the most rehearsed sites of European conquest – the plantation and the jungle — is a moment of profound consternation. More intriguingly, it seems worth asking why this consternation, even if disingenuous or exaggerated, should narrate itself as a categorical confusion – that is, over categories of race, gender, and the human that the legacy of imperial history ought to have secured, or at least lent the fantasy of certitude. Thus at the moment *la Baker* was invented on

¹⁸ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

stage we see not the affirmation or the denial of Modernist Primitivism but the failure of its terms to inscribe its own passions.”¹⁹ In order to digest and understand the Baker Myth, we must first explore the reception to Baker’s debut at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (figure 3). Most recounts of that evening describe the audience’s response as simultaneously one of fascination and attraction and one of disgust and repulsion. Upon the conclusion of Baker’s performance, some of the audience rushed the stage screaming and applauding while others left the theater. The following day, Parisian newspapers published a response to Baker’s performance, “ ‘Was she horrible, delicious? black, white?... Woman, other?... dancer, fugitive?’ ...’a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something, equally nonprimitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.”²⁰ This response, which ignored the pertinent message and instead entirely focused on her appearance, is just one of several that acted as a catalyst for Baker to become one of the most significant figures during Primitivist Modernism.

As detailed earlier, Baker began the performance in stereotypical attire similar to the racist mammy caricature which painted dark-skinned Black women as mother-like figures to care for white American families. At this time, mammy caricatures were used as a political ploy to further solidify Black women's social position in the US by reinforcing to white Americans that they were readily available as stand-in caretakers for their families’ needs. Baker’s choice in attire can not be mistaken as anything else but clear commentary on how society defines and limits Black women diminishing them down to nothing but those who exist for the purpose of

¹⁹ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

²⁰ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

pleasing white populations, just as those in the audience of the performance. Baker contrasts this portion of the show by following up with one where she is in nothing but feathers. This time attention was diverted away from her attire and into her surface. This contradictory performance successfully captured what many believe to be Baker's intent. In a time where The Other was defined by Western audiences, Baker engaged with her racialized body and turned herself into a form of other in which she held the authority to define herself on her own terms: "When aesthetic history meets the history of human bodies made inhuman, what we will confront may not be an account of how modern surface represses makes a spectacle of racialized skin but, instead, an intricate and inchoative narrative about how the inorganic dreams itself out of the organic and how the organic fabricates its essence through the body of the inanimate. This reciprocal narrative in turn will radically implode the distinction of surface versus essence so central to both racist and progressive narratives about the jeopardized black body. That is, perennial opposition between what is open and naked versus what is veiled and hidden has been as important to the racist imagination as it is to the critical intervention designed to decode it. For the racist, nakedness signals rawness, animality, dumb flesh and is repeatedly invoked socially and legally, as the sign of the inhuman and the other."²¹ What Anne Chen so eloquently outlined is the way Western groups manipulated the bodies of Black and non-Western people and redefined them as physical and visual indicators of one's stature. In Western societies, the presentation of the body became indicative of how others could/would treat you and Baker's performance is nothing short of that. Baker's first performance with her 'veiled and hidden' body still unveiled her sentiments about the detrimental and demoralizing attribution of Black women

²¹ Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

to subservient homemakers for the benefit of white households, but her subsequent ‘open and naked’ performance directly countered Western perceptions of nudity as primal or *primitive* because she understood that her skin, based on the audience, would be deduced to a racialized and gendered surface, thus igniting the kind of aforementioned disquisitions that would separate her from Western stereotypes and enable her to define her body on her own terms; “...we have to revisit Baker's own famed nakedness. Nudity and exposure were, of course, central themes in her iconography and theatrical repertoire. it is almost universally agreed, by conservatives and radical feminists alike, that Baker exemplifies the history of pseudoscientific, ethnographic display of racial difference in the 19th century. But Baker nudity is a peculiar business. When one looks at its surface, what one finds is not what one expects. she was known for her primitive femininity, yet on the night of her explosive debut at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925, members of the Parisian audience were overwhelmed with both adulation and repulsion; moreover, they seemed terribly confused.”²²

Baker’s prominence after this performance came from discussions about race & surface and nudity which were amplified as other artists began to use Baker as a source of inspiration for their work. In the context of Modernism, it is necessary to make the distinction between how Modernism and Primitivism interact with one another. In Western societies, Primitivism was a way to present and define The Other without allowing The Other to respond, thus, “...the intimacy between Modernism and Primitivism is not what it can tell us about how we see racial difference, but about how racial difference teaches us *to see*...”²³ Baker’s performance of the

²² Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 107. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

²³ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Second Skin: Josephine Baker & Modern Surface.” (2000): 6. <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.99.1-2.0136>

body countered previous connections between Modernism and Primitivism because The Other was now presented from someone who themselves was a visualization of a ‘racialized surface’ and who had now become a notable public figure which was unprecedented for the time. This contradictory relationship became especially apparent once Josephine Baker and Adolf Loos came into contact with one another shortly after her, now infamous, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées debut. Loos, fascinated by Baker’s perceived exoticism, developed a prototype home for her in 1927 titled the *Baker House*²⁴.

A multistory home, the *Baker House* appeared to embody the ornamentation Loos so strongly detested by drawing influence from ‘primitive icon’ Josephine Baker’s life. Though documentation on *Baker House* is somewhat limited, many scholars have confidently pieced together Loos’ intention behind the work. The exterior, covered in black and white stripes was said to simultaneously represent Baker’s place within white society, some of the attire she wore, but more importantly, her own “tattooed” skin: “The striking facade features alternating thirty-centimeter bands of black and white marble. In architectural criticism, this facade has repeatedly been described as ‘tattooed’ or erotically marked. This rather idiosyncratic designation only makes sense when one understands it has a deliberate allusion to Loo’s own references to tattoos, with the implication that Loos, in designing for the “primitive” Baker, has lapsed into the very ornamentation that he abhorred. Indeed, numerous commentaries about the Baker House have found this design to be unusual in Loos’s repertoire and have repeatedly described it without much critical reflection as ‘primitive’, ‘exotic’, or ‘African’...the fundamental and philosophic intimacy between modernity and nostalgia that structures the very

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relationship between black skin and modern surface that we have been tracing”²⁵ What’s attractive about the *Baker House* is Loos’ own self-contradiction²⁶. The *Baker House* later became the perfect model - both architecturally and metaphorically - to expose the flaws in Loos’ *Ornament and Crime* and within Modern Primitivism itself. As one who vehemently equated tattooed surfaces to degeneracy and criminality²⁷ and deemed non-Western communities as primal, it was shocking to see Loos not only engage with someone like Baker, but produce a body of work that strips away the modern, pure surface and presents an ornamented, racialized surface. Loos’ view, laced with misogyny, racism, and perversion - is precisely the reason the *Baker House* sums up the entirety of the Baker myth - the misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and dilution of her as a Black woman and a performer.

A once-in-a-lifetime multitalent, Baker did not limit her work to dance and performance. Her repertoire also included a multitude of photographs from various modeling endeavors. As with her performances, Baker continued to perform her body through experimentation with tools including clothing, props, nudity, and photographic techniques. Now seen as a muse, Baker transitioned to using herself to challenge racialized feminine sexuality. Oftentimes Baker utilized the aforementioned tools to blur the line between her surface and that around her. An example of this is in Baker’s frequent use of animals and animal materials. In covering her naked body with feathers, posing with a live cheetah, or looking statues of elephants right in the eye, Baker further objurgated comparisons of savage, wild animals to Black women as Primitive Modernism did:

²⁵ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 107. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

²⁶ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 114. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

²⁷ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 111. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

“Indeed, the Baker myth has always generated more visual and political conundrum than current accounts of her can accommodate. As noted, she was (in)famous for exploiting her nudity, yet key moments of exposure in her films and photography are often impeded by literal and symbolic veils; that is, the moments where she gets exposed are also often moments in which she gets covered in everything from coal to flour to feathers. And in the sizable archive of her studio photographs, Baker's nakedness never stands alone but is invariably accompanied by two reoccurring tropes: shimmery gold cloth and animal skin. At a quick glance, one sees the expected Primitivist conflation between animalism and racialized female sexuality.”²⁸

Another notable characteristic of these studio images, was the surreal presentation of her skin which defied racial and sexist depictions of Black women (figure 4). In most of the images, Baker is draped in shimmery gold cloth or jewelry and her skin appears silky almost as if it is in its purest most perfect state. Contrary to Loos, who in the *Baker House* depicted her skin as tattooed, when Baker wears the gold, silky clothing, the softness to her skin reads almost as though it blends in with the inorganic material she is draped in. This cuts through the Primitive Modernist definition of the racialized, in this case Black, surface as it seemingly melts right into other materials which, “allow her image to offer critique of misogynist and racist logic and may even offer a critique of - or at least an alternative response to - the discourse of flesh designed to rescue that captive body from that history of objectification”²⁹ In essence, the racist and misogynistic objectification of Black women by Primitive Modernist like Adolf Loos (and the rest of the West) created the Baker Myth. Adolf Loos’ contradictory and flawed *Baker House*

²⁸ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 108. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

²⁹ Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility.” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 110. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.98>.

exposed just this in his simplified attempt to simply ornament the outside of the house as Baker does with her body without taking into account the depth of Baker's bodily performance and use of her 'racialized surface' to counter the prejudicial and destructive implications of Primitive Modernism.

Josephine Baker singlehandedly set a precedent for Black women representation in media. Her dedication to relentlessly countering Modernism with her body redirected Modernism and media. Baker inserted herself in Western discourse on race, skin, femininity and the body to deconstruct the "objectification, commodification, and fetishization of racialized skin, especially black female skin"³⁰ Baker rewrote and redefined how audiences *see* non-Western communities by forcing them to confront precisely what they avoided - the autonomy and self-authority of non-Western people.

Chapter II

Claude Cahun

³⁰ Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Second Skin: Josephine Baker & Modern Surface." (2000): 11. <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.99.1-2.0136>

“Claude Cahun is not an alter ego; it is not, as she declares, a nickname, but is an actual self-nomination, i.e. it is part of the reconstructive process of a self, which to be effectively accomplished, must start from a basic element, i.e. from the definition of the very coordinates it belongs to, so that - once reprocessed - they may introduce and contain congenital elements of a new, self-determine personality”³¹

As Josephine Baker utilized her body to challenge racism, xenophobia, and misogyny within Primitive Modernism, contemporaneously Claude Cahun utilized her body to challenge gender identity and presentation in Surrealism. Cahun was a French photographer and multimedia artist who used surrealist techniques to dissect and criticize Western expectations of body presentation, femininity and self-determination. In order to understand the direction and intention behind Cahun’s work, it is necessary to explore her background, upbringing, and how she became involved in the Surrealist movement.

Claude Cahun was born to a well-off family in Nantes, France in the fall of 1894 to a Protestant mother and Jewish father. Born Lucy Schwob, Cahun made the decision to change her given name at a very young age with the intent of presenting herself as more gender ambiguous; “Claude Cahun is not an alter ego; it is not, as she declares, a nickname, but is an actual self-nomination, i.e. it is part of the reconstructive process of a self, which, to be effectively accomplished, must start from a basic element i.e. from the definition of the very coordinates it belongs to, so that - once reprocessed - they may introduce and contain congenital elements of a new, self-determined personality”³² While the origin of her decision behind ‘Claude’ is unknown,

³¹ Latimer, True Tirza. "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Academia*. 357. https://www.academia.edu/26753139/Acting_Out_Claude_Cahun_and_Marcel_Moore_Tirza_True_Latimer_IN_Dont_Kiss_Me

³²Gravano, V. “Explorations, Simulations: Claude Cahun and Self-Identity.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*. (2009): 357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506809342619>

Cahun was her maternal grandmother's last name which she chose to adopt³³. Cahun's adolescent life, especially her relationship with her mother, informed much of her work and her relationship with her body. Cahun's mother, Mary Antoinette suffered from mental illness which caused her to have an incredibly traumatizing and turbulent relationship with Cahun; "[Cahun's] mother, Mary Antoinette, manifested a dramatic refusal of [Cahun]: she could not touch her and even committed violent acts against her. Her mother's detention would generate...the constant fear, which was also obsessively shared by her father, of ending in the same terrible vice-like grip of mental illness"³⁴(358) Unfortunately, this relationship never repaired and when Cahun was a young child, Mary Antoinette was permanently institutionalized for the rest of her life. It is suspected that Cahun's aforementioned grandmother, Mathilde, stepped-up to care for her once her mother became hospitalized which may indicate Cahun's intentions with adopting her last name. Not too long after Cahun's mother left the household, her father remarried and Cahun became stepsisters with Marcel Moore. Having similar artistic and personal vision, Cahun and Moore grew very close and formed a powerful bond. Moore, born Suzanne Malherbe, changed her name for the same reasons as Cahun and the pair were often referenced as C.C. and M.M. Cahun and Moore eventually fell in-love and became partners both in art and in their personal lives. Moore was behind a large percentage of Cahun's work both as a collaborative partner and as the person behind the camera. The two spent a brief amount of time in Paris before eventually settling in St Brelade, Jersey in the Channel Islands where the two of them engaged in politics

³³ Wampole, Christy. "The Impudence of Claude Cahun." *L'Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 101–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378827>.

³⁴ Gravano, V. "Explorations, Simulations: Claude Cahun and Self-Identity." *European Journal of Women's Studies*. (2009): 358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506809342619>

both physically and artistically³⁵. The decision to move followed the rise in anti-semitism in France at the time which unfortunately followed the pair as German military entered Jersey in the 1940's. In lieu of fleeing, Cahun and Moore made the decision to remain in St. Brelade and began a "two-women anti-Nazi propaganda operation and...after several years of risk, [they were] arrested for crimes of high treason."³⁶ Eventually, after an emotionally and physically challenging time in prison, Cahun passed away from the aftermath of her time in prison – but not without leaving an incredible portfolio of writings and photographs that dared to oppose the Western constructs imposed onto her.

Cahun's emotive artwork could not have been possible without the dark part of her life with which she chose to explore. For Cahun, "...it is important to understand that all her work forms an integrated whole: the building or showing of what we would define today as a *self-identity*, assembled through the juxtaposition and the gathering of elements from her background - including her family descent."³⁷(354) The themes present in Cahun's work can essentially be summarized by her interactions with 'abnormality' in reference to both the devastating events in her life and her efforts to use her body presentation as a tool for superceding the binary. When looking at her images, most of Cahun's intended message derived directly from her body and the way Cahun manipulated herself to exaggerate certain features and confront various themes. In regards to her mother, Cahun digested her own sentiments about her

³⁵ Wampole, Christy. "The Impudence of Claude Cahun." *L'Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 101–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378827>.

³⁶ Latimer, True Tirza. "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Academia*. 357. https://www.academia.edu/26753139/Acting_Out_Claude_Cahun_and_Marcel_Moore_Tirza_True_Latimer_IN_Dont_Kiss_Me

³⁷ Gravano, V. "Explorations, Simulations: Claude Cahun and Self-Identity." *European Journal of Women's Studies*. (2009): 354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506809342619>

mother and conceptualized her mother's battle with mental illness perhaps to destigmatize and rehumanize those who struggle; "Claude would find the mystery and pain of this illness represented publicly a much of the literature and art that - from the beginning of the century - focused on 'lunatic women', and this became, in my opinion, another central element in her iconography, at least in her first photographic self-portraits, and a conspicuous part of her writings."³⁸ In taking "physical charge" of herself, Cahun intentionally "presents herself willingly as an ostensibly 'embarrassing figure' to be looked at through a declared deconstruction of her physical features."³⁹ By engaging with her body, Cahun used her 'Jewish' nose and "androgynous slimness" to her advantage by combining them with attire, scenery or props that would either enhance or blur her identity. For Western audiences - particularly in the Surrealist movement - Cahun became 'othered' in that she not only used her work to promote the struggle of 'lunatic' or institutionalized women, but also countered societal expectations of binary presentations of the body; "...Claude Cahun: taking physical charge of herself, embodying several conditions in her own limbs, not harmonizing them, or searching for some resolute mediation, but keeping them in a constant condition of negotiation and contradiction. In that body, which appears both front back to be both masculine and feminine, there is no attempt at gratification, rather, a vital disquieting sense of the indefinite"⁴⁰

³⁸ Latimer, True Tirza. "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Academia*. 362.
https://www.academia.edu/26753139/Acting_Out_Claude_Cahun_and_Marcel_Moore_Tirza_True_Latimer_IN_Do_not_Kiss_Me

³⁹ Latimer, True Tirza. "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Academia*. 358.
https://www.academia.edu/26753139/Acting_Out_Claude_Cahun_and_Marcel_Moore_Tirza_True_Latimer_IN_Do_not_Kiss_Me

⁴⁰ Latimer, True Tirza. "Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Academia*. 356.
https://www.academia.edu/26753139/Acting_Out_Claude_Cahun_and_Marcel_Moore_Tirza_True_Latimer_IN_Do_not_Kiss_Me

One of Cahun's most layered art works is a series of untitled images made between 1927-1929. A large portion of Cahun's work were portraits in which her body was the focal point and manipulations in makeup, lighting, and attire told the intended story, In *Untitled (I am in Training)*, however, an entire set accompanies Cahun creating a deeply meaningful work that encapsulates many of the themes Cahun addresses. In *I am in Training*, Cahun sits in a chair with her legs crossed (figure 5). Her hair is parted in the center and two strands curl upwards framing her face. Her makeup is bold and lipstick, presumably a darker color, is used to paint both her lips and the two hearts that sit right on her cheek bone on either side. Cahun's top is unclear but appears to be a full-body suit with which she pairs loose-fitting shorts, leather cuffs on her wrist and leather boots. Her top is altered to include two dark dots on her chest which obviously represent nipples and writing, in english, which reads, "I AM IN TRAINING DO NOT KISS ME". In her hands she hold pantomime barbell hinting at a weightlifter or boxer in that time period⁴¹. This piece is complex to fully digest, but on the surface, it is evident that Cahun is resisting the binary and fully embracing a masculine and feminine persona via her use of stereotypical body language and presentation to contradict norms. Her attire, mainly the shorts, and her use of a barbell connects to sports which, at the time, were spaces almost exclusively for men. Her shirt, with the false nipples and clear statement read as though it is her body, or a second skin, and thus by marking her body, Cahun is engaging in confronting the 'tattooed' surface. Her makeup and crossed legs appear as soft, more feminine, but its her piercing facial expression which captures the viewer and demands them to acknowledge the message. At some point, Cahun was involved with theater, thus, her performances of her body and her attention to

⁴¹ Enger, Reed. "I am in training, don't kiss me." Art History Project. 2018. <https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/claude-cahun/i-am-in-training-dont-kiss-me/>.

detail show considerations of one who has studied the embodiment of other characters/personas; “...citing Cahun's work as an actor, many scholars have found that this is exactly the point, arguing that Cahun's boxing shorts, like her heart-shaped dimples and fake eyelashes, function as a part of camp masquerade. This theatrical lens foregrounds Cahun's use of her body and her portraits and lends itself to current thinking in feminists include modernist studies which - following Judith Butler's invitation to regender as a performative act - has a look to the stage as a particularly vital forum for queer subversions...experiences feelings, desires and communities...Of course, bodily performance is equally central to boxing, but type of performance necessary to survive, much less succeed, in the ring appears decidedly less compatible with Cahun's queer practices and identity than the king of performance practice on the stage... ‘Boxing...is for men and about men and is men,’ affording little space to those who do not conform for its ideal of masculine strength...’queer’ in relation to boxing speaks to the sport's hostility to queer performance”⁴² In this context, queer is a homonym of sorts indicating both Cahun's identity as a queer person and as a term that was once utilized within boxing. In the early 1900s, it was ‘dangerous to be queer in the ring’ as it denoted a fighter whose abilities have been either temporarily or permanently softened by continuous fist-to-head contact. This double entendre conveys Cahun's thoughtfulness and intentionality behind her work and her profound ability as an artist to layer messages that concurrently object Western impositions. At this time, women were also beginning to express interest in boxing and Cahun's decision to mirror the attire of boxers further spoke to cultural shifts that were subtly taking place. Modernist women began to use the boxing ring as “a productive site for contesting and destabilizing the norms of

⁴² Hancock, Austin. "Queering Modernism's Masculine Arena: In the Boxing Ring with Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Modernism/modernity* 28, no. 4 (2021): 736. doi:10.1353/mod.2021.0058.

modern gender and sexual identity” because of its masculinized nature⁴³. For Modernist women, this site was interconnected with theatrical stages as well premitting women to embrace less feminine personas and their accompanied implications and explore masculine ones. Artists and critiques alike have debated whether this piece was triumphant or unsuccessful, but either way the symbolism, imagery and overall performance from Cahun points audiences in the direction of her abject work and body presentation.

Despite Cahun’s success now, at the time, she was disregarded by several prominent Surrealists. Famed Surrealist André Breton, for example, “remained relatively unresponsive to Cahun’s attempts to gain artistic affirmation from them.”⁴⁴ This was a reality for Surrealist artists who were women due to misogynistic beliefs held by Surrealist icons. Other women, especially queer/androgynous women, were dulled within the movement minimizing opportunities to explore the ‘creative potential’ they possessed. Make no mistake, Cahun was not isolated from being *socially* included and, in fact, even had a genuine friendship with André Breton, but outright recognition and acknowledgement of her work and impact never came from him. Artists and leaders like Breton failed Cahun and are what ultimately led Claude Cahun to never be provided an opportunity to showcase her work and, later, her posthumous success. Though parts of Cahun’s identity were seen as “Other” (queer, Jewish) Cahun is not a Black woman. Her work is prevalent to the progress of Black women in art in the way that, along with Baker, Cahun’s work was a space for her to redefine herself and force audiences to engage with

⁴³ Hancock, Austin. "Queering Modernism's Masculine Arena: In the Boxing Ring with Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore." *Modernism/modernity* 28, no. 4 (2021): 735-759. [doi:10.1353/mod.2021.0058](https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2021.0058).

⁴⁴ Wampole, Christy. “The Impudence of Claude Cahun.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 101–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26378827>.

her “othered” body. Cahun opened up opportunities for exploring gendered performance and intersecting mediums as she so prolifically did with theater and her camera.

Vaginal Davis

*“Davis’s **archive** becomes art through her artistic embodiment of the archival — as her body/self is a walking installation and archival piece. Davis crafts and enacts her body/self in order to queerly perform an intricate and vibrant tapestry of not only countermemories, counterhistories, and nonce taxonomies, but she also moves queer embodiment, performance, and art to far more dangerous places — places William Haver asked we go to as quoted above — far more toward “something more essentially disturbing...”⁴⁵*

It would be remiss to explore performances of the body and not include Vaginal Davis.

Vaginal Davis (aka Dr. Davis and many other aliases) is a Mexican and Black queer artist, musician, and performer who utilizes disidentification, as theorized by José Esteban Muñoz, to explore, criticize, and publicize the experiences of queer people of color. Like Baker and Cahun, Davis uses her body presentation as performance to subvert imposed expectations of masculinity, femininity, and people of color.

Vaginal Davis was born in the late 1960’s to a Mexican American father & African American mother in Los Angeles, California. Born intersex, Davis’ mother declined surgery for her and while her birth certificate reads “male”, Davis and her family always identified her as a woman⁴⁶. While Davis keeps the majority of her personal life private, including her given name and precise birthdate, she makes it clear that her experiences as a Mexican and Black Queer

⁴⁵ Summers, Robert. "Queer Archives, Queer Movements." Academia. (2015): 52.
https://www.academia.edu/30060997/Queer_Movements_Queer_Archives_The_Visual_Archives_of_Vaginal_Davis

⁴⁶ Dunham, Cyrus Grace. “The ‘Terrorist Drag’ of Vaginal Davis.” The New Yorker. (2015)
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/terrorist-drag-vaginal-davis>

performance artist inspire her work and are constantly being challenged and confronted throughout. Davis adopted the name Vaginal Davis as an homage to Angela Davis' after attending college and becoming fascinated with Angela Davis' "whole late '60's and early 70's militant Black era"⁴⁷. In the Black Power movement, hyper-masculinity and militancy excluded "queerness and effeminacy" and created unsafe spaces for queer-identifying people. Instead, "Vaginal Davis...disidentified with Black Power by selecting Angela and not the Panthers as a site of self-fashioning and political formation...[Vaginal] Davis used parody and pastiche to remake Black Power, opening it up via disidentification to a self that is simultaneously black and queer"⁴⁸. For Davis, this was one of her earliest moments with disidentification.

In *The White to be Angry*, José Esteban Muñoz theorized Vaginal Davis' disidentification strategy in her performance art which is "...understood as 'a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ . . . to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology.' She (sometimes as a he) performatively creates queer scenes and characters that unhinge identity as something fixed and natural. For example, she often describes herself as an "alcoholic, tranny whore," whether she is in "female" or "male" clothes — all the while crisscrossing masculinity/male and femininity/female. Describing herself as "a poor, tragic mulatto," Davis deconstructs race by hyperbolically and humorously exposing its fabricatedness"⁴⁹(48) Davis, in other words, physically embodies other personas, characters, and even stereotypes to showcase to audiences the artificiality of identity. Heavy as this may

⁴⁷ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁴⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁴⁹ Summers, Robert. "Queer Archives, Queer Movements." *Academia*. (2015):48. https://www.academia.edu/30060997/Queer_Movements_Queer_Archives_The_Visual_Archives_of_Vaginal_Davis

seem, when engaging in disidentification, Davis skillfully uses humor not to dilute the potency of her commentary, but to have fun with herself while processing and facing the complex realities of a queer person of color. As a multimedia performance artist, Davis' approaches to disidentification are varied and come in contact with varying demographics of audiences. Davis' earlier works were 'riotous queercore' zines of which one in particular accelerated her rise in popularity. Her magazine *Fertile La Toyah Jackson Magazine* and video-zine *The Fertile La Toya Video-Zine* follows a story inspired by a former coworker of Davis' who in the zine is constantly pregnant and loved to gossip. Vaginal Davis explored music through her concept bands like Cholita! where Davis and other members adopted personas, in this case a Mexican teen girl Graziela Grejalva, and used songs to tell stories. Born around the emergence of the punk rock scene, Davis was privy to the exclusionary culture of punk in its early years; "The L.A. punk scene worked very hard to whitewash and straighten its image. While many people of color and queer [people] were part of this cultural movement, they often remained closeted in the scene's early days...In the lifeworld of mostly straight white punks, Davis had, as a black gay [person], a strongly disidentificatory role within that community."⁵⁰ As Graciela Grejalva, Davis became "not an oversexed songstress, but instead a teenage Latina singing sappy bubblegum pop."⁵¹ As an African-Mexican-American, Vaginal Davis used her work to dissect and get in-tune with her identities, reformat herself and mute the constructedness of personhood. Graciela Grejalva gave Davis the platform to revisit youth through the whimsical eyes of a teenage girl in a art rock concept band showing how she is often referred to as an archive. Her

⁵⁰ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁵¹ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 84. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

performances capture a space in which racialized, gendered, or sexualized bodies are brought to 'life' by Davis for her to disidentify with. Naturally, as a queer African-Mexican-American, Davis is already an other, but in "queering" herself through characters, Davis uses a theatrical approach to becoming a walking documentation or, as some put it, a 'walking installation'. While whimsical and enjoyable, Davis' performances are not to be taken lightly. Performing the self and employing disidentification strategies, "are often strategies of survival"⁵². For queer people of color, not fitting within certain standards, or standing out amongst those who conform to Western constructs, can be a matter of life or death. Davis' performance of self is both impactful for her own self-determination, but also for her bravery in doing so.

Davis as an archive and as one who engages in disidentification is, arguably, the clearest in her drag performances. What is referred to as the "mass commercialization of drag", Davis used her performances to counter this presentation of drag as a "sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption" whose performances were seen as stepping stones for building up social tolerance between queer and cis-heterosexual communities⁵³. In response, Davis engages in what is referred to by Muñoz as "terrorist drag". In lieu of participating in the comfortable, easily digestible, socially acceptable drag performances, Davis embodies whomever she desires to "stir[s] up uncertain desire[s]" and enables subjects to imagine a way of "break[ing] away from the ... restraints on the 'social body,'" ⁵⁴. Contrary to 'mainstream drag', Davis' drag performances also don't enforce a standard of beauty, glam, of womanly presentation. In fact,

⁵² Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁵³ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 85. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁵⁴ Muñoz, José Esteban. "'The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

Davis intentionally removes terrorist drag from those expectations citing the culture around 'passing' within drag communities. Historically, drag performances placed a particular focus on a performer's presentation of themselves and its proximity to conforming to 'white female glamour' where 'believability' is the focal point. Davis, instead, looks to disidentification within drag in which the performer can "produce" woman through performing femininity severing the tie between femininity and biological makeup. In her performances, Davis looks to her fantasies for inspiration which "involve cultural anxieties around miscegenation, communities of color, and the queer body... She instead dresses like white supremacist militiamen and black welfare queen hookers. In other words, her drag mimesis is not concerned with the masquerade of womanliness, but instead with conjuring the nation's most dangerous citizens. She is quite literally in "terrorist drag."⁵⁵

One of Vaginal Davis' other concept bands was birthed out of a random interaction Davis had at a bus stop with three random strangers - Pedro, Muriel, and Esther aka PME. With PME, Davis created one of the most prolific pieces in her repertoire. *The White to be Angry* is CD created by her hard-core/speed metal band, PME in the late 90's (figure 6). A visual album, *The White to be Angry* is a series of videos in which PME engages in disidentification in a darkly humorous sort of way - ranging from notorious anti-queer/racists serial killers to skinheads. At one point in the 90's, Davis and the rest of PME did a live performance in Chicago which included an exceptional performance by Davis perfectly encapsulating her relationship with disidentification and passing. While on-stage performing songs from the album, Davis vacillates between herself and a character, Clarence. A white, pro-gun, hyper-masculine, straight man,

⁵⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. "The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

Clarence, is a depiction of a threat to Vaginal Davis' safety, yet Davis chooses to embody him. Her brown-skinned face covered in white paint, Davis' goal is clearly not to pass as a white man; "Her dark brown skin does not permit her to pass as white, the beard is obviously fake, and the fatigues look inauthentic. Realness is neither achieved nor is it the actual goal of such a project. Instead, her performance as Clarence functions as an intervention in the history of cross-race desire that saturates the phenomenon of passing. Passing is parodied, and this parody becomes a site where interracial desire is interrogated"⁵⁶. Consider Vaginal Davis compared to Clarence: a Black queen and a white supremacist. Clarence, as a white supremacist, holds sentiments about people of color that makes him believe he needs a gun on him to protect himself from the threat of the dismantling of white supremacy – i.e, the threat of *terror*. Davis, a queer brown-skinned African-Mexican-American, sees Clarence and his gun as a threat, or *terror*, to her livelihood. This dichotomy of self reveals the extraordinary impact of disidentification and passing: "This performance is also obviously not about passing inasmuch as the whiteface makeup that the artist uses looks nothing like real white skin. Clarence has as much of a chance passing as white as Vaginal has passing as female. Rather, this disidentification works as an interiorized passing. The interior pass is a disidentification and tactical misrecognition of self. Aspects of the self that are toxic to the militiaman-blackness, gayness, and trans vestism-are grafted on this particularly militaristic script of masculinity. The performer, through the role of Clarence, inhabits and undermines the militiaman with a fierce sense of parody."⁵⁷ Make no mistake with what parody in this instance is seen as. Davis' performance is not strictly comedic as it counters historical

⁵⁶ Muñoz, José Esteban. "The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 92. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁵⁷ Muñoz, José Esteban. "The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

misrepresentations of Blackness. By painting her face white, Davis 'appropriates' the historical practice of white people performing blackness via blackface. Similar to Josphine Baker and mammy, Davis now counters the political caricature 'fat-lipped Sambo' with a pro-gun, hyper-straight, hyper-masculine white one⁵⁸. But, of course, even amidst challenging damaging stereotypes and enforced identities, Davis never fails to incorporate her humor: "Davis's disidentification with minstrelsy offers a more polyvalent response to this history. Davis's disidentificatory take on "whiteface" both reveals the degraded character of the white supremacist and wrests "symbolic controls" from white people. The white supremacist is forced to cohabit in one body with a black queen in such a way that the image loses its symbolic force. A figure that is potentially threatening to people of color is revealed as a joke."⁵⁹

The White to be Angry is a project that beautifully demonstrates Davis' thesis as an artist. Both as political commentary and comedic subversion, PME used an array of artistic styles - video, music, performance- and techniques to build and heal community through disidentification. One thing in particular about Vaginal Davis' work is its accessibility. With a focus on low-cost productions, Davis, PME, and her other projects are traditionally debuted/performed in spaces like clubs, queer spaces, her apartment or even, more recently as she works in academia, university classrooms. Davis simultaneously removes herself from white cube gallery spaces and places herself in spaces where fellow queer people of color belong or deserve to belong.

⁵⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. "The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

⁵⁹ Muñoz, José Esteban. "The White to Be Angry': Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag." *Social Text*, no. 52/53 (1997): 93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466735>.

Chapter III

Kara Walker

Born in Stockton, California in 1969, Kara Walker is notable for stepping into the white cube gallery space and approaching bodily performance in a uniquely near-tangible way. An RISD alum, Walker uses her work to manipulate presentations of the body throughout history to transcend the misrecognition and weaken the reality of Black American history in the United States. One of her most infamous and recognizable techniques is the use of paper cut-outs, crafted by Walker herself, which adhere to gallery walls and create silhouetted scenes depicting, criticizing, and illustrating “historical narratives haunted by sexuality, violence, and subjugation”⁶⁰. Some Black academics, artists, historians, and more have criticized Walker’s work seeing it as historically inaccurate depictions that falsify Black narratives, however, Walker (and her supporters) acknowledge that the scenes themselves are fabricated histories, but the events in them are not. What audiences see are sickening yet authentic combinations of historically disturbing Black experiences placed together to call attention to past and present realities to remind audiences that, despite what many attempt to argue, the insidious reality of slavery and its impact on Black Americans can never dissipate.

Kara Walker’s silhouettes are like no other. Inspired by Victorian art and post-Civil War cycloramas, Walker’s large-scale silhouette scenes create haunting yet nostalgic imagery (figure 7). Her 1994 debut at the Drawing Center in New York, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b’tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* was

⁶⁰ Walker, Kara. “Kara Walker.” Walker Art. (2023). <https://walkerart.org/collections/artists/kara-walker>

25-foot-long and presented audiences with, “caricatured antebellum figures, which are engaged in violent and sexual interactions, were silhouettes cut from black paper and installed directly on the wall”⁶¹. Another famous exhibit, *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Walker’s silhouettes are often cut from black paper and pasted to white walls to lean into the stereotypes and expectations imposed on Black bodies. This piece is particularly notable for its contesting of Modernism and the ‘Primitive’: Organized deliberately as a narrative, the exhibition articulates the parallel shifts in Kara Walker’s visual language and subject matter: from a critical analysis of the history of slavery as a microcosm of American history through the structure of romantic literature and Hollywood film to a revised history of Western modernity and its relationship to the notion of “Primitivism.”

Because of Walker’s precision and attentiveness, the silhouettes, though obviously not meant to appear life-like, are read as real. They perfectly cut-out to blur the line between paper and body, and are scaled in a way that effectively demands viewers attention without obscuring important relationships between the cut-outs (i.e. . child to adult or woman to man). The silhouettes enable Walker to confront the racialization, sexualization, fetishization, and brutalization that African Americans have experienced in the US both during slavery and today. In historical texts and documents, these themes are often minimized or excluded, thus Walker uses her silhouettes as ‘blank spaces’⁶² for viewers to engages with brutal reality. Walker anticipates and hope audiences to see her work not as accurate historical accounts, but spaces that utilize a multitude of historical accounts to send a greater message about African American history; It has been the

⁶¹ Walker, Kara. “Kara Walker.” Walker Art. (2023). <https://walkerart.org/collections/artists/kara-walker>

⁶² Ferguson, Roderick A. Review of *A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History*, by Kara Walker, Philippe Vergne, and Yasmin Raymond. *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 186. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734983>.

convention of African American history to try to fill the space around those blanks with talk of respectability, social progress, or revolutionary potential. But the holes have always persisted, haunting African American history with their blank immoralities. We can think of Kara Walker's work as exposing those blanks by imagining their form through visual art. We cannot thus read those blanks as historical or sociological documents that can tell us what happened in the where and when of U.S. slavery. We must instead read her art as a meditation on the ingredients of African American history itself. From her art we see the ways in which African American history is both constitutive and disclaiming of the social impurities that have made up American existence, in general, and African American existence, in particular. Another way of thinking of this is to say that African American history, like history in general, is constituted out of a poetics of evasion - avoiding those elements that confound our narratives of heroism, political purity, and innocence. Kara Walker's art, then, opposes this poetics of evasion with an aesthetics of engagement and confrontation and looks bold-faced at those elements to which African American history has turned its back."⁶³

Walker's art is also recognized for its placement within, or better parallel to, Black feminist literature. Many of her silhouettes surround Black womanhood and chillingly portray an 'array of racialized, gendered, and sexualised projections' including sexual assault and incest⁶⁴. As mentioned before, Walker has been the subject of criticism especially for those who view her work as 'fantasizing' trauma, however, what Black feminist literature reveals is that the 'sexual

⁶³ Ferguson, Roderick A. Review of *A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History*, by Kara Walker, Philippe Vergne, and Yasmin Raymond. *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 187-88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734983>.

⁶⁴ Ferguson, Roderick A. Review of *A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History*, by Kara Walker, Philippe Vergne, and Yasmin Raymond. *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734983>.

explicitness' of Walker's work is not what upsets, but the apparent decline in allowing Black women to address their historical and modern maladies; "In truth, the controversy around her art is not simply a measure of many people's aversion to its sexual explicitness. It is also an indication of how far that grand effort of black feminism has receded. It is a sign of how removed we are from those days when engaging difficult issues of racialized gender and sexuality was what it meant to be a reader and viewer of black women's intellectual and artistic efforts. In this capacity, her work reminds us of an old but forgotten covenant that we made with African American feminism and the literacies that it tried to produce."⁶⁵ This makes Walker's work that much more appetizing as it exposes the societal limitations imposed on Black women (and African Americans overall) of when it is and is not appropriate to uncover the facade that America has yet to acknowledge and attempt to remedy the harm it is done to them. Walker's work visually depicts the nauseating realities of slavery for the Black woman while simultaneously exposing (and perhaps shaming) America's failure to recognize the transmission of generational trauma in its hurry to 'move on from slavery'.

One of Walker's' works, which I believe to be one of her most formidable, is her 1997 piece titled: *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey Into Southern Slavery or "Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Instillation as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand Of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause* [referred in this paper as *Slavery!*]. In this piece, Walker revisits the 'antebellum American history and southern plantation life' in a series of her signature black paper silhouette cut-outs. Walker's ability to manipulate

⁶⁵ Ferguson, Roderick A. Review of *A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History*, by Kara Walker, Philippe Vergne, and Yasmin Raymond. *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2009): 190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27734983>.

paper is particularly alluring in this piece. Despite only using paper, Walker is able to, through stereotypical characteristics, create faceless figures that are instantly recognizable as Black or white⁶⁶, woman or man, child or baby. Just as many criticize Walker for her ‘fantasization of slavery’, *Slavery!* focuses on stereotypical depictions of the American south during slavery to startle audiences with grotesque, violent, explicit imagery to prevent the sanitization of history. The exaggeration of features is obviously in reference to the racist imagery and caricatures white Americans produced to continuously reinforce racial stereotypes and social hierarchies. In particular, many of the cut-outs include exaggerated head shapes, lips, figures, hair, and torn attire as visual cues for which silhouettes belong to Black people while white figures have subtle Eurocentric features, “perfect” hair and pristine clothing ; “Those **features** were deemed, in the 1800's, to be primal, and those who had those features were seen by white Euro-American audiences as dumber and less advanced than those without. Lastly, the clothes that the figures have on also play a part because of the vast differences. The two white figures have on glorious attire: a ballgown and an almost royal coat and sword for the male. This attire makes the figures seem powerful and almost untouchable. The black girl in the water has a long simple dress on, and the younger black girl does not have any clothes on at all. The idea of nudity comes with a powerless connotation”. This display of race connects to Jim Crow stereotypes that originated back in nineteenth century. Jim Crow is a pseudonym in reference to laws surrounding segregation in the US. In constructing characters this way, Walker reminds audiences of the origination of misrepresentations of Black Americans in media. Given that this piece came out in the late 90’s, one may also interpret this as Walker’s response to the emergence of Black representation in digital media (like TV). The 90’s saw a Black renaissance of sorts as Black

⁶⁶ Heusel, Jennifer. *Woman’s Art Journal* 27, no. 1 (2006): 62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20358077>.

sitcoms like *Martin*, *In Living Color*, *Living Single* and more began to dominate American television and amidst their success, white critics often made demoralizing statements in response to feeling threatened by their popularity. Walker here, may also be reminding audiences to reflect on the representation of African Americans in media and appreciate the ability for Black Americans to finally define themselves through self-representation⁶⁷.

To further blur the boundaries between “Walker fantasies” and reality, Walker explores the body via sexuality and bodily functions. Figures in *Slavery!* are seen fornicating, farting, vomiting, and one woman appears to be engaging in a performance whilst bodily liquids spew from her mouth, breasts, and vagina. For Walker, “images of grotesque violence and sexuality to further her idea of blurred history by mocking the romanticism that white people use to hide the true brutality of the history of slavery. By depicting the slaves as committing horrendous acts that are seen by the viewers as disgusting she mirrors how the conditions and lives of the slaves were during the Civil War era. Kara Walker mocks how shocked her audience should be by slavery and the conditions slaves endured through these graphic images...As you look at each individual as a whole you begin to see figures groping, sucking, ejaculating, defecating and doing terrible things both to themselves and to one another. Many of Kara’s viewers want to look away from the gallery wall in disgust, while part of them feels compelled to stand and stare. This form of sexuality that Kara Walker evokes is to show the separation between slaves and masters and to also show the slaves in American antebellum south’s power for freedom, desire, and the want to satisfy their thirst.” With sexuality, Walker frequently portrays rape or scenes where figures are engaging in sexual acts as it is a part of this history that is intentionally muted. In antebellum

⁶⁷ Harper, Kris et. al. “Kara Walker’s (Re)Presentation of History in the Antebellum South.” (2013). <https://pepperdine.digication.com/Kara-Walker/Welcome/published>

times, the sexual abuse of enslaved peoples went undocumented and unacknowledged. When white Americans speak on slavery, they consciously minimize reality and ignore the sexual assaults and sexual violence that many African Americans, particularly women, suffered. Walker reaffirms this brutal history and forces audiences to visualize what American history aims to suppress. Further, Walker frequently uses feces, semen, and other bodily liquids as commentary on the ‘association of Blackness with excrement’, but to many, “the images of figures defecating are encoded with messages about obscenity, disobedience, and defiance. Walker’s images can be interpreted as symbolizing slaves’ resistance to absolute domination”. This is especially critical if one understands the history of how women’s bodily liquids are commonly seen as disgusting or appalling regardless of the fact that breast milk is what kept most beings alive. Which brings us to one final element that may not be as conspicuous – Walker’s inclusion of infants and children. In *Slavery!* most of them appear to be working, if not near their mother’s which speaks to another painful reality for African American women - breeding. Many Black women were forced into motherhood by owners to keep them controlled and to ensure future enslaved populations for white Americans. Motherhood, a personal and intimate experience, was often forced upon Black women and Walker acknowledges this by including children in ‘vulnerable situations’. Including children amongst the rest of the disturbing imagery in *Slavery!* (and other work) is presumably appalling for audience members to see, but it was the lived truth of Black mothers who experienced contradictory sides of motherhood.

Kara Walker’s work is profound and influential in a time where generations are transitioning further away from antebellum/Southern plantation American life. Supporters of Walker refute the claim that Walker is fantasizing trauma, by revealing how informative Walker’s art is. It is so provocative and evocative that older generations see it as ‘part of their

living memory' while new generations are in the position to learn the significance of the work, and thus, better understand the history and reality of Black and Black Americans. Walker's blurring of 'real' history with portrayals of history allows her to uniquely deconstruct the white-washing of Black American history⁶⁸.

Janet Jackson

“A lot of people ask me “Am I a feminist?” And I... a lot of people have a lot of different definitions of feminists. So I ... just say if it's someone, a woman who's taking control of her life as well as your career and just getting into, into the things like that then I say that I am a feminist.”⁶⁹

Janet Jackson, born in Gary, Indiana in 1966, is the youngest sibling of the infamous Jackson family. Born in a musically-inclined family, Jackson grew up in a world where her entire life was one big soundtrack. With two music-loving parents and brothers who began their early careers as the world-renowned Jackson 5, Janet Jackson grew up in a world where her entire life was one big soundtrack. As implied in her biography, music, as the priority, came before anything else – even her relationship with her father, Joe. Despite her childhood desires of becoming a horse racking jockey or entertainment lawyer, Jackson ultimately knew that performance and entertainment were her destiny. At just 7 years old Jackson debuted at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas where she performed with her brother Randy Jackson. From here, Jackson pursued acting for awhile until she was signed to A&M records on 1982 at the age of 16.

⁶⁸ Harper, Kris et. al. “Kara Walker's (Re)Presentation of History in the Antebellum South.” (2013). <https://pepperdine.digication.com/Kara-Walker/Welcome/published>

⁶⁹ Capetola, Christine. “Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 96. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

With her debut album, *Janet Jackson* and subsequent, *Dream Street*, Jackson gained some recognition including charting in the Billboard 200, but it wasn't until she debuted her third album, *Control* that propelled Jackson's career and made her one of the biggest musicians of her time. As an internationally admired musician, actress and performer, Jackson redefined herself both outside of her family and within society by using her music to find herself. Like Josephine Baker, Jackson used her talents as a performer to condemn white expectations of Black womanhood while also subverting the societal expectations and imposed role of woman musicians⁷⁰.

Janet Jackson's first two albums broke her into the music scene, but their 'bubblegum pop music' vibe deterred Jackson from music for a short period of time. Once Jackson turned 20, however, she decided to do something different which changed the trajectory of her career forever. Instead of commercialized pop, Jackson turned to new sounds like hip-hop and funk and focused on making her music more personal, autobiographical, and more attuned to her audience: "The entire album is autobiographical. It's me just putting my feelings on, on record. I wanted to let a lot of women know out there that they weren't alone, I know they had experienced a lot of things that I have."⁷¹ In doing so, Jackson unknowingly created an entire new genre of feminism in her music that "created songs and videos that conveyed a new kind of feminist affect that intertwined individual stories of endurance, the forcefulness of relatively new digital music technology, and Black and female collectivity."⁷² With her third studio album,

⁷⁰ Wikipedia contributors. "Janet Jackson." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. (2023). https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Janet_Jackson&oldid=1150365310

⁷¹ Capetola, Christine. "Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 96. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

⁷² Capetola, Christine. "Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 95=. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

Control, Jackson rebranded herself as separate from her family but together with women, but most importantly, Black women. Up until Janet, few to no Black women musicians/performers leaned into their sexuality in a way that appealed to Black feminist, but Jackson did so with *Control* by altering her sound and her lyrical motives: “In addition to existing in this space of tension between neoliberal resilience narratives and Black feminist responses to them, *Control* was also a unique album in the 1980s due to the way it channeled sounds associated with Black masculinity into the sonic Black womanhood presented by Jackson on the album. Through working with her collaborators on the album and subsequent music videos, Jackson located a feminist affect in this space of tension, one that created something in excess of both Black respectability and the tropes of the hypersexualized Black woman. Pulling from traditions of Black feminism and Black musics, this feminist affect would mobilize a politics of feeling—and extend this affective politics to her audiences through sound and vibration Teaming up with producers—and Prince collaborators—Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, Jackson sought to craft a sound that was unique to her, a sonic Black womanhood that would amplify her lyrical narrations of life as a young Black woman.”⁷³ The impact of Jackson’s work is also amplified when considering the context of how Black womanhood was viewed in the 80’s. With two-term President Ronald Reagan and his declared “War on Drugs”, an era of new stereotypes were imposed on the Black community mostly labeling African Americans as: criminals, ‘welfare queens’, ‘crack mothers’, and more⁷⁴. So, Jackson’s rebrand could not have come at a better time. Before the aforementioned Black TV renaissance in the 90’s, Black women were desperately

⁷³ Capetola, Christine. “Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

⁷⁴ Capetola, Christine. “Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

seeking positive depictions of Black woman, and Black sexuality, in the media; Thus, *Control* brought exactly what they were looking for and exponentially boosted Janet Jackson's career. Following *Control* and her subsequent album, *Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation 1814* (1989), Jackson proceeded to redirect her attention towards acting again with *Poetic Justice* before going on to release, *Janet* (arguably an intentional redefinition of herself since her debut album *Janet Jackson*) (1993), *The Velvet Rope* (1997) and several others after. These subsequent albums affirmed Jackson's ability to produce albums (and their supporting visuals) that "deliver a 'socially conscious' message that addressed themes such as 'poverty, injustice, drug abuse, racism, and war.'" ⁷⁵

In the 20th century, popular culture began to transform into a vessel for subverting identity barriers in the US. Music, especially, became a tool for making commentary on social events that typically countered common sentiments. Examples of this include, "the music developed during the Civil Rights movement in the US in the 1960s, and similarly, the music developed during the anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. [With] songs like "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" (by James Brown) and "The Revolution will not be Televised" (by Gil Scott-Heron)" ⁷⁶. Because of this, popular culture gradually became a platform for presenting new sentiments on social situations with the hope of it permeating society enough to become adopted by them. As said previously with the Black TV renaissance of the 90's, US TV was beginning to especially see progress with more shows tailored to audiences of color that were not diluted to appeal to white audiences. As impactful as this was, its efficacy eventually

⁷⁵ Capetola, Christine. "Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 95. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

⁷⁶ Capetola, Christine. "Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

declined near the turn of the century as acts that were “seen as transgressive on the surface [were] actually reproducing ideologies that are racist, sexist, and homophobic at a deeper level...they: (1) do not have a purpose beyond the act itself (beyond having fun, beyond their “shock value”), and/or (2) are performed exclusively under comfortable circumstances....In many cases profuse public apologies, explanations, and statements of contrition follow these performances/ events, subtracting from the value the performance may have had as a transgressive act in the first place, and reproducing ideologies that deem minoritized groups in racist, sexist, and homophobic ways. Needless to say, “pop transgression” carries regressive consequences. (100) An example of this was with the “Britney-Christina-Madonna kiss” (or, “The Kiss”) at the 2003 MTV Awards. In one of the most iconic popular culture events ever, Britney Spears and Madonna (Christina Aguilera was also involved but camera’s cut her shot out to instead focus on Justin Timberlake in the audience who had split from Spears not long before) kissed on-stage as Aguilera performed. The media swarmed with commentary, interviews, etc... all focusing the kiss which was allegedly was planned, not to transgress homophobia or normalize public lesbian intimacy, but because of their ‘boredom’ with depictions of intimacy in the media in general. Despite audience reactions and mass media coverage, this event did not nearly garner the same attention nor audience disapproval as the Janet Jackson-Justin Timberlake incident in the 2004 Superbowl Half-Time Show.

In the 2004 Super Bowl Half-Time Show, headliners Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake were moments away from wrapping up one of the most legendary performances in popular culture (figure 8). A wardrobe malfunction, unfortunately, ended with Jackson under public scrutiny for what the media thought was an intentional pop culture transgression like the “The Kiss”: “At the conclusion of their performance, which included a series of sexual lyrics and

choreography, Timberlake reached across Jackson and removed the molded right cup of Jackson's bustier, revealing most of her bare breast, except for a starburst-shaped covering held in place by a nipple piercing. Their finale, later described as a “wardrobe malfunction,” not only sparked the intended interest and coverage, but days of debate and dialogue about the transgression of society's standards within today’s world of popular culture.” (101) Following the malfunction, Janet Jackson became the focus of an entire country’s outrage and was instantly blackballed in the industry. While Justin Timberlake, a white male musician, received almost no backlash, Jackson was completely torn apart with no remorse – especially by men. Jackson was let down even further as Timberlake did not defend her or take accountability for his role in the malfunction. The outrage was mostly split into three primary issues: (1) Many saw it as anti-American being that it took place during one of the most sacred American traditions, the Super Bowl; (2) Because children were watching and Super Bowl media crews could not react fast enough, many families were upset with the indecent exposure; (3) Above all, Black woman representations of sexuality were heavily impacted as the War on Terror made it so that America was expected to be portrayed as stable, perfect, and family-oriented. With this display of a Black woman’s body circulating internationally, Jackson became a target for anti-Black and anti-Black women rhetoric.

As America ignored the reality of Jackson’s criticisms, the fear of Black sexuality exponentially increased. Compared to “The Kiss”, public discourse against Jackson would not let up. Though arguments could be made about the difference in venues/audiences (MTV Awards vs a ‘Great American’ Super Bowl), Spears and Madonna’s white identity granted them a privilege Jackson was not so fortunate to have; “In wake of the “Britney-Christina-Madonna kiss” or “Janet’s flash,” public debates ensued as to which event was more shocking and troubling.

Invariably critics and respondents alike concluded that the sight of Janet Jackson's breast was more surprising and disturbing. While social critics may view various polls and the discursive reactions as signs of progress, of the acceptance of lesbian sexuality (or more accurately, straight performers pretending to be lesbians), we see the desperate reactions against Janet Jackson's performance as signs of the interplay of race (and racialized bodies) and taboo. Mainly, the cultural imagination that allows for a comfortable visual of two (or three) white women kissing is perhaps not as comfortable with a kiss between a black woman and a white woman (or two). We are certain that including Missy Elliot in the kiss exchange would have produced different reactions from the crowd and from viewers. Where a kiss between two white women, known to be heterosexual, ideologically raises fewer eyebrows, we must put that again in the context of a society infatuated with "woman-on-woman action," where heterosexuals don lesbian face within porn and strip clubs, all of which is part of the cultural construct of lesbian chic. On the other hand, an interracial sexual exchange (culminating with the exposure of the black body) raises much ideological outcry, a fact that challenges notions of progress where race, sexuality, and gender are concerned. However, neither challenges dominant values/ideologies or conventional norms—the varied outrage, explained by the persistent meaning of racialized sexuality, among other things, and moral panics, is not evidence of a transgression, or an assault on America's moral fabric, but rather because of the position of black women's sexuality and homosexuality within the American landscape, ultimately contributes to the legitimation of the status quo."⁷⁷

What Janet did was not a pop culture transgression, but a genuine error of which was confirmed. Society, however, chose to believe the former which can be for no other reason than for the

⁷⁷ Capetola, Christine. "Gimme a Beat! Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 109. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

media to take advantage of an opportunity to deter Black sexuality in media and retain the historical “hegemony of a hypersexual Black woman’s body and her ‘insatiable sexuality and erotic proclivities”⁷⁸ As much as Jackson had spent her entire career countering the American fear of Black sexuality and reclaiming/redefining herself as a vessel for Black women sexuality, a single wardrobe malfunction and a pathetically timid white counterpart sealed Jackson’s incident as, “fulfilling longstanding ideologies of black womanhood, which historically justified rape, abuse and enslavement, as well as facilitating systemic curtailments of welfare and sustained efforts to sterilize women of color, the performance at the 2003 Super Bowl did not offer a transgressive moment, one that violated societal norms through the exposure of the taboo black breast, but reified hegemonic visions of black femininity”⁷⁹.

Unlike Josephine Baker, who knew she was transgressing Parisian social norms and could embrace self-definition through nudity and performance, Jackson’s self-determination diminished and a repertoire of careful, strategic performances went along with it. The reception of both performances, on the other hand, do parallel quite a bit. Baker and Jackson became instantaneous household names for going against Modernist/Western beliefs of Black authority of the body. This is why is it so vital for Black woman to perform their bodies on their own terms. Jackson was a staple for hypersexuality and garnered millions of fans for it, but the minute someone other than herself ‘performed’ her body, Jackson’s entire career and reputation collapsed. Jackson’s industry blacklisting caused her to declines in ‘radio airplay, televised promotion and sales’. Fortunately, Jackson was able to develop her own label through which she

⁷⁸ Capetola, Christine. “‘Gimme a Beat!’ Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 106-7. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

⁷⁹ Capetola, Christine. “‘Gimme a Beat!’ Janet Jackson, Hyperaurality, and Affective Feminism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. (2020): 107. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2020.32.4.95>

independently released additional albums and even fell back into acting becoming a leading character in Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married* series (2007-2010).

Conclusion

Performance of the body was monumental in the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. As the suppressive nature of Modernism created the need for liberation, artists like Josephine Baker, Claude Cahun - and later Vaginal Davis, Kara Walker, and Janet Jackson - used their bodies to transcend their oppression and call attention to the discriminatory structures in Western societies. Each artist worked diligently to produce work that was not only effective because of its provocative social commentary, but also because they knew how to perfectly structure their work based on their audiences. Hence, making it abundantly clear how vital agency and autonomy are in the production of body art. When agency and autonomy are removed from performances of the body, the efficacy of the work nearly becomes obsolete and repercussions far worse than anticipated occur. Regardless of Janet Jackson's popularity, fame, and reputation as a Black feminist icon, once her body was displayed and performed without her permission, her entire stature dissipated. We see how significant self-determination is for performance of the body and we must applaud the aforementioned artists for being able to elicit and pioneer discourse that condemned social constructs. It is necessary to recognize the impact body art has had in social and cultural development because of its ability to critically question the labels we assign to others while simultaneously blurring the relationship between an artist and their body.

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Image Appendix

Figure 1:



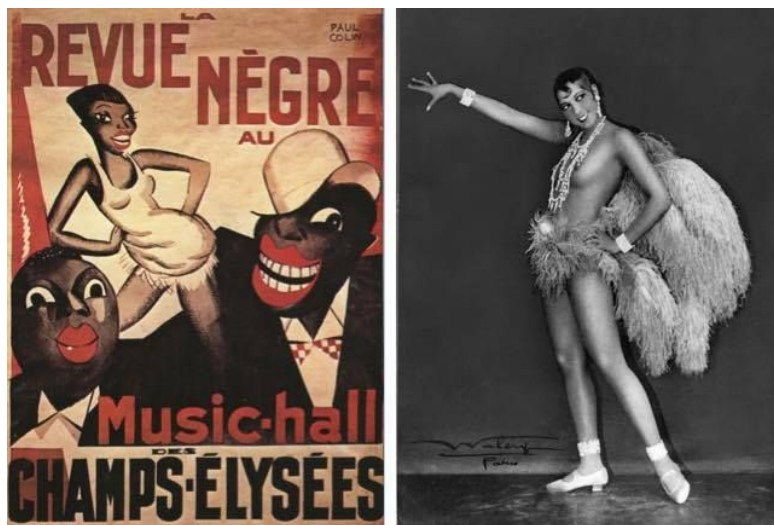
Spencer, Lauren P. *Modified*, 2022, vinyl, Pitzer College Kallick Gallery, California, photograph courtesy of Pitzer College and owned by author.

Figure 2:



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1911, oil on canvas, 243.9 cm x 233.7 cm (96 in x 92 in), MoMA, New York, <https://flic.kr/p/8pVKwY>.

Figure 3:



Paulette Brockington, Untitled, 2020, digital media,
<https://twitter.com/hoofer2/status/1249129363490181122>

Figure 4:



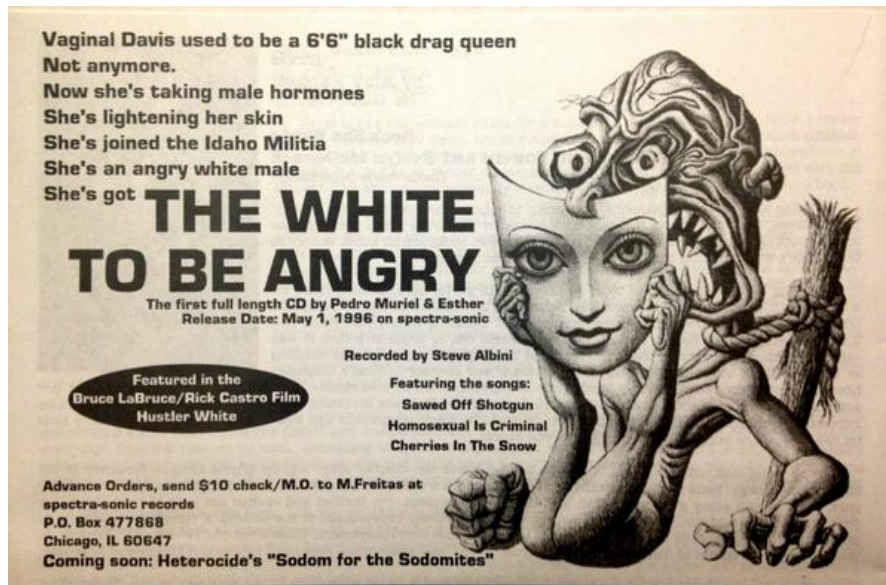
Lucien Waléry, *Josephine Baker*, circa 1927,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Josephine_Baker_2.jpg.

Figure 5:



Karen Bryan, *Untitled (I Am In Training)*, 2011,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/europealacarte/5625110920>

Figure 6:



Larry Bob, Untitled, 2013, digital media, <https://twitter.com/larrybobsf/status/362388650908082176>

Figure 7:



Rob Corder, (detail) African't, 1996. Cut paper. Broad Collection,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/rocor/22984178939>

Figure 8:



Entertainment Weekly, Super Bowl XXXVIII halftime show controversy, 2004, digital media,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Janet_Jackson_%26_Justin_Timberlake%27s_wardrobe_malfunction.jpg

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Appendix A

To provide more context and insight into the production of *Modified*, please see the following artist statement from the author.

- Artist Statement -

In gallery spaces, art is praised, appreciated and revered. On the body, art is criticized, judged, and discouraged. Western colonial standards of professionalism and presentation have discriminated against expression through body modification harming generations of non-Western communities and those who find healing, power, and peace within body modification – specifically with tattoos. As someone with a very visible tattoo, there have been several instances in which I have been asked to keep it covered. I felt as though I was not presenting my full authentic self and instead hiding a part of myself I take pride in. Aside from the symbolism, I love my tattoo for the way it looks on my body and for the level of vulnerability it took for me to acquire it.

Receiving a tattoo is a vulnerable process that physically pushes your body, creating a permanent bond between you and your art that is both physical and symbolic. Whether it be a concrete or impulsive choice, the decision-making behind a tattoo oftentimes comes from a part of the person's identity. "Modified" goes beyond the meaning and illuminates the aspects of one's identity that a tattoo can represent. The tattoos that you see and the voices that you hear come from college students within and outside of the 5Cs who were willing to share their art and the stories behind them.

“Modified” draws attention to the sacred and intimate process of selecting and receiving a tattoo while emphasizing themes of permission, permanence, identity, and individuality. It serves as a response to being told to cover up tattoos, a response to those who see tattoos as insignificant, and most importantly, a response to those who believe their tattoos are part of their identity. In an installation that includes immersive visual and audio elements, “Modified” attempts to distance tattoos from the body and into a gallery space, forcing the audience to see it for what it is - art⁸⁰.

⁸⁰ For more in-depth information and discussion see: [LP Spencer Final Media Project Paper.pdf](#)