

“LIVING IN IT”

By

JASMINE BEST

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MASTER OF ART

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To whom it may concern,

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter reporting the unanimous decision of Jasmine Best's Thesis Committee that she will have "With Distinction" added to her MFA from the University of Georgia.

It is the finding of the committee that Jasmine's stunning work, ambitious scholarship, archival research, superb written thesis, stellar performance in the oral examination, notable career achievements, and commitment to building community make her exceptionally qualified for this appellation.

Sincerely,

Benjamin Britton
Chair, Thesis Committee for Jasmine Best
Associate Professor, Painting and Drawing
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In my studio, I create something previously unimaginable with existing and often limited tools and resources through repetition and storytelling. I work with materials of the past to prevent being trapped by the past and to create the “living in it” (Cooper). Similar to how a musician can take apart a repeating scale. I twist and pull till the history holds tension, and my revision of its subtext is highlighted and presented forward.

I seek out the reasons behind why I work the way I do. Most of the reasons I could find are in the framework and elements of Southern storytelling, and specifically in Blues aesthetics. I was drawn to “... call-and-response between particular historical moments and their future incarnations.” and how that allows my work to exist in a fluctuating space in Black aesthetics. What I refer to as problem-solving in my iterative drawing practice that leads to object making can also be viewed as searching for “opportunities of newness” in the differences of each iteration. Working through how my identity as a descendant of those who stayed in the South through and after the Great Migration affected how I made connections and interpreted my archival findings as a form of corporeal archaeology. The connecting tissue of all these elements became improvisation as defined by:

“Improvisation is a form of knowledge creation through expressive practice: whether we are conscious of our bodies in the moment, or transported by what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) famously calls ‘flow’...Improvisation is also a form of recollection and repetition... improvisation

is often a means of narrating the past through the filter of the present moment (Siddall and Waterman 3).”

I work with a bodily awareness of history, combined with using contemporary art to communicate back and forth between the past and the present. The initial choice to start with Southern folk histories, stories, and songs gave me access to “...distinct and evolving complex of social explanation and social action[s]...” that are still a part of African American identity today. Looking for those “traditions of resistance, affirmation and confirmation...” through time, I was able to discuss and critique social dynamics and structures now while acknowledging the history they stemmed from or were altered by.

Research Narrative

During my time at UGA, I started with an interest in the Southern oral storytelling tradition and defining Southern visual contemporary art for myself. I started with a series focused on heteronormative relationship dynamics. These were direct narrative interpretations relevant to where I currently sit in history. I was influenced by Hurston’s approach to rewriting folk stories to reflect her concerns, learning the proper use of tropes and storytelling techniques, and dissecting the relationship dynamics from the perspective of a Black woman on the Asexual spectrum. During my thematic inquiry course with Eileen Wallace, I learned to access collections at the special collections library and pair that with my book and folk volume research. This led me to rethink how I approached reinterpreting archival material and the creation of my power object series. Working through this new mode of research and object making culminated in attending

the Olive's Porch artist residency at John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, where I connected people back to what I was finding in the collections, joined a community of broommakers, and initiated a larger interest in the cultural connections to relevant research topics in other parts of America

The second residency I attended during my time as a grad student was at the James Castle House Museum in Boise, Idaho. I used this opportunity to research other regions of America in reference to Black culture. At this time, I also added a different approach to my drawing practice; not as a means to an end but as a practice that can stand alone.

Due to my archival practice, I was invited to present and participate in a panel discussion about how special collections are used in artistic practice, pedagogy, and curatorial practices at SECAC. Finally, during my residency at Berea College in Kentucky, I was able to do more special collection research on brooms and Appalachia. Through all of the many opportunities both on and off campus, my research looped back around to connect folklore/poplore, blues aesthetic to black interior, black subjectivity, and archival practices.

CHAPTER 2

Improvising Among the Archives and “the blues”

Richard Wright once “...identified orature in general and music in particular as a point to begin the study of African American representational structures (Woods 33).” So I started with folk histories, music, and oral storytelling in the Southeast United States with my research. As a lover of analyzing literature, I approach archive materials from a deep reading approach as if I were reviewing a poem. Not just taking in the stories but analyzing what was said and not said, noting outliers, researching repeating tropes, noting who recorded and how they recorded information, and making personal ties to what I find. When starting with Southern oral traditions to make connections to visual culture, it becomes unavoidable to make comparisons to the connection to oral storytelling and music culture via the blues.

The Blues is an innately archival practice (Simpson). Something that transferred from the improvisation of storytelling to the improvisation of the instrument and body. When a musician plays an instrument, it is like all the musicians before them playing the instrument through their body. This is Something I understand as a former singer. When improvising, “... you bring oneself under the influence of other bodies from the past (Wong and Eidsheim 217).” This connection from archive to improvisation is directly related not only to my research practice but how I approach my studio practice. I am drawn to look for or create my subtext of a record because that is where I can fit in; where the corporeal histories can exist, and what is not recorded or implied or lived through a people. When I build out an artwork, it is not that I want to make a piece about a specific story, but that the conversation with a past, canon, or lineage of an individual

is an aspect of the work. Through my practice, it is like my interior process is talking to both an audience in the present and also the individuals who live in the subtext of how a story changes, in the anticipation of a call and response, and the blank spaces of a typewritten, segregated bibliography. So the folk-inspired work was created with a Blues aesthetic in mind and an awareness of Blues epistemology.

“Blues aesthetic situates the discourse squarely on:

1. Art produced in our time
2. Creative expression that emanates from artists who are empathetic with Afro-American issues and ideals
3. Work that identifies with grassroots, popular, and/ or mass black American culture
4. Art that has an affinity with Afro-US derived music/or rhythms; and artists and/ or statements [whose] *raison d'être* is humanistic (Woods 32).”

These aesthetics kept me from getting trapped in the past when working with historical material. Blues aesthetics made it possible to apply relevant literary and musical theories to improvisation in visual mediums. Working in this way allowed me to branch my interest into what was relevant to all African American culture as well as American culture outside of the South. One of the foundations of Blues epistemology is that African Americans across the US measure social relations, social progress, and spirituality in physical and psychological distance to the plantation South (Woods 29-30). Through America’s unique relationship to folklore and how it fuels pop culture, the plantation bloc and social dynamics also directly influence mainstream American culture.

One of the ways I define improvisation as it is relevant to my studio and research practice is experiencing possibilities within the limits of one's materials. Yes, this can be applied to physical materials, but I consider this limitation placed on archival materials as well as history itself. Music improvisation “enacts a politics of hope” because it can lead to the “... development of new, unexpected, and productive co-creative relations among people.” From music, I want to take that creation of the unexpected and bring that into my visual practice. I want to present the unimaginable in its current state, or encourage the viewer to consider the unexpected themselves, or question why they have not. Politically, improvisation can be used as a “practice of freedom,” but it can also be a negotiation of agency. The practice of freedom can be “defined and even enriched by the constraints under which it operates,” but the negotiation of agency can be defined by the possibilities that one is opened up to.

Power Object Series

The theme of the broom in conjure and hoodoo used to either protect or harm inspired my interest in utilizing fibrous materials as a means of turning the everyday into the supernatural and as forms of Black resistance. My own family has many broom superstitions, but I was excited to find the logic behind some of my family's beliefs among the archives. I'm interested in the history of everyday people finding themselves empowered through everyday objects. I learned how to make traditional Appalachian brooms so I could better understand how these many broom beliefs may have been formed. And started a series of nonfunctional broom objects.

The Broom Power object series is as much a material study of United States Southern visual culture and the cultures connected to it as it is something that utilizes Southern conjure beliefs to create powerful art objects. Each object uses traditional tension-based means of broom-making that are used globally to create objects that are not designed for sweeping but purely to protect, harm, heal, and yield power in various other ways.



This body of work is improvised through the experience of possibility within the limited materials and their environment. Each power object has its own personality of sorts that emerges alongside the creation of each work that stems from the liberatory improvisational methods I approach each object with. These works start in my drawing process, where the folk and social history of the broom is considered, but the physical limitations of physical broom making are not. By choosing to live in the history of the

American broom but unrestricted by existing practices and standards, I am able to improvise something beyond.

Pardon my Language Baby Girl and Hunted Bride

By looking at the variations in different versions of the same story or even different stories in the same category, my work can speculate on the history that stories travel, but more specifically, the implied gendered reasons for these changes. Stories in the Southern oral tradition are shaped by who tells the story just as much as by who is listening. *Pardon My Language Baby Girl* explores how a story can be altered based on who is in the room to hear it. Often, different versions of a story are born out of the idea of polite company or being told within a heavily gendered space.

For me, it calls to mind being aware of existing as a girl child entering into a male-dominated space, such as my uncles gathered in a front room or porch, and the language altering based on my presence (them apologizing for crass language). These branching stories are created with the idea of preventing offense or harm to these interlopers in a space. So you have stories where the language and characters are altered for a more femme-friendly audience, but the true danger, the sexism, misogyny, and misogynoir, are still in place or amplified in this new telling.



A sister piece to the *Pardon My Language Baby Girl*, *Hunted Bride* focuses on stories from the genre of the “Neatest Trick” and “Quickest Trick” story. These particular stories are in the same format, where three people compete for a prize. In one version of the story, three men are tasked with impossible tasks and aided with tools given to them by the keeper of the prize and judge. Each completes their task in fantastical ways that allow the storyteller to show off their storytelling abilities to the intended audience.

In the other story, three sisters use small domestic tools they produce on their own and their bodies to perform perverse feats to impress a male third-party judge. One version of the story is metaphorical, the other a literal “pissing contest” These one-to-one versions of this story trope leads one to compare the prize that is competed for in these stories as they merge into one. The three men compete for a desirable and marriageable young woman, silenced of all agency, and the three sisters compete for a

dead, hunted rabbit to consume. Animals are often used as stand-ins for people in folk tales, but in this non-traditional anthropomorphized tale, a dead rabbit is deemed as desirable as a living woman.

Don't You Know Your Skin

Don't You Know Your Skin focuses on the outlier story among stories of witches that shed their skin at night to conjure folks, and what it can tell us when considered among the other stories of its kind. In the stories, a witch is caught leaving her skin by someone who salts and peppers her skin so that she can not put it back on. She either bargains for her skin and lives out her days human and powerless, or she abandons the skin to escape with her full power, but is unable to pass as a human ever again. There is only one version where neither of these endings happens. It is also the only version where the witch is specified to be a white woman instead of a black woman. In that version, the woman is caught, tortured, and killed. *Don't You Know Your Skin* asks questions different from the original stories by acknowledging all of the stories to piece together a larger societal reflection about power, race, gender, and social capital. There is something to be said about privilege and the assumed protection that White womanhood can provide in America. There is also a warning about the dangers of relying on this long-standing but delicate social construct. It asks the question, what does America do with a White woman who stops being a white woman? It does this without using the tragic Mulatto troupe thus begging for a different reflection.



The priorities of the witches of all the stories are then called into question. Why did some give up their power to pass as humans, while others kept their power and became something new? And in the case of the white witch, why did she neither bargain nor attempt to flee? Freeburg writes about Ellison and Baldwin's philosophy of the personal form, "...one must risk one's self fully and be willing to give up one's view of self and world to embody radical transformations (81)." The white witch was not willing to give up her white status, represented here by the fact that her skin is treated as a separate entity from her motivations. Her whiteness is treated as something separate from her ability to pass as a human and the power she holds as a witch. She is unable to give up either, so she gains nothing. She can not change how she thinks of herself, which is why she does not fear the spying eye of her servant and modestly drapes herself in her skin instead of fleeing or attempting to get back in it.

I deal with the gaps and biases of my inspirational material by putting myself in it in some way. "...those able to link historic African American objectives and expressions with present realities and visions of the future are often viewed as having been the recipients of ancestral gifts." My use of the past can be misunderstood as purely reinterpretations, but I see the archival materials as more of a marriage of corporeal archeology and archival interpretation. "Corporeal archaeology attempts to understand how sociohistorical concepts and events, retained and transmitted through shared cultural memory, influence the way an individual understands her bodily capabilities, how she and her society value her body, and therefore how she uses her body...(Wong and Eidsheim217)."

By approaching these archives under an operation of improvisation, I can represent those histories not recorded directly that have lived through a people and through me on an individual level, but choosing to rejoin them to what was recorded and severed from a people or individual here in the present. I searched the subtext for what is not being said, what was not asked, and who was and was not listening, or speaking. A clinging to the past in hope it will "aggrieve the dead" (Freeburg 34) is the very opposite of "living in it". Choosing to adapt the inefficiency of the past instead of fully acknowledging the realities of the past and utilizing it for a future that does not look like the past at all. It is a cyclic living of only seeking the familiar. The interior self must have an acknowledgment of history, a questioning of one's beliefs, or perhaps how you sit in that history in the present, and openness to the uncertainty of the future.

CHAPTER 3

Withdrawal: Signifying Through Absence

In my search for why I am drawn to storytelling, I revealed an interest in black subjectivity, specifically in black interiority. In literature, the subjecthood of a character can be conveyed through their opinions, desires, actions, and thoughts. But there are cases where the withholding of these things utilized by an author or character within the universe from the reader is a powerful tool.

The withholding of the future is a crucial part of the subject. It is not a false withholding where you do not say because you do not know, but a withholding of the known to ensure the power and trueness of the self by and for the self. It can also make the audience feel confronted or powerless. It can call them to question or be drawn to do the same and withdraw themselves. That future is defined by "uncertainty and self-risk...When the collective histories hail us, it occurs to us that we can choose how we answer or, perhaps, whether we want to answer at all. (Freeburg 22)."

Give You All My Silence

With *I Give You All My Silence* I am Interested in how characters, morals, and tropes can completely change nature and categories from their origins in Africa through the terrible funnel of slavery in the Western hemisphere. A turtle warning of boastfulness can be transformed into a talking human skull warning of the importance of keeping quiet for one's survival.

I suggest the next transformation of this story. Silence is still championed, but instead of for survival, it is to protect one's sense of peace. The skull encourages a



withdrawal of the figure. There is a power gained with this relationship, a sort of romance. But there is an edge to this relationship. The Skull is now the protector of one's peace when trying to fully express oneself to a world that frustrates you with its inability or lack of desire to meet you halfway. However, there is uncertainty if the withdrawal will yield all the results desired. So the figure chooses to focus only on the skull, the present. In a knowing and intimate agreement.

This piece depicts the uncertainty of not knowing if the power gained in the withdrawal is indeed the best decision made or not.

I could have easily completely altered the skull to another form or back into a creature. I chose to keep the skull but alter it enough to establish a shift in the story to establish it as having a direct correlation with the message and history of the last version of the story. In *I'll Give You All My Silence* there is a transformation of acceptance from terrorized to lover of the monstrous skull.

A False Name for the Conqueror's Laughter

I interact with the tropes of Southern storytelling and the symbols to find direct connections to contemporary black culture and to better understand the source of Black resistance in the South. High John the Conqueror is a symbol of black joy and laughter and a tool of resilience and resistance. He was more than a trickster, and often his stories focused on the power of secret joy and of not fully being known or understood. Zora Neale Hurston talked both about the privateness of Black folks and also of how that same privateness led to nonblack folks believing they understood High John the Conqueror as Brer Rabbit, but they did not fully recognize him. What is unique to High John the Conqueror in comparison with other trickster characters is that the resistance comes not only from outsmarting an opponent but in having or keeping something that is inaccessible about oneself or people that is not actively being hidden. The inability to access this interior is less through active withdrawal and more leaning on the expectation that the outside part will fail to recognize it.

I'm creating a throughline between this history of the public privateness of Blackness, specifically black joy, and the public and private lives of black people in online spaces. The private lives of black people are more public than ever, but has the understanding of them gotten any fuller? One can argue that this level of distance is what allows black people to wield these online platforms in ways they were never intended to be used. "Black life is a constant improvisation on what it means to be human...An improvisation that moves forward and backward at once...(Reeves 150)."

The choice to use the visual language of multiple duet reaction videos from online



platforms like TikTok is to convey a few different elements of this improvised movement in time and space. Firstly, the duet feature was intended for one person to react to another person's content. Often in Black and music-based online spaces, this feature is

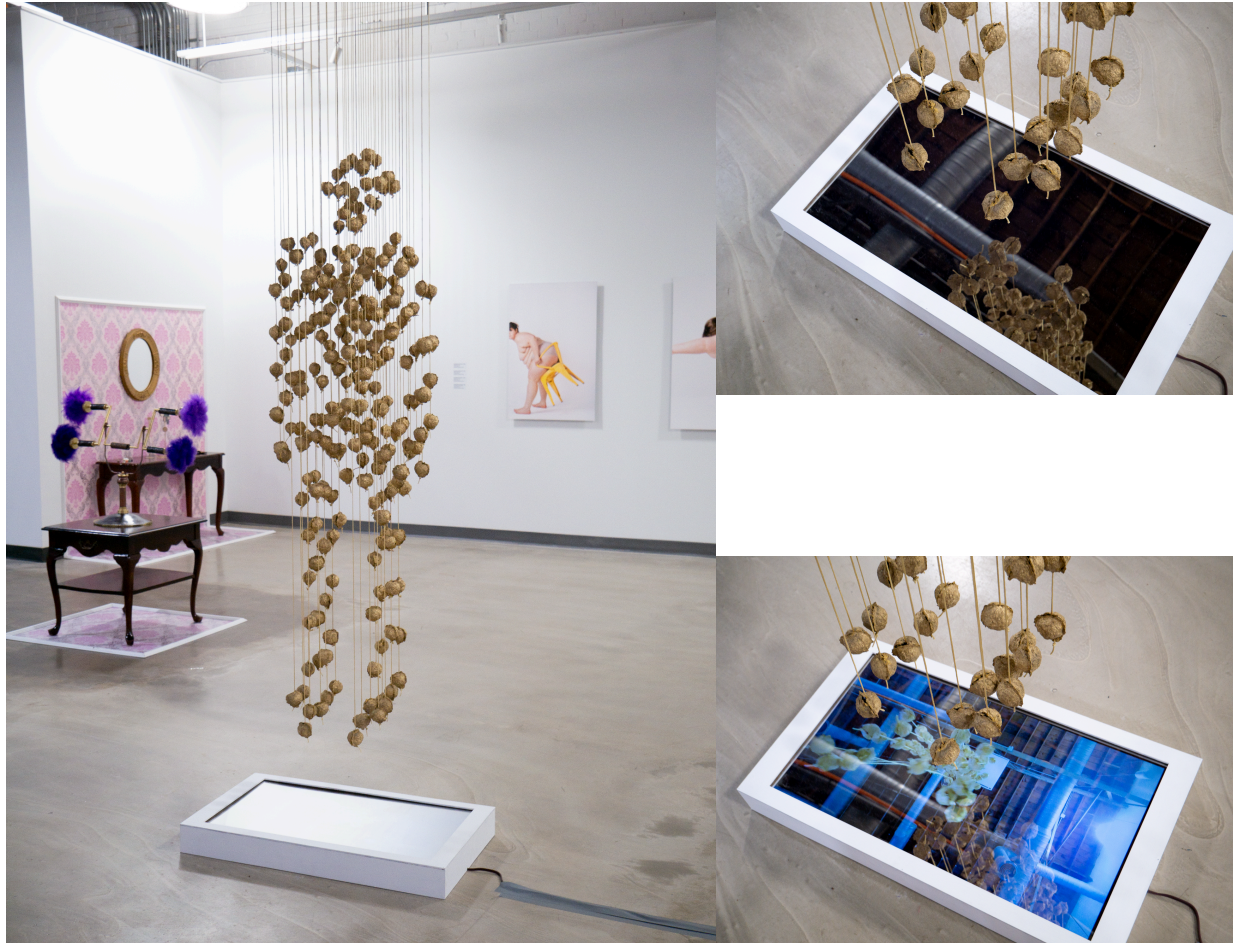
utilized for many people to react to each other or create sound in harmonies. Secondly, when used conversationally in Black online spaces this sort of visual collage is used to give the appearance of many Black people responding, laughing, and watching something all together in real time but is, in reality, many people playing off each other at different times signifying the illusion of a single point in time to express a private shared feeling publicly.

In this work, the audience is challenged to engage with the illegibility of the portraits of the piece over the less complicated images of the Brer Rabbits. The Brer rabbits are printed in a way that not only makes them more comfortable than the faces but also gives the illusion that they are vintage fabrics. A distraction and deception necessary to draw away attention from the Black online space, which is often targeted for dissolution. Will the audience fall for this construction or be drawn to decipher the expressions of the stacked conversation of the individuals in this work?

Root Source and Soul

Root Source and Soul is a hanging matrix of reproductions of High John the Conqueror roots created in an almost daily ritual of casting paper pulp from reused fabric in a single cast of the hoodoo root. The root is named for the folk hero High John the Conquer, who, “embodies music, storytelling, and laughter as a kind of mobility, a fugitivity which others the slaves’ condition...(Mackey 268).” The roots matrix makes up a figure that floats in silence, but the audience is aware that the figure is capable of rattling when moving. The mirrored surface below breaks the stillness and silence with

evidence of the figure's ability to rattle and shake. The mirror is just a replication, a falsehood made at a different time.



The only way to make the figure move is by force, and even the audience is unable to reproduce the same repetition and disruption of the rattle depicted in the mirror. The more one would attempt to force the figure to move, the more tangled the roots become, evidence of an outside entity attempting and failing to force its will onto the root figure. There is not only a resistance in that but also a liberation through an unfixing fugivity, even in its stillness being depicted through this figure. Yes, its matrix and form can be disturbed, but the self is validated by the presence of the exterior force.

There is also the knowledge of the audience that there is an uninhabitable interior, represented by the knowledge of the figure's movement, but their inability to access it in a present way.

Picking Up What I'm Putting Down

Picking Up What You Are Putting Down is about connecting with those values as represented by the banjo, an instrument with strong cultural connections to Black history. The banjo forms are constructed from wet-processed handmade paper. The banjos sit across from each other like figures sharing stories on a porch. The two translucent instruments have a skeletal form bringing to mind "...the musicking body a 'sonic archive' " a body marked by its past, that thus keeps tracks of history (Wong and Eidsheim 224)." They are ghostly, shifting between something old and possibly



something of an organic speculation of the future. They call to mind sound but sit silent, withholding their conversation from the viewer along with their sonic archive.

The choice of the banjo is for two main reasons. First, the banjo is arguably the most American instrument we have. It is an African American and Afro-Caribbean instrument that was left behind during the Great Migration because of its association with slavery. In the present day, many Black people in America, including myself, have picked the banjo back up. With both a desire to connect with the values of those from our past and a call to redefine this symbol.

Secondly, the banjo is a tonal instrument. It sits in-between the space of percussion and string instruments and, unlike the guitar, small changes and shifts can be made to alter the sound of the individual banjo that is impossible to replicate on another. “Tones are frequently employed which we have no musical characters to represent...’(Mackey 269).” These variations in tone affect the musical performance and can not be notated in a traditional Western notation, similar to the sway in a singer's hips or bend in a trumpet player's knees. The tones of the banjo, like the sonic archive of the Black body, are present, but under the institutional gaze, they are rendered invisible despite the evidence of their impact.

I think of this idea of the withdrawal as both a showing of how improvisation can be a negotiation of agency, but also as a counter to the flattening or misinterpreting of the individual. Similar to how the blue note is thought to be played out of tune instead of just under the note in a specific way, because African scales were attempted to fit to European scales (Woods 35). These three artworks work with “...those improvisational

moments that are skewed, incomplete, or compromised to bring bodies that are often silenced into audibility.”

CHAPTER 4

Nonconformity and Black Subjectivity

“Subjectivity is a complex negotiation of lived embodied experience and social forces that work to regulate behavior and therefore shape that experience (Siddall and Waterman 3).” But what behaviors are formed when a culture of anti-blackness shapes the lived experience of the black individual? And how does the behavior then go on to shape the culture in return? There is an inherent nonconformity to Blackness and Black culture in America due to the anti-Blackness of Western culture. So despite the constant consumption of Black American culture, music, art, etc into mainstream American culture, there is no true assimilation. That nonconformity makes it impossible for it to become fully homogeneous. This difference can and has been wielded as a resistant tool. The subversive nature of the Black imagination is best conveyed through improvisation. “Improvisation...is ‘a rigorous mode of making oneself ready for a range of potential situations. It is an incessant preparation, grounded in the present while open to the next moment’s possible actions and constraints (Siddall and Waterman 4).” And though it can be used to “...enact[s] a politics of hope (Siddall and Waterman 3), it can also be used to transform the self and the world around us.

Ace in the Yard

A miraculous amount of African culture and influence survived in the Americas through slavery. That must mean elements of pre-colonial African queerness also survive among the subtext of the folk histories and stories I read. I found a story of a woman who comes to ruin, recorded by Langston Hughes, where part of the story was written conversationally with a call and response from the storyteller and audience. Hughes and Hurston both were ones to present a folk story as a conversation for a reason, which led me to glean a new story from only the teller and the audience, back and forth. It was the visual language I needed to find a connection between my own experience as an asexual Black woman in America to that of what I am interpreting as a queering of the main character of the story.

The story itself is not what is so important to me, but the conversational language of the call and response. “To ensure the autonomy of thought and action in the midst of constant surveillance and violence, African Americans constructed a highly developed tradition of social interpretation (Woods 29)” The back and forth of the teller and listener interjecting their thoughts of the main character of the story not only reveals the queerness of this character from the perspective of her community but uses language similar to how my own “Aceness” is attempted to be explained away in the present. There is a dismissal, disbelief, and justification of the audience of the story to be indifferent toward men, that the woman of the story carries herself with that rang familiar to me.



Many asexuals' identities are written off as phases or can be hidden as religious and/or polite occupancy. Pair this with the dichotomy of hypersexuality and the fictionalized asexual mammy aesthetic that is often balanced onto black women, especially in predominantly white spaces. This is felt exaggeratedly for Black women on the asexual spectrum. To be authentically and queerly asexual outside of a mammy context is something that is viewed as outside of blackness due to the relationship with the plantation block's need for both the production of more slaves and the desire for distance from the realities of sexual violence. Creating this implied idea that aceness is a white queerness. Black subjects are deemed to be hypervisualized for this almost "invisible" queerness. They are often forced to play into the desexualized other, take up

this hypersexualized performance to pass and placate, or exist within the space of the call and response. This work focuses on the nonconformity of this queer identity in the history of Black subjects and black femme bodies in America as a way of confronting the audience with my own lived experience.

Illusion of Escape

Illusion of Escape is an alternative interpretation of a classic werewolf story by way of focusing on the subtext of the story taking place within the American plantation block. By approaching the werewolf transformation story in this way, I've constructed a look of the false transformation by way of minstrelsy and appropriation. Minstrelsy's long-lasting appeal in our culture comes from the "Flexibility of standards" it is believed to afford the participants. Taboos, emotions, and language are restricted by society, and often, whiteness can be addressed with a black facade. It can make the participant feel safe to approach what is often off-limits and gain a sense of power and freedom not present in their place in society. It is all done with a sense of insincerity but an "implicit critique". the drive to participate in a counterfeit is because of a subconscious acknowledgment that Blackness in America like, "...all authentic blues and jazz share a poetically subversive core, an explosive essence of irreconcilable revolt against the shameful limits of an unlivable destiny...(Woods 38-39)." This aggressive nonconformity becomes appealing to play in but not truly participate with consequences.



The piece depicts a feminine pale hand surrounded by white lace peaking out from underneath a ridiculous and ferocious cartoon of a creature. The creature is her outlet for what she can't obtain in her restrictions of white womanhood in the plantation block. But this momentary freedom is all an illusion. To acquire real freedom or the ability to go beyond the critique of society would be to exist in a way that is not burdened by the same restrictions. The dichotomy of the white lace and the black fur does not call to mind the realities of race but the idea of the Black subject. Similar to how minstrelsy's, "Stump speech was used to make fun of black people's 'alleged

insecure hold on language' but actually made fun of language itself and its 'insecure hold on the world' minstrelsy was used to vent apprehensions on how tenuous language is (Mackey 280).", the American Idea of blackness or the black exterior has less to do with black people and more to do with a societal critique.

Baldwin talks about how to acquire newness, one must be willing to give up what or who they think they are. This werewolf was unable to sacrifice who she was in her society and instead opted to air her frustrations through appropriation. The evidence of what got her is present in her missing hand that was no doubt separated while in her creature form, but slipping back into her human form and place in society does not heal. The illusion of that freedom is broken. "The influence of blackface minstrelsy extended well into the present century,...' into pop culture (Mackey 280)." So we see this failure still permeate our media less through literal blackface but in cultural and social minstrelsy and appropriation. Instead of the release it is thought to bring to limitations of whiteness, minstrelsy is often, "...a pattern at times of racism, at others gesturing toward a specific kind of political or sexual danger; and all of it compromising a peculiarly American structure of racial feeling (Bluestein 74)."

Screaming Brown

The in-progress work "Screaming Brown" references Hurston's "verbal noun" and the Blind Willie McTell Song Teasing Brown where the performer boasts of his colorist taste in women as being a brown-skinned woman who gives him her paycheck and is easygoing about what he gets up to. This trope represents all the social labor expected

of women based on the social capital they are perceived to provide. For me, the escape from such expectations tied to black beauty standards was in alternative music scenes. I needed an out from both Black beauty standards and white mainstream ones, while needing something familiar.

There is an inherent nonconformity in the blackness that shaped punk and metal scenes of music, and that was where my othering could become a form of self-expression. In musical improvisation, there are moments where what is noise and what is music are blurred; the shriek, the honk, the rattle (Mackey 275). These are moments that can't be easily noted but also create space for transformation. In these spaces, I could become illegible. For those outside these spaces, metal vocals sound unintelligible, but to those in the know can understand. The grid of "Screaming Brown" is in the shape of a log cabin quilt pattern, which was used as a symbol of safety on the Underground Railroad but also as a symbol to instruct the communication of secret messages (Tobin and Dobard 100-103). A scream is found at the center of this square as a source of self as a verb. "We screamed and screamed at the clear image of ourselves as we should always be. Ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression (Mackey 274)." Disrupting the expectations of the teasing brown but living in the resistant history that Black music built into these spaces. Alternative music is one of the few places where one is free to scream or shriek or growl, and it is perceived as music. The repetition of the screaming figure is torn about the mouth. Yes, to reference a destructive force or the shredding of vocal cords, but also to create a parallel in the experience of the listener to a bodily or instrumental scream. "Hearing the sound of the saxophonic scream forces the listener to enact the process and experience of

screaming and all the physical and emotional associations this act carries (Wallmark 238).”The tearing of the paper calls to mind the act of tearing or ripping of paper, maybe calls to mind the sound of it, or how much resistance different materials give in the act of ripping. There is a direct connection from tearing to screaming to individualized resistance. “The timbre of the vocal scream is marked by the signs of extreme friction and wear; there is a tearing quality, a sense that the material bounds of the body are fraying against the overwhelming force of its utterance. Screaming makes the agitated, overtaxed interior of the body audible; its sound is shot through with the physical effort required to produce it (Wallmark 238).” Through the connection of audience bodily empathy to tearing and screaming, I hope to guide the audience to consider the bodily and the emotional interior connected to both. There are also the gendered implications tied to the scream. “...*screaming, shrieking, and crying* are heavily gendered terms, associated since the Greeks with uncontained female vocality and hysteria (Wallmark 241).” In this context, paired against the otherness of black femininity and used in a resistance form. Though this artwork is still in progress, I wanted to include it here because its development has been shaped alongside my research in a way that makes it impossible to separate.

“...heavily steeped in tradition but equally reliant on individual expression...” This work approaches different ways of being an individual while “living in it” or what happens when one fails to do so. I’m calling for the viewer to reflect on self-transformation and othering (Mackey 275).

CHAPTER 5

Looking to the Future

I will continue working with archives and special collections, but I hope to explore archives across the states for connections via blues epistemology and continue looking for queer subtext in folk stories. I am particularly interested in the jazz/blues archive at Ole Miss and archives connected to the Great Migration route taken by individuals in my family (up to Philadelphia and New York). I will continue to research further into the connections to contemporary visual arts and blues aesthetics. I have more I want to explore with Black interiority and exteriority as it pertains to black fugitivity, post-post blackness, thing theory, and black feminist performativity theory. I plan to delve deeper into the connection with improvisation and material culture and/or collage practice. The following books will feed my research for the foreseeable future: *Black and Blur*, *Stolen Life*, *In the Break*, *Representation*, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, *Things*, *Other Things*, *Staging Black Fugivity*, *Black Post-Blackness*, *Posthuman Rap*, *Black Popular Culture*, and *Cross Rhythms*. I will finish *Screaming Brown* and build out a series of drawings and paper-based art around the themes I have started upon with that work. I will continue to push the Power Object series further with the more immediate goal of an exhibition. With *Root Source and Soul*, I am building out a larger, more confronting installation piece.

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