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A Meditation on Afrosurrealism, Black Gender, and the Non-Human

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A Meditation on Afrosurrealism, Black Gender, and the Non-Human

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Troubling the Human

Fleeing and escaping, second-class servitude in their own “home” countries, refuged white Europeans mimicked their intimate familial class violence to create the New World mercantilist-capitalist system by stratifying themselves into a higher class, enslaving African people and Indigenous people in the process. These white insecurities manifest in laws, literary genres, epistemological constructions, and every facet of American life. One of those is the American romance literary tradition that writer Toni Morrison explicitly names in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison gives us the language to understand America as a white, nationalist, hegemonic world-building project that brands its aesthetic as generative and restorative through the shadow of slavery: “The black population was available for meditations on terror—the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed. In other words, this slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man.”³⁶ Ultimately capitalism derived from feudalism to free the peasants and serfs who were the least powerful in Western Europe and established a new white hierarchy that “freed” them from their poor, oppressive class conditions.

The white reordering of history acquaints us with a narrative of historical progression and controls when the tape stops, plays, and rewinds. I use Black feminist literary scholar Michelle M. Wright’s concept of “linear process narrative” to acknowledge how white linear historiographies play on a loop to place Blackness in constrictive, barricaded time-spaces in which whiteness uses Blackness as a historical causality to map out its regressions.³⁷ As Black folks attempt to break “free,” they must appeal to and reason with fallacies of white freedom and equality through the same forms of language, mediums, and textiles that are used to hold captive Black matter in its anti-Black world-building projects. Through the destabilization of historical time periods, the Black collective will be better

³⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 38.

³⁷ Wright, “The Middle Passage Epistemology,” 38.

equipped to destroy the machinery of white supremacy that naturalizes anti-Black normative assumptions of gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

As whiteness defines freedom in the form of white patriarchy (dependent on the suffering and oppression of stolen African people), Blackness runs the risk of inadvertently re-inscribing signifiers of white humanity in their new constructions of subjectivity and humanity. While the abandonment of freedom as a concept could seem degenerative and pessimistic to the survival of Black people, I beg the question of why Black existence is predicated on running and escaping the whip, ultimately an inescapable, slow necropolitical death? Perhaps, surrendering could possibly be more “freeing” than rendering Black matter legible to the category of the white Human. In our swapping of (white) Humanist conceptions of freedom for the non-Human, we are liberating ourselves from limiting, fixed categorization. In solidarity with Jayna Brown’s *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music Of Other Worlds*, I recognize “those of us who are dislocated on the planet are perfectly positioned to break open the stubborn epistemological logics of human domination. These (im)possibilities open up where the human has abandoned us and onto a much bigger universe, when we jump into the unknowable.”³⁸ Brown’s statement has facilitated my choice to abandon the white Human category. The intimate interiorities are expressed in the Black feminist quilting of both Afrosurrealism and Afropessimism as artistic traditions and philosophical meditations that highlight how Blackness exists beyond the limiting concepts of white gender and the illegibility of white assumptions surrounding Black family, sexuality, and gender.

The category “Human” rests in the condition of gender; gender enters on the stage of European colonialism and sexual conquest. I call upon Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s overrepresentation of the man to define Black freedom’s attempt to perform citizenship in the desire to be “Human,” in others words, a white Man:

Other, the abnormal Other, the timeless ethnographic Other, the most salient of all these was to be that of the mythology of the Black Other of sub-Saharan Africans (and their Diaspora descendants). It is this population group who would come to be made, several centuries on, into an indispensable function of the enacting of our present Darwinian “dysselected by Evolution until proven otherwise” descriptive statement of the human on the biocentric model of a natural organism. With this population group’s systemic stigmatization, social inferiorization, and dynamically produced material deprivation thereby serving both to “verify” the overrepresentation of Man as if it were the human, and to legitimate the subordination of the world and well-being of the latter to those of the former.³⁹

³⁸ Brown, *Black Utopias*, 38.

³⁹ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 267.

There is no “Human” and white regime without the control of Black reproduction and life. The American colonial law “Partus Sequitur Ventrem” was imagined as a curse that assigned subjects with a Black female genitalia to be slave-producing vessels: “Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman shall be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother—Partus Sequitur Ventrem. And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.”⁴⁰ On the basis of white reproductive logic, this law fertilized the grounds on which the colonial mappings of the “New World” were reinforced in every Black striving towards freedom. However, it is important to note that Blackness does not emerge from whiteness, but it is rather whiteness that exists because of the coercion of Black matter. To be white is to be human as to be human is to oppress and dominate. In our captivity, Blackness is expected to show up in specific ways that stabilize the existential insecurities of whiteness.

Black Feminist Quilting of Afropessimism and Afrosurrealism

African diasporic cultural practices and expressions center story-telling. In his crediting of fellow Afrosurrealist writer Henry Dumas, Amiri Baraka measures his execution of Afrosurrealism in his ability to create “an entirely different world organically connected to this one.”⁴¹ Afrosurrealist artists can be read as modern-day oral griots who create worlds through the tethering of epiphenomenal time-space portals. The following question that perils the essence of our collective existence, plays on loop as a soundtrack: “It’s yours! Whose world is this? The world is yours, the world is yours. It’s mine, it’s mine.”⁴² Black bodies and labor are found in the construction of the New World but are erased by the curse of the black womb—partus sequitur ventrem. My entry into Afropessimism is mediated by the work of Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* and Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Additionally, Afropessimist scholar Frank B. Wilderson III builds upon sociologist Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death to further detail how anti-Blackness is integral to every facet of the world’s “civil society.” Hartman details in her article, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, how the Black womb/abyss functions as both a life/death giving portal as it naturalizes Black social death: “The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. Partus sequitur ventrem—the child follows the belly.”⁴³ In this essay, I will use Hartman’s Black womb/abyss imagery to trouble gender. I will

⁴⁰ Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large*, 170.

⁴¹ Baraka, “Henry Dumas,” 164.

⁴² myclef9, “Nas - The World Is Yours,” 0:05–0:13.

⁴³ Hartman, “The Belly of the World,” 166.

also reference Terence Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness*, an Afrosurrealist sketch comedy television show on HBO that addresses interesting issues of homophobia, transphobia, sexism, misogynoir, and anti-Blackness.

In season one of Nance's *Random Acts of Flyness* "Everybody Dies" segment, Rippa the Reaper, a Black woman, is in charge of the Department of Black Death. Reminiscent of *partus sequitur ventrem*, the Department of Black Death is Rippa the Reaper, a Black matriarch figure who serves as the intermediary presence between the anticipating inevitable death of young Black children: "Kids you know That you will die, No matter how hard you try, You can squeal Or whine or pray, Everyone dies one day, I'm your last and only friend. Cause this is where your story ends."⁴⁴ Black mothers' subject-positions possess them with a foresight that identifies the varied slopes of death, risk, and injury that a Black life could encounter; the role of the Black female is to prime children with techniques to mitigate and evade injury. There is a specific scene where Rippa the Reaper beats a child while they are in a black trash bag; the trash bag is a Black womb that is detached from its mother. The mother is Rippa who ultimately expedites the anticipated necropolitical death and suffering. This scene can be read as over-exaggerated and gruesome, its Afro-surrealist expression exists as both familiar and extra-real as Blackness is fixed as a slave category by way of the legacies of *partus sequitur ventrem*.

Further, Ra Malika Imhotep's *gossypiin* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* speak to how Black woman (subject-positions who hold the assumed responsibility of the race) take control over Black life forces through cotton to prevent unwanted pregnancies and taking the life of their babies to save them from an already predetermined life of suffering and death. While these acts can be read as horrific and animalistic, the system of slavery creates the conditions in which Black life is not offered choice nor freedom, therefore, escaping an anti-Black world is synonymous to death. Through this Afrosurrealist tradition of Sankofa, the brewing pot bubbles with voices from the past that inform both the present and future: "Afro-surrealism is art with skin on it where the texture of the object tells its story, how it weathered burial below consciousness, and how it emerged somewhat mysteriously from oceans of forgotten memories and discarded keepsakes."⁴⁵ Afropessimism and the past of slavery remind Black people that we eternally occupy the position of slave on the plantation, which lingers in Afrosurrealist imagery. Centering Atlanta Trap-Rap music as an object of study, I do not aspire to problematize Atlanta trap-rap music or incite Black gender wars that reinforce normative assumptions about Black sexuality and gender but rather define what subconsciously is being represented in the collective genre and communities. Rappers express deep interiorities and pain as they meditate on the predetermined, inevitable death of their Black gender: "I looked over my shadows and seen a

⁴⁴ HBO, "Random Acts of Flyness," 0:33-0:56. (Season 1, Episode 1 Clip)

⁴⁵ Francis, "Meditation," 94.

woman. Can't fuck over everybody, nigga, death comin.”⁴⁶ I propose that reorienting our analysis of Trap music as an Afrosurrealist meditation is a step to analyzing the overdetermination of Black gender, specifically Black masculinities. Through highlighting its absurdities, Afrosurrealism places emphasis on the everyday survival and transgression thus denaturalizing of white hegemony. Afrosurrealism functions as a paradigm that brings wholeness to the condition of pessimism and social death that Blackness rests in. This wholeness is achieved through the destabilization of normative categories.

The Black Hole

Much of our survival as a community roots from Black feminist epistemology of alchemy, or in other words, making do with what we've got/making sum shake/making a way out of no way, the gray area in between life and death is largely stewarded by Black women whose bodies and labor serve as the foundation of modernity. In Ja'Tovia Gary's "An Ecstatic Experience," viewers sit and workshop a collective existential Black meditation regarding suffering and Black matriarchal labor.⁴⁷ Gary holds viewers in a captivating, reflective gaze that makes sense out of "the shadow" in our lives. Once over, viewers left disassembled, returning back into our mother's wombs, in a deeper feminine plane and presence, we weep, waiting for a Black mother to nurse us. Black feminists enter as doulas, politicians, professors, mothers, sisters, partners, and maids facilitating both the maintenance of the white man's matrix and the treatment balm for its intimate injuries and violence. Specifically, the white gender binary becomes exhausting to the category of Blackness, as the Black female subject rests in overdetermined normative properties that give other non-Black female subject-positions the disillusion that they will be able to break "free" and enter the "Human" category. Their presumed "distance" from the category of the Black female is a disillusion as all properties of matter rest in the Black hole/womb. To be running from the female within is the denial of one's true self: "the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."⁴⁸ The orientation of history's singular, individualistic "freedman" that runs alone without family and pulls himself up by the bootstraps as a father of American patriotism and citizenship renders absence to not only Black women and children but the true existential meaning behind the Black collective as a whole. Perhaps the "emasculating," nagging mother, girlfriend, and the Black woman is tasked with reminding community members to surrender to the survival of the collective rather than selling their soul to white patriarchy—the aspiration to emulate the power of white man. Afrosurrealism seemingly operates on a

⁴⁶ Sahbabii, "Sahbabii - I See (Official Lyric Video)," 1:40–1:44.

⁴⁷ Gary, "An Ecstatic Experience (2015)."

⁴⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

pessimistic, plane but its realism reminds one of the apocalyptic conditions we rest in.

In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, a text that mothers and births the field of Afropessimism, Black feminist literary scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman coins redress as “a re-membling of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of devastation, captivity, and enslavement.”⁴⁹ This generation of Atlanta’s rappers embrace the darkness and dwell in the Black hole; many are planted and grown from the ashes of Sherman’s March to Sea, a historical moment that marks a time of transitional failure as the enslaved subject attempts to shapeshift “American citizen” and “Human.” The hoods and projects that rappers like SahBabii and Yung Nudy originate from represent the instability and corruption of ethics relating to American pragmatism and ethics. Many of these homes were promised to Black Americans after fighting in World War II and saving up enough money to escape their racially violent conditions in the South; however, no amount of performance of citizenship could shift an already fixed anti-Black necropolitical system. Eternally, Black matter, living-unliving corpse, rests in a state of fungible ungendered flesh: “the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.”⁵⁰ Under partus sequitur ventrem, the intimate familial grounds of sexual violence breed the grounds for particular psychoanalytical realities to arise as the father of an enslaved mother’s child was rendered null and void in the court of law. This causes the assimilation into the category of “citizenship” and “Human” to be further complicated as it is defined under the logics of white gender binary. Without recognition of a paternal father figure, how does one easily transition into the “Human” category? The failure to explicitly recognize the intimate and familial nature of sexual violence on the plantation must be read as parallel to the Black American’s exclusion of aspired American citizenship.

Trap music, specifically the genre of Atlanta Trap music, ought to be considered Afropessimism tradition as it embraces the failure of the “Black Man” to be fully assembled and neatly fitted into the category of the “Human,” in other words, the White Man; rappers curate their image through villain-like imagery, such as Vampires (PlayBoi Carti refers to himself as King Vamp) to represent a psychoanalytic craving for self-esteem and acceptance in the face of oversexualization, criminalization, and failures to assimilate into hegemonic masculinity. Patrick Moynihan's rhetoric is retained through state propaganda that claims the socioeconomic failures of the Black community root from the inability to possess a strong family unit with a male head of the household. In reality, the question is not in relation to the “effectiveness” of Black families but rather its failures to assimilate into a white patriarchal family that owns land and retains its generational wealth through the sexual conquest of the Black womb. Political

⁴⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 76–77.

⁵⁰ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

campaigns and programs, such as the welfare system and criminal justice system, are created to reap profit from “Black pathology” by hyper-surveilling and controlling Black inner life in attempts to “correct” an already “pathologized” community of people who lack a stable family unit. Due to the legacies of *partus sequitur ventrem*, a white enslaver’s paternal involvement is invisibilized; in contemporary Black urban culture, the narrative often blames Black fathers for leaving their children without contextualizing abusive racial-sexual violence committed against Black families. Subconsciously, Black men in a way attempt to reconcile with the deadbeat enslaver who they were unable to inherit any land or generational wealth as they were assigned to enter as human commodities and not “sons” (heirs to property). The question to be proposed is how does an enslaved Black person, both property and commodity, inherit other properties? The contemporary Atlanta “rockstar” rapper lifestyle of money/sex/drugs and overall apathy and detachment from one’s self can be read as a fusion of an imagined dream-space of Afrosurrealistic expressions in a white, Chaucerian social matrix. In this realm, Black men cosplay as their deadbeat white enslaver fathers who owned land and women as sexual property. The requirement of the stabilizing Black feminine subject in an over-sexualization postured, can perhaps relate to the racial-sexual geographic structures of the auction block. Black men’s gendered performance could be read as a process into the psychoanalytic reckoning of the category non-human’s failure to assimilate white gendered performance. In a failed attempt to disassociate from the traumas associated with the legacies of slavery, the white social matrix is replicated in Black dwellings; it is here where the strip club represents a memory that “enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affliction.”⁵¹ Rape and sexual violence is almost a necessary initiator for this Black performance of ownership of property to occur; I wonder how a culture of dissemblance (which is defined as “the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressor”) holds the secrets for white patriarchy’s ego to be satisfied in the vessels of Black male rappers?⁵² The sexualization of violence is preserved in not only geographic space and place but expressions of Black male subjectivity that dwell in the collective reckoning of slavery’s sexual violence. In Atlanta strip clubs and digital spaces, as a twerking ritual, Black women from Atlanta twerk to SahBabii’s “Pull Up wit ah Stick” and “Tonight”; both songs sexualize the realities of Black gun violence and death: “Mob shit, big sticks, get killed. Thought she was dancin’ on the dick, that’s the clip/ She gettin’ on top tonight (Yeah) I’m riding with that Glock tonight.”⁵³ SahBabii’s “Pull Up wit ah Stick” and “Tonight” function as an expression

⁵¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 74.

⁵² Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” 915.

⁵³ WORLDSTARHIPHOP, “Sahbabii ‘Pull up Wit Ah Stick’ Feat. Loso Loaded (WSHH Exclusive),” 1:10-1:16; and SahBabii, “Sahbabii - Tonight,” 0:45-0:51.

of Afropessimism-surreal, a state of Black living-unliving; the haunting, sensual nature in which he narrates death is engendered in an expression of Black male sexuality and violence that feels contradictory and misogynistic, but exists in Black Southern spaces as alchemizing ritual of Black female flesh where Black femmes free their flesh in movement and are showered with money and erotic admiration. Twerking is a sacred, erotic act that catalyzes knowledge-making. In the name of the Lorde, this sacral-creative labor (the erotic) “functions as the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.”⁵⁴

The distinction between the non-Human and dehumanization refers to the requirement of white proximity and non-Blackness to have protection in this hegemonic state. These Afrosurrealist, yet white Chaucerian social matrices, are governed by memories as being held of human property and eternal social death; it is no coincidence that the subject of oppression may aspire to perform racial class structures to be granted economic power. Perhaps, including Trap music in the Afrosurrealist tradition has the ability to challenge white essentialist binary epistemology in Black music rather than reinforcing Black male trauma (depression, loneliness, police brutality, incarceration, sexual violence, etc.) as naturalized properties to signify as Black Man. The lack of advantages that white patriarchy has to offer to the intimate lives of Black men is a testament to not only the lack of integrity of gender in the social lives of Black people but an affirmation of bell hooks’ teachings and meditations on the effects of white patriarchal culture on men: “The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves.”⁵⁵ Music and art exists as the only outlet for Black men to meaningfully express and articulate emotions, while confined in some regard, as the entry into subjectivity relies on misogynistic, stabilizing Black feminine figures; its ability to convey Black men’s subconscious interiority is a representation of Black literacy and collective thought that ought to be valued rather than problematized under the rules of white epistemology’s criteria of good/bad. Art is a medium that is most distant from the white time matrix and has the ability to rupture white epistemologies that otherwise would go unchallenged in white hegemonic societies. Without the performance of white gender, Black art and Black feminist world-building gives *all* Black folks the space to exist in a way that affirms their bodies and souls as sacred. We return to the Black feminist literacies, intellectual genealogies, and world-building as the origin to map and dream our freedom.

⁵⁴ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic.”

⁵⁵ hooks, *The Will to Change*, 66.

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