

11-2019

## Envisioning utopia: the aesthetics of black futurity

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### Recommended Citation

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ENVISIONING UTOPIA: THE AESTHETICS OF BLACK FUTURITY

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of Arts

December, 2019

BY

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Chapter 1:

A Litany

## Prologue

Today I'm tired. Today once again I'm laid victim to the tumultuous tug and pull of sifting through which way of being will keep me feeling alive the longest. Feeling alive and being alive I've come to learn are two very different things. Survival is nuanced. In an interview with Judy Simmons in 1979, Audre Lorde said:

“...Survival is not a one-time decision. It's not a one-time act. It's something that goes on and on and on. And you make a commitment, the same way I make a commitment to myself, the way I make a commitment to my working, I make a commitment to my survival and to being able to see it...” (Simmons)

There are many litanies, many ways recommit to the notion of survival, and there are times when the commitment seems too grand, too difficult to tend to. There are some moments when survival seems tangible and in reach, sustainable, communal and practical, and all in one instance, it feels deeply futile. Unfortunately this isn't anything new. In “Black Mysticism: Fred Moten's Phenomenology of (Black Spirit),” Calvin L. Warren speaks of this oscillating between “diaspora blues” to “black nihilism;” in existing within the “contemporary fracturing into ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ stresses...two fields of African American Criticism [that] orbit around the gap of black ontology, each attempting to understand black existence in an anti-black world” (Warren 1).

Understanding Black existence is a process that ferments, a process that is sometimes unkind in its deepest abscesses. Today is a day where every news outlet is streaming footage of a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville. A small corner of my room glows in the dark from the river of torches illuminating from my screen. I too, am awake and burning. It's a day where I

wake in a feverish sweat, unable to tell a dream about my father's death from reality. It is the same day that activist Erica Garner has passed away<sup>1</sup>. A day where I remember Sandra Bland's mugshot and the deep, dark murmur that we were not looking at her, alive, but at her lifeless body laid on display<sup>2</sup>. A day where I hear the screams of Diamond Reynolds as she watches her boyfriend, Philando Castille, be shot by police<sup>3</sup>. A day when Atatiana Jefferson<sup>4</sup> is killed in her own home by a police officer. It is a day where casual acts of violence permeate into schools (where black girls are wrestled to the ground)<sup>5</sup>, their homes (where 8 year old black girls have the cops called on them for selling water bottles because she is a "suspicious person")<sup>6</sup>, and their towns (while canvassing for political office)<sup>7</sup>. Today is a day where "both sides" are at fault for the swift, quick access to black death that roars like white noise in the underbelly of the day. It is a day where blackness is still often defined by death, defined by a lack, defined by violence, by something looming that must constantly be fought back again and again. Racists act terrifyingly emboldened when they can code their racism in politically misinformed jargon.

But today is also a day where I'm again reminded of the great power of possibility that is ushered in with creativity, art, music, and everything in between. It's a day where I hear a song that shows me the intimate parts of myself and the capacity for love shared between others. It's a chorus that floats in from a car window as I'm walking home that makes me think of the

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/30/574514217/erica-garner-who-became-an-activist-after-her-father-death-dies>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/07/24/sandra-bland-mugshot-dead/30647275/>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005181340/philando-castile-diamond-reynolds-and-a-nightmare-caught-on-video.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/10/13/20912212/atatiana-jefferson-fort-worth-police-shooting-texas-aaron-de-an-murder>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/10/24/20929397/police-officer-excessive-force-school-11-year-old-girl-new-mexico>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jun/25/permit-patty-eight-year-old-selling-water-san-francisco-video>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/us/janelle-bynum-police-portland.html>

imperfect but intentional home my mother tried to craft for us. It's texting my friend in LA and my friend in New York who I know from Tucson while I'm in Chicago about what so and so did. It's about the connections and community we form through a love for a craft that loves us back. To think a song, a lyric, a poem, can upend weeks and months of sadness sometimes sounds hyperbolic, almost outlandish in comparison to the structural ugliness of reality that it is up against.

In "The Year in Ugliness" Arabelle Sicardi asks "what part of yourself did you have to destroy in order to survive in the world this year? But most importantly: what have you found to be unkillable?" (Sicardi). And this is where I am left, pondering the unkillable. Blackness and black womanhood and black bodies remain susceptible to physical and structural violence, as always, a result of dehumanization by individuals and the state, as a result of a maintained system of policy, policing, and culture that attempt to maintain this order.

So I ask, where are my commitments? What is left, what is the fuel, what drives us to move forward diligently, pragmatically? It is in these moments that I continually find myself turning to the soft arms of sound and the intricate layered worlds crafted in music videos; the outfits, the melodies, the chorus' rung out in the backseats of cars, in my kitchen as the sun sets, on a damp dance floors, in my ear pressed against a cold car window. And this is where I find my commitment to survival, and where I've found that others are committing to do the same. Black women creating music that defines personhood outside of this violence has given me small moments of what I believe my ideal present and future would look like, if only for a moment.

## Introduction

Through this project I intend to call attention to performative work that I believe addresses the future as a means of survival and as a step towards an individual and collective healing through the medium of song and music video. I situate these works in a space where harmful discourses regarding race, class, and gender are used as markers of ineptitude and justification for death and displacement. I hope to link this to the larger dialogue surrounding the question of who gets to exist within the future, what terms they must exist on, and what many are doing to disrupt that.

The materials I will be examining for this project are media from three artists that produced work in the year 2017-2018. I will be conducting a critical analysis of Solange Knowles' *Cranes in the Sky* music video and lyric booklet from *A Seat at the Table*, Kelela Mizanekristos' *Take me Apart*, and Tierra Whack's *Whack World*. These specific performances and projects were chosen because I believe they address three main areas of existence pertaining to black womanhood and personhood; the self, interpersonal relationships, and communal space. They are also creative projects that held and hold tremendous space within my personal, creative, and social worlds. These are spheres that are both seen and unseen, and will be analyzed in that vein of thought.

Multimedia historically has been a space in which black women have been able to utilize materials in a way that's indicative of their lived experiences. In "A Cosmic Demonstration of Shari Frilot's Curatorial Practice," Roya Rastegar speaks upon how "physical spaces and social contexts shape the conditions and terms in which people are able to engage with one another and...how audiences might relate to artistic works" (Rastegar 85). The spaces

that people create in, both literal and nonliteral, influences the ways in which discourses about lived experiences are translated. Juana Maria Rodriguez also speaks to this in “Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces,” noting that “objects, art, texts, buildings, [and] maps can also create knowledge, change history [and] refigure language” (Rodriguez 6). In reference to work done by Nora Alarcon, Rodriguez speaks to the ways in which “the act of becoming never ceases” (Rodriguez 7). From the onset of film and music festivals, black and queer and black *and* queer artists have consistently have been conscious of the power that lies with who produces discursive meanings through varying performative texts. In “The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality Volume 1” Michel Foucault asks “who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, [and] the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (Foucault 11), to emphasize that those in the position to create are in a position to shape the institutions which enforce meaning. Echoing the same sentiment, Rodriguez notes that “identity...is not merely a response to culturally defined differences, but is continually engaged in unpacking the

In this project, I will be utilizing a critical theoretical framework that both situates and contextualizes the social discourses that define creative work made by black women, analyzing the way music videos often work both as pieces of art; lyrically, sonically, and visually interwoven and connected, as a cultural aesthetic, and what it means to create in an aesthetic that is wrought of this. Blackness and its many constructs inextricably links each of these projects. I will be using a critical black feminist framework to highlight the ways in which race, class, and gender have been historically and intersectionally situated in/on specific bodies and spaces, and how that extends into arenas of creative work. How does the lived history of individuals, or the



interpretation of lived experience, integrate into performance? Cultural and racial tension and violence targeted towards black people have a direct influence on the creative work that is generated from the black community. In many ways as Jose Munoz iterates in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, “mourning is highly aestheticized,” and allows for us to recognize that “the lost and dead are not altogether absent. Not only do they exist within the drama of African-American life, but they help formulate it” (Muñoz 66). In queer theory, queer concepts of futurity are linked with the ways in marginalized individuals who have experienced and/or continue to experience trauma contend with and counteract their lived reality through acts of performance. Identifying how oppressive forces have attempted to define the “future” is important to the extended narrative of these pieces. In deconstructing what certain people *think* the future means, I hope to show that these artists and makers are “queering” the concept of survival from these standard definitions.

The paper will be broken into three sections; first I will be examining *ASATT* as an act of resistance through the ways in which the project embodies gesture, and the engaging of futurity through the performance of a black ephemera. Drawing heavily from Jose Muñoz’ concepts of gesture and ephemera noted in “*Cruising Utopia; The Then and There of Queer Futurity*,” I hope to assert that the aesthetics of *ASATT* is a response to the harshness of existing in the world as a black woman. Specifically, I will be looking at the ways in which physical and digital space, connectivity, and gesture function throughout the “*Cranes in the Sky*,” music video, exemplifying the ways in which “performance of futurity [is] embedded in the aesthetic” (Muñoz 87). Asserting that Knowles is positing a way to exist through and past, and not despite of impending circumstances, thus, creating a future of radical possibility.

The next section will examine the ways in which Kelela Mizanekristos' *Take me Apart* evokes a queer black vulnerability through a subset of a conceptual "hauntology," a phrase that Nabeel Zuberi describes as something that is unique to music made by black people within the diaspora. I posit that *Take me Apart* utilizes sound as a material, extending corporeality and thus subjecthood to queer bodies through the use of a uniquely black sound that sonically and visually constructs intimate worlds through calling both to the past and the present to manifest the future. Asserting that intimacy, sex, and love can happen on your own terms and through your own volition gives us a glimpse into a utopia where black women and black queer bodies are able to carve out their own intimate spaces while still being mindful of the past and present. Mizanekristos stated in an interview that "it's a very black thing to be tender and vulnerable," and that it's also a very black thing to "command ...sensitivity and rawness," and I posit that through these actions, these intentional commands and attention to detail, those who did not, or are told that that should not, are able to "get a life" (Zuberi 283) of their own.

Lastly, in the third section, I will explore the notions of Black Camp through the praxis of Tierra Whack's *Whack World*. Through a close analysis of past and present media, I hope to expand on the growing conceptualization of, and Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis' definition of contemporary black camp as it is expanded in "Beyonce's Slay Trick: The Performance of Black Camp and its Intersectional Politics," and demonstrate how black camp can be utilized as a creative and expansive tool to create worlds that act as a vessel for meaning making. Through the disruption of linearity and abstraction of reality, Whack evokes a black camp that in turn generates a world in which blackness is intrinsically dialectic, fractured, and constantly reinventing itself.

**Towards a black women's "aesthetic":  
The political and social implications of gesture**

There is no singular "black aesthetic," and though black women have been performing and creating art for decades, they have not received the same resources, the same recognition, or the same preservation of their work. In 1982, Kathleen Collins' *Losing Ground* was one of the first features directed by a black woman since the 1920s. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* followed in 1991, making her among the first black woman directors to have a mainstream theatrical run. *Daughters of the Dust* has since become heavily influential in the constructing, naming, and defining of what exactly a black woman/feminist aesthetic is and how it operates within the visual and cinematic canon.

In "Transcending the "Dust": African American Filmmakers Preserving the "Glimpse of the Eternal," Foluke Ogunleye begins to construct parameters regarding a black woman/feminist aesthetic. Ogunleye observes that this aesthetic has four primary functions; it restates and re-contextualizes historical facts, provides a "counter to destructive, racist images," images that are "demeaning to the African American psyche" (Ogunleye 158), and gives a platform for black women to tell their stories. Ogunleye explains that "one of the strong points of the African American feminist aesthetic is its positive image of black womanhood" (Ogunleye 158). Within the text, Ogunleye provides reference to an interview about the film in which director Julie Dash echoes similar sentiments when speaking on the intent of her film. In this interview she specifically names and identifies her work with the term "black aesthetic," stating that:

The films that I make are from a black aesthetic and from an African American woman's reality. I make the kinds of films that I've always wanted to see. My films are about women at pivotal moments of their lives, enigmatic women who are juggling complex psyches', who speak to one another in fractured sentences, yet communicate completely through familiar gestures and stances, women who remind me of my old neighborhood and women who raised me (Ogunleye 160)

In this moment, Dash not only gives form to what a black aesthetic is, but posits that black aesthetic relies heavily on the elements of black women's reality. At its core, many of the works made by black women, when analyzed through this lens, as further explained upon by in "Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern," by Jayna Brown, "...are a strategic way to think through the theoretical problems we face when weighing the relationship between discourse, inscriptions, and the black body's agency" (Brown 57). From this definition, Dash expands on Ogunleye's initial four parameters. In this context, a black woman's aesthetic also contains moments in which they are "speaking to one another" through "familiar gestures and stances" that allow for this work to exist in a way that is distinct to black women. For Dash, it is a form of processing a complex reality and of creating moments of identification in the times in which words fail. In the case of *Daughters of the Dust*, the aesthetic of film is not merely superficial but socially and politically influenced. In many instances in the film, Dash creates a gentle tableaux of daily life; in wide angles through which we see the women of the women of the Peasant family dyeing indigo, how wind moves through the white fabric draped over the women preparing food on the light undisturbed beach, the way the apparition of an unborn child can narrate the trajectory of a Gullah family in societal limbo and they attempt to make an extremely pivotal decision; to go to the mainland or stay. Stylistically

the film takes advantage of the dreamlike island by infusing the narrative with literal dreams and apparitions. In both instances, in the tableaux and the apparition, the aesthetic serves as a formative mode of identity making. The tableaux serves as a capsule, a form of seeing and archiving a way of life that, as we know in the narrative, is in a constant state of threat. Through connection also comes a fracture that emphasizes tradition. The apparitions and nonlinear mode of storytelling serves as a way of acknowledging the then/and, the here and now. Within the story, much like the varying views of the women, aesthetic of the film allows us to see the layers of history that coat each interaction.

This formation of a particular black woman's aesthetic was also employed by queer black women creating media around the same time. In "A Cosmic Demonstration of Shari Frilot's Curatorial Practice," Roya Rastegar speaks of how "in the early nineties, there was an explosion of work by makers of color which engaged the issues of race, class, sexuality, and aesthetics in ways that [were] revolutionizing experimental film" (Rastegar 71). In 1992, Shari Frilot's *Cosmic Demonstration of Sexuality* made "observations that straight lines do not exist in nature....[and how] one emotional state progresses into another, never following a rational, straight path" (Rastegar 70). Like Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, Frilot hyper-exaggerates how the past bleeds into the present and future, and how intimacy is often regulated within this nonlinear space through the implementation of a specific aesthetic. Media that was nonlinear, ephemeral, emotive, and diverse began to dominate the scenes as a mode of creative self-expression. For black creatives, aesthetics were more than just a marker of personal taste or a facet of decoration; it was way in which a particular site of being could be communicated.

In “Our Aesthetic Categories,” Sianne Ngai explores the ways in which “aesthetic categories generated by and for the world of taste can become a useful tool for the political evaluation of large scale cultural phenomenon” (Ngai 957), that is, when we start to conceptualize aesthetics, one must understand that they do not exist within a vacuum. “Historical analysis and sociopolitical evaluation” (Ngai 957) is critical to understanding the ways in which certain aesthetics are perceived within the world. Who is able to inhabit both the aesthetic and the space in which the aesthetic is found is born of the ways in which individuals identify with their lived reality. Though the 90s saw a boom in black artists utilizing technology in their media making, in “Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds & eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era,” Francesca Royster notes that black aesthetics, notably in the realm of eccentrics, had been employed through the realm of performance outside of technology for decades. The term “post soul,” Royster says, “describes both a period - one that is still with us - and an aesthetic” (Royster 5). Post soul eccentrics, through the use of costume, lyric, and style, utilize aesthetic to ask “where might blackness not only uplift us, feed our souls, but sometimes also fail us, erasing our desire or constraining the ways we move in the world as sexual and sensual beings?” (Royster 10).

As it was when Grace Jones graced the floor of night clubs, or when Sun-Ra shimmered on stage, I believe it’s important to look at the ways in which Soyica Colbert notes that “aesthetic movements enable and imagine political movements” (Colbert 275) in “Introduction: on Black Performance.” The ways in which the art and music black people are making, specifically black women, directly correlates with the political and social tensions and changes that are happening within their communities.

The personal is inherently political, and I contend that for black women, performance is not just performance — it is their way of situating themselves within the world, taking into account the daily hardships that they experience, and using familiar and distinct forms of movements, ways of speaking, and gestures to connect, to share with others who are also going through the same experiences. This is how bonds that allow for extended survival are forged — through radical acts of vulnerability, of creating spaces in which pain, and joy can be spoken about with honest intent, a heartfelt motif, and determined critique. In ‘Black Marxism : the making of the black radical tradition,’ Cedric J. Robinson notes that “cultural workers have used the transformative power of performance — repeated actions presented before an audience that carry with them the history of their re-occurrence — to shape viewers’ and listeners’ perceptions of blackness (Robinson 275).

Music and dancing and bodies can extend what is often thought of as in-extendible. Movement can sometimes see. When I think of dance as an extension of the self and also an identifier through the other, I think of the moment in Jenny Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, where house mother of the House of Ninja, the pioneering Willi Ninja, demonstrates the complex meaning of Voguing. Through the dance style, the extended hand becomes a compact mirror, finger tips become caked with blush only the dancer can see. As the hands move in formation with the music, Ninja performs the act of applying makeup on himself, later to then place the palm outward, extending the mirror to his opponent and thus the audience. Dance and movement and music become modes of communication and a form of signifiers in this moment, simple, earnest, and most importantly, fun. Through performance, black people are able identify tradition, ritual, and archive through the act of choreography. As we know, voguing later came to

be highly commercialized by white consumers, however, the introduction of the consumption of such practices still does not change the inherent political and social implications of this specific type of Black performance. Voguing, the proverbial ballroom, still remain a signifier of a collective community and consciousness. Brown further expands on how dance and movement are forms of intercultural communication:

For African Americans, popular dance—on the musical stage, in the dance halls, and on the street—was a collective dialogue of cultural and social self-formation under conditions of migration. The protean resilience of black dance compositions recognized the fragmentation and disorientation of the social and individual body as the shock of the modern condition. Dancing together in the spaces of the city was a way of recognizing this condition and also of creating new rhythms of selfhood and communality within and between several timed and spatial zones. The artistry of black dancers was a form of *flânerie*, affirming a sense of multiple-sited, modern black subjectivity” (Brown 159, emphasis authors)

Performance, thus, is a mode of self and community making, of subjectivity that can be practiced in a multitude of manners.

Black womanhood and expression of queer black sexuality, in conjunction with the notion of performance, spanning from the 60s and 70s, coalesced in the 90s. In the chapter “Construction of Computation and Desire: Introduction to Yvonne Welbon's Interview with Pamela L. Jennings / Kara Keeling” in the anthology “Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making” Kara Keeling notes that in the 90s, “black female embodiment and black lesbian sexuality [partook in] early experiments in interactive, electronic sounds and images” (Whelbon 49). At this time, Pamela L. Jennings in conversation with Yvonne Welbon, found in the chapter “Ruins and Desire,” states that:



Early music videos explored and celebrated the oddly experimental in the moving image and sound. It opened the door to synthesized coolness, which... brought people not necessarily into wanting to do MTV music videos but wanting to explore this new creative medium for self-expression (Welbon 52)

That urge to express coupled with a new medium with which to do so opened the doors for black women to emerge within and expand upon a growing aesthetic. The music video itself being the perfect informal tool with which to do so.

### **Music Video as a Site of Aesthetic Formation**

Music videos as a site of cultural production have long been, as emphasized by Pamela Taylor in “Press Pause: Critically Contextualizing Music Video in Visual Culture and Art Education,” something that is “fundamental to the way some of us view the world, [for]...a number of them have become deeply imbedded stories in our memories” (Taylor 231). It is in the music video where performance and aesthetics coalesce. In the mornings waiting for my mother to get ready for work, I would sit belly down on the floor, fixated on VH1’s top ten. I remember the first time I saw TLC’s “Waterfalls,” and Beyonce’s “Check On It.” Music videos are often how I recall time and trends, it is a way to connect with friends across time and space. They leave marks on us; shape what we want to wear, leave indentations on our taste, and shape our interests due to their almost ingenious intersection of fashion, dance, and performance. Often music videos exist as the perfect social product, often remaining archival while still withstanding the test of time.

The music video, similar to film, has its own history of industry practices and praxis that have shaped who, how, and what gets produced and consumed by audiences. The intentional combination of music and visual mediums had been in use as early as 1927 (Taylor 2007) seen in

films like Disney's *Fantasia*. In "Video in the Machine: The Incorporation of Music Video into the Recording Industry," Jack Banks notes that major record labels were utilizing music clips in the 1970s to promote artists on television (Banks 1998), but this was notably usually done utilizing *live* performances of artists. The premiere of MTV in August of 1981 was the catalyst for what we now know as the contemporary music video (Banks 1998), a style of video that utilizes various modes of style, structure, and scripting to creatively tell stories and personify the talent of a musical artist and their work. With this development, "major labels incorporated this cultural product [music videos] into the organizational structure of their companies" (Banks 294), leading to an institutional and structural gatekeeping that gave labels and executives the power to decide "which of its artists will be featured in music clips and which songs from the artist's album will have accompanying videos" (Banks 294).

### **Making the Video**

Music videos as a site of cultural production have long been "fundamental to the way some of us view the world, [for]...a number of them have become deeply imbedded stories in our memories" (Taylor 231). In the mornings waiting for my mother to get ready for work, I would sit belly down on the floor, fixated on what video would make the top ten slot. I remember the first time I saw TLC's "Waterfalls," how I cried on the way to school. They are often how I often recall time, trends, dates, etc. They leave marks on us; shape what we want to wear, leave indentations on our taste, shape our interests due to their almost ingenious intersection of fashion, dance, and performance. Often music videos exist as the perfect social product, often remaining archival while still withstanding the test of time.

The music video, similar to film, has its own history of industry practices and praxis that have shaped who, how, and what gets produced and consumed by audiences. Though the use of an intentional combination of music and visual mediums had been in use as early as 1927 (Taylor 2007) seen in films like Disney's *Fantasia*, and major record labels were utilizing music clips in the 1970s to promote artists on television (Banks 1998), but this was notably done utilizing *live* performances of artists. The premiere of MTV in August of 1981 was the catalyst for what we now know as the contemporary music video (Banks 1998), a style of video that utilizes various modes of style and structure to often creatively tell stories and personify the talent of a musical artist and their work. With this development, "major labels incorporated this cultural product [music videos] into the organizational structure of their companies" (Banks 294), leading to an institutional and structural gatekeeping that gave labels and executives the power to decide "which of its artists will be featured in music clips and which songs from the artist's album will have accompanying videos" (Banks 294). It was in this cultural sphere that "MTV's ability to place a song and musician into the pop music conversation was unparalleled at the time, and by the end of the decade that meant absurd levels of both financial and creative commitment to music videos" (Pitchfork )

On the onslaught, Black artists had few opportunities to have videos funded by record labels until channels like BET, and the development of hip-hop's consumability for a black and nonblack audiences (Banks 1998). But it is not to say that Black artists were not *not* having music videos made and featured during this time. In Pitchfork's list of the "Top 50 music videos of the 1990s," only three of the 50 slots are occupied by black women, one being Lauryn Hill in the 41st slot with *Everything Is Everything* (1999) directed by Sanji, the 10th slot being Missy

Elliott's *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)* (1997) directed by Hype Williams, and as a featured artist, Kelis at 47th on Ol' Dirty Bastard's *Got Your Money* (1999) directed by Nzingha Stewart, Scott Kalvert, Hype Williams, and Durville Martin. Though this is just based off of *one* list, Black men in hip-hop, rap, and R&B acts occupy 8 out of the 50 slots, putting the representation of black artists (combining men and women) at canonically being considered to produce only about 22% of the most creatively (again, according to this list) notable music videos of the time (Plagenhoef 2010). This is representative of the fact that many black artists had to contend with the parameters of marketability set up by labels, which made it difficult comparatively to white, male musicians to be able to produce varied and creative work.

It should be noted that within the black creative community, it was more difficult for black women specifically to carve out space within the realm of music videos; navigating different sites of desirability often proves to be a double edged sword. Within music videos featuring primarily black male artists, black women often found themselves in the foreground as video "girls," usually as dancers or as actors. I don't want to assume or assign an inherent lack of agency on the women who performed in these roles, but it would be remiss to ignore that often, black women's value is often based on their silence and hypersexuality. It is in this space that black women who are also performers must content how they can assert, define, and modify their image, which may or may not engage in notions of sexuality that is rooted in the body moving and being visible. To have a music videos produced and circulated, they must negotiate the ways in which their race, gender, class, and sexuality are/have been constructed as other, as something inherently undesirable. It is found that in the right circumstances black women performance artists are deemed worthy of spectacle under certain guidelines.

It is for this reason that music videos created by black women performance artists often operate as a space of expression that is influenced by and attempts to influence these notions of desirability, visibility, and agency as a way to subvert these guidelines that too often try to define who is worthy of being seen. Social and political ideologies code the black body in motion. Emerson states that “the 1990s witnessed the emergence of Black women performers, producers, writers, and musicians who have all made the music video into a site for promotion, creativity, and self-expression” (Emerson 116), and though the *noted* list is small, we see this in the music videos created by Elliot and Hill. The music video, thus, is/has been a site in which “race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect” (Emerson 116) in a way that is distinct to black women. This is the site in which Kelela Mizanekristos is creating visual representations for her music in. In a press release regarding the album, Mizanekristos noted that “despite it being a personal record, the politics of my identity informs how it sounds and how I choose to articulate my vulnerability and strength” (Gelsani 1) highlighting the fact that historically, “Black women’s rhetorical and performative strategies were public performances of black female identity designed to counter negative stereotypes” (Reid-Brinkley 240). The image of black womanhood and femininity constructed on screen has an impact that is often reverberating. In being conscious of the ways in which her intersecting identities are performed, for Mizanekristos and artists like her, in the present, past, and probably future, are negotiating impact of what presenting their image has in the collective social realm, for as Cartier states in “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations”:

The ideological power inherent in black screen representations creates possibilities as well, since black audiences’ engagement with black characters on-screen is at once a mat

ter of fantasy projection as well as the reification of a collective sense of self...black people are always in a process of becoming, of imaging that what we see on-screen might both reflect our screen fantasies and refract our lived realities (Cartier 152)

How black artists manage to both reflect lived realities and construct fantasies through the medium of the music video again makes the music video a site of something more than just a marketing tool, it places the music video in a realm of possibility, a space in which worlds that hold their desired sense of self and community can exist, often in spite of reality, even in a world where commodification and image rule what type of music video gets made.

If black artists were going to have music videos made, they ultimately must be performed a certain way to a certain audience. The ways blackness has been presented in music videos has historically been racialized, gendered, and often incorporates elements of class. There have been numerous critiques of specifically about the persistent hyper-masculinity, glorification of drugs, sex, crime, and obtaining of money, and largely, the objectification and commodification of black women's bodies. Knowledge is situated and originated from a more monolith point of view. These critiques exist in a space ignoring the ways in which blackness is celebrated In tracing the development of the music video, it is important to remember again, that for record labels, it was first and foremost a marketing tool, a way in which the artists image could be constructed, something that could "modify an established performer's public identity" (Banks 296), and this was done to inevitably sell more records. This resulted in fewer black women being able to have their work created.

## **Debasing Gatekeepers**

The advent of technology and streaming sites has made production and consumption of non-conventional music videos widely more accessible, and has changed the ways in which black independent creatives can produce and disseminate their work. Again one can see links in how the film and television industry have also be impacted by such change. Notably in the creation of web-series that give shows that may not be so easily picked up by networks the possibility to be shared. Similarly, this has bled into the DIY music scene; record labels being run out of bedrooms can now garner a large following, producing records, merchandize, and in some cases music videos for their artists. One example is Father/Daughter records, a small label that has produced records for queer black artists such as Shamir and Vagabon. Though on a smaller scale compared to performers like Kelela, it can be argued that accessibility when it comes to the production and creative process has allowed for there to be a larger pool of content. In this space and time, the music video, though still maintaining its original function as a tool for marketability, can now more than ever serve as “a digital medium used to create and sell artists while both inventing and disrupting the world it represents” (Taylor 231).

The ability to self produce and publish, to choose your creative team, to not be under the umbrella of a large label has allowed for black women to have more control in their creative projects and again, create their own worlds and fantasies without limiting corporate oversight. In conjunction, viewers are also being given more intimate, recognizable spaces due to the fact that people more aligned with their experiences now have the opportunity to create. Because of this accessibility, “viewing music videos online gives viewers more control over what they see than television does because viewers can find and download particular music videos immediately

rather than waiting for scheduled programming on television” (Taylor 231), the “scene” has a creative control that is less top-down and more collaborative.

Though we have novel things happening now and in the moment, I would be remiss to say that this was happening simply on its own volition. There is a style, a history, an impression that Black women have crafted as a result of their unique position within society and their ability to create and subvert despite existing within a creative and professional community that made it extremely difficult at times to do so. It is from this tradition that the music video is a tool with which Black women have negotiated the ways in which their bodies are perceived and consumed in popular culture.

*LMK* was released on Warp records, an English independent record label started in 1987 by Steve Beckett and Rob Mitchell (Birke 2007) however, the music video itself was produced by the production company Strangelove (Knight 2017). Warp is known for its “discovery” and release of obscure, electronic, and alternative rock artists, notably Apex Twin and more contemporarily Born Ruffians. Independent labels like Warp have existed since the boom of music video production and promotion, but historically they have had a difficult time having their artists work compare competitively to the content put out by larger labels. This resulted in usually lower-budgets that created a more distinct style of creation, however, much of this energy was utilized to produce white male musicians and white male fronted acts. In facilitating the collaboration and creation of the work of a queer black artist, Warp still continues the legacy of providing space and resources to artists that may not have the same desirability to larger labels. Steve Beckett stated that they “...usually find our artists based on recommendations or hearing music in clubs,” (Birke 2007), connoting the more intimate, personal aspect of signing



artists through a connection with the music, rather than simply on the marketability and potential profit. LMK debuted on the streaming platform Vevo on August 9, 2017, like many contemporary music videos, they are able to be released outside of the conventional label to television company exchange.

### **Methods: Identifying sites of creation**

It is clear that the music video as a digital medium is an important site in which critical cultural engagement can occur. In speaking of how to critically engage with the music video in a classroom setting, Pamela G. Taylor implements a set of guidelines that takes into account the multiple intersections of cultural and social production that happens within a video. This is broken down into four modes of analysis. First, one must look the “image, brand, and reputation” (Taylor 235), that is being conveyed within the video. Again, this takes into account the ways in which capitalism and creation intersect and have historically intersected in the creation of music videos. It is important to take into account the label the video was released on, who the director and crew are, who is in the music video, and the modes in which it was released. The second prong of the analysis is reading the way that “images depict, contradict, and/or extend the lyrics and melody,” thus attempting to make connections between the the sonic aspect of the song to the visuals that are presented. This is important because the content of the lyrics may be inextricably linked intentionally to the way bodies move in/out of spaces, and how they interact with other people within the space of the video as well. The third is to seek to “[identify]... connecting images and meaning” (Taylor 235) thus canonizing the video and assuring that it does not exist in a vacuum in which it has no influences. This is particularly important when critically reading music videos created by black women due to the fact that black women’s

performance and representation is highly coded and contorted, often laden with social constructs that often are not intentionally performed by, but rather interpreted as inherent to the artists simply due to the ways in which black women's bodies are read. Lastly, one must take into account the "phenomenon of stardom" (Taylor 235) or rather, who is the subject of the video and why/how are they operating within the larger socio/political/cultural context.

### **Music Video as a site of Futurity**

Music videos created by black women often operate as a space of expression that is influenced by and attempts to influence notions of desirability, visibility, and agency, a continuation of the foundations of a black women's aesthetic. Social and political ideologies code the black body in motion. Here is a space where multiple cultural black aesthetics can be shaped and formed. Emerson states that "the 1990s witnessed the emergence of Black women performers, producers, writers, and musicians who have all made the music video into a site for promotion, creativity, and self-expression" (Emerson 116). We see this in Missy Elliott's now iconic *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)* (1997), or the way Macy Gray gives us a glimpse in her intimate world via a neofuturistic aesthetic in "I Try" (1999). The music video is/has been a site in which "race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect" (Emerson 116) in a way that is distinct to black women. This is the site in which Kelela Mizanekristos, Solange, and Tierra Whack are creating visual representations of their music in. In a press release regarding the album, Mizanekristos noted that "despite it being a personal record, the politics of my identity informs how it sounds and how I choose to articulate my vulnerability and strength" (Gelsani 1), Solange offers a similar narrative as well. Again, similar in what is seen in the formation of a black women's aesthetic, "Black women's rhetorical and performative strategies were public

performances of black female identity designed to counter negative stereotypes” (Reid-Brinkley 240). Through stereotypes, black bodies are cast as untimely bodies, bodies that do not belong spatially and rhetorically. In countering stereotypes, formation of the self through multimedia visuals ignites a process that not only debunks but rebuilds. In “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations” Nina Cartier explores how:

The ideological power inherent in black screen representations creates possibilities as well, since black audiences’ engagement with black characters on-screen is at once a matter of fantasy projection as well as the reification of a collective sense of self...black people are always in a process of becoming, of imagining that what we see on-screen might both reflect our screen fantasies and refract our lived realities (Cartier 152)

How black artists manage to both reflect lived realities and construct fantasies through the medium of the music video makes the music video a site of something more than just a marketing tool, it places the music video in a realm of possibility, a space in which worlds that hold their desired sense of self and community can exist, often in spite of reality.

It is in this way that music videos, through the formation of aesthetic, through the performance of the imagined self, can engage with concepts of futurity. Futurity as a concept is something that, as a result as a continuously unpredictable and ever-changing present, is constantly negotiable. Despite the ways in which capitalism and heteropatriarchal notions of time try to define a definite, concrete future, In “After the Future” Franco Berardi iterates that “The future is not an obvious concept, but a cultural construction and projection,” the future therefore, takes on a sort of mythological temporalization, the future does not just happen but is constantly tended to. Racism and sexism work in ways that attempt to replicate the same outcome despite the circumstances; it teaches people that, if you in operate from a racist, heteropatriarchal

standpoint, if you invest in the infrastructure that purports these systems, then you can expect a certain type of future in which you and those around you benefit. It is a myth of progress, a false investment. What then does it mean to not believe this myth? What trajectory is altered, what sort of temporarily is dispelled when you decide that those systems are not of benefit to you, and that future is not the space in which you will be housed? Within “Untimely Bodies: Futurity, Resistance, and Non-Normative Embodiment” Joshua St. Pierre and Kristin Rodier assert that “thinking through temporality...offers new ways of understanding how bodies resist normativity” (St. Pierre & Rodier 6) for “rooted in and lived through one’s body then so is the capacity to resist dominant time orders. For “reclaiming the possibilities of ‘untimely bodies’ thus requires that we attend to how the multiple and impure ways in which bodies that are cast out of time simultaneously reconstitute these socio-temporal relations” (St. Pierre & Rodier 9). The music video therefore operates as a space where bodies cast out of time, space, and resources can rebuild and regrow in the expansive temporal space of a world distinctly crafted by those who have been excluded and marginalized within reality. The worlds created are worlds that dispel the myths of a preordained future. Worlds made by those who choose to divest in the active mechanisms attempting to make a future of continued oppression seem as if it is inevitable.

Black women, specifically queer black women, have foundational roots in utilizing multimedia as an artistic medium. Black queer women have utilized music video from its inception as a tool to understand the self and the body as it interacts with the world. To challenge notions of self and to instill notions of possibility. There is a style, a history, an impression that Black women have crafted as a result of their unique position within society and their ability to

create and subvert despite existing within a creative and professional community that made it extremely difficult at times to do so. It is from this tradition that the music video is a tool with which Black women have negotiated the ways in which their bodies are perceived, consumed and hopefully, survive.

Chapter 2:  
Cranes in the Sky

The importance and necessity of *A Seat at the Table* felt instantaneous and infectious; amongst a year of death, of rigorous demonstrating and of fatigue, music became a refuge, a space to sit and be seen. The album quickly grew into more than just a record, it became a moment, the flick of the flame igniting wordlessly through a gaze. The album cover is a visually striking photo of Knowles with long hair parted in the middle, draped over her shoulders sectioned off in colorful clips, creating soft indents and waves. Referential of the in between state one hovers in as they get their hair done, Knowles implicates that this is going to be a journey that we are all going to share. The reference calls us to see and be seen, like an ode to the mirror gazed in across the beauty salon chair. Solange in this moment is us and calling to us. We are in a sense, offered a seat at the table. In an interview with her sibling Beyonce for *Interview*, Solange iterates the intent of the album art's hazy gaze, stating:

...[I] wanted to create an image that invited people to have an up-close and personal experience...and that really spoke to the album title—that communicated, through my eyes and my posture, like, ‘Come and get close. It’s not going to be pretty. It’s not going to be perfect. It’s going to get a little gritty, and it might get a little intense, but it’s a conversation we need to have (Knowles 2017)

Indeed, this album has been the cause of many conversations and celebrations. The audio album is accompanied by a physical and digital photo series, live performance art pieces, and 3 music videos. In totality, *A Seat at the Table* functions in 4 separate, yet interlinked pieces, rather than only a free standing, singular music album. It has expanded into the world in ways that flatten time, space, and genre. In utilizing interdisciplinary modes of expression, Knowles adds to the canon of black women's performance art as a mode of exploring the ways in which race, class, and gender shape the ways in which the body interacts with the world, and more notably, how

the body reacts to such malleability in the form of a multifaceted, powerful world making through the medium of music video. In a review, Pitchfork's Julianne Escobedo Shepherd notes that "...at its spiritual core it is an ode to black women and their healing and sustenance in particular; in writing about herself, Solange turns the mirror back upon them, and crystallizes the kinship therein" (Escobedo Shepherd 2016).

I would like to specifically examine the ways in which physical and digital space, connectivity, and gesture function throughout Solange Knowles' *Cranes in the Sky* music video, exemplifying the ways in which Jose Munoz notes that "performance of futurity [is] embedded in the aesthetic" (Munoz 87). I'll be drawing attention to the use of space, color, bodies, and movement in music video, lyrical content, and the format and placement of text within the lyric booklet. These elements call and respond to each other, supplement and give context, snaking between the inside and outside world, they all form, as Knowles implicated, a performance of conversation, a conversation about blackness, gender, self-worth, expression, and existence in a world in which black existence is constantly under surveillance, attack, and erasure.

*Cranes in the Sky* effectively became my self-care anthem of the year the first moment I heard that opening echo of the snare. In the track, Knowles takes the listener on a reflective, earnest, borderline solipsistic gaze backwards as she asks the burning questions that we all wonder persistently; how do I fix myself, how do I survive, what is effective self-care? Immersed in an airy space between a waning synth and tepid beat of stick and symbols, Knowles utilizes her own story to tell us that self-destruction and erasure are not the answer, however much we may need to escape the harshness of reality; "I tried to drink it away, I tried to put one in the air, I tried to dance it away, I tried to change it with my hair," (Knowles 14) she sings in



the first verse of the song. In the lyric booklet, these words are printed on one side of the page in a linear, topical and traditional pattern, reading like one reads a book, or standard poem. As the story progresses into the next verse, Knowles states, “I ran my credit card bill up, thought a new dress would make it better, I tried to work it away, but that just made me even sadder” (Knowles 14) visually (printed within the book), emphasis is put on the phrase “I tried to,” as it sits isolated, away from the rest of the text. Even more emphasis is placed on the I – alone, singular, as it becomes more repetitious. At this same moment in the music video, we are introduced to the variant spaces. Knowles sits wrapped in tense, crinkled dress of plastic, with a large mesh sack filled with dense blocks. The bag itself rests in ambiguity due to its assortment of undefinable material. You’re unsure if it’s light or heavy, soft or rough, a burden or just a load to bear that is quietly accepted.

There are coping mechanisms that are distinctive to that black community that have left both positive and negative indents in our collective culture. Within these simple statements Knowles alludes to the often tragic mishaps of attempting to cope with things that are much larger than ourselves. Alcoholism, the subset of debt, bankruptcy, migration to find a “better” place, a better way of life are all things we have inherited as a way of trying to figure out how to not be even sadder. Within the digital booklet, these phrases are laid upon the page in a mangled, staccato type fashion, the stanzas strewn across the page, almost as if marking the ways in which time becomes disparate and disconnected in these moments of internal and external conflict.

Knowles states “I tried to let go of my lover, thought if I was alone then maybe I could recover,” and follows it with the final repetition of the word “away.” *Away away away away away*, she sings in a crescendo that builds into a waning harmonic echo, a note that is both

calling out and calling inwards, a cry into the void. Within the lyric booklet “away” is displayed linearly in all caps; AWAY, laid across the page six times in three rows, highlighting the immediacy of it, its uniformity emphasizing the urgency of the statement, a simple word given a tragic, yet convoluted meaning —*it*, whatever “it” may be, is something Knowles wants to dispel away, but also, in repeating this word, in having it reverberate, the phrase *away* takes on a meaning of potential. In this moment, away reads as more than just physical motion, it is a statement, it is an urge, and it suggests motion. In this moment away means movement, and for Knowles, movement, be it to or in or towards something, is what answers the lingering question, it is in itself, the response. We do not know if Knowles has found peace, for all she says is that she tried. It is in the imagery that her place is perhaps alluded to - people, are her refuge, her body occupying space, is a refuge to the world.

This movement is then shown to us visually within the music video. The lyrics of the song and the visuals of the video are where the past and present collide. It is in constructing this space that the embodiment of gesture and the engaging of futurity through the performance of black ephemera and an aestheticized gaze emerge. While Knowles depicts visions of her past self through lyrical imagery, telling us what has been, she physically embodies the future, and we are watching this now, conscious of what has been, is, and can be, all in this one moment of viewership. But this view changes, it contorts based on what element of the project we are viewing, the project in itself contextualizes its own parts.

Performance of futurity means that aesthetics contribute to the ways in which the performance itself utilizes time, space, material, color and movement. Who is there, how are they there, what are they doing, and why are they doing it? Within the music video, space is

structured so that it can be empty and then filled repeatedly. It is also structured in a way that deconstructs and juxtaposes time and space by evoking a sense of liminality. It is framed in a way that instructs the viewer to see bodies in their entirety; implanting images that once gone will last. In utilizing a multitude of media, Knowles makes a distinction between what we consider physical and digital space — a distinction that is noted in order to be blurred, to be formatted, and consumed particularly on its own volition. In this staging of bodies in spaces where bodies usually are not staged, in clothing that is contrasting, or made more visible due to its color, particularly bodies that are black, we see a space occupied that usually isn't; we see a community forming. It is in this way that Knowles collapses how we begin to view spatial and temporal reality; in this ornamental display of bodies, potentiality is emulated and visualized — the future starts to form before our eyes. These images highlight the fact that “the best performances do not disappear but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future” (Muñoz 104). The image of these bodies, specifically the bodies of black women placed in this environment alters the terrain in various ways; it does so one, in the present, in the time in which the video was filmed, and furthermore in the creation of those images, in the ways in which the performance lasts because it was documented on screen, and also because of the fact that it was viewed and dispensed and remembered.

In one instance, a group of women are linked together by a muted cloth purple, standing elevated in the open desert, a plateau jutting out of the earth behind them (see image to the left). It is creating this connectivity, this possibility for gesture that the video generates. It is important to note that this is intentional. The audience for this song and this music video is made clear by the artists, in another interview with NPR's *All Things Considered*, in conversation with

Ari Shapiro, Knowles states that “I honestly was writing them for myself and for my healing and for my self-discovery. On some moments [] that can be universal. And then some moments, I feel like that is for us, by us, and we deserve to have that moment” (Knowles 2016).

It is these moments that I want to focus on, these moments in which the lived experience, and the person living the experience are acknowledged, where community is built upon this shared experience. Knowles reflects that she wants to create these moments of connection not only for herself but for others to heal and to discover their sense of self. This is where you see the recurring theme of connectivity and gesture running throughout the video. “Choreography of the gestural” (Muñoz 88) is something that happens in subtle moments. Costumes function as a prop often throughout the music video. The physical placing of these bodies intentionally marks a line in the terrain, both literally with the cloth, but also figuratively as well. Though they do not stay there, the image of their bodies does, permanently etching a reference onto the earth in which they occupied only for one moment. This moment, the documentation of this connection, is what makes the music video so powerful; as Muñoz states, it stays with you. Due to the ways in which the cloth is fastened, connecting each at the front and back of their bodies, a subtle link is created; when one moves, the other does. However, if one person at the end of the line moves, it does not necessarily mean that the other at the opposite end of the line will. However, the possibility is there, if there’s enough strength. But at the present moment, everyone is connected lightly, even if they are not being affected by the movement of the other. Throughout this video, the use of color and material that seems uncommonly placed within wide, neutral spaces again serves as a way to mark the terrain.

At one point, Knowles is wearing an outfit that is made out of thread, a purplish pink yarn that is wrapped around her torso and lower/upper-body, tensely tangled and knotted, causing indents and compression on the body, it lays limp like a mangled snare. As Knowles stares directly at the camera, a hand reaches out from off the screen, holding the end of the thread lightly between two fingers, slowly unravelling the yarn from around the wrist. With her hand extended out towards Knowles, the string appears to be connected at Knowles' wrist, at the end of which her hand also extends out towards the woman holding the end of the string. The appearance of the yarn around the body gives the illusion that it is all but one strand that is wrapped around the body, and this strand ends at the hand of someone else slowly attempting to unravel it with the given permission of another person, the person ensnared within it. It is stated that “quotidian gestures [are] laden with potentiality” and that “relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (Muñoz 91) can be expressed through these gestures. This moment in the music video lasts for about 1 second, but the image of it burns within the memory; the concept of a small gesture, the recognition of intimacy, the vulnerability in admitting that you cannot untangle yourself alone, or possibility not that you can't do it alone, but you are choosing not to.

Another part of the music video that I'd like to call attention to is the choreography, both individual and group. The groups of people vary. When Knowles isn't alone, she is in some sort of unison with the women around her. At one point, Knowles sits amongst a group of black women, all dressed in white, though each of their outfits vary. The group flows rhythmically back and forth, extending their hands, placing them upon each other in an ebb and flow like motion, as if they are all small parts of one microorganism floating in water. Limbs softly

draping over limbs. At one point, in another scene, a head is placed in the palm of a hand, and it rests there, supported as the person looks towards something outside of the scenes view. The outfits in this scene are a tan, burlap sort of brown, a futuristic sort of tunic. Again, the image of the head being cradled in the person's outstretched hands is subtle, and almost could be missed for its brevity, and that is I contend, what makes the scene full of beauty, power, and potential.

I liken this scene to a play that Jose Muñoz references in his study of the gestural. The play, a one scene act that involves a group of high school boys in a restroom, explores the ways in which small gestures in acts of violence take place. The premise of the play is that two boys are accused of being in a relationship with each other. In the face of ridicule and terror, they are encouraged to physically fight. Blood is drawn between the two lovers, and ultimately, after everyone has gone, one of the bruised and bloody boys cradles the head of his presumed lover in his head. Though he was the one that physically inflicted the pain on him, it is clear that in this gesture, they understand that the violence is not something that emanated from them. This scene is similar to that in Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*; in one scene in the film, the two protagonists, Chiron and Kevin, are urged to fight in a public sphere. Later on in the film, when the two are older, Kevin cradles Chiron's head in his hands, a gesture that again, highlights the fact that each is understanding of the ways in which the violence they face is not necessarily emanating from them.

It is this gesture, of laying the head in ones hands, the hands of someone known, and the hands of someone that understands the pain and experience that Knowles evokes here. This gesture shows a form of intimacy that is not lost despite the pain and violence that has been places upon the bodies, whether they have witnessed pain or been inflicted by it. Muñoz asserts

that “the gesture of cradling the head of one’s lover...is therefore not an act of redemption that mitigates violence; it is instead a future being within the present that is both a utopian kernel and an anticipatory illumination. It is a being in, toward, and for futurity” (Muñoz 91). Meaning, these moments of gestures towards intimacy do not negate the fact that violence is a real thing, and probably will be in the immediate future, but it is a statement that here in the now, that violence does not exist, and as Muñoz states, it is a look into the future to a time where this act can be a permanent fixture.

In creating a highly aestheticized world in which her music can expand into, Knowles lays the framework for a continuously evolving practice of expressive blackness. This expressive blackness, though earthly and referential continues to cusp on the edge of utopia, an imagined future that is both beautiful and militant, playful and dystopic, equal parts Houston and extraterrestrial. Knowles continues to look inward by pushing us to move outward. By having bodies be the center of possibility and the central language that connects one to another, the answer may and can always be housed closely to use all. I personally am still running my bills up and am still feeling sadder, but I know that I’m not the only one trying to cry it away. Or write it

Away.

Chapter 3:

Imk; queer black intimacy and glimpses into utopia



In “Ghosts,” Ashon Crawly asks “what are the intimacies held in the space in which ghosts appear? The glance, the graze, the gaze” (Crawley 2018). *LMK* (2017), the first single of Kelela Mizanekristos’ debut album *Take Me Apart* (2017) set the precedent for what could be expected of the project; a tender, intricate blend of electronic and R&B that created a world of its own that was both new and familiar. The music video aided in setting the scene for the world *Take Me Apart* had the potential to create. Mizanekristos not only sings “there’s a place for you and I,” but shows us that place through the use of physical, temporal, and sonic materials. Through auditory and visual use of evoking the past, present, and future, an expansive concept of space laced with desirability and life is created in the *LMK* (2017) music video, hosting ghosts of past glances, grazes, and gazes. In contextualizing this work through a queer, critical black feminist lens that places it within the cultural production of the music video, I hope to give insight into the spaces that are created by artists who conceptualize and create work outside of the traditional notions of music theory and production, and why work like this is not only important, but often life sustaining.

Through the lens of contemporary music video and in conjunction with a black feminist and queer lens I will be analyzing the *LMK* music video as a site of queer possibility. I will be aesthetically setting the music video in the canon of black women’s performance in music videos. This analysis will then be expanded to understand how sonically, the music video references past, current, and in doing so, expands into its own world, utilizing sound as a material. This is done through creating images of black femininity and community that creates an image that is again both referential and expanding, portraying a queer black vulnerability that situates “sexuality, eroticism, and desire away from using each as a form of sexual economy on

power”(Stallings 47) that is normally associated with how black women are presumed to interact with such intimacies. Lastly, I contend that this places Kelela, and ultimately people like her, in a place to demand and create their own worlds, dislocating time and space as a means of creating “an open and fluid text” (Zuberi 294) that makes a place for you and I

### **Conceptualization & Production: Creating a world of your own making**

The song LMK (a colloquial texting abbreviation meaning “let me know”), was birthed from a conversation Mizanekristos had with a friend. This conversation, regarding how one is *expected* to navigate a one night stand versus how one actually feels about it, tackles notions of how casually and fluidly sexuality can and is desired to be practiced. In creating the song, Mizanekristos not only affirms but creates a visual space that makes the scenario her friend hoped for and anticipated come into animation. It now doesn’t just hypothetically exist, or in some instances, exist as something of a fallacy, or as something that is unseen, left in futility by nature of its lifespan. It is now something that can be materialized. Kelela asserts that “...there’s a place you know, like a physical place, but what I’m trying to articulate also is that there’s a place. We can exist in this place. This abstract, sort of casual place in a healthy way” this place, both physical and abstract, according to Mizanekristos, is “...an honest vision of how we navigate dissolving ties with each other and yet remain sanguine for the next chance at love” (Citation). It is in this conception that we see a creation of something that is distinctive to black women’s creative process. It is by and for them in almost every sense.

*LMK* was released on Warp records, an English independent record label started in 1987 by Steve Beckett and Rob Mitchell (Birke 2007) however, the music video itself was produced

by the production company Strangelove (Knight 2017). Warp is known for its “discovery” and release of obscure, electronic, and alternative rock artists, notably Apex Twin and more contemporarily Born Ruffians. Independent labels like Warp have existed since the boom of music video production and promotion, but historically they have had a difficult time having their artists work compare competitively to the content put out by larger labels. This resulted in usually lower-budgets that created a more distinct style of creation, however, much of this energy was utilized to produce white male musicians and white male fronted acts. In facilitating the collaboration and creation of the work of a queer black artist, Warp still continues the legacy of providing space and resources to artists that may not have the same desirability to larger labels. Steve Beckett stated that they “...usually find our artists based on recommendations or hearing music in clubs,” (Birke 2007), connoting the more intimate, personal aspect of signing artists through a connection with the music, rather than simply on the marketability and potential profit.

Andrew Thomas Huang, the director of the video, is a queer Chinese-American director known for his collaboration with singer Bjork. His work is noted for “[merging] technology and art in a way that takes viewers into a world that feels almost physically of his own making” (Nicolov 1). In his direction of the LMK music video, he utilizes the effervescent artifice of light to shape the constantly shifting identity of the space and the bodies within it. The process of creating a very specific space took intimate forms of collaboration, combining again, the notion that music videos do in-fact shape the public identity of the artist and serve as a marketing tool for upcoming projects, but in this case, due to the context of the song, a song about sex and bodies and friends and community, something that is happening due to the creator’s position as a

black queer woman, the music video is also something that has critical potentiality. This praxis is something that the creative team also embodied, and in an interview with Promo News, Huang expands on the intentionality of the music video, aware that it is not just a statement for the album but an extension of the artist herself:

Kelela and I started development many months ago talking about how to create a break out piece for her new album *Take Me Apart*. The album is so rich and emotionally dynamic that it became clear that there are so many different dimensions of Kelela's personality that we were trying to capture at once. This led us to make a video that showcases the multiplicity of who Kelela is and who she has the *potential* (emphasis added) to be (Knight 1)

Potentiality of the space is a key and inherent in the way that it is presented and performed within the video. Futurism and surrealism are brought in as critical modes of storytelling in order to create a world that both does and does not exist. Both Huang and Mizanekristos utilize technology and artifice to show the *potential* of space, bodies, and relationships. This tactic, the use of technology to highlight the multi-dimensionality of blackness on-screen, specifically in the music video, is a style that has been utilized by other prominent R&B artists throughout the early 2000s. Aaliyah's *More Than a Woman* (2001) music video takes place entirely in a computer generated, VR motorcycle engine. As the cycle races down the street, it is insinuated that she exists within it, and is thus a part of the machine as it becomes a mechanized extension of her mind and body. It is in this moment that the lyrics "more than a woman" begin to take on both a literal and conceptual meaning, for she may in-fact be something more than a person, something that is a blend of human and technology, something that is more than the expectations placed upon her as a black woman. It is also in this vein that the lyrics "there's a place for you and I," sang by Mizanekristos, start to take on a spatiotemporal, mechanized and structural place

of their own. This place, like Aaliyah's, is something that is an extension of herself, something of her own creation, something that by nature, the people she is around manifest.

Having a cast and crew primarily consisting of women and people of color again allows for the music video down to its production to be a space in which blackness and womanhood can be explored and critically engaged with. In having the creative freedom that might not be afforded to artists on larger labels, or during a time in which technologies were inaccessible due to price, or because labels and their gatekeepers were unwilling to fund a production aimed at representing an empowered, queer, black portrayal of black women's sexuality from an artists who was not relatively "big," Mizanekristos is able to create a place for you and I to delve into and to experience over and over again.

### **LMK: a break down**

It starts with a force. Sonically, the first verse begins with something akin to a pair of doors being thrown open. Visually, that's exactly what we get. Bursting through a pair of red doors, Mizanekristos enters into the space that looks like a "futuristic corridor [of] nightclubs" (Reed 1), complimenting the "space-age clubbiness and sultry R&B" created by producer Jam City, whose "wobbly, three-note synth-bass" backdrops "the singer croon[ing] about a potential one-night-stand" (Reed 1). The walls of the hallway are red, the lights lining the ceiling a chemical blue. Smoke lingers in the air creating a liminal like haze as the warmed beams of light cut through it. Kelela moves through the hallway in a way that seems part choreography, part born out of an innate reaction to the music. Arms in sweeping movements, proud struts, turning to and from the camera that moves as if a dance partner. These stylistic choices that move and mark the body are littered like breadcrumbs, reminding the viewer that "the development of

performative strategies to combat these stereotypes is not individualistic. Black women as a discursive and social community developed these strategies that were then passed down from generation to generation” (Reid-Brinkley 240). The space from the beginning is marked by ghosts, a creation of fragmented movements, sounds, and ornaments that in their existence, allow it to be seen. Kelela is not the first to do this, but that is precisely why it’s so magical that she is engaging in this familiar, enticing moment that we all recognize.

It is this legacy of the black music that allows for queer and black spaces to manifest in this way. Structurally and lyrically, the music video is a product of specific cultural environments and lived realities. For instance, “rap music is a cultural form deriving from a specific economic (capitalist, postindustrial), political (post-civil rights, and social (sexist and racist) context” (Hunter & Soto 173) as Margaret Hunter and Kathleen Soto explain in “Women of Color in Hip Hop: The Pornographic Gaze.” It can be argued that black r&b and electronic music are also operating in this same way as a cultural form. This is also seen in the ways in which the music and the lyrics it intends to convey is performed, specifically in the space that is physically constructed and how the bodies that occupy it are commodified. Often, black women’s bodies and sexualities are consumed in ways that rely on constructing caricatures of them that are flattening and one-dimensional, leaving them open and vulnerable to be controlled and distorted. Keeping the relationship black women’s bodies have within rap and r&b culture is important to contextualizing the ways in which they’ve constructed their own music and visual style to combat and challenge these traditional notions of creation and performance.

Jose Esteban Muñoz states that “...the dance floor,” and I argue in this case to extend this analogy to the club itself, the place in which the dance floor resides, is a “...space where

relations between memory and content, self and other, become inextricably intertwined” (Muñoz 66). This is the scene that Kelela and Huang have intentionally produced. The video winds through various dance floors, linking intimate spaces and worlds, visually illuminating and expanding the “place” Kelela sings of as something that is vibrant and engaging, creating a map of a literal and figurative world.

### ***Linearity and Future Texts***

In “Queer Phenomenology,” Sara Ahmed begins to contextualize the ways in which space(s), and the bodies within them are oriented, or in some cases, disoriented due to the ways in which they are constructed to relate to the world, she goes on to state that:

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and we know which direction face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view (Ahmed 16)

Thinking of “lines” in this sense, as a performative act, something that is a proverbial path influenced by ideology, and also the quite literal “lines” we follow and occupy within life, is a way of conceptualizing how space within visual and audio performances can be read as queer and derivative of something more profound and complex. A place you are led to if you’re following a “straight” line may be that of compulsive heterosexuality, partaking in sexist, patriarchal behaviors and customs. This is an ideological place that is often *housed* in a physical space. Be it bars, colleges, family homes, the ways in which these spaces are depicted visually and aesthetically are often indicative of who they are trying to call to the space, depict in the space, and in the same vein, keep *from* the space. In “Future Texts,” Alondra Nelson states that

future texts are “text[s] and images... [that] reflect African diaspora experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are they by-product of new idea and information technology. [Future texts] excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future...and represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them” (Nelson 9). Nina Cartier postulates in “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations” that future texts as a strategy “proffer new paradigms for black women, particularly to re-present and create anew the ‘black’ in popular culture” (Cartier 151). More specifically, “to utilize future text as a strategy is not simply to ‘read against the grain’ of what we expect black women on-screen to represent, or to flip the binary so that black women perch atop the hierarchy of representational standards” (Cartier 152).

What happens when typical directions aren’t followed or say, the destination is not the ideal space in which one wants to arrive? What happens when these directions are re-mapped, left to follow by those who also are unable to follow the conventional path? It is here when I begin to think of linearity in a sense of pertaining to time, but also in marking spaces, both physically and metaphysically. I contend that work by queer and black artists grapple with this negotiation of existing within and outside of this framework of linearity both physically and theoretically. In utilizing this theory as a framework for a creative visual analysis, I hope to give context into the ways in which the deviation from and challenging of these “lines” is apparent in the work of black women and queer artists.



## **Ghosts in the machine: Black performance and the referential**

Within the *LMK*, we hear and see ghosts. They line the walls and are pouring through the speakers. In doing this, Mizanekristos creates a space that is distinct to the visual and oral tradition of black women creating R&B and pop music. It is a space in which past, non-normative, and future bodies are able to exist in the same place and time. Mizanekristos calls upon these “ghosts in the machine” (Zuberi 284) to give us a song and place to dance, and sing, and exist in.

Stylistically, this music video is also similar to that of Janet Jackson’s *Doesn’t Really Matter* (2000). In the video, there is a scene in which Jackson walks down a hallway flanked by two other women, presumably as they get ready to go out. Like Mizanekristos, Jackson is not followed by the camera but follows it, making the scene less gazed upon but rather glimpsed within, adding an element of documentation, consent, and control in the construction of how they and the space they are existing in is viewed. I also contend that the *LMK* music video is also referential to Blaque’s *808* (1999). Within the *808* (1999) music video, the use of afro-futuristic imagery is implemented to blur physical and digital space and the concept of linear time. Within the music video, they challenge notions of how music can be literally and figuratively haunted. The ghost of past artists are evoked within this space through referential imagery and literal visual re-manifestations. Musically, we can hear the haunting of Lisa “Left Eye” Lopes, but Blaque does more than just stylistically sample her, they include her in the music video. In doing this, the music video creates a space in which artists like Left Eye can continue to exist through the utilization of not only technology but of the evoking of her very distinct style of performing.

It can be said that Kelela continues on this legacy of re/manifesting through her embodiment and recreation of one, the style of singing and two, the afro-futuristic visual imagery.

In some ways, this is a reinvestment in the framework laid by previous artists, it is also a way in which to create linkage. The referential is power, it is evoking ephemera in a way that adds layered meaning; blocked light is not just blocked light, hand movements are not just hand movements, they are so much more. Simply existing in or referencing the black canonical performance is not what gives performance value, for the evoking of it does not come from a place of wanting to garner value, but of wanting to generate connection. It is a projection of self that was created by someone else creating the space to do the same.

**intimate Interpellations:  
Expanded embodiment of black womanhood**

In one scene, Kelela is contrasted in a black body-con dress, a cropped blonde wig and sunglasses, as she dances and sings down the hallway. Rather than the camera following her, she follows it, walking past the walls lined with various black, often visually queer individuals. Her gaze is engaged, alluring, and cognizant. It feels as if she is recreating a memory, a familiar scene as the story and lyrics progress. The doorway remains a fixture, a place of entry into this unknown (yet known) world. Again the music marks an entrance, notifying listeners and viewers that it connotes a manifestation of being, it elicits a response due to its historical and social use as an indication to the prospect of a dance. Two other individuals blast through the door as the pre-chorus begins, (again with a force) and they join Mizanekristos in a choreographed dance that is accompanied by the flashing of lights, indicating the build up to the inevitable chorus. Still, the camera remains at the whim of Mizanekristos, cutting between quick movements and

scene changes at the indication of the music. This is in fact, for the girls, and we see a wide variety of them.

In “The Essense of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women’s Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video,” Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley posits that we must be conscious of what we consider subversive, and should be mindful of the various caricatures of black women that exist in the pop cultural sphere. In doing so, we avoid adhering to modes of respectability politics when attempting to conceptualize what is “good” representation and what is “bad.” The song and music video Mizanekristos states, is a response to the ways in which women’s sexuality is perceived and expressed. This is her “cultural process,” a process defined as the way in which “individuals read media texts in terms of the social groups to which the individual is culturally attached” (Reid-Brinkley 238). In embodying various forms, various types of women, and by constantly being surrounded by various women, people, bodies, and portrayals of desire and sexuality, Kelela expresses that there is and should be a myriad of ways in which black people express their sexuality, exonerating the myth that there is only one spectrum available to this process.

It is in this vein that again we should think about what calls certain people to a certain space. The visual space remains tight and intimate as we traverse through this hallway, the threshold of something hopefully much larger. Kelela’s costume and hair changes fashion her as a “a one-person girlband” (Knight 1). As she changes from costume to costume very distinctly, we become aware that they are just that; costumes. In the taking on and off of costumes there is an assertion of agency and grounding in the self, Huang states that "the video is essentially a grand unveiling featuring Kelela wearing different wigs and guises as she pushes through the

club with her friends, *ultimately revealing herself* at the end of the video,” (Knight 2017, emphasis added). The camera, rocking back and forth, darting in different directions, never entirely focused, never totally still, starts to chart a map of the space. Like the change in costume and dance style, the camera’s consistently changing trajectory highlights the constantly changing, inherently evolving and vibrant lives and bodies that make up the space. It is not until the end that we are met with the clarity of an all-white party, Kelela’s iconic dreads finally revealed, space wide and open, bodies still moving in time with each-other, all the faces recognizable.

LMK, linked with its lyrics and visuals, creates a discursive dialect, a call for those who are listening. Upon hearing the wane of the synth, you are hailed into a space that allows you to embark upon a terrain in which your body is free to do as it pleases, this “discursive community defines its social allegiances and disciplines its community members into committing those allegiances” (Reid-Brinkley 239) in an aesthetic process that is distinctive of the ways in which “black women’s rhetorical strategies create discourse in opposition to the dominant representations of black femininity” (Reid-Brinkley 239).

The phrase “let me know” becomes an anthem, a gateway into a place in which sexuality is expressed freely, reclaimed, morphed from its confines. It is in an instant a portal, a glimpse into a world that both does and doesn’t exist, a place that many people do not want to exist. A place in which queer bodies move and love freely is a place that outside of these manifestations is unable to exist in its entirety, and it is for this reason that asserting and projecting this world into the here and now is an act of manifesting a future in which it possibly can have longevity. In concluding on his feelings of the project, Huang states that:

The message of this video is empowerment: it's for the girls, for anyone whose heart has been trampled on and deserves to go out and feel good about themselves. It's a call to action, demanding to be taken and to be quick about it. This is the reason why we love Kelela - she's making herself vulnerable and kicking down doors in the process (Knight 1).

It's this vulnerability and will to be seen that drives this entire album. Intimacy precedes connection, and connection precedes survival. Kelela reminds us that this is something that is possible and should happen in the casual, fun, healthy way that we all deserve to experience connection with others.

Chapter 4: Whack World  
On the uses of black camp

It often does feel like we're living in a whack world. Constant political turmoil, physical unrest, incessant emotional upheaval. The phrase "out of whack" defined as "out of order; not working." To "take a whack" means to try or attempt, or to administer a sharp or resounding blow. Whack is also just Tierra Whack's given last name, and Whack World the title of her constructed reality. What does it look like if we - we being, those who are marginalized, susceptible to violence, and weakened by trauma - were able make our own world? What would it look like? If we were able to choose the spaces our bodies are in, what would they look like? Feel like? Sound like? And what, of the actual world, of the turmoil and violence, would it acknowledge, what would it challenge, what would it dream out of existence? Tierra Whack's "Whack World" is an homage to the slippery in-between, textured, mythic worlds that blend reality with what is imagined, challenging the status quo while seamlessly creating a new strata of the way performance and reality can intercept.

Whack World is a 15 minute, 15 track album; brief, colorful and dense. Lyrically and sonically Whack weaves through multiple genres, demonstrating her ability, capacity, and mastery of expanse. From rap to country to hip hop to R&B. At times it seems as if the ease that she shuffles through genre, is almost satirical, almost poking fun at how easily she can saturate this album with so much diversity. Almost as if she's demonstrating the fact that she also, despite the lack of women in these genres, despite the over-saturation of men making the exact same (but not exact same noise), can do so in a way that is better than them, even if it's just a snippet, while still maintaining integrity, vulnerability, and transparent honesty. Whack, in many ways, is a black eccentric, specifically in the ways that black eccentrics have cut paths into, and warped the way genre acts within the world. Whack World as an album is a manifestation of her ideal

world, but also a synthesis, a reflection of the way she sees the world. It's in one part an embrace and a rejection. The duality of what it means to be here and also elsewhere.

This is done via the medium of music video through the use of camp as a mode of storytelling, reorienting the black eccentric as a cultural politic, and reintegrating this new world into the present. Through camp, the distinct experience of navigating the world as a black woman manifests visually. Whack World oscillates between beings of identification, be it through the alteration of body, the jester of storytelling or the intricacy of set that gives us glimpses of vulnerability, and truly creates a whack, absurd, world in which day dreams can be manifested and explored. Whack World, in all intents and purposes, isn't just an album, it's a "boundless and eerily saccharine" destination (Green 1).

Whack World is the brainchild of Tierra Whack, a 23 year old raised in Philly. Her first job was working at a carwash in Atlanta where, after saving money washing the cars of notable male rappers, 2 Chainz and T.I, to name a few, she was "able to save up enough money to buy my own laptop to record myself. That gave me the time I needed to formulate songs, figure out a sound, flows and hooks." (Coscarelli). Whack went on to attend the Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush as a vocal major and fine arts minor, where she experienced difficulty navigating higher education, specifically higher arts education as a black student at a primarily white institution. Whack's style of creating, when tracing the lineage of how her creativity was cultivated

In most interviews, Whack is described as humorous, eccentric, sly and ironic. When asked what type of place Whack World is, Whack iterates that "it's down, then up, down, then up. It's scary, it feels good, it doesn't. It's crazy, it's calm. It's everything. That's exactly me" (Coscarelli). Whack World is a 15 minute album consisting of 15, 1 minute songs, accompanied



by 15 music videos of the same duration. Initially released solely on Instagram, it is a short film that's "consumable while you're scrolling through your friend's weekend pics" (Green). In the age of the digital drop of music and visuals, pioneered by Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and subsequent film, *Whack World* both reflects "the 60-second limit of an Instagram video, along with the common promotional tactic in hip-hop of posting teaser snippets of songs (many of which are never released in full)" (Coscarelli).

In Philly, rap artists are known for making performance quick and accessible in non-traditional ways. Street-cypher and rap DVD made these artists consumable, eventually moving from a DVD bought in the street to short clips on YouTube (Owens). There is a niche of instagramers from Philly making content that is described as a "collision of this legacy of Philly DVD rap, street battle rap ... but then also meme culture, Instagram culture, and post-Vine culture" (Owens). *Whack World* in its release via Instagram reflects this legacy of collision. But it can be argued that *Whack World*'s bite-sized format is more than just a notion of quick and easy consumption. Though "Instagram is a shiny, sadistic fun house, a space that can puncture self-esteem in the space of a minute. If only for a few, she seems interested in hacking its tyrannical gaze." (St. Felix).

The tyrannical gaze that *Whack* sets to hack, is a complete obfuscation of the parameters in which blackness functions in popular performance. "*Whack World*'s format was a way to capture her different interests and styles" (Kameir), and "the elastic potential of a minute" (St. Felix). Directed by Thibaut Duverneix, whose work is self-described as "funny, grotesque and sensual" and Mathieu Léger, "*Whack* uses her brief songs to riff on those swooning states that young women enter intensely and fleetingly—infatuation, frustration, mania, grief, that sudden

and intoxicating burst of self-confidence that mercilessly dissipates into self-loathing” (St. Felix). Whack World is both linear and nonlinear, referential to itself and the world outside of it, and is not just something you scroll past once without a second glance. 15 brief minutes expand into worlds upon which the single minute has simply built the door to. It is because of its clandestine insertion of story, its quick, over the top oscillation between genre, and its kitschy, colorful, warped and abnormal design that I believe Whack’s world is operating in the realm of a black camp.

### **Re: Notes on Camp**

Camp historically has been used by, in addition to being consumed by, queer people as an aestheticized mode of storytelling. As a way of conveying complex, often marginalized, misunderstood or at risk modes of being. It has many forms, uses bodies and objects and spans across various mediums of performance and media. It enlarges the microscopic. Camp itself can be performed live, can be placed on a stage, in a small room filled with a single performance artist, in a film screening. Camp, often, is seen through a lens of whiteness. In her seminal “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag goes as far to insinuate that camp can function as something apolitical. The study of camp and how race *and* sex *and* gender intertwine and operate within the medium of camp is often lacking. When expanding on the notion of what is camp, who does camp, and why they do camp, it seems impossible to avoid the notion of blackness.

In “Notes on the Uses of Black Camp,” Anna Pochmara and Justyna Wierzhowska note the “lack of scrutiny devoted to race in the aesthetics of camp” (Pochmara & Wierzhowska 696). Whack’s use of camp is in a way that hyper-exaggerates various modes of existence. From the way bodies look, too large, too small, made of organic materials that seem to be

unidentifiable. To the ways in which concepts of bodies exist in space. In all of this, central to the narrative is the intricate performance and construction. As Susan Sontag noted, the people and objects involved in the manifestation of camp, are to be understood as “being-as-playing-a-role” (Sontag 4), camp thus, is hyper aware of the systems in which it is operating in, and structures the performance around that knowledge “The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag). In Jaime Babbit’s *But I’m a Cheerleader* (2000), notions of sexuality, gender, and social roles are challenged and hyper exaggerated through the performance of the actors but also through the set itself. The world and the spaces the people within the film exist in become its own social text, its own creative fabric. What is in the background often says just as much as those who are engaging in dialogue on screen.

In the film, we are to believe that this gay conversion camp, in its attempt to “cure” queerness, almost outlandishly replicates all that is queer. The extreme color-blocking of the set, the outlandish outfits, the double-entendres generate an obviously queer aesthetic, further exemplifying Sontag’s notion that “camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy”(Sontag 41). The gays prevail in *But I’m a Cheerleader* through the sheer will of their embodiment and the fallacy of flawed ideology, all poked fun at through making sure we’re all aware of the ludicrously of the concept of conversion therapy, and by proxy the institutionalized notion of gender and sexuality itself. Whack’s use of black camp plays upon this notion of an aestheticized world that turns tragedy into irony, and embodies a style that, in contrast to Sontag’s postulation that content gets lost, exemplifies the primary threads of storytelling.

## Notes on Black Camp

Black Camp, in taking into account what we already know about how blackness informs performance, could be (and is not limited to) film, television, music, performance and/or theatre, that explores the parameters of morality, aesthetics, and storytelling in a way that stylistically plays homage to the rudimentary concepts of what camp is while infusing it with a cultural and contextual sense of blackness. In “Beyonce’s Slay Trick: The Performance of Black Camp and its Intersectional Politics,” Constantine Chatzipapathodoridis speaks to the ways in which the pop artists, specifically black women, perform notions of camp that are inextricably linked with feminist, racial, and queer politics:

“...It can be argued that black camp inhabits a dynamic interstice that accrues from the development of black queer culture as doubly oppressed from racial and heteronormative ideologies alike. To acknowledge a black camp tradition and, therefore, incorporate the race factor in the tracing of camp’s cultural peace eventually leads to challenging the seeming white homogeneity of queer culture. Evolving alongside the allegedly elitist white canon of camp fads and fancies, such as Broadway musicals and baroque architecture, to name just a few, the praxis of black camp nests in the subcultural practices of African American culture.” (Chatzipapathodoridis 2017).

Black camp is extremely dynamic, and arises out of a tradition of subcultural expression. Black camp is not genre specific; black camp is pop music, R&B, comedy, and also horror. I argue that surrealism and horror exist within the subculture of black camp, and have influenced how it has developed aesthetically in its most recent form. In Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) the traditional genre of horror is expanded beyond the traditional boundaries, alluding to the notion that lived reality of existing while black is in itself, a type of habitual horror. It challenged notions of how

we thematically, in the pop cultural lexicon, explore notions of the body, race, trauma, and tragedy in a way that is consumable. Peele's crafting of story accentuated conduits of structural racism that hides in plain sight. Not only are black bodies not safe now, but generationally, hundreds rest in what is called "the sunken place." Whiteness, in this case quite literally, occupying black minds and bodies, calls to real, tangible fears of the way black bodies have been systemically controlled and occupied by structural whiteness. *Get Out* (2017) in a way reorients notions of the way black people, in the year 2017, see themselves relating to white bodies, and vice-versa, how white people see themselves as occupiers. The artifice of bodily horror is utilized to hyper-exaggerate modalities of whiteness, and in turn, blackness. Similar to *Candy Man* (1992), the supernatural is interlinked with the past. It is in this way that black camp relies on orientation of style and the performance of it to define accentuated modes of being. In *Whack World*, there is an element of body and situational augmentation, of moments of camp horror infused with humor that remain thematic and elemental for a very specific reason; always in the background of black being are the realities of what it really means to exist while black.

In black camp, the "metaphor of life as theatre" (Sontag 12) is not in every sense, as Sontag illuminates "a tender feeling" (Sontag 13). In some essence, if "camp taste nourishes itself on the love that has gone into certain upbeats and personal style" (Sontag 13), black camp challenges that notion by saying it can but maybe-and. To be relatable, but to not be at all times tender, marks the intersecting motifs of black camp, for it is based on, at the end of the day, a black reality; one that sits at an intersection of race, class and gender, a place that has marked the black body as something that has to struggle often, to receive tenderness. Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) also explores the ways in which hyper-exaggeration, body horror, and

narrative can intersect in a way that tells a more complex story of institutional and trans-generational violence experiences by black bodies and black people. Again, we see hyper-exaggerated visions of the home, the work place, and the occupied black body.

These glimpses and performed worlds are altered by a horror ridden, larger than life, fictionalized portrayal of how capitalism, race, and class, mark the everyday. Lakeith Stanfield's character is faced with the very realistic decision to make; perform white ness and complacency in the workplace to gain social and physical capital. In putting on his "white" voice, Cassius "Cash" Green is given the opportunity to move up in his tele-services job. To literally pass through the golden elevator doors, out from the dated, fluorescent corporate workplace into the bright, millennial tech-start up adjacent upper-cast. We soon find out that the company is the equivalent of chattel slavery. Alluding to the global dominating ethos of Amazon and the rise of the ethos-lacking Silicon Valley tech bros. Infused with elements of magical realism that clash with almost unbelievable (but maybe believable) reality. The CEO, played by a exhaustingly and terrifying enamoring, yet void Armie Hammer, is turning black people into hybrid horse people, alluding to the notion of chattel slavery.

Not all black camp is necessarily horror, however, fears, anxieties, and moral qualms linked to blackness are often explored within the genre. Take Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* (1988), where Murphy portrays a fictionalized king from an Africa who finds himself in the U.S searching for sense of self. With all its qualms, its a humorous take on notions of diaspora. In *The Early Works of Cheryl Dunye* (1994), the short film *The Potluck and the Passion* (Experimental Narrative, 1993), places us in a world where we find extreme and humorous caricatures of various queer women at a dinner party. In this instance, black camp is

portrayed in the exaggerated versions of the black and white lesbians that occupy the space through dialogue and moments of signification. Black camp is dialectic, as much visual as it is performed through dialogue, denoted in the conversations had. Black camp in this instance, relies heavily on words.

Black camp can seep into the elegant, surreal, fantasy, and quotidian. These films are of course not perfect; they do not represent in totality the essence of what black camp is and can be. However, they are a good place to start when speaking contextually and contemporarily about the direction in which black camp is attempting to find itself in this current moment. It is also important to note that Black camp, and its elements of horror, perplexity, and nuance, are not conceptually linked to the genre of film. Music video again, creates a bridge of how visually and culturally we expand the notion of performance.

In music video, black camp and futurism collide. Missy Elliot's entire repertoire is a maxim portrayal of what black camp within this genre can be. Elliot engages in many of the facets of black camp; futurism, horror, referential aesthetics, all to tell a uniquely black experience. In black camp, hyper exaggerated and fantastical versions of the self and community are utilized to tell stories and define personhood, and process reality. Black performance, and in conjunction black camp, extends into multiple genres. What links something like Whack World canonically to films such as *Sorry to Bother You* and *Get Out* is the formation of cinematic landscapes. Like Peele and Ridley, Whack has created "a fantasyland that imbues random-seeming objects with deep meaning" (Kameir). Throughout our time in Whack World, Whack presents us with "maximalist tendencies into bite-size packages" (Coscarelli), like Elliot, there is a type of "existential pragmatism that doubles as survival" (Kameir).

## **Whack World**

The first five songs of Whack World embody some of the core stylistic elements of the fifteen song project. The film starts with Whack seated at a table in an all pink room, a hoodie with an embroidered hood with her face on it draped over her head as a white nail tech. The song, “Black Nails,” is about authenticity and definition of self. "Best believe I'm gon' sell (yuh), if I just be myself," she sings, each nail corresponding intricately with the lyrics. Upon revealing herself from under the hood, we find that her face isn't as clean and constructed as the hood that was over her, nor as crafted as her nails. With a swollen and bruised face square the frame, Whack quickly transitions into the song “Bugs Life,” the first lyrics being "probably would've blew overnight if I was white," along with painting pictures of her desire for home, family and monetary success that rests upon her creating successfully. In this moment, Whack is aware of how far being consumable can take you, and in this moment, she makes herself traditionally un-consumable; swollen, bruised, deformed, in all black. Whack takes this moment to address the fallacy of the politics of respectability in an extremely hyperbole manner.

From “Bugs Life,” the album transitions into “Flea Market,” the person sitting at the table walks from frame into another room, carrying the stuffed dog that sat in the corner of the nail salon onto a grooming table. It is in this moment that we become aware that Whack will be embodying multiple characters, and that there are clues of one world in the other, and quickly these worlds can intersect. This transition also lets the viewer know that this project will be covering a variety of topics. “Flea Market” is about a relationship, “I don't wanna rush ya (won't you realize, I'm the one)” Whack raps. In this shift in vulnerability the visuals become a bit more



silly and absurd, Whack is having fun with us now as she sheers this stuffed dog, singing about her frustrations in love, alluding to the notion that to her, men are sometimes dogs. Staying within the same theme, the transition to “Cable Guy,” pokes fun at the name of the song and the idea of again, being consumed by men and also whiteness. We transitioned to a room in through the t.v; the previous scene plays on the small screen in front of an unsuspecting cable man who is attempting to make fixes to the machine while Whack sits in a recliner, disappointed in his inability to fix the cable. We come to see that she’s not just disappointed in his lack of ability to do his job, but his lack of ability in many areas of life. Whack’s critique of masculinity is again explored through humor, though she speaks of an instance in which her trust was betrayed by a person who she assumed was her friend; “wish he had a remote just to control me We was supposed to be friends, he was my homie. He was there when I was lonely, hungry Now he seems phony,” she sings.

There is a feeling of loss as she sings about having to let go of a friend due to crossed boundaries of intimacy. We then are transported to the next scene through a menu sitting on the side table by the recliner. “4 Wings” takes place in a Chinese restaurant, a place in which the theme of mourning is continued. In this track, Whack alludes the the notion of life that is embodied and continued through her performance, rapping of her friend Hulitho who has passed away, and the element of hardness she has to maintain in both her work and personal life. Again within this moment, Whack intricately links the visual and lyrical, continuing and exploring the personal and social dynamics of her life in a way that is almost magical in this contained world that at an instances transports you from one space, thought, time, and place to another.

Whack hyper-exaggerates elements of reality to the point of fantasy, but somehow grounds these notions through clever lyrics. What we see in Whack world are elements of visual surrealism and lyrical realism that utilize black camp to create a world that is both here and now. In this process, difficult and often beautiful notions of blackness are explored in a way that is again, expansive and uprooting. Whack does not confine herself to solidity, she makes reality and memory malleable. You can build a whole entire world if you want to, you can orchestrate all the small moving pieces that fill it, and this is what makes Whack World so imaginative and futuristic; it's wonderfully indulgent yet effortlessly pragmatic.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

## Epilogue

There's an Astropoets tweet that says "desire is endless," I think of this often, and try to remind myself of what I desire, of what is endless. Still despite all I know, despite how much I've studied, how many conversations with friends and family and my therapist I have, I forget to desire. I forget that the future is not predetermined. I've come to understand this forgetfulness as fear, as a valid anxiety that injustice will continue in the small, heartbreaking ways that they do. I understand the past, I remain ever conscious of the present, but for some reason, the future continues to feel elusive to me. In moments where we cannot find what we need within ourselves it is important to turn outward, to always know that you can turn outward. This is what utopia is; the small moments in which we gleam sight of something beautiful and earnest outside of us.

We tend to the future each and every day, and this I've learned from others. The future can be predetermined by those who want to see beauty and equitability and life. I am often reminded that I have the possibility to tend to something endless, and I remain drawn to the work of those tending to a future whose endlessness is stretched into expanse. In "Zami: A New Spelling of my Name," Audre Lorde states that "every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me-so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins" (Lorde)

The beauty of being able to continue to exist in this world is that sometimes, in brief moments, in a quiet night at home, in a conversation with my mom, dancing with a friend, watching a movie, singing a song walking down the street, we see things we imagined. This is where the work begins again and again. And it is important to continue to see things we imagine,

to look towards things we imagined, to acknowledge the things we imagine, to see ourselves in things imagined. Because too often, we are denied what we imagine. We are ripped from it. We see it die, we feel we can't reach it, are undeserving of it.

The aesthetics of futurity are that of critical engagement with the looseness of material reality and a drive to connect. Utopia is the space in which this is brought to life. It is a disavowal of oppressive structures, and an assertion that there is another option, that there always has been and always will be another option. In the arid desert of A Seat at the Table and the dance-floors of LMK and the foam filled homes of Whack World are the blueprints for understanding black personhood outside of the parameters of whiteness. Creating a world outside of whiteness and the structures that sustain it are the core elements of denying the future that hopes to maintain and uphold those structures.

In this exploration of self there is a celebration of self. In the building of place and space outside of oppressive structures there is a calling out and calling into something that is passed, here, and beyond. It is an expansion of community and well-being, despite existing in a world that does not foster this sort of growth. It is also just, simply, a music video, an escape. A time for me, and those who create, to see something that they imagined, and that, in all its simplicity, is more than enough.

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