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The flesh marks a political violence that scars us. Let us listen to these scars... Performance art as a lens of research frees us to engage with our senses, material and spiritual, that traditional and quantitative research analysis may often inhibit. Performance art enables us to critically listen to our feelings, intimately connecting the personal with academia. Performance art analysis, in turn, is an explicit contrast to this separatist ideology, as it is a "live" performance that is interdisciplinary in its medium and often incorporates body, also referred to as "body art"¹. In doing so, performance art becomes a far more holistic and intersectional mode of analysis, more effectively capturing one's experiences. In this art form that incorporates the body, it is crucial to acknowledge the multiple identities through which one is oppressed², inevitably attached to the body. Performance art in the United States emerged along with second-wave feminism during the 60s and 70s, responding to the absence of women of color and their issues in Eurocentric forms of art and first-wave feminism. One is not to mistaken performance art for body representation,

¹"Performance Art Movement, Artists and Major Works." *The Art Story*. The Art Story: Modern Art Insight, n.d. Web. 12 Aug. 2015.

This source served as background and understanding for the emergence of performance art. Performance art is heavily interdisciplinary, as it borrows ideas and concepts from other forms of activity not traditionally associated with art. It focuses much on the body, integrating itself with second-wave feminism, which is crucial for the work I look into.

² Collective, The Combahee River. "A Black Feminist Statement." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 42.3-4 (2014): 271-80. Print.

The Combahee River Collective is a collective of black lesbian feminists who have gathered and discussed in Boston from 1974 to 1980. The collective highlighted that the white feminist movement was not addressing their needs. Even more so, they opposed the separatist idea in that each identity can be isolated and pushed for a more effective understanding of identity through a more intersectional approach –in that we are all us all at the same time and are oppressed through each of these identities in specific ways.

especially when women of color bodies were never represented in the first place, as they were confined to hidden spaces missing from the public sphere. Though they were immediately absent from the public eye, they held a lingering presence that haunted the public, with most people knowing what happens to their bodies behind closed doors –being perpetrators, victims, or witnessing these sexual violences. Out of this collective, cold indifference rises a unified, heated insurgence from women of color. We will examine a history of sexual exploitation and violence committed against black women that confine and isolate them into the private, rendering them vulnerable to sexual violence, followed by a black female performance artist, who exposes and combats these series of sexual violences. The performance we will analyze is *Untitled* (2012), by black artist Tameka Norris. This piece powerfully uses blood and body as medium, conveying a deliberate performance of frustration and agency. As black women's bodies have historically been sites of sexual violence in private spaces, Tameka Norris has contested this secrecy by invoking her body and its pain endured into public spaces, forcing confrontation from the public domain.

Colonial Archives That Are “Never Against Her Will”

Rape, particularly of black women, has not yet been given a history, thus it never existed, and so it never became a publicly accepted knowledge. Before we can discuss rape of black women, we must first discuss why it has not yet registered into historical accounts. This absence is predicated within the colonial archive. The colonial archive can be understood as a “repository of codified beliefs that clustered (and bore witness to) connections between secrecy, the law, and power”³; these archives only remember who is deemed significant, forcing narratives of sexual violence and rape out of state and legal archives, rendering them actively suppressed and/or insignificant. Black women are severed from legal visibility, losing sight of them altogether while remembering them in terms of the colonial archive, selectively capturing their entirety in bits and pieces. She appears in the archive of Atlantic slavery as a “dead girl”⁴. She could have been anyone and is found everywhere in the Atlantic world: “the hollow of the slave ship...the brothel, the cage, the surgeon’s laboratory...the kitchen, the master’s bedroom,” thousands of girls who share her circumstances, these circumstances generating few stories. We only know what can be extracted from her captors and masters. The stories that exist are not about her but rather the violence and deception that seized their lives and transformed them into commodities and

³ Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. Print.

⁴ Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe* 12.26 (2008): 1-14. Print.

corpses. The colonial archive is “a death sentence, a display of the violated body...a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life ” (Hartman 2). It becomes difficult to grasp her body again, in a free state, without reproducing the violences that first narrated her into existence.

Colonial archives render black suffering (in enslavement and beyond) as mundane (Weheliye 11) –there is nothing exceptional about black suffering, deeming some forms of humanity more exceptional than others. Those privileged enough to enter the colonial archives are precisely those who are understood as significant, defined through the “genre of human” as Man⁵, whom the state and archives view worthy of liberalism. Liberal philosophy, culture, and government have emerged from a deeply implicated slavery and colonialism; this subsumes an apparent contradiction to modern liberalism, which “examines liberalism as a project that includes at once both the universal promises of rights, emancipation...and asymmetries on which the liberal tradition depends...according to which some liberties are reserved to some and wholly denied to others” (Lowe 3). The colonial archive is inherent to the archives of liberalism that permits us to understand that modern liberalism defined the “human” and universalizes its attributes to European man, immediately rendering slaves as less than human. Even as it proposes inclusivity, liberal universalism affects principles of inclusion and exclusion; in the very claim to define humanity, its gestures obscure it into a definition that divides the human from the nonhuman (Weheliye 6). Moreover, rendering full humanity to Man, who is white and male, presumes everyone else, particularly black women, are not worthy of humanity. Thus modern liberalism becomes a fatal process in which “the human” is selectively classified, universalized and “freed” by liberal forms, while the peoples who create the possibility for that freedom are assimilated, forgotten, or destroyed.

It is important to note that raping occurred alongside lynching of mostly black men, which were constructed through gendered and racialized violences committed onto bodies of black men and women, post-slavery. Lynching was *religiously* practiced as public spectacles with a full on lynch mob of an audience. Not only are rape and lynching race and gender specific, they are also location specific. As black men posed an apparent threat to the patriarchy, laws were constructed in order to exclude them from adult male legal privileges in the public sphere⁶.

⁵ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.

⁶ Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. “The Mind That Burns in Each Body”: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence.” *Powers of Desire* (1983): 328-46. Print.

Lynching against black men collaterally became a violent embodiment of the practice of the legal mechanisms of public exclusion. It is important to note that black women faced a “double jeopardy in race and sex” (Hall 332). They were excluded from the political domain from the get-go by default of being a woman, so keeping them out of the judicial arena required less force. On top of being disenfranchised and legally kept out of the public, *and* occasionally lynched, they were continuously and primarily targets of sexual assault. Black women posed a far more ambiguous threat that further pushed them away from the public and into the private margins.

Women are, without a doubt, feared for their power in their sexuality, with the white patriarchy responding to it by desexualizing the white woman and hyper-sexualizing the black, characterizing her as loose and wild in order to tame her in the (private) bedroom. The idealized white woman was illustrated as pure, virgin, and holy, coming to embody the Victorian sexuality, a process in which female “passionlessness” replaced an older, scarier concept – women’s dangerous sexual power. The white woman then becomes a helpless victim, always, who must be protected by her chivalrous white savior. This leaves white women domesticated and effective (read reproductive) with their sexualities, and white men still perverted with their sick fetishes.

Thinking in opposition to white womanhood, in an attempt to construct it as reasonable and progressive, gave rise to a colonial modernity that “ungendered” the female flesh, birthed by the Middle Passage. In the United States, “the fear and fascination of the female sexuality” was projected onto black women, who rose as the primitively sexual savage in symbiosis with the passionless lady (Hall 333). The black female subjects on the slave ship were not human enough to be permitted a womanhood, thus justifying further inscriptions of rape through hypersexuality when her sexuality was recognized. Black subjects are imbued with either a hyperhuman surplus, hyper-sexuality/femininity, or complete lack thereof, a desexualization and degendering of the flesh, within the universe of Man. These essential qualities worked in favor of the white man, as any of his impositions on black women were never unwanted since she is “naturally” hyper-sexual and always wanting it, thus she is “unrapable,” and so it was “never against her will” (Hall 331). This

This source provides much primer and historical context for the emergence of lynching and raping, especially within the context of them being gendered violences being committed against black men and black women. I emphasize that lynching against black men is public, whereas raping of black women is private, pulling this analysis as a driving question for my research.

logic completely dismisses her boundaries, denying her any privacy and the ability to consent whatsoever. House slaves at the time served as substitute mothers for white women; "at a black woman's breasts, white men experienced absolute dependence" (Hall 333). The black woman is already a house slave, condemned yet again to the private life of the white man to work out his sick, unresolved fantasies. Such men could find in this black woman that she is readily available at their disposal to impose their rage and desire that often underlie male heterosexual impulses that are kept secret, consequently subjecting black victims to this secret from the public. If black women ever turned her maternal and sexual resources to the benefit of her own family, her own *privacy*, she would suffer sexual violence from the white man, becoming reconstructed and consumed into *his* privacy. To reassert white dominance, white men attempt to control the potential of her sexuality, her power, in private spaces or bedrooms, where it is raped out of her.

The power of sexuality in especially black women is very well known, as they are predominantly characterized as highly sexual. Even if it is disrespectfully done, sexuality in black women is absolutely acknowledged and absolutely public. If her sexuality had not have been so feared by the public, the white patriarchy would not express so much insecurity in having it locked inside and controlled. That being said, discourse and actions surrounding her sexuality –which was not crafted by *her* private right might I add– had absolutely nothing to do with *her* and everything to do with the sick perversion of the public fetish. Contradiction after contradiction, the public felt entitled to her privacy and sex life but only admitted disgust and atrocity towards her; the black woman is displaced into an ambiguous zone between her threat to the public (patriarchal system) and the attempted taming of her threat in the private arena.

The Jezebel Stereotype

"Rape and rumors of rape became the folk pornography of the Bible," as white men played such honorable Christians, projecting as false a biblical role –of Jezebel– onto black women, circulating a dangerous misrepresentation of black women into the public that justifies the fate of her sexual assault in the private to fulfill the white man's fear and fascination of her sexuality that he wants to keep secret, thus forcing the enactment of his perversion onto black women, a secret. Committing these crimes in secrecy allows the white man to conceal the hypocrisy he is also committing in being a supposed good Christian man, a religion in which non-marital and non-reproductive sex is taboo. He then goes onto

publicly accuse black women in being hyper-sexual, assigning her as a biblical, ill-intended deviant; all the while, he is raping her in private.

In 1619, the first ship of enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia. Upon arrival, "bondwomen were placed on the auction block, stripped naked, and examined to determine her reproductive capacity"⁷ (all the while, violence is already in the making, as the black female slave is erased and assaulted in the colonial archives that reproduce these violences). Upon the very second of arrival, black women have had their bodies completely stripped of boundaries and thrown into the public eye for everyone to consume, where all the scheming occurred of her private life that will not be her's. Once sold, they were ordered and forced to have sexual relations with slaveholders, their sons, relatives and overseers. Unfortunately, sexual terrorism continued well after slavery. Quite obviously, the private is actually very public and very much digested by the public. During routinely nighttime raids, the Ku Klux Klan, consisting of seemingly respectable men and government officials, savagely raped black women, by default committing rape in a masked public, entering a space far more complex than just the public and the private, as both here tend to be quite intertwined. This ambiguity is reinforced by her complete dismissal of boundaries as the lines are blurred between her existence, primarily consisting of sexual violences and rape, in the public that casts her into the private.

These atrocities were rationalized by the Jezebel stereotype, branding black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral. Again, this image conveyed that black women could never be rape victims if they always desired sex. All black women are assumed to be sexually promiscuous, which translates to: they should not be sexually respected or permitted any boundaries. Consequently, perpetrators faced little to no legal sanctions for raping black women (West 294). This, in turn, discourages black women from reporting or entering the courtroom as black rape survivors, who would often internalize victim-blaming. Here, it is critical to understand the relationship between flesh and law, rape and the courtroom. Weheliye articulates analyzing flesh as a practice of liberation and possibility of other worlds. Habeas corpus and law tend to recognize humanity of racialized subjects only within restricted parameters of "personhood-as-ownership," taking us back to understanding the genre of human as Man, assuming all subjects entered a stage in human development in which they are granted equal access

⁷ Luth, CN. "Racial Stereotyping: Black Women and the Need to Shift the Narrative." Crgcgp. Word Press, 16 Mar. 2015. Web. 13 Aug. 2015. This is another source that provided background and broke down three of the racial stereotypes of black women: the asexual Mammi, the hyper-sexual Jezebel, and the angry Sapphire.

to western humanity, legal protection and modern liberalism. The law thus constructs itself around who is deserving of personhood and who is not (habeas), immediately excluding the black woman. The linkage between flesh and habeas corpus becomes, what Weheliye coined, habeas viscus ("you shall have the flesh"), an assemblage of human viscus/flesh borne of political violence burned into the living flesh.

The Black Woman and the Law

The law sanctioned whites' denial of the black woman's humanity by deeming any child born to an enslaved woman to be a slave. This permitted slave-owners to gain profit from the sexual commodification of the black woman and girl, and particularly profit from their assaults while failing to recognize the rape of the enslaved woman as a punishable crime. The law did not recognize the rape of the black woman by *any* man, including black men. When a slave named George was tried for having sex with a slave girl under the age of ten, a Mississippi court dismissed the prosecution on the grounds that "the crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves" (King 83). The court proceeded to rule that "[t]heir intercourse is promiscuous" and is left to be "regulated by their owners" (Roberts 43). In 1860, the Mississippi legislature responded by passing a law punishing enslaved men for the rape of "negro or mulatto" girls under twelve years of age (Roberts 31). It is highly unlikely that this law prevented sexual abuse against enslaved girls, as slave-owners had an economic interest in avoiding criminal punishment and execution of their male slaves, or risk lost commodity. Because the black woman did not have the right not to be raped, she could not appeal to laws that made the white woman's self-defense against rape justifiable. The law continued to sexually exploit the enslaved woman by punishing their acts of resistance against abuse.

Historically speaking, disenfranchisement and disempowerment through hyper-sexualization work hand in hand, as the black woman had already been kept away from the legal public⁸, fueling her to personally keep herself away from the public. The public is made so inconvenient for African American women, they are often more comfortable in keeping themselves out of it. Powerlessness in the private transcends to powerlessness in the public courtroom, under which they have been

⁸ "New Statesman." *Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality: "I Wanted to Come up with an Everyday Metaphor That Anyone Could Use"* N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Aug. 2015. This article discusses Kimberle Crenshaw coining the term, intersectionality, the multiple identities through which one is oppressed. She looked at this through a legal standpoint, as the law does not recognize the complex ways that one can be discriminated against.

historically excluded along with politics and mentality constructed that work against her favor to start with. Furthermore, adopting a rape culture mentality becomes historically rooted and normalized; as they are unable to enter the public, they shame themselves back into the private. The black female body cannot bring her private violation into the public sphere since what happens in private is denied in public, treating her in multiple, simultaneous violations that occur alongside each of her spaces inhabited.

Untitled (2015)



Tameka Norris, *Untitled*, 2012. Blood, lemon, saliva.

With a body that carries a collective memory –of rape, disenfranchisement, and materialized subjectivity and ambiguity between the private and public– that has been repeatedly been beat down, forgotten and shoved into the private abyss, Tameka Norris, in her performance *Untitled* (2012)¹⁰, resurrects her body and demands its

⁹ Tameka Norris performing her *Untitled* piece, dragging her slit tongue, blood and saliva across a gallery wall. Digital image. *RAdIcAl PrEsEncE: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Radical Presence NY, n.d. Web. 13 Aug. 2015.

This is a still from Tameka Norris' live performance of her piece. We see her kneeling on all fours, painting a minimalist landscape across the wall with her blood and saliva.

¹⁰ *Tameka Norris: Untitled*. Perf. Tameka Norris. *YouTube*. The Studio Museum in Harlem, 4 Apr. 2014. Web. 13 Aug. 2015.

In this thirty-two minute video, Tameka Norris, clothed in a red robe, performs her piece, *Untitled*. She cuts her tongue with the single stroke of a knife disinfected in lemon, dragging it deliberately across the gallery wall, replacing brush and paint with her mouth and

attention. As Tameka forces her audience to look, she controls their gaze in almost every respect; whether it is their visual gaze of her body or of their discomfort in bearing witness to the pain she is inducing upon herself, she holds a presence that is inescapably everywhere. She is critiquing the “invisibility of blackness in cultural forms built upon the appropriation of black cultural expression”¹¹. Slavery’s technologies of violence through the whipping, the branding, the marking of the captive body all render a kind of “hieroglyphics of the flesh”¹². She is not merely combatting or opposing the former invisibility, but also revealing that the gendered and sexualized pain and suffering endured has always existed and well experienced on a multi-generational level, this phenomenon actually “transferring” from one generation to the next. The private suffering that has been denied generation after generation has also always been public, if not publicly induced to an extent. Norris reshifts the focus from the private to the public, commenting that the private has always existed within the realms of publicity in multiple levels of hypocrisy –underneath the superficial layer of publicity assumes no existence of sexual violences committed against black female bodies, all masked under denial. She forces recognition in a public space of the violence that has been committed against her body, further connected to a lineage of black female bodies. She drags her bloody tongue against the wall, creating a disturbingly uncomfortable site that demands from her audience their attention. She embodies the markings and the brandings, all instruments of slavery and terrorism centuries in the making that produce these political violences (Weheliye). Her performance draws attention to sexual violences committed in private spaces, that have just as well been committed by the public, forcing the public audience to confront the consequences of their doing and ignorance. Her body then leaves the physical site though still existing, daunting the audience with a mysterious and lingering presence, in no specific location –further emphasizing the ambiguity of space between the private and the public, that they now know surrounds them forever.

One can read the entire performance as her traveling across an indefinite space and time, constructing and cutting across borders.

blood and saliva as medium. Her performance tests her ability to endure pain as well as the audience’s ability to bear witness to the pain.

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¹² Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64. Web.

Tameka paints a landscape, “a borderland that is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary”¹³. In doing so, she is creating this landscape with her own blood, body and flesh that is in “a constant state of transition” (Anzaldua 25). Traveling across her own landscape, she crosses and defines the borders for herself, after having her sexuality disrespected and boundaries rejected. As she calmly and slowly drags her body across the wall and floor, she is fearlessly occupying the space she does, rightfully so, with the audience clearing up and moving out of the way for her. She is finally receiving respectful and considerate treatment and recognition that has been long overdue. She is setting a standard for her life that has now been achieved¹⁴ in this performance; she cannot look back as she knows this standard of living exists, even if imagined, and can no longer expect any less. This is the power of the erotic (Lorde 53). She is engaging, as well as engaging us, in the erotic. Experiencing eros with one another gives rise to a level of understanding of differences that unleashes a creative energy that is so crucial for our existence¹⁵. She marks her blood, her “filth and impurity,” onto a white gallery wall, leaving the blood that flows within her, her differences, into a public space; she deeply and intimately engages with the public space, with the publicity of her blood open to interact with anyone else who is willing to involve a part of themselves with her in understanding each other’s differences, in a way that is not abusive and truly, consensually intimate.

The erotic as power has been shunned or relocated into the bedroom, *if* it is acknowledged. In doing so, women are prevented from tapping into their erotic power and integrating to all facets of their life, as

¹³ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987. Print. Anzaldua often personifies the borderlands into her wounded flesh. It runs down her body as it tears it apart. Her body embraces the impacts and aftermath of the borderlands splitting her culture. The division isn't clean –fence rods stake into her flesh, emphasizing the violence of this physical and metaphorical borderland that tears her flesh apart.

¹⁴ Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider* (1984): 53-59. Print. Audre Lorde does a fantastic job in defining and structuring the erotic, as joy, and its uses as a joy that can be shared amongst oneself or with those you are close to. The erotic can be experienced with someone you love in bridging a gap that reveals differences and true understanding of them. It can be experienced within yourself and unravels a standard of living exists that we must always strive for.

¹⁵ Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 110-114. 2007. Print.

This is such a powerful piece by Audre Lorde in which she critically analyzes differences. Because they are unknown, they are then feared and so we learn to criminalize and fear each other’s differences, these are the master’s tools. She reappropriated difference into strength the site of creative function –we are so much stronger with our differences– that is absolutely necessary for us to effectively make creative change.

the eros very well is. It is no coincidence that the sexuality of black women have been excluded from the public and cornered; it threatens the very heterosexist patriarchy that relies on the suppression of the erotic. Frankly, the erotic is not site specific; it is everywhere, as Tameka Norris still daunts her audience after her physical leave. Not only has she marked her audience immediately, but they will take home with them, to each of their private lives; what they just witnessed only once in their lifetime will “burn indelibly into the mind” –this is the mind that burns in each body (Hall 331). She is claiming the space, an initially public space that will follow home, into the private, everyone who bore witness to her presence. Her pain and presence claims a space, a space that is infinite and infinitely expanding; with it, she shall travel and expand, becoming a physical embodiment of the spiritual.



Tameka Norris, *Untitled*, 2012. Blood, lemon, saliva.

Conclusion

The black female body has, as extensively discussed, been a site of sexual exploitation and simultaneously an opposition to that sexual violence. Tameka Norris' performance piece has undoubtedly served us with an archive of liberalism that artistically and uncomfortably (necessarily so) exposes us to those violences and her radical presence, without recreating that violence historically committed against her through countless colonial archives. Simultaneously, Norris draws attention to the state-sanctioned sexual exploitation of the black female body and her numerous encounters with such interactions. She inhabits a space that is continuous and subject to change; with it comes the dynamics of her presence that is constantly shifting while inhabiting an unpredictable, undeniable space –her space and presence coexist, mingling interchangeably. Norrison deeply understands that exploitation occurred in the body, working from external forces into the body, so healing must occur from the inside out, from within the body that rises out of it. This is a massive task to place upon oneself but a crucial one nonetheless. If we do not encounter our demons, we will continue to possess and be possessed by them. Though our internal demons do not solely operate uninfluenced, as they also stand upon “demonic grounds” that set the standard of the genre of the human as Man. As only Man is worthy of receiving humane treatment, we must abolish the Man for true emancipation (Weheliye 21). These categories, of the genre of the human, carve from the swamps of slavery and colonialism the very flesh and bones of modern Man (Weheliye 30). It does not stop with our bodies, as we inherit and transfer them to generations to come. We must heal from the intergenerational trauma that so deeply wounds us or we will yet again be subject to this cyclical trauma. Through an intense interrogation of “what could've been” if we had listened to the unrecorded pauses and breaks in narrating the black woman, we must imagine a world that does not reproduce the violences engraved onto her body. Tameka Norrison leaves her blood and wounds open for us, if we dare to engage in such intimate insurgence from sexual violence.

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- Tameka Norris: Untitled*. Perf. Tameka Norris. *YouTube*. The Studio Museum in Harlem, 4 Apr. 2014. Web. 13 Aug. 2015.
- In this thirty-two minute video, Tameka Norris, clothed in a red robe, performs her piece, *Untitled*. She cuts her tongue with the single stroke of a knife disinfected in lemon, dragging it deliberately across the gallery wall, replacing brush and paint with her mouth and blood and saliva as medium. Her performance tests her ability to endure pain as well as the audience's ability to bear witness to the pain.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. Print.
- West, Carolyne M. "Mammi, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls." (n.d.): 287-97. Print.
- This source examines the various stereotypes (Mammi, Jezebel, Sapphire) that plays out in African American women historically and contemporarily in various realms, whether they be film or literature. I pull from the Jezebel stereotype that imposes her sexually loose and malicious character onto black women.