When U.N.I.T.Y. Isn't Enuf: Black Tomboys as Gender-Bending Social Disrupters

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Introduction

i used to dream militant
dreams of taking
over america to show
these white folks how it should be
done
i used to dream radical dreams
of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers
of correct analysis
i even used to think i'd be the one
to stop the riot and negotiate the peace
then i awoke and dug
that if i dreamed natural
dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she's natural
i would have a revolution

- Nikki Giovanni, "Revolutionary Dream"

I cried for a week when Aaliyah died. I was only eleven years old, but the rising R&B and pop icon was my idol. Though the memories are somewhat fleeting because of my young age, I remember being in awe of her when I saw the video for "If Your Girl Only Knew," the lead single from her 1996 album *One in a Million.* The opening sequence depicts her riding shotgun on a motorcycle through the city streets biker gang style. When they reach their destination, she dismounts the bike and reveals a full leather outfit, complete with a form-fitting leather crop top and baggy leather pants. There is an air about her that is undeniably cool as she walks into the building, "dapping up" her brother when he greets her at the door. The video continues, cutting to scenes of her sauntering through the party in a mysterious but confident way, her dark shades never fully revealing her face. She sits in a chair in a quintessentially "unladylike" manner, legs in a wide position as she leans back with her hands resting in her lap.

Despite her presence as tomboy, she sings the lyrics, “If your girl only knew that you was dissin’ her to talk to me…” in a sexy tone. She’s “girly,” but somehow very legibly masculine. I was intrigued.

At age six, I was far from being able to dress like the seventeen-year-old songstress, but I was a budding tomboy who saw myself in her—I wanted to *be* her. Over the next few years, I watched her ascend to true stardom as she released number one songs, starred in movies, and solidified herself as an “it” girl in fashion. As she came of age and dived deeper into the Hollywood scene, her look became more polished, more feminine, but she was still the coolest tomboy I had ever seen. That is why on August 25, 2001, when my older brother broke the news to me that my idol died in a plane crash on her way back from what would be her last video shoot, I was absolutely devastated, and if I am being honest, I still am. One day, my mother grew frustrated by my tears and confusedly asked, “Why are you still crying over her? You didn’t know her.” She did not understand the gravity of having lost the first person I ever admired. I tearily responded, “But I did.”

Of course, I did not *actually* know her, but there was a bond that was built on seeing a girl like me, a tomboy, be so loved, be so alluring, be so dope in masculine clothes. Her impact on my life was always abundantly clear. Not only did she make music that spoke to my soul (even though I was too young to *really* know what she was talking about), she represented all I could hope to be while maintaining my realness. As Kathy Iandoli states, “She defied the confines of gender, as her baggy clothes were paired with a fully made-up face, making her visually the best of both worlds. Aaliyah was unclassifiable” (33). She eluded rigid definitions and that became what I desired, too. What I did not know, however, was that the confidence she gave me to be my full tomboy self would be a site of external contention and self-doubt as I

transitioned through adolescence and into adulthood. I did not know the depths of that type of resistance.

My tomboyism was birthed out of a genuine draw towards stereotypically masculine behavior and attire. As the youngest of four and the only girl, my first companions were my brothers. I grew to abhor "girly" clothes and toys, which, on a basic level, means destroying every Barbie I had and refusing to wear pink. I wanted to do what my brothers did, whether it was playing baseball in the alley with the neighborhood kids or testing out wrestling moves on each other, I was game. As I got older, however, my tomboyism became a source of insecurity. When I looked at the other girls around me or on TV, I suddenly felt that I was less-than. I felt unattractive (as a boy-crazy teenager, this was devastating), and I began to feel like I would not get very far in my social life unless I looked and acted like other girls my age. I bought more lip gloss, bought more dainty jewelry, and wore more skirts—I folded. In hindsight I see that I attempted to shield myself from ostracism by sacrificing who I really was. I hate that I allowed the pressures of gender conformity to define me. Conversely, I have learned that there are girls and women who lean *into* tomboyism for some of the same reasons I suppressed mine, further complicating the collective understanding of what it means to be a tomboy. For many, marking oneself as more masculine is like protective armor. In "Tomboy as Protective Identity," research psychologists Traci Craig and Jessica LaCroix conclude that tomboy status can provide: "(1) Sexual reputation protection for heterosexual girls and women; (2) protection for lesbians who are closeted; and (3) protected access to male privileged spaces, activities, and conversations" (1). Their findings exhume some of the nuances in the motivations behind subscribing to tomboyism, including a need for physical and emotional safety. They determine that said

protections are temporary, however, which ultimately undermines the tomboy's ability to "truly transcend the binary gender system" (Craig and LaCroix).

This study reveals another bleak reality about tomboyism– the common practice of conflating one's gender with one's sexuality makes tomboys susceptible to faulty judgements about their interests, desires, and lifestyle based on their masculine inclinations. Far too often, one's deviation from gender norms is perceived as a deviation from heterosexuality. There is cultural evidence of this, too. In "The Session (Longest Posse Cut in History)" by hip-hop group The Roots, rapper Shortie No Mass says, "Yes you might be wantin to consider me a tomboy / Boy get it right, I'm still strictly lovin men." Her need to announce her heterosexuality stems from the historical practice of equating masculine femininity to lesbianism. There is a constant assumption that tomboys want to be *like* men for the purpose of attracting women, and Shortie No Mass' words signal how she doesn't adhere to that fallacy. I can relate. As I transitioned into being a young adult, my tomboyism became a marker of lesbianism. Suddenly, girls at the mall were flirting with me and my brothers were questioning my sexuality. How I choose to visually present myself to the world went from being a product of functionality to being indicative of my sexual preference. On the surface, the mis-categorization is not problematic, but there is an innate issue with passing judgements based on superficial qualities. Thus, a curiosity for *why* people often mis-categorized me (or perhaps the fact that they felt the need to categorize me at all) led me to want to explore how tomboyism has the potential to function as an act of resistance against the various types of restrictive taxonomies beyond the scope of protection.

I quickly discovered that the radical potentialities for tomboyism greatly depends on factors such as one's cultural context, geographical location, and race. This is highlighted in one of the only books exclusively about tomboyism, Michelle Ann Abate's *Tomboys: A Literary and*

Cultural History.[1] The book traces the history of the figure of the tomboy in literary and cinematic representations, but the focus is definitively on the white tomboy. Abate outlines the aims of the book when she states, "By exploring the literary and cultural history of white tomboyism–and, in doing so, uncovering its hidden history as a racially charged construct– it is my hope that these pages offer the first step toward imagining a form of white female gender rebellion that is not predicated on the appropriation of nonwhite peoples and cultures" (239). Abate admits that tomboyism has historically been used as a tool for bolstering whiteness and as a prop for survival in a patriarchal society. Her exploration allows for redemption for white tomboys and suggests certain freedoms that have been granted to them over the course of history. For Abate, the [white] tomboy in the twenty-first century is not beholden to the same judgements precipitated by the rigid twentieth century social norms. While I cannot validate this claim, I can confidently declare that this is not true for Black tomboys, thus necessitating an expansion of the study of tomboys in American history and culture.

Black Tomboys is predicated on the fact that progress, or the lack thereof, for Black women looks drastically different from their white counterparts. Abate declares that examinations of tomboyism must be regionally, historically, and culturally situated. When she references criterions of femininity in nineteenth-century American culture and literature, she points to how Black women were masculinized, never viewed as too delicate to do grueling labor and never needing protection. Their socio-economic status and race rendered them exempt from

[1] There are only two scholarly books dedicated to tomboyism in America. Abate's is the first, but Lisa Selin Davis' *Tomboy: The Surprising History and Future of Girls Who Dare to Be Different* examines the same historical arc of tomboyism in American society and culture. Like Abate, however, Davis' book never offers an in-depth examination of Black tomboyism. Though she acknowledges the need for cultural specificity because definitions of tomboyism shift based on class and race, she limits the commentary on women of color to a few short sentences dispersed throughout the book.

standard (white) conventions of femininity.[2] However, within Black culture's constructs of femininity and masculinity, the correlation between the masculinization of Black women and the perceived social acceptance of Black tomboyism is tenuous. Regardless of how Black women are viewed by non-Black communities, in many ways, they are still beholden to the same rigid, feminine ideals birthed out of patriarchy. This is often understood as an "either/or" situation, but it's a "both/and" predicament. As scholar Dorothy E. Roberts states, "Racism and patriarchy are not two separate institutions that intersect only in the lives of Black women. They are two interrelated, mutually supporting systems of domination and their relationship is essential to understanding the subordination of all women…Racism is patriarchal. Patriarchy is racist" (3). It is historically understood that one system depends on the other, yielding a symbiotic relationship that does not allow Black women to somehow be *less* impacted by one or the other. With this, one can conclude that the Black tomboy, regardless of context, has never been *truly* free from sexist ideals even if those bounds look different in practice.

In her foundational 1987 article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers complicates this notion, opening possibilities for how Black women can recuperate power and autonomy by harnessing their (un)gendered being and constructing alternate ways of inhabiting the world. She contends that the (un)gendered Black female body is

[2] Despite operating outside of these paradigms, Black women were sexualized in a way that further objectified them. They were worthy of being vessels for sexual pleasure, enactments of sexual violence, and reproduction, but not worthy of being deemed womanly. Saidiya Hartman interrogates the subject position of enslaved women, specifically within the context of sexual violence, and in doing so, unpacks how those acts were not considered rape because the women fell outside of the heteronormative framing of the crime (*Scenes of Subjection* 80). As property, the Black female body was exempt from any ascriptions of womanhood because they were not considered people. To further distance Black women from personhood, they were purported as sexually lewd, a stereotype that buttresses the modesty and purity of white women while aligning Black women's sexuality with animalistic behavior. As portrayals of Black women became more common in popular culture in the early twentieth century, the "Jezebel" stereotype perpetuated the racist ideals that framed Black women as promiscuous and unfeminine. This trope continues into present day, further complicating how shifting constructions of womanhood impact Black women.

marked by a system of symbols born out of the violence endured in the transatlantic slave trade. Black women were stripped of their "femaleness" because they were not allowed to be mothers in the conventional sense and men were not allowed to be patriarchs, ultimately precluding them from white patriarchal standards. According to Spillers, gender evaporated in the middle passage, and Black people had to forge their own way as humans first, deprioritizing the enforcement of gender roles in their household and community. In a 2007 interview, "Whatcha Gonna Do?"- Revisiting "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she nostalgically reflects on her childhood when she saw "a kind of democratic form that I haven't seen quite like that since…people did whatever work was to be done, whether it was 'men's work' or 'women's work,' if it needed to be done, people simply did it…As I see it now, success in black culture has brought us a lot closer to appropriating gender dynamics that I do not necessarily like." The time she references are the 1940s and 1950s, and there is evidence to support her claim, especially as respectability in the Black community ramps up in the fight for civil rights during that time.

Respectability politics (or politics of respectability) is a term coined by scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Higginbotham notes how Black women in the Baptist Church commonly subscribed to the idea that behaving a certain way and dressing in "respectable" clothing can get one closer to being wholly respected by white society. She contends that this model of social and racial uplift was meant to destabilize the commonly held perceptions about Black people that were pervasive in popular culture at the time. However, subscribing to politics of respectability also meant subscribing to hegemonic values, thus requiring one to also adapt the ideals of the oppressor. Higginbotham asserts:

> While adherence to respectability enabled black women to counter racist images and structures, their discursive contestation was not directed solely at white Americans; the black Baptist women condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people. Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of manners and morals. (187)

This practice is inherently problematic, however, and it fueled the angst that Black women were already feeling about where their standing in society. Respectability politics gave license to others in their own community to police them and evoked feelings of shame if one strayed from the "divine" path. In countering racist stereotypes, respectability reinscribed the oppressive hegemonic values that the Black community sought to vacate, rendering the freedom of self-making nearly unobtainable, thus, by the 1980s, Spillers' declaration of the power of (un)gendering becomes less an observation and more a rallying cry that challenges us to nuance and/or destroy normative gender constructions.

In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997), Cathy Cohen expands what Spillers pinpoints as the resistive power of (un)gendering by pushing for a "destabilization and remaking of our identities" when conceptualizing queer politics. She challenges the "hetero/queer divide," arguing that queer political action at the time was often reduced to a declaration that "all heterosexuals are represented as dominant and controlling and all queers are understood as marginalized and invisible" (25). By operating solely within the framework of this binary, queer activism effectively ignores the "intersecting systems of power that largely dictate our life chances" and reproduces the process of homogenization that flattens dynamic individuals into a collective, reductive identity (25). Cohen goes on to unpack

the radical potential of bringing into the fold of queer politics those who are "(outside)" of heteronormativity. In doing so, she outlines how "regulated nonnormative heterosexuality" such as the "stigmatization and demonization of single mothers, teen mothers, and poor women of color dependent on state assistance," is demonstrative of who is *truly* outside of heteronormative power and can contribute to and benefit from coalition efforts (42).

What Spillers and Cohen elucidate in their work is crucial in this dissertation. In exploring the ways in which Black tomboys are vehicles for queer possibility as corporeal manifestations of (un)gendering, it is imperative that their intersecting identities are considered.[3] The Black tomboy figures I explore here, both fictional and real, vary in age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and locale. Each part of their identity impacts the social reception of their tomboyism and contributes to the power that they wield in deepening and expanding the lexicon of Black girlhood and womanhood. In combatting the negative connotations associated with the term and freeing it from the unyielding bounds of a masculine/feminine binary, *Black Tomboys* seeks to historically trace and place the Black tomboy within the Black radical tradition as a source of resistance and empowerment.

Two terms I employ throughout this project are "tomboy" and "queer." A tomboy is a cisgender girl or woman who visually and/or behaviorally displays attributes typically ascribed to boys or men, eschewing stereotypical femininity. This can be as simple as participating in "boyish" activities like playing in the dirt or being "rough," or as complex as exhibitions of independence, physical strength, mental fortitude, assertiveness, and sexual expression. The Black tomboys in this project effectively queer gender normativity. With that, my

[3] The heterosexual tomboy, for example, occupies a space that is normative on one hand, but unsettles visual markers of gender on the other. Social norms disallow this intersection because women who are more masculine are often assumed gay. Therefore, heterosexual tomboys rupture expectations and untether gender and sexuality, opening space for redefinitions of all the identities they hold.

conceptualization of the term "queer" is fluid. It is meant to push against fixed definitions, including its own. Borrowing from Carla Freccero in the framing of her book *Queer/Early/Modern*, "Queer continues to exploit its productive indeterminacy as a word used to designate that which is odd, strange, aslant . . . Ultimately, if this book can be said to have a position on queer, it would be to urge resistance to its hypostatization, reification into nominal status as designating an entity, an identity, a thing, and to allow it to continue its outlaw work as a verb and sometimes an adjective" (5). Above all else, queerness is a site of possibility. Whether it is applied to a place, a person, or even a music genre, it is both imaginative and real. As Jose Munoz states, "It allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (*Cruising Utopia*). But I will add that it urges us to take action in the present, too, requiring us to stir up some audacity to do what we want and be who we want in the *now*. The Black tomboys presented here did not wait for permission and they did not hold out for the imagined future. They queer the collective understanding of womanhood in both their quotidian lives and in their extraordinary performance.

Black Tomboys traces presentations and perceptions of Black tomboyism primarily through stages of maturation from girlhood to adulthood. Each chapter adds depth to the story of Black tomboys as conduits of queer possibility. They also investigate how social context adds to or detracts from their journey towards self-actualization. In uncovering how Black tomboyism disrupts paradigmatic ideas of Black womanhood, my theoretical framework draws from queer theory and intersections of critical race theory with Black feminism and Black cultural studies. Specifically, my project builds upon hip-hop feminist scholarship. Coined by scholar Joan Morgan in her 1999 publication *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, hip-hop feminism was birthed out of a longing to fully identify with a

movement that does not speak from the ivory tower and is not rooted in discourse on victimization. Morgan explains, “More than any other generation before us, we need a feminism committed to ‘keeping it real.’ We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful” (62). In a more recent essay, “Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure,” Morgan expounds upon this idea and urges for a breaking away from “traditional” means of producing Black feminist thought while prioritizing the excavation of contemporary (1980s - present) sites of cultural significance:

> We've become overly reliant on the field's most trenchant theories—specifically Kimberle Crenshaw's “intersectionality,” Patricia Collin's “controlling images,” Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic, Higginbotham's “respectability politics,” Hine's “cultural dissemblance.” Bequeathing them the sanctity of dogma and rendering them impervious to the changes of time, we've often failed to re-interrogate these venerated interventions with the temporal, cultural specificity reflected in contemporary US black women's ethnic heterogeneity, queerness and the advent of digital technologies and social media. (38)

While my project does not focus *solely* on the contemporary, recent depictions of Black tomboyism in literature, film, television, and music are central. This exploration is bolstered, however, by the groundwork laid by the scholars who complicated the worldview of Black womanhood and girlhood. Through their work, I meaningfully nuance the dynamic genealogy of Black tomboys.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine fictional Black tomboys who contend with societal pressures and expectations in childhood and adolescence. Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), the six-year-

old heroine of the 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild,* and Esch, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones,* navigate the tension between their tomboyism and gender normativity while fighting for their survival. Both stories are set in Louisiana before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Natural disaster, strained familial relations, and personal decisions force both Hushpuppy and Esch to come into roles of great responsibility at extremely young ages. There is a complexity to each character that sheds light on how their tomboyism impact their daily lives and their maturation process. Esch and Hushpuppy are motherless children during these transitions (also rather fatherless, at times), so these chapters excavate how they learn and engage with "womanly" ideals and practices within the social context of small, Black southern towns without guidance from an overtly feminine figure. Esch also faces the reality of her impending motherhood, further complicating her understanding of femininity. Both characters ultimately gain a sense of empowerment and agency when they come to realize the importance of staying true to themselves regardless of life's circumstances.

I move into a study of the real-life adult Black tomboys in popular culture, more closely exploring the implications of their interventions given the sociotemporal context and mediums through which they expressed themselves. Famed blues singer and pianist Gladys Bentley, drag king and activist Stormé DeLarverie, and legendary hip-hop MC Queen Latifah are studied in Chapter 3. As entertainers, they gained fame locally and globally despite (and perhaps because of) their defiance of the masculine/feminine binary. One of their primary modes of rebellion is through their attire. Bentley was famous for how her raunchy lyrics paired with her crisp white tuxedo when she sang in 1920s Harlem. DeLarverie's masculine attire, both on stage and off as a dapper male impersonator and MC for the Jewel Box Revue in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced

gender-bending fashion. Latifah wore a pants suit on the cover of her debut rap album in 1989 and redefined regality. They all carved their own space in their respective worlds and presented messages that underscored their subversion of gender norms. When Bentley sings about her lack of sexual satisfaction in "Red Beans and Rice Blues" and when Latifah yells, "Who you callin' a bitch?" in her 1993 hit song, "U.N.I.T.Y.," they demand respect regardless of their explicit delivery. Through performance and lived experience, these women upset the idea that a patriarchal brand of feminism is the only route to success for women in the entertainment industry and this chapter uncovers the challenges they had to confront in their journey. Their lives and careers epitomize how Black tomboys have historically been social disrupters but also reveal the incessant *need* for such disruption in a world that praises faux progressive attitudes.[4]

Chapter 4 takes a closer look at Queen Latifah's expansive career in media because she models various modes of tomboyism in her acting roles. Her portrayals as Khadijah James in the Fox sitcom *Living Single* (1993-1998), as Cleo in *Set It Off* (1996), and as Leslie Wright in *Just Wright* (2010) demonstrate a positive arc in the reception of Black tomboys in visual media. In the early 1990s when she shifted her focus from music to film and television, she was initially cast as the less attractive friend alongside light-skinned, modelesque women. When she began receiving more opportunities to play major roles, she transcended such castings. As Cleo, Latifah pushed the boundaries of how butch women are perceived by playing a hard-edged gangster-like woman who is also unabashedly vulnerable and soft. As the star of *Living Single*, she presented the world with an image of a successful, career-driven Black tomboy who is

[4] Since the early twentieth century, women's rights have greatly expanded, from the right to vote and to the right to have their own bank account. Along with women having more individual freedoms, attitudes about what is socially acceptable behavior and attire for women have expanded, too. Recent events demonstrate how easily certain rights can be revoked, however, which inevitably impact social mores. The fight to overturn the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that gives women the right to an abortion is an example of this. Though the ruling remains intact at the time of the publication of *Black Tomboys*, the mere question of whether it should be rescinded reveals the fragility of progressive measures in the American social and political landscape.

desirable, too. After proving that she could give a stellar performance as an actress, she wanted to prove that she could excel on the silver screen as a lead. A 2015 interview with *Variety* reveals that she was initially discouraged from pursuing movie roles by a former agent. In 1995, she founded Flavor Unit Entertainment alongside Shakim Compere because they wanted to forge their own path regardless of Hollywood's standards. Compere says, "Most writers don't write with Latifah in mind, so she doesn't get the opportunities that most actors get, so we've gotten in the habit of creating our own agenda and our own projects" (Riley). One of the opportunities they created themselves was her role in the romantic comedy *Just Wright*. Though she was already in full swing as a go-to rom com star by the time this movie was in the works, *Just Wright* speaks directly to the importance of Black tomboy representation, not as a supporting role, but as a lead character. The chapter examines the ways in which each portrayal expanded perceptions of the tie between desirability and femininity. As a heavy-set Black tomboy, she defies the need to fuel racist stereotypes about Black women to gain mainstream fame.

These chapters coalesce around the idea of defying expectations and the radical act of self-making. *Black Tomboys* hails the girls and women who signify the power of putting theory to practice, the ones who challenge the societal bounds meant to limit the infinite possibilities of their being. Toni Cade Bambara wrote in her 1970 essay, "On the Issue of Roles":

> I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine," not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandising nonsense, but rather because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about—and what revolution for self is all about—the whole person. And I am beginning to see, especially, lately, that the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles is an obstacle to political consciousness, that the way

> those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to full development. And that is a shame, for a revolutionary must be capable of, above all, total self-autonomy. (123)

I stand on the shoulders of women like Bambara, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Demita Frazier as I make my declarations. For them, it was not sufficient to simply enumerate the struggles of women in general and not point to the very specific, very systemic ways that Black women are not free to do as they please. They recognized the cultural nuances that impede advancement for Black women compared to their white counterparts. *Black Tomboys* interrogates the implications of neglecting the positionality of the Black tomboy as an exemplar of a lack of cultural specificity when assessing so-called progressive attitudes. It demands that we move beyond the call for U.N.I.T.Y. that Queen Latifah rapped about in 1993 if we want to make progress in Black women's freedom to define themselves and live true to who they are without the threat of violence or social marginalization. Moreover, it pronounces a desire to *not* make Black tomboyism a norm. The Black girls and women who dare to be themselves by rupturing the conventional ideas of womanhood are revolutionary and embody a radical queer possibility that lends to the liberation of *everybody*.

Ch. 1

The Queer Possibility of Tomboyism in Childhood: A Study of Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

> "Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. To inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable, to be deeply aware of the gulf between where you stayed and how you might live…Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of what might be…It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive."
>
> - Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives*

As a child, I vehemently denied all things "girly." I abhorred all things pink, was repulsed by dresses, and wanted to stay far away from flowers of any sort. I was naturally drawn to boyish activities and clothes. Growing up as the youngest of four and the only girl, this was unsurprising. I took pride in being able to keep up with my brothers despite the age gaps between us. My ability to jump the fences, hit a homerun when we played baseball in the alley, and climb into the high window of our house whenever we lost our keys (over and over) made me feel more equipped to take on life's challenges, and even in hindsight, I fervently believe this is true. Having the freedom to explore, the freedom to do what I want and dress how I please, made me self-sufficient at a very young age. Of course, I could not pay bills or drive, but I started cooking for myself around age five, I was a latchkey kid, so I spent long periods of time alone in the house from elementary school forward and never had any issues. I was keenly aware that my tomboyism was my superpower.

Though my real-life experience was a source of empowerment, Black girls having too much autonomy is often a site of contention, however. Depictions of Black girls in literature and popular culture initially repudiated narratives about Black girls having any sense of agency because such portrayals undermined certain social and political agendas. In the book *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, Nazera Sadiq Wright explores how representations of Black girlhood written by Black men for Black publications, such as the *Colored American* and *Freedom's Journal*, were deliberately static. In those contexts, young Black girls were symbols of racial uplift, often assigned characteristics that uphold and promote a white patriarchal standard of life. The girls were "willing helpers, virtuous and obedient, kind and concerned about the welfare of others, hard-working, and valiant." They were not complex figures and were viewed as mere continuities of subservience. Wright marks a shift from the flat characterization of Black girls to a dynamic one when Black women began publishing their own stories. She observes, "In nineteenth-century African American literature, black women writers often introduced black girl characters when they were at a youthful age, usually less than twelve. This is a popular age in early African American literature because the youthful and unknowing girl represents a blank slate with the capacity to undergo transformation through intellectual agency and achievement" (61). According to Wright, these depictions are progressive compared to Black women writers such as Harriet Jacob and Harriet Wilson, the first Black woman to publish a novel in the U.S., defied those tropes by leveraging their lived experiences to create nuanced portrayals of Black girlhood. Wright explains, "In the texts of African American women writers, black girls learn lessons in survival, self-reliance, fortitude, and determination" (62). An exemplar of this is the story of Frado, the six-year-old Black girl protagonist in Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. The mostly autobiographical text

draws upon Wilson's personal experience in the antebellum North. Frado endures physical and mental abuse as an indentured servant, but the narrative traces the awakening of her self-confidence and agency. *Our Nig,* is a story of Black girl empowerment but gained little to no traction when published. The text was lost for nearly a century but was rediscovered and republished in the 1980s. The suppression of the message that Wilson was trying to send demonstrates the silencing of voices that dared to present Black girls as whole beings who feel, fight, love, and prevail.

Ultimately, Jacob and Wilson's more accurate representations of Black girlhood were destabilized by the widespread popularity of children's literature by white authors. Through characters in books like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, white benevolence and saviorism were upheld by reinforcing racist stereotypes about Black girls. Written as an anti-slavery text, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* laid the foundation for what Black girlhood looks like in the white imagination. Published in 1852, years before Frado was introduced to the world, Stowe offered a version of Black girlhood that conformed to commonly held beliefs about Black people in antebellum America, even amongst white abolitionists. Wright explains, "Often illustrated with vivid pictures and sketches, these texts contain plots that feature black girls who are orphaned or whose mothers are unavailable due to early death or extreme working conditions. Although young black protagonists in early children's literature written by white authors are nurtured by community members through acts that demonstrate goodwill, they often suffer" (62). One of the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is Topsy, an enslaved child reformed by her new white masters. When the reader is introduced to her, she is described as wicked and goblin-like in appearance but, eventually, she is transformed into a pious, obedient girl. Stowe's main message is that through love, people like Topsy can be tamed. She stresses the idea that Black

people need to be saved from themselves and their circumstances and this can be achieved by an imposition of Christian morals and values. Though progressive for the time, Topsy was stripped of her agency and became the quintessential picaninny, a "wild child" of sorts. Her presence in a widely popular and canonized novel made Black girlhood legible, but at the expense of Black girls themselves. While Stowe hoped to stoke empathy for the enslaved and formerly enslaved by presenting her in an unkempt, uneducated, downtrodden way, but she ultimately reified racist stereotypes that restrict what Black girlhood is and can be well into the twenty-first century.

In this chapter, I explore a Black girl protagonist who can be considered an extension of such a caricature and is a manifestation of the limits placed on Black girlhood when filtered through the white imagination: Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The 2012 Behn Zeitlin directed film garnered critical acclaim but was the focus of intense criticism as well. In an article titled "How Do You Pronounce Quvenzhané Wallis?," Black culture critic Armond White answers by saying, "Pickaninny would be a viable option." He goes on to refer to Hushpuppy as a "Noble Savage," accusing Zeitlin of depicting the "Southern poor as slatternly, exotic freaks." Though harsh, White is not alone in his sentiments. One of the most prominent voices of dissent is that of famed scholar and feminist, bell hooks. In the article "No Love in the Wild," hooks expresses deep dismay about the characterization of Hushpuppy. Hooks critiques the film saying that viewers "overlook violence, eroticization of children, and all manner of dirt and filth." For hooks, Hushpuppy's father, Wink, is an abusive, neglectful, violently drunk man. His violence towards Hushpuppy, coupled with the violence of severe poverty, reinforces negative stereotypes of Blackness, in general, and Black girlhood, specifically. In conversation with scholar Melissa Harris-Perry, there is an echo of this reaction as they both agree when hooks says, "I can't take another image of an abused Black child being

represented as entertaining. We can't get past the construction of Black children as mini-adults whose innocence we don't have to protect" (Irwin). For these critics, the stripping of Hushpuppy's innocence through violence, poverty, and an abusive child-father relationship perpetuates the adultification of Black children as well as reifies racist picaninny, "wild child" imagery in mainstream media.

Hushpuppy is much more complex than these assessments afford, however, inhabiting the "wild" that Jack Halberstam defines as "the order of things that we have left behind, the anticipatory mood that accompanies all claims of coming after something, and the unknown future that, for now at least, still beckons from the horizon" (*Wild Things* 7). Though *Beasts* is criticized because of its perceived romanticization of poverty and Black suffering, there are moments when Hushpuppy recuperates some of what is historically omitted from depictions of Black girlhood by white writers—she plays, she is nurtured, and she pushes herself towards self-actualization and fierce confidence as a leader. Through an examination of her locale, her community, and her relationships with family and strangers alike, her wild Black tomboyism is revealed as a fixture of her revolutionary prowess, queering the boundaries that would otherwise keep her tethered to a life of social adherence.

She Ain't No Baby: The Makings of Hushpuppy

Hushpuppy's life locates her at the intersection of many queer identities—a member of a non-nuclear family residing in a virtually lawless town where she is a child of the wild, or the "un/place," resisting domesticity.[5] She is a six-year-old Black tomboy living in a fictional place

[5] "Queer" refers to a state of being that resists a static definition or a fixed position in society. Hushpuppy is at the intersection of multiple identities that are traditionally deemed precarious. This status is compounded by the fact that she inhabits the "un/place," which is "where the people who are left outside of domesticity reside—small children, animals, and ruined adults, an anticommunity of wildness," as defined by Halberstam. (*Wild Things* 137)

called the Bathtub, which is based on the real-life town of Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, a sinking island roughly 80 miles southwest of New Orleans that is only a quarter mile wide and two miles long (Boyd). They've been plagued by coastal erosion and rising sea levels, slowly succumbing to effects of climate change. The film follows the people of the Bathtub as they prepare for, undergo, and recover from Hurricane Katrina. They are a melting pot of races and ages, from newborns to elderly, but they are unified. Hushpuppy's location in the Bathtub, an impoverished town in the rural South, is what primarily shapes what is acceptable behavior and attire for her, essentially placing her beyond the limited scope of normative definitions of Black girlhood.

Hushpuppy's mother died when she was younger, so she lives with her father, Wink, on what many would consider a wasteland. The opening scene depicts her playing in mud, talking to the baby chickens, and wandering around their property. Old tires and scrap metal pepper what would be considered their lawn. Hushpuppy and Wink live in run-down, rusty, cluttered mobile homes on stilts, a safeguard from the recurring floods. They eat with their bare hands. They go out on the water to fish on a makeshift boat, rendered out of the bed of an old pickup truck (see fig. 1). The sun makes their skin glow as they relax and bask in it while they catch their next meal. They look towards another town located beyond the levee where industrial smokestacks span the horizon like skyscrapers. Wink says, "Ain't that ugly over there? We got the prettiest place on Earth," expressing his preference for the beauty in the land they tilled themselves, regardless of how impoverished they are, over industrialization (Zeitlin). Hushpuppy shows reverence to Wink's words, recounting what he told her about what lays in the horizon. She narrates, "Daddy says up above the levee, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all gonna drown down here, but we

ain't going nowhere." The precarity of the Bathtub contributes to how it can be defined as a queer locale. The juxtaposition of the Bathtub to the "dry side" presents the gross reality of how some communities are left to drown if there is no money to be made by their staying afloat. The scene is revelatory of who, in this instance, is "othered" and who is doing the "othering."

The people of the Bathtub construct the dominant discourse within their worldview. They evoke a sense of empowerment and pride despite the incessant threat of both natural and man-made catastrophes. A major part of the reason they remain there in the face of what is an inevitable demise rests in the spirit of their community. They demonstrate an unfettering commitment to one another and deep respect for life. Hushpuppy says, "The Bathtub got more holidays than the whole rest of the world!" They celebrate often and drink ten times as much. She continues, "Up in the dry world, they got none of what we got," while she jumps and screams in elation during one of their parades. Undoubtedly, their culture runs deep, and they view an alternate, albeit more stable, way of life elsewhere as one not worth living. Hushpuppy is acutely aware of their fate, but she declares, "Me and my daddy, we stay right here! We's what the Earth is for!" The impending storm threatens to absorb them into the Gulf, but Hushpuppy and Wink are amongst those who fear losing their town, community, and culture more than they fear the potentially fatal blow of Katrina.

As the storm nears, though many townspeople evacuate the area because of the strong possibility of flooding, several families decide to stay, perhaps out of a lack of resources to leave, perhaps out of a will to preserve their land regardless of the circumstance (if the resilience of the real-life inhabitants of Isle de Jean Charles is any indication, one can confidently lean towards the latter). Eventually, the hurricane comes and goes, leaving many of the people of the Bathtub stranded in their dilapidated homes. The flood waters swallow the town whole, washing

away the gardens and killing many of the farm animals that they depend on for sustenance. Their journey toward rebuilding commences immediately and the film chronicles their will to live despite the less-than-ideal circumstances and enduring lack of aid on part of the government, mirroring the horror that unfolded in 2005. The primary plot of *Beasts* reveals their drive to preserve their space and an unwillingness to join the "others" in what is likely a cleaner, more stable part of the Louisiana county. They prefer to live in a place where they can define themselves for themselves. The townspeople of the Bathtub defend what is uniquely theirs and Hushpuppy willingly participates in the fight as a physical manifestation of the power of their world-making.

Fig. 1. Still from *Beasts of the Southern Wild* of Hushpuppy on her makeshift boat.

Destabilizing Gender: The Genealogy of Hushpuppy

A crucial aspect of Hushpuppy being a genderbending defender of her people and culture is her presence as a little, Southern Black girl. The genealogy of her characterization reveals why her perceived instability as neither prototypically masculine nor feminine is especially palpable in the film and it lends to her ability to reconstruct paradigms of Black girlhood. Firstly, *Beasts*

of the Southern Wild was adapted from the play *Juicy and Delicious* by Lucy Alibar. In the process of translating the story into a screenplay, Hushpuppy's character was reconfigured. In the play, Hushpuppy is a poor ten-year-old white boy from rural Georgia. The primary action consists of Wink and Miss Bathsheba preparing the schoolchildren, including Hushpuppy, for an apocalypse that may leave them without adults to help navigate their lives. Wink's character is similar across both the film and the play. He is dying from untreated health issues and is abusive in many respects as he "attempts to masculinize a child perceived as too weak to survive his or her imminent abandonment" (Nyong'o 257). In an interview with Barnes and Noble, prior to the completion of the film, Alibar was asked about how this change may impact the story, and she states, "My first response is, of course it affects the audience's experience. I always felt like there wasn't a blueprint for father daughter relationships—for them or for us. Because what are they supposed to do with us, treat us like boys, or small women, or what?" (Kreizman). Alibar's real-life uncertainty about that dynamic is projected onto the characterization of Wink and Hushpuppy in *Beasts* as it depicts a somehow both slippery and stable relationship. Further, this commentary unveils the possible source of some of the troublesome details of Hushpuppy's characterization.

There are several unintended negative implications of making Hushpuppy an impoverished Black girl. In *Juicy and Delicious*, Hushpuppy is simply described as "a sweet little Southern boy. Not the sharpest knife in the box" (Alibar). Although he is several years older than the film's iteration of Hushpuppy, he proves to lack the wisdom that she demonstrates through her monologues in the film. For example, in the play, when Hushpuppy speaks about his father potentially dying, he says, "My daddy's building me a boat. For when he— For when it's the end of the world and we graduate. I'm supposed to sail to Japan. I think I'm gonna die when

he dies. I can't swim. And I can't understand Japanese. I can't hardly understand English" (12). There is a premature sense of defeat that Hushpuppy expresses, one that implies a lack of resiliency and determination. Juxtaposed to cinematic Hushpuppy's perception of life and death, he, indeed, is not as knowledgeable and competent. In contrast, after her father dies in the film, Hushpuppy thinks, "Everybody loses the thing that made them. It's even how it's supposed to be in nature. The brave man stay and watch it happen. They don't run" (Zeitlin). She is sure of herself and confident in her ability to continue without her caretaker. Essentially, the ten-year-old white boy in Georgia is presented as dumb and unable to care for himself, an innocence typically afforded to children, while the six-year-old Black girl in Louisiana is presented as wise beyond her years and capable of caring for herself in a way that is abnormal for a child her age. While this shift in characterization appears to be beneficial to the audience's perception of Hushpuppy, adding depth and nuance to an otherwise nearly flat character, it aids in the perpetual adultification of young Black girls in media and in real-life.

The film emphasizes Hushpuppy's autonomy despite being under the care of her father and the other adults in the town. This autonomy, when met with the hefty expectations her father has for her, is problematic in many respects and is particularly troublesome when considering the white gaze of most viewers and the history of the "adultification" of Black girls in general. hooks highlights this when she says, "She is only six years old. Of course, in the mindset of white supremacy Black children, no matter their age, are always seen as miniature adults" ("No Love in the Wild"). What accompanies the lack of presumed innocence of Black girls is a lack of empathy, harsher punishment, and decreased protections. In a 2017 study conducted by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality called *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, researchers found that "compared to white girls of the same age, survey

participants perceive that Black girls need less nurturing, Black girls need less protection, Black girls need to be supported less, Black girls need to be comforted less, Black girls are more independent, Black girls know more about adult topics, and Black girls know more about sex" (Epstein et al. 1). The adults surveyed were from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, but 74 percent of the participants were white. The aim of the study was to combat the unfair treatment of Black children in major public systems including juvenile justice and education, but the findings also illuminate the disparities between the expectations regarding the gender and sexual identities of Black women compared to their white counterparts starting at very young ages. In exploring the adultification of Black girls, the study points to the stereotypes of Black femininity that have persisted from slavery forward such as the Sapphire (emasculating, loud, aggressive, angry, stubborn, and unfeminine), the Jezebel (hypersexualized, seductive and exploiter of men's weaknesses), and the Mammy (self-sacrificing, nurturing, loving, asexual), all of which impact the disciplinary practices and perceptions of Black girlhood held by those who have adopted the notions of these stereotypes (5). These skewed perceptions of Black girlhood may seem innocuous to some, but they result in real-life consequences for the Black girls themselves, including increased chances of imprisonment, and, in the grand scheme, their proliferation is "essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression," as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (147). This reality contributes to heightened critical analysis of how Black girls are portrayed in media, demanding that a figure like Hushpuppy bear the weight of undoing centuries of negative stereotypes.

To some, the skewing of Hushpuppy's gender reflects a purposely obscure characterization, not for the sake of empowerment, but for the sake of the film's success. bell hooks, for example, points to various moments throughout the film when Hushpuppy is

presented wearing only a dirty, stretched tank top, filthy underwear, and rainboots, citing her presentation as an eroticization of prepubescent girlhood for capital gain. She examines the directorial rendering of Hushpuppy as a Black girl who blurs gendered classification when she notes:

> This transgender casting of Hushpuppy as sometimes representing maleness and sometimes femaleness is the constant image when the film begins. From the onset of the movie the camera highlights the back of the child's body wearing a thin white undershirt and orange boy briefs leading onlookers to wonder are we seeing a boy or a girl. Again and again the camera zooms in on Hushpuppy's behind. We see her gleefully running and jumping. Audiences wait for a gendered identity to be revealed. Clearly the camera toys with the child's body pornographically eroticizing the image…Given the recent mega success of films featuring southern black females this choice has an opportunistic flavor. ("No Love in the Wild)

Given that there was little to no commentary by Alibar or Zietlin on why this shift was made, hooks may be correct in her assessment. The audience's inability to immediately categorize Hushpuppy as either a boy or a girl distorts the perception of her in such a way that it leaves her up for interpretation. They filmmakers can capitalize on the fact that she cannot be placed, thus granting each individual viewer an opportunity to define her based on their own biases or desires as a consumer.

This obscurity can lead to negative readings of Hushpuppy, but the messiness in changing her gender positions her as a representation of fluid girlhood, never stabilizing into a singular defined being, eschewing both masculine and feminine paradigms. In "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," Tavia Nyong'o examines

the implicit and explicit narratives that are present in both the play and the film and how they are shaped by the casting of Hushpuppy. Nyong'o cites one particular scene that exemplifies how the reconfiguration of Hushpuppy impacts their gendered characterization. After learning of Wink's impending death, Hushpuppy expresses a deep feeling of despair and sadness. Wink naturally responds with anger and frustration, imploring them not to cry. The scene culminates in a motivational moment when Wink tells Hushpuppy to "show me them guns!" Wink yells, "Who the man?" and is met with an emphatic "I'm the man!" from Hushpuppy. In the play, a little boy's exhortation of being "the man" errs on the side of normalcy. Masculine bravado is often instilled in boyhood as a precursor to a more verbose iteration of patriarchal expression. The film's context makes that declaration much more complex, however, given that it's a little Black girl making an explicitly masculine claim. Nyong'o explains how this gives way to a queering of Hushpuppy, saying:

> But while the play must posit the source of Hushpuppy's weakness as male effeminacy—the proverbial "sissy boy"—the film instead produces the equally recognizable figure of the strong-willed, resilient little black girl. While each are coherent on their own terms, the repetition of dialogue and characterization between play and film accentuates Hushpuppy's virtual queerness, which derives less from perverse sexual orientation than from the characters' disjunctive emergence into sexed and raced beings. As Hushpuppy crosses between drama and cinema, Hushpuppy becomes an incompossible of wild child and sissy boy, while never stabilizing into either. (257)

The slippage between the two Hushpuppys creates dissonance between the corporeal and the spiritual in the screenplay. While one can conclude that this is the result of a messy

reconfiguration, one can also derive a more meaningful assessment of how this affects Hushpuppy as a representative of Black girlhood. Cinematic Hushpuppy emanates a queer materiality that can be leveraged in the Anthropocene, or most immediately, in her daily survival efforts as an impoverished, precarious figure. Her queering makes her especially equipped to navigate spaces and circumstances that do not tend to quintessentially masculine or quintessentially feminine duties or presentations of self.

Taming the Beast: Stripping Hushpuppy of Her Tomboy Superpower

What both bolsters and threatens Hushpuppy's ability to self-make is her engrossment in the social mores of the tightknit precarious community of the Bathtub and their intergenerational teachings. They prioritize self-sufficiency and lessons in how to be independent, though only six-years old, is a major aspect of Hushpuppy's day-to-day life. Throughout the film, Wink's mission to prepare Hushpuppy for surviving in the world in his absence requires her to lean heavily into her tomboyism. He teaches her to fish with her bare hands, she eats with no utensils, her hair is never styled, and she dresses in stained, loose-fitting clothes. She accompanies her father on various excursions and flaunts her ability to be more boy-like when she makes proud declarations like, "If I drink all this here, I can burp like a man" (Zeitlin). Wink's life lessons reach an apex during a significant scene in the film when the people of the Bathtub are gathered immediately following the storm. While Wink is entertaining the others, a man from the community is teaching Hushpuppy how to eat crab by cracking the shell with her hands. The man's delicate method angers Wink. He slams his fist on the table and yells, "NO, HUSHPUPPY!" He walks over to them, grabs the crab, and says, "Beast it!" while violently ripping the crab apart. Hushpuppy is startled but motivated to follow her father's instructions.

Initially, she looks at the crab in confusion, but Wink encourages her to summon her inner animal by screaming, “Show me you can do it!” Hushpuppy musters her strength and grapples with the crab while everyone in the room begins to chant, “BEAST IT! BEAST IT! BEAST IT!” Finally, the crab gives way, she sucks the juice out, slams it down, climbs on the table, and flexes her muscles while she releases a high-pitched war cry as everyone cheers (see fig. 2). This moment marks a transformation for Hushpuppy. She realizes her strength and ability to be a “beast,” blurring the line between her girlish self and her animal instincts.

Fig. 2. Still from *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Hushpuppy flexes her muscles after “beasting” the crab.

Wink’s preference for Hushpuppy to be *like* a boy is evidenced in him consistently admonishing her any time she displays stereotypical girlish propensities (i.e., showing affection, crying, and expressing emotion). He subscribes to the notion that emotional vulnerability is a sign of weakness. Wink thinks Hushpuppy’s survival depends on her strength and demands that she perform masculinity in the same way he does, operating within the belief that any display of softness undermines one’s ability to fight. Hushpuppy, though only six years old, has already internalized this message. For example, after Hushpuppy transitions into being the “beast” she

needs to be, the pace of the film hastens, signaling their relentless road to redemption. The film shows a montage of the townspeople working diligently on getting the Bathtub back to an inhabitable state as Hushpuppy proclaims, "Wasn't no time to sit around crying like a bunch of pussies." Her mindset is a direct reflection of Wink's emphasis on survival over emotion, but it is also the mantra of the people in the Bathtub at-large. Poverty-stricken and prone to state-sanctioned neglect, they understand that physical, mental, and emotional fortitude is the only way they can stay afloat.

The film repeatedly reminds the viewer that the Bathtub is a queer space, culturally disconnected from standard social practices. The town is comprised of run-down shacks, dirt roads, dilapidated houseboats, and junk. The homes appear to sit on acres of land that has not been tended in years and they eat the vegetables and meat that they grow and kill themselves. In the opening scene of the film, Hushpuppy is wandering around the land, on which her home sits. She plays in dirt, picks up one of the chicks they have, and pets their pig while her father prepares dinner. When supper is ready, Wink rings the bell and yells, "FEED UP TIME!" Hushpuppy comes running out of her house to get her piece of the full chicken that Wink cooked for her and the animals. She eats amongst them while throwing them scraps of her own food because Wink tells her to "share with the dog." This is their life and there is no evidence of discontentment with their lifestyle. Outside of Hushpuppy's home, the rest of the town seems to operate similarly, which is brought to the forefront in the scenes with Miss Bathsheba, her teacher, where she teaches the children how to grow their own food and take care of animals. Stereotypical femininity can be viewed as an unrealistic way to present oneself in such a carefree, physically laborious environment, so reading Hushpuppy against the same backdrop as other little Black girls can lead to harsher criticism of what she represents.

The precarity of the townspeople of the Bathtub make them vulnerable to state violence, illuminating the real-life consequences of not adhering to social norms. One day as Wink and Hushpuppy are resting beside each other in their dilapidated temporary home, they hear the rustle of outsiders. A group of white men are surveying the land, announcing a mandatory evacuation of all occupants. Wink exclaims, "WE AIN'T GOIN' NOWHERE!" as the men kick down the doors in a violent fashion, physically accosting them to take them to what *they* feel is safer place. All the townspeople of the Bathtub put up a fight, refusing to concede to their request. The white outsiders wrestle them to the ground as if they are resisting arrest, including little Hushpuppy, but it is all in the name of "help." The imagery of the men forcefully reprimanding women and children is one that is all too familiar in our American social landscape. The townspeople of the Bathtub, as victims of natural disaster, are susceptible to the same violence that is enacted on violent criminals, signaling how many people view them as one in the same.

When they are apprehended, they all get shuttled to a place ironically named the Open Arms Processing Center. Hushpuppy is in awe of the place. She narrates her observations, noting that "it didn't look like a prison. It looked more like a fish tank with no water." Her sentiment in this moment suggests that she expected to go be incarcerated after being brought there in such a forceful manner, and though they are not in prison, there is a similar air of lifelessness. The room is filled with despair and Hushpuppy cannot seem to reconcile how they all could be there "for their own good," as told by the workers, but still be hopeless. She sees other displaced evacuees scattered around an open room, bundled in blankets next to the few belongings they were able to bring with them. Her and Wink have only a short moment together before he is taken from her so

he can get treated for his illness. Hushpuppy watches as he resists, but he ultimately succumbs to their advances and is taken to be sedated.

Fig. 3. Hushpuppy being scolded by a woman at Open Arms in *Beasts of the Southern Wild.*

In Wink's absence, Hushpuppy is solely under the care of the workers and their first order of business is to tame her. The scene cuts to an image of a "clean," girlish Hushpuppy, one stripped of autonomy and any marker of masculinity. For the first time the viewer sees her with combed, neat hair and clean clothes—a blue dress with ruffles. She stands silently in the middle of a room, staring into the hallway, tight-lipped with anger while she is getting scolded for not listening (see fig. 3). Hushpuppy is quiet in a sea of chaos, surrounded by white girls who are throwing toys, running around, and yelling without punishment. Hushpuppy is positioned as the "bad" child, the wild child that has finally been caged, even though she is the most compliant of them all. She wanders around the facility and is taken aback by how the sick people have so many tubes coming from them and are hooked up to monitoring devices, including her father. She says, "When an animal gets sick here, they plug it into the wall." Hushpuppy reveals that her

father once told her how he never wanted to be plugged in if he ever became so ill that he is unable to live the carefree life that he's accustomed to living. Being tethered to the sterile walls of a facility until death is simply not appealing to people who have navigated life mostly unencumbered by social norms and restrictions.

The jarring experience that Hushpuppy endures also points to the importance of cultural and geographical context when assessing the appropriateness of certain types of behavior. In *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History,* Michelle Ann Abate writes about how an understanding of tomboyism *must* be culturally situated. When dissecting the perceptions of Black tomboys, she states:

> In the same ways that factors such as geographic region, historical time period, and socio-economic class impact the construction of this code of conduct, so does racial and ethnic identity. Together with being excluded from prevailing definitions of (white) womanhood by their racial and cultural heritage, these gender-bending female figures are being reared in environments that contain differing conceptions of femininity and masculinity... (xxii)

One of the stories that Abate cites as an example of Black tomboyism is Jamaica Kincaid's 1978 short story "Girl," in which the mother teaches the daughter lessons on womanhood. According to her, a woman's proper conduct includes spitting, fishing, and bullying men; "activities that would all be considered tomboyish for their Anglo-American counterparts," says Abate (xxiii). What is neglected is the fact that "Girl" is steeped in expressions of respectability politics as well. Most of the narrative is instructing the girl to cook correctly, clean properly, eat neatly, walk like a lady, sew, cater to her father, and smile in the face of someone she does not like. The reading of Kincaid's story is not met with the cultural nuance that it requires but is indicative of

the complexities of examining Black tomboyism when the Black tomboy figure occupies a space that is outside of socially normative structures.

The disconnect between the people of the Bathtub and the world at-large when considering what is socially acceptable behavior and decorum for a little Black girl is on full display in Open Arms. In Hushpuppy's everyday life amongst people like her, she is at liberty to bend the norms of gender performance. When taken out of that context, her liberties are stripped, and she is reminded of social constructs that exist beyond her worldview. The rules of the care facility are illegible to Hushpuppy, not because she is ignorant, but because her quotidian life is not governed by the hegemonic social order. She is not unknowing, she is untethered. In her wayward life, she practices what Saidiya Hartman deems the "social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies" (*Wayward Lives* 277). Hushpuppy comprehends the lexicon of "wildness," but in the sea of coloniality in which she finds herself, she is considered illiterate.

The rescuers represent the purveyors of social normativity. Through their lens, gender nonconformity and lack of feminine respectability are markers of a primordial way of life that needs correcting. They attempt to mold her into a girl who fits into a stable categorization because her genderbending nature is unsettling, but she fights back. In the scene immediately following the image of her in a dress, she is back with her hair disheveled and is wearing only a hospital gown. She stands by her father's side and attempts to encourage him. In this moment, her silenced voice speaks again. In this galvanizing moment, she decisively rebels and strives to free herself and others from the strains of those who supposedly came to save them from their circumstances. In the end, it is Hushpuppy, with her hair undone and tattered clothing, who confidently leads her people out of their confined and back home. In her social context, she *is*

being the Black girl that she is supposed to be, free from the judgement of those who do not understand her way of life. Without saying, she commits herself to leading an untamed life. She sees the perils of conformity and vows to resist. Hushpuppy stands as a symbol of what might be, breaking from the "wild" to which Blackness is typically relegated, and moving towards the "wild" that has historically been a place of refuge for Black people seeking to reclaim personhood. Hushpuppy symbolizes how beyond the confines of colonial rule, beyond the domestic, there are opportunities for self-making that are otherwise unobtainable.

Breaking the "No Cryin'" Rule: Hushpuppy's Powerful Vulnerability

The adultification of Hushpuppy is challenged and her genderbending nature is fortified in the transformation she undergoes from the beginning of the film to the end. The major plot points, her relationship with Wink and incessant quest for her mother, offer a space for her innocence and budding femininity to be recuperated, crystallizing her resistive power as a queer subject who is a robust embodiment of masculine *and* feminine energy. As she is confronted by Wink's mortality and encounters mother-like figures who demonstrate a gentle care, she meets her softness with the same fervor in which she meets her strength. Throughout the film, Hushpuppy's child-like behavior is still very prominent despite her wisdom and ability to make-do with what she is given. An example of this is when she attempts to make dinner for herself. Because she resides in her own shack adjacent to her father's, she has her own kitchen. As she is preparing dinner, she throws canned goods and cat food into a pot, puts on her protective gear, grabs a blowtorch, and lights the stove herself. To cook the food faster, she turns up the heat and causes an explosion which quickly sets the shack ablaze. Instead of running to get help, she hides in a box on which she frantically starts to draw a picture. Her innocence is in the forefront. In

this scene, Hushpuppy does not understand that she could die in the fire and responds irresponsibly. The line between her imagination and real-life is so distorted that she thinks she can essentially ignore the fire until it goes away, which is indicative of immaturity. Though she proves herself capable of getting to and from school without assistance and can forage for food to satiate her hunger in her father's absence, she is not an adult.

Moreover, Hushpuppy seems to be less afraid of the fire and more afraid of her father's punishment, which is indicative of the discipline she regularly endures with Wink. When her father bursts into the house to rescue her, she thinks, "If daddy kill me, I ain't gon' be forgotten" and takes off running away from him (Zeitlin). Wink is indeed furious with her and slaps her face when she screams at him in response to his frustration. While this particular scene demonstrates a harshness in the way Wink disciplines Hushpuppy, Wink's anger is rooted in his desire to protect her more than anything. In his exchange with her he screams, "I gotta worry about you all the damn time! You killin me!" At this point, Hushpuppy is unaware that Wink is coping with a terminal sickness. Wink, however, knows his fate and wants to ensure that Hushpuppy can manage without him after he dies. Her setting the house on fire is a reminder of her inability to truly keep herself safe in his absence and he is fearful. This care and protection is manifested in a gentler manner later in the film, marking a skewing of gender norms not only for Hushpuppy, but for Wink, as well.

Through the duration of the film, viewers are led to believe that Hushpuppy is being steered away from ever expressing feeling, away from sensitivity, and away from the negative stereotypical implications of femininity, but by the end, this idea is upended. One of the final scenes reveals the depth of the father-daughter dynamic of Hushpuppy and Wink. From the beginning, Wink seemed to be suffering from a horrible cough. Neither him nor anyone else is

certain about his ailment, but it is evident that he is not physically well. While teaching Hushpuppy to be strong, he is too weak to stand at times. At one point, he argues with Hushpuppy, leading her to hit him in the chest. He falls and can't get up. Hushpuppy rushes to Miss Bathsheba to get something that can help him. Hushpuppy says, "When you small, you gotta fix what you can." She becomes his caretaker, disrupting their typical cold and cruel dynamic. Eventually, Hushpuppy realizes the extent of his sickness and she laments, "You think I don't know? You think I can't see?" She is outraged by his lack of communication and has tears welling in her eyes. Wink looks at her and commands, "No, cryin', man! I said no cryin'!" Initially, this scene demonstrates a regression to the dismissal of her feelings to toughen her. However, the scene shifts when he lays down and Hushpuppy climbs onto the pallet with him. He wraps his arm around her, and they peacefully rest in a loving, soothing embrace. Though his realization of his own mortality may be his impetus for being tough on Hushpuppy, it is also a source of gentleness. He stresses the point of her being able to take care of herself. Her mother is absent, and he is her sole caretaker. Wink is acutely aware of this as he declares that it is his job to protect her as long as he lives. Despite him wanting to build her up, he allows for her vulnerability, especially when he cannot help but be vulnerable, too.

Those final moments with her father are not the primary indicators of Hushpuppy's exploration of her feminine self, however. Hushpuppy's quest for her mother throughout the film suggests her intuitive need for balance. Though it's impossible for her to "find" her biological mother, other women stand in as motherly figures, teaching and nurturing her in untraditional ways and serving as models of a type of femininity that is more fitting for her life in the Bathtub. One of the central mother figures in her life is Miss Bathsheba, her teacher. Her classroom is a run-down shed covered in wildlife as if it is folding back into the Earth. She is also rough around

the edges, presenting as an unkempt woman. Hair disheveled, sweaty, and dirty, she saunters around the classroom with an air of deep respect and authority. The viewer's introduction to Bathsheba is when she is giving a lecture to Hushpuppy and the other schoolchildren. She declares, "Everything is part of the buffet of the universe." In her loose, tattered dress, she lifts her sweaty leg to show the children the tattoo on her thigh—a scene of aurochs, massive prehistoric boar-like animals, attacking cavemen. These creatures appear throughout the film, serving as "a larger-than-life monster that is neither real nor imaginary but an involuntary speculative image of what lies in store for us all" (Nyong'o 251). Bathsheba asks, "Who up in here think that the cavemen were sitting around cryin' like a bunch of pussies? Any day now, the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled…Y'all better learn how to survive now" (Zeitlin). She believes in tough, honest love, echoing the importance of not wasting one's time on crying when you are fighting for your life. This harkens to Audre Lorde's essay, "Man Child," which focuses on the importance of raising Black children to be acutely aware of the inherent challenges that accompanies their Blackness. She states, "For survival, Black children in America must be raised to be warriors. For survival, they must be raised to recognize the enemy's many faces" (75). While the essay focuses on her experience with raising a child as a lesbian couple, it resonates with the critique of the way Wink raises Hushpuppy and the lessons she learns from Bathsheba. They teach her to survive and thrive in a world that may not always be in favor of her and her lifestyle. They teach her that life goes on after a disaster and one can either choose to wallow in their misery or choose to take action. Hushpuppy practices this mindset throughout the film, demonstrating a budding mastery of perseverance.

While Wink and Miss Bathsheba instill an awareness of the world into Hushpuppy, they are not able to completely take the place of her mother and the value she would have brought to

her understanding of self. Hushpuppy constantly seeks her mother's care despite being "cared" for by Wink and the townspeople. There are elements of a more nurturing love in her relationship with Bathsheba, but it is not as robust as what she imagines when she thinks of her mother. For example, Bathsheba instructs the children on how to "take care of folks smaller and sweeter than you are" and teaches them how to garden, but her role is still one predicated on the need to teach the children how to stay alive, allowing little to no space for actual feelings (Zeitlin).

In the absence of a consistent nurturing figure, Hushpuppy constructs an imaginary relationship with her mother. When alone, she acts like her mother is present. She talks to her, she engages with her as if she is sitting in front of her, and she looks for her in the ocean, where her father says she is. Hushpuppy she keeps an archive of her belongings in her house, separate from where Wink resides, including an old worn-out Michael Jordan jersey that serves as a physical placeholder for her mother. Hushpuppy keeps the jersey hung on the wall in a shrine-like fashion with string lights decoratively strewn around it. She takes the jersey down and lays it across a chair as if her mother is sitting there with her. She holds a conversation with her, glancing at the jersey as she speaks. She imagines her mother calling her pretty and singing a gentle tune as Hushpuppy scrambles to make a meal for herself out of gravy and cat food because she cannot find her father. In that moment, despite her fear of not having Wink there to care for her, she leans into her mother's fictive presence, which, in Hushpuppy's mind, is sufficient.

Unlike the tone of everyone else in her real life, her mother is warm. There is a deeply entrenched longing that she has for her mother despite not truly knowing her before she died, which is indicative of an inherent bond that Hushpuppy has with her that cannot be replicated by

others. Lorde notes how mothers, specifically, bring a certain balance to the life of a child that cannot be fulfilled by a father or other members of one's community. Whereas Hushpuppy constantly gains the lessons on survival, she rarely, if ever, receives the lessons of love. Lorde says:

> Raising Black children—female and male—in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot love and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive. And in order to survive they must let go. This is what mothers teach—love, survival—that is, self-definition and letting go. For each of these, the ability to feel strongly and to recognize those feelings is central: how to feel love, how to neither discount fear nor be overwhelmed by it, how to enjoy feeling deeply. (74)

Hushpuppy's fixation on her mother's absence illuminates how she does not get to practice "enjoy feeling deeply" day-to-day. She lives in a world that prioritizes an emotionless state of being, so when she is not being lectured about how cruel and cold the world is, she dreams of having the freedom to *feel* and she imagines that she would have that space if she were in her mother's care.

Ultimately, Hushpuppy has the will to survive and the skills to match, but there is a gaping hole in how she understands love and the act of "letting go." However, there is another motherly figure presented in *Beasts* who provides a glimpse into what it might feel like to not *have* to fight. Later in the film, after Wink dies, Hushpuppy and the other little girls from the Bathtub go in search of her mother by swimming out to sea. They rush into the water with one floatation device in tow, and swim into the unknown. A small boat comes to rescue them. They help each other to climb aboard the boat, drenched and exhausted. Hushpuppy looks up at the captain and says, "I'm going to find my mom," and he replies, "That's a good place to go." They

are brought into a lounge located beyond the Bathtub. The flashing "GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS" sign welcomes them, and they are immediately engulfed by the affection of the women who work at the bar, all of whom are clad in lingerie. As Hushpuppy continues to explore the strange place, she encounters a woman who she becomes enamored with, entrapped by her as if she is the mother she'd been searching for her entire life. The unnamed woman invited Hushpuppy to the back kitchen so she can show her a "magic trick." Hushpuppy, fully engrossed by the woman, marvels at her as she effortlessly cracks an egg and begins to whip up a meal. The woman throws back a beer as she slices open an alligator's tail. Hushpuppy's romanticization of the woman is quickly shattered, however, as she begins to lecture her the same way her father always had. She instructs, "Let me tell you something! When you a child, people tell you life is gonna be all happy and hunky-dory and all that bullshit, but I'm here to tell ya that it's not, so you need to get that out your head right now! Life some big ol'feast, but you ain't nothin' but a lil stupid ol' waitress." Her tone is familiar to Hushpuppy, but still jarring. This is not the way she imagines her mother speaking to her.

Although Hushpuppy is confronted by the realities of her "mother" not being as gentle-mannered as she hoped, she also seemed to recognize that the woman's coarse demeanor and femininity is the perfect match for her family. The woman's words were the same type of love taps Wink would offer. When Hushpuppy gets dismayed, the woman demands, "Smile, girl…'cause nobody like a pity party havin' ass woman." The molding of a tough-minded woman continues to be the mission for everybody in their corner of Louisiana. Hushpuppy is home with her. They exit the kitchen and walk onto the dancefloor of the lounge, joining her friends who are warmly embraced by the other women. The woman carries Hushpuppy as she has her arms tightly wrapped around her and her head on her shoulder. Though she may be a

stranger, the woman evokes the feelings that Hushpuppy had only dreamed of having. They slowly dance to the tune of the live jazz band. Hushpuppy says, “You can take care of me, me and daddy.” The woman is taken aback, fully aware of her inability to do so. She shatters Hushpuppy’s fantasy once again, but they continue to dance. The woman is visibly shaken by Hushpuppy’s expressed need for a mother, but she holds on to her for a few moments longer. While they dance, Hushpuppy narrates, “I can count all the times I been lifted. I can count all the times I been lifted on two fingers.” Beyond that moment, she had only been lifted in such a gentle manner when she was a newborn. For perhaps the first time, she feels what it would be like to have the truly nurturing touch of a mother, but she knows this is probably the last time. With a newfound understanding of the possibilities that *aren’t* out in the ocean, the girls return to the Bathtub with a renewed sense of urgency to rebuild and conquer their circumstances and a fortified understanding of the type of femininity they prefer to embody—one that is fiercely fearless.

Hushpuppy’s quest to embody both vulnerability *and* strength culminates in one of the final scenes in *Beasts*. When the girls embark on their journey home, they feel the aurochs, a symbol of the apocalypse, on their heels. Out of fear, they begin to run. Hushpuppy opts to stand her ground instead. She turns and comes face-to-face with the beast meant to destroy her and their land. Wink watches as she confronts them. Hushpuppy intrepidly looks them in the eyes signaling her unwillingness to back down. The aurochs concede to her unwavering presence. She softly states, “You’re my friend, kind of,” articulating their active role in her life. They’ve been engrained into her psyche as bearers of death and destruction. Images of them flash before her as she navigates the world, instilling both fear and motivation to survive. With her head held high, Hushpuppy exclaims, “I gotta take care of mine,” and the aurochs quietly retreat. Hushpuppy

marches towards the crowd of onlookers who silently show her reverence. They step aside so she can get to her dying father. She sits beside him on the bed and feeds him leftovers that she had clutched in her grip through the entirety of her journey back home from the brothel. Wink begins to cry and tells her, "Real good." Though feeble, he beams with pride. Hushpuppy cries, too. They both repeat their mantra, "No cryin'," as they weep. For the first time, they permit themselves to physically express how they emotionally and mentally feel. Their corporeal and spiritual is unified. They live in that moment as Wink takes his last breath.

In the end, Hushpuppy demonstrates her ability to be both vulnerable and fearless. She realizes her feminine softness as well as her masculine stoicism are what makes her who she is. After she casts her father off to his final destination in the sea, Hushpuppy narrates, "When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. And when it all goes quiet, I see they're right here. I see that I'm a little piece of a big big universe and that makes things right." She is aware of the power she wields, embodying everything and nothing.

Hushpuppy as Queer Possibility

In the face of the need to survive and the will to thrive, Hushpuppy and the people of the Bathtub depict the realities of such a life. Hushpuppy *should* be afforded the luxury of living a carefree childhood, but she was dealt a hand that requires her to fight. Her hardships, most of which are born out of state sanctioned violence, necessitates a premature knowing that is meant to keep her alive. Wright notes, "The 'prematurely knowing' black girl was contending with serious issues of survival and safety at an age when most middle-class white girls were being protected and carefully prepared for a successful marriage. The prematurely knowing black girl

had already begun to look for ways of surviving. She had become alert and had experienced a shift in her consciousness. She had become aware of her power to do something about her situation" (61). Depictions of Black girlhood in works by Black women in the nineteenth century and beyond often portray Black girls who had to reach a certain level of maturity much earlier in life. Wright differentiates between those works and that of white authors when she cites how Black women writers "uncovered the power and potential of black girls as seekers of their own fate. In their narratives, black girl figures knowingly break laws of conventionality and feminine virtue. They take on active roles and revolutionary stances that reject their objectification as victims of violence or as models for marriage and reform" (90). Though not made by Black writers and filmmakers, Hushpuppy's characterization in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is indicative of the will to resist that is inherent in Black tomboyism.

Hushpuppy is a complex figure, one who reifies racist imagery while simultaneously breaking the monolithic paradigms of Black girlhood and femininity. While there is tension between her innocence and perceived maturity, her relationships with her father and the townspeople allow her to toggle between both states of being as, by the film's conclusion, she is both tenderly cared for *and* challenged. Moreover, her tomboy status grants her an ability to seamlessly occupy those spaces as a child who is allowed to be both "rough around the edges" in a stereotypically masculine way while maintaining a delicate touch and sensitivity that is stereotypically ascribed to femininity. There are possibilities in her queer presence. Though she is a victim to systems that are meant to limit who she can become, she victoriously carves her own space despite the boundaries that are built by her circumstances.

Ch. 2

Let Me Tell You 'Bout This Country Shit: Adolescent Black Tomboyism in *Salvage the Bones*

> "I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands."
>
> – Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

When I hit puberty, my self-confidence plummeted. A once carefree little girl became consumed by a need for social acceptance. I wanted to be desired, I wanted to be "cool," I wanted to be the girl I thought everyone wanted me to be. As a tomboy, this meant feeling like I had to pay more attention to my overall appearance. I felt pressured to wear form-fitting clothes (tight low-rise jeans and crop tops with bedazzled belts were *it*), which led me to be self-conscious about the shape of my body. Even though I was a teenager, I hated that I did not have hips like the women in the music videos. They exuded sex appeal and I was the opposite of that. I judged myself for having what I now know are "hip dips" and my attempts to keep up with the latest fashions ultimately failed because I had no money, like most fourteen-year-olds, and the clothes were not flattering on me. I felt like an outcast even if I was not actually treated like one.

There is a distinct line between a girl's childhood and her adolescence as it pertains to the social acceptability of tomboyism. Hushpuppy, for example, is granted certain freedoms not only because of her precarity as a part of the Bathtub community, but also because of her childhood innocence. Jack Halberstam dissects this transitional period in girlhood as he cites the negative social implications for girls who remain tomboys beyond the onset of puberty, noting, "We could

say that tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl" (6). Halberstam differentiates between what girls and boys endure at that stage of life. For girls, transitioning into adolescence "represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in male-dominated society" (6). He continues, "If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage and an ascension to some version of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity" (6). Tomboyism in childhood is tied to the assumption that when a girl begins puberty, she'll "grow out" of those more masculine inclinations. One's decision to hold on to those desires is perceived as a sign of rebellion and a lack of adhesion to the patriarchal social order.

This chapter explores the heightened tension between the masculine and feminine for the adolescent Black tomboy. Whereas Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* represents a prepubescent Black tomboy, Esch Batiste, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones*, represents a more mature iteration of that figure, offering a more complex perspective of Black girlhood. As told by Ward, *Salvage* is "a story about a boy in love with his pit bull, and a girl who'd grown up in a world of men" (Bonia). The plot follows Esch and her family as they prepare their home for the impending strike of Hurricane Katrina, fight to stay alive during the storm, and strive to pull the pieces together after it ravages their home and city. Like Hushpuppy, Esch is motherless and lives in a less-than-ideal environment alongside her father and brothers. The internal and external turmoil that Esch endures, from poverty to pregnancy, elucidate the strain between Black tomboyism and perceptions of femininity, self-esteem, and romantic partnership in constructions of womanhood, specifically within the context

of the American South. Though her journey towards adulthood is complicated by hardships, her response to those circumstances underscores her resistive power. When her location in the rural South is also considered, her Black tomboyism crystallizes into a mode of being that is imbued with a rich sense of freedom and confident self-expression.

Tomboyism and World-Making in Bois Sauvage

Esch resides in the fictional Gulf Coast town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, a setting that greatly impacts how one reads her Black tomboyism. Bois Sauvage appears in several of Jesmyn Ward's novels and is based on her own experiences growing up in DeLisle, Mississippi. Ward configures the town as a Dirty South locale. Whereas the "South" encompasses all who inhabit it and the mores that come with them, the *Dirty* South is rooted in Black southern tradition, specifically. A term birthed out of hip-hop and coined by Atlanta rapper, Cool Breeze, the "Dirty South" is synonymous with grit, determination, and old school Cadillacs. It is a place where "troubled and complex histories continue to dog society into the present even as it has allowed room—under unyielding persistence—for Black bodies not simply to survive but to thrive."[6] Inspired by Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Ward felt empowered to write from a southern Black woman's perspective and theorize southern landscapes through her own lens (Lee). She proudly lays claim to being a Dirty South writer, citing "a certain rawness to the art that comes out of it. A certain honesty. A willingness to bring secrets and despair and hope and all those other messy human emotions to life. To express what it means to be born and grow up into the cycle of poverty that has been bequeathed to so many of us" (Taylor). Through Esch, Ward interrogates how a cycle of poverty in the deep South does not equate to relentless hopelessness.

[6] Dirty South exhibit blurb

When this vantage point is paired with what distinguishes Ward from many other southern writers, her hip-hop influence,[7] *Salvage* echoes the emergence of queer possibility that is cultivated by Dirty South sensibilities.[8] The marriage of Black southern traditions and hip-hop in *Salvage* communicates the power of self-making and one's ability to queer the limits of their own imagination as well as how they live in the imagination of others.

Ward paints a vivid picture of Bois Sauvage, emphasizing how it shapes those who inhabit it. The opening epigraphs immediately clues the reader into the culture that will color Esch's experiences. A verse from the Biblical book of Deuteronomy, an excerpt from a Gloria Fuertes poem, and a line from OutKast's "Da Art of Storytellin (Pt. 1)" are the first words the reader sees. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Ward comments on her motivation behind this collection of epigraphs meant to frame one's entry into Esch's story. She says, "Biblical myth is as integral to the spirit of the South as the heat and humidity. The epigraphs acknowledge that history. Hip-hop, which is my generation's blues, is important to the characters that I write about. They use hip-hop to understand the world through language" (Hoover). Directly correlated to the narrative of *Salvage the Bones* as well as Black traditions in the Dirty South, the epigraphs elucidate Esch's worldview. The landscape and the music impact her perception of the world at-large as well as her understanding of how she fits into it. The dirt, the music, the cars, and the storm shape Esch's ability, and *perceived* inability, to thrive as a Black tomboy and soon-to-be mother.

[7] In many interviews, Ward sites hip-hop as an influence in her life and work. In a 2014 interview with *Guernica*, she notes how she wants to work against the stereotype of Southern hip-hop lacking depth (Murphy). By using hip-hop lyrics as epigraphs and weaving hip-hop references into her rich, contemplative narratives, she draws attention to how robust hip-hop is.

[8] Borrowing from bell hooks, "queer" is "not as being about who you are having sex with (that can be a dimension of it), but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" ("Are You Still a Slave?")

Living in Bois Sauvage, the dirt follows them everywhere, or rather, they follow it. They live on dirty land, swim in a dirty manmade pool, the Pit, and trek across town on dirt strewn paths. The Batiste family lives in a run-down home in the woods that was built by their grandfather. Esch describes their land as "never clean," "full of empty cars with their hoods open, the engines stripped, and the bodies sitting there like picked-over animal bones" (Ward 22). She recounts how they "spent the summer dusted an orange color" and waking up to their sheets feeling "powdery like dry red clay" (22). Normally, this type of scene is merely a marker of poverty, but for the people of Bois Sauvage, for Esch, the dirt signifies a deep cultural connection with their town, with each other, and with their ancestors. As they walk through the streets, Esch takes inventory of "the few dirt-scratched yards and thin-siding houses and trailers" and the "swimming holes that are fat puddles…fed by skinny clear creeks, but the earth makes the holes black, and the trees make them as filthy with leaves as a dog with fleas. There are clusters of magnolias that are so tall and green and glossy, they are impossible to climb, and the air around them always smells like peaches" (22). Esch's observations take a tone of reverence. The level of detail in which she describes her home is demonstrative of the countless times she's walked those streets and the countless memories she associates with them. She acknowledges the struggles of living in such a place, but she still finds pride in the history and resilience that the land holds.

Esch's spiritual and cultural connection to Bois Sauvage is deepened by Ward's layering of her hip-hop influences throughout the narrative. Esch's reverential outlook on her surroundings, despite the hardships, mirrors the way rappers from the Dirty South pay homage to the mud that fortified them. Big K.R.I.T., an MC out of Meridian, Mississippi, comes to mind. Ward used lyrics from his music as an epigraph for another novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, making

the calibration between his music and the cultural vibrance of Bois Sauvage intentional. In his 2011 song, “Country Shit,” he pulls the listener into his narrative about Black southern traditions and his respect for the land. Known for his bass-infused music, “Country Shit” showcases K.R.I.T.’s affinity with the legacy of his Southern hip-hop predecessors like UGK (Underground Kingz) out of Port Arthur, Texas and the groundbreaking hip-hop duo OutKast out of Atlanta, Georgia. He repeats, “Let me tell you bout' this super fly, dirty dirty, third coast muddy water,” throughout the song, boasting about the murk of Mississippi. K.R.I.T. pulls the listener in with his fervor about the southern Black traditions that he loves, with repetitions of “country shit / country, country shit” resounding in every chorus. He reflects on the soul food, the music, and the people in the place he calls home. From the “candied yams and collard greens” to the candy-painted cars, it informs who he is in the same way Bois Sauvage informs Esch’s identity.

Ward summons imagery that is ubiquitous in Southern hip-hop tradition, communicating a familial bond between herself, the cultural milieu of the South, and the characters. In an early scene in the book, Esch watches as Big Henry pulls up to the Batiste house in an old Chevrolet Caprice with only “two six-by nine speakers that work because he blew his amp and his bass, so their talk was louder than the music” (Ward 13). An old-school car with a robust sound system is a Southern hip-hop staple. Often the focal point of music videos and photoshoots with southern MCs, old-school Chevys, Buicks, and especially Cadillacs are a source of boisterous pride. With imposing, sturdy frames, restored old-school cars are a status symbol, serving and cultural and social currency in the Black community. Though already popular in the Black community at-large, in the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, these types of cars gained popularity in the hip-hop world, specifically. From Ice Cube rolling around Compton, California in his 1964 Chevy Impala telling us about how it was a “good day,” to the Houston slab community’s (an acronym for

slow, loud, and bangin') exponential growth onset by the popularity of DJ Screw, a Houston legend who created "chopped and screwed" music, these types of cars became synonymous with visibility. If you want to be seen, pulling up in an old-school car with the bass thumping will certainly command attention.

Ward signals the hip-hop South's old-school car culture throughout *Salvage,* ensuring the reader is made aware of the fact that the characters are heavily influenced by it. Ward's specificity of how Big Henry's music is softer than it should be, for example, is her way of positioning Big Henry as a child of Southern hip-hop while lacking the financial stability to have a sound system that is up to par. Beyond this description, Ward sets scenes that speak directly to the characters' connection to hip-hop. In one scene, Esch and her brothers walk through Bois Sauvage to meet up with friends at the park. She narrates, "Randall runs over behind us, reclines on Big Henry's hood and the front windshield so that his wet back looks like pudding. Inside the car, Big Henry and I sit with the doors open, one leg out, heads back. Big Henry plays OutKast" (13). The scene conjures a familiar image, one that pays homage to iconic moments in hip-hop such as those in OutKast's music video for their debut single "Player's Ball" (1993), which appears on their first studio album *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik.* The album is an ode to Atlanta, solidifying their position as movers and makers of culture and worthy of respect. As highlighted in *Chronicling Stankonia: The Rise of the Hip-Hop South* by Regina Bradley, "Both Organized Noize, [the producers of the album], and OutKast paid meticulous attention to amplifying—representing—specific locales within the city by sonically and lyrically highlighting Atlanta as southern, urban, and an incubator for hip-hop" (9). The video for "Player's Ball" is their introduction to the journey that they're embarking on as stewards of Dirty South hip-hop and the imagery in *Salvage* mirrors the song's visuals in many ways. In the video,

OutKast members André “André 3000” Benjamin and Antwan “Big Boi” Patton cruise through Atlanta in their old-school Cadillacs and Buick Sevilles rapping about how “all the players came from far and wide / Wearing afros and braids in every gangster ride.” The performance scenes in the video use the cars as a backdrop, depicting their comrades leaning against them in parking lots the same way the Black youth in Bois Sauvage do (see fig. 4). In other parts of the video, they perform in a clearing in the woods (see fig. 5). The trees frame their lyrics, the dirt on which they stand signifies being grounded in their red clay roots. Esch is similarly rooted, rendering Ward’s explicit and implicit announcements of this kinship emblematic of her position within a robust cultural network that spans centuries.

Fig. 4. Still of André “André 3000” Benjamin’s performance scene in “Player’s Ball.”

Fig. 5. Antwan “Big Boi” Patton’s performance scene in “Player’s Ball.”

Beyond the imagery, Ward positions the Black community of Bois Sauvage, especially Esch, as reflections of the cultural and intellectual impact of the hip-hop South, symbolizing a breaking of the limits placed on southern Blackness. As noted by Bradley, "The black American South seldom has room to expand past three major historical touchstones: the antebellum era, Jim Crow, and the modern civil right movement" (4). Despite the sociotemporal distance from those historical moments, communities in the contemporary Black South remain tethered to the ideologies birthed in those times. Bradley continues, "Non-southerners take comfort and pleasure in being able to restrict black identities to these markers of southernness because of their accessible narratives, romanticization in mainstream American culture, and lagging agency outside of a white imagination" (4). With an air of superiority from a perceived progression away from racist ideals and mores, Bradley speaks to the tendency for non-southerners to bask in being *unlike*, being stronger and smarter their southern counterparts, and this is evidenced in criticisms of Southern hip-hop. Further, from the mainstream perspective, there is already an assumption of intellectual inferiority of hip-hop MCs that derives from stereotypes placed on the Black community as a whole. This is compounded when southern MCs are met with stereotypes of the American South, which associate thick southern accents with a lack of understanding of the English language and rural life with naivete and ignorance.

These paradigms are proven untrue time and time again by southern MCs. Their ability to profoundly articulate the intricacies of their lived experience and their ability to give shape to the people they encounter positions them as theoreticians in their own right. Ward harnesses this sensibility and uses it to frame the way Esch articulates her life in Bois Sauvage, drawing parallels between hip-hop's greatest poets and the adolescent Black girl from Mississippi. Ward chose to open *Salvage* with an epigraph from OutKast's "Da Art of Storytellin' (Pt.1)," overtly

drawing a connection between the two. This song is on OutKast's third studio album, *Aquemini* (1998), which is a "memoiresque navigation of their increasingly experimental and fluid reckoning with southern blackness," where they "fine-tune the act of storytelling" (Bradley 50). "Da Art of Storytellin' (Pt. 1)" ushers the listener into an exploration of Black girlhood, using their poetic acumen to humanize the Black girls who are otherwise viewed as expendable. The song presents what initially feels like a dichotomy. On one side, Big Boi raps about a seemingly promiscuous girl he names Suzy Screw, "'cause she screwed a lot," and he connects with her solely for his own sexual exploits. She is reduced to someone who is physically attractive, therefore worthy of a physical relationship, but not worthy of much more than that.

André's verse follows, presenting the other side of the story. He raps about a girl named Sasha Thumper, Suzy's friend. As Sasha's surname suggests, she is a drug addict. He recounts meeting her on a summer night sometime years ago, presumably while they were children. They dance under the streetlights and ponder existential questions. André recounts, "In the middle of the ghetto on the curb, but in spite / All of the bullshit we on our back staring at the stars above / Talking bout what we gonna be when we grow up / I said what you wanna be, she said, 'Alive' / It made me think for a minute, then looked in her eyes / I coulda died." Though her response was simple, it was heavy. For Sasha, living a *full* life felt like more of an accomplishment than a right because of her circumstances. He expresses how he could see the pain in her eyes even at a young age. He goes on to talk about losing contact with her over the years and searching for her when he came back home. Her mother reveals that Sasha is in an abusive relationship. Two weeks later, Sasha is found dead from an apparent drug-overdose with a "baby two months due." Sasha's story is tragic, but André's juxtaposition of their innocence in childhood compared to the cruel realities that they faced in adulthood highlights the almost inescapable perils of their

environment. The song affords the privilege of nuance to Sasha's story but over-simplifies Suzy's, illuminating how the lives people lead are often much more complex than they appear on the surface. In actuality, the lives of the two girls aren't as disparate as they may seem. They're one in the same, representing the complexities of Black girlhood.

Ward similarly centers the hardships of southern Black girlhood in *Salvage*. Whereas OutKast offers a perspective through a male lens, Ward writes Esch's experiences through the lens of a southern Black woman, a vantage point from which a more nuanced exploration of Black girlhood can be derived. In doing so, she takes the reader further into the innerworkings of girls like Suzy, Sasha, and Esch, tapping into the internal struggles they face in their southern socio-cultural context. With this, the epigraph from "Da Art of Storytelling (Pt 1)" becomes a point of departure for the reader's journey with Esch. Ward places Esch's life in conversation with Suzy Screw and Sasha Thumper's before the reader is even introduced to her. Like them, Esch is stigmatized as a poor teenage mother, and, like Sasha, Esch foresees a life where her circumstances do not improve. Throughout the book, she is constantly negotiating between her present self and who she hopes to become, and those thoughts typically conclude with a sense of hopelessness. For example, when Manny discovers Esch is pregnant, she is discouraged by his negative response. She sobs and narrates, "…I'm crying again for what I have been, for what I am, and for what I will be, again" (Ward 147). Esch imagines herself trapped in a cycle of rejection, sequestered to a life of loneliness.

Despite Esch's pessimism and self-doubt, she is given space to mature in her confidence and her will to fight, unlike Sasha. Her character development is foreshadowed in the title of the book, which also draws upon a word often used in hip-hop language and culture— savage. When

asked about the title, Ward notes how it pays respect to the grit that many southern Black communities must possess to endure the pains of their circumstances. She says:

> The word *salvage* is phonetically close to *savage*. At home, among the young, there is honor in that term. It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope. When you stand on a beach after a hurricane, the asphalt ripped from the earth, gas stations and homes and grocery stores disappeared, oak trees uprooted, without any of the comforts of civilization—no electricity, no running water, no government safety net—and all you have are your hands, your feet, your head, and your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: you survive. You are a savage.

Esch's savagery is within her but must be excavated. *Salvage the Bones* taps into the internal struggle that this young southern Black girl endures in trying to figure out how she can become the person she *knows* she needs to be if she wants to live. Esch pushes for the same mode of resiliency and perseverance that Hushpuppy realizes in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Whereas Hushpuppy's dire conditions force her to come into her "beastly" being at only six years old, Esch's social environment and angst about social acceptance somewhat stagnate her journey towards having full confidence in her ability to survive. Esch recognizes everyone else's savage potential but struggles to see it in herself. Eventually, both girls are fortified by the places they call home and are emboldened, not defeated, by their circumstances, but for Esch, that journey is much longer.

"She Can Hold Her Own": Overcoming Societal Pressures as an Adolescent Tomboy

Throughout *Salvage the Bones,* Esch navigates anxieties about being socially accepted as her natural self. A contributing factor to her complex self-perception is her relationship with her family, particularly her father. Like Hushpuppy, Esch is in the care of a father who treats her as he would stereotypically treat a boy, which impacts her personal relationship with femininity. Esch's father, only known as Daddy in the novel, is a poor alcoholic man who is coping with the loss of his wife, Esch's mother, and the impending loss of his home as the storm nears. Despite his alcoholism, Daddy is invested in the safety of his children, but his affection is in the form of "tough love," like Wink in *Beasts*. He treats Esch and her three brothers the same, making no distinction between what a girl should do and what a boy should do. Esch is aware of this conflation. At one point, she contemplates getting an abortion and thinks about who could possibly drive her to get the procedure done. She immediately dismisses the idea of her father taking her when she thinks, "Who would bring me? Daddy, who sometimes I think forgets that I am a girl?" (102). Esch's tomboyism is a direct result of her upbringing, including the treatment she receives from her father. Eventually, Esch uncovers her own power as a tomboy, but initially, it is the source of angst and pain.

The extent to which Esch is conditioned to function in a stereotypically boyish manner is evidenced in her father's insistence that she perform strenuous physical labor and the pride he takes in her being able to rise to the occasion. From the time she was young child, Esch was urged to do as her brothers do. Her father encouraged sibling squabbles, ensuring, "She can hold her own." He draws parallels to the physical and mental fortitude that Esch embodies to that of her mother, suggesting an innate, inherited strength. Esch recounts a time when he expressed to her mother, "Told you she was going to be a little scrappy tawny thing—built just like you" (6).

This pride continues into her adolescence, traversing the threshold of the social acceptability of tomboyism. Esch, however, is troubled by the expectations her father has for her, and she grapples with the reality that there is a disconnect between the strength she was *taught* to exhibit and her *actual* strength. For example, as they prepare their house for the storm, Daddy asks Esch to help carry wood and assist in hoisting her brother up so he can reach the attic entrance. "Esch, let your brother climb up on you," he says (62). Despite her smaller frame, her father asks her to do the heavy lifting. "Skeetah looks at him like he's crazy," Esch narrates, suggesting her physical inability to comfortably hold his weight, but their father does not acknowledge, perhaps doesn't even notice, the discrepancy. Instead of contesting, Esch bears the weight. It is a painful experience, but she insists that she can't show weakness. She silences the pain of Skeetah stepping on her thigh as she thinks, "It hurts. I can't help but let a little sound come out of my throat, but then I close it off so I can't even breathe…Another noise surprises its way out of my throat, and I breathe hard, ashamed" (63).

At that moment, Esch prefers to suffer in silence than face ridicule from her father for not being "strong" enough. Like Hushpuppy, Esch was conditioned by her father to suppress expressions of pain and angst, which reinforces her idea of him "forgetting" that she is a girl. There is evidence of her suppressing her emotions throughout the novel, and she repeatedly ties it back to how she was raised. She vividly remembers her father telling her and her brothers not to cry. She reflects, "When we were little and we would fall and skin a knee and cry, Daddy would roll his eyes, tell us to *stop*. *Stop*" (63). Esch is taught that crying is a sign of weakness. Because her father pushes her and her siblings to hold back their tears even if they are in pain, Esch begins to apply this concept to all instances of hurt, even if it means she must endure more pain than necessary. Daddy wants Esch to be as "strong" as possible and this directly conflicts

with her perception of femininity. To her understanding, even though she is a girl, outwardly expressing sadness means she is not masculine enough. Interestingly, she applies this logic to her romantic relationships, too, equating physical and mental strength to desirability (perhaps because she figures that if her father admires it, other men will, too). In one scene, Esch hurts her hand on a broken bottle in front of her beau, Manny. Her immediate thought is, "I didn't yell; I wanted Manny to see me, but not as a weak, sorry girl. Not something to be pitied because I couldn't take pain like a boy" (11). She opts to for silence yet again, not because it is her natural inclination, but because she learned from her father that an emotional response is a wrong response in the face of adversity. This informs her understanding of what womanhood should look like.

Esch being a girl amongst men allows Ward to interrogate paradigms of masculinity and femininity, and how Black tomboys skew them, in a more concrete way. The scene that is most demonstrative of this is when Esch reveals to Manny that he is father of her child. After telling him about her pregnancy, they argue, leaving Esch feeling discouraged, angry, and more alone than ever. In this moment, however, she finds strength in her ability to feel, process, and express her emotions. When Randall approaches her while she sits in the dirt, devastated by her circumstances, she has a surge of certainty about what needs to be done next. Esch narrates:

> And then I get up because it is the only thing I can do. I step out of the ditch and brush the ants off because it is the only thing I can do. I follow Randall around the house because it is the only thing I can do; if this is strength, if this is weakness, this is what I do. I hiccup, but tears still run down my face. After Mama died, Daddy said, *What are you crying for? Stop crying. Crying ain't going to change anything.* We never stopped crying. We just did it quieter. We hid it. We learned how to cry so that almost no tears

> leaked out of my eyes, so that I swallowed the hot salty water of them and felt them running down my throat. This was the only thing that we could do. I swallow and squint through the tears, and I run. (206)

Esch discovers that the root of her strength rests in doing what she feels will get her through her less-than-ideal situation—crying and moving forward. The reader receives a glimpse of Esch practicing autonomy rather than following the directives of her father. She not only conjures her strength *through* the tears, but she aligns herself with her brothers by using a collective "we" when contemplating the moments when they *all* cried. In this instance, being "like" a boy is being cognizant of one's emotions and shedding tears despite admonishment against doing so. Though she outwardly adheres to the external pressures that are imposed by her father, internally, she surrenders to the feelings that naturally flow through her and harnesses them as her source of resilience.

Piecing It Together: Esch's Undefined Femininity

Though external motivations guide Esch, she is consumed by personal contemplations of her own femininity. Her internal dialogue reveals the apprehensions she has about transitioning into womanhood and motherhood given her current physical attributes. As a postpubescent girl, she is preoccupied by wanting to be desirable to her male counterparts. Her lack of femininity, at least by her own understanding of the word, hinders her from being viewed as a potential partner beyond sexual relations, which is on par with notions about tomboyism and transitions to adulthood. As a fifteen-year-old, Esch reached the point where tomboyism is disparaged, which leads her to fixate on her physical appearance in comparison to other girls her age who more closely align with social norms. Ward uses Esch's relationship with her beau, Manny, (or lack

thereof) to unravel the challenges Esch faces as a Black tomboy in a world that typically castigates anyone like her. Through that exploration, Esch's concerns about the shape of her body, her hair, and her skin tone reveal how Black tomboys must contend with complex histories of certain beauty standards, deepening the rift between them and social acceptance. Eventually, however, it is her tomboyism that allows Esch to recuperate strength, independence, and confidence that transcend the racist and quixotic paradigms meant to preclude her from self-love and admiration.

The reader is made aware of Esch's negative perception of herself early in the book when she describes the first time she had sex with Manny. She reflects on how the boys she's had sex with "saw through my boyish frame, my dark skin, my plain face" (16). For Esch, her lack of a curvy figure and darker skin should've rendered her an unfit sexual partner, but her relations prove otherwise. In fact, she later notes how "the boys always came for me," suggesting an ability to attract men, but only for sexual favors (27). This demonstrates a differentiation between being physically desirable enough for sex and being physically desirable enough for a loving relationship. Although Esch admits that she is wanted in a sexual manner by her male counterparts, she has yet to experience being wanted in a way that moves beyond sexual gratification, which exacerbates what she considers a disconnect between her appearance and romantic desirability. The dissonance is reinforced by Manny's aversion to engaging more intimately with Esch in their encounters. He refuses to kiss her on the lips, for example, despite them having a sexual relationship. Esch narrates, "His fingers tugged my panties, his forearms rubbed my waist, and the brush of his skin burned like a tongue. He had never kissed me except with his body, never his mouth" (27). Because of this, she fantasizes about him *finally* kissing her the way she'd like, equating an intimate kiss with being fully seen. With a kiss, Manny's love

will be confirmed as well as her desirable femininity. Esch believes that her love for him is not reciprocated because she is not yet the woman she wants to be, signaling a misalignment between her appearance and the physical attributes that thinks a "real" woman has. She inextricably ties womanhood to the shape of one's body, the maintenance of one's hair, and one's skin tone and she fervently believes that if she possesses certain physical qualities, not only will she be deemed womanly, but she will be desirable in a more romantic, fulfilling way.

One physical attribute that Esch ascribes to mature femininity and desirability is a curvaceous body. On various occasions, she notes her disdain for her figure. She deems her slim frame "unremarkable" and frequently thinks about how her romantic relationships would flourish if she had the quintessential "womanly" body. Esch narrates, "I looked in the mirror and knew the rest of me wasn't so remarkable: wide nose, dark skin, Mama's slim, short frame with all the curves folded in so that I looked square" (7). These ruminations persist throughout the novel. She has moments when she feels like she's *finally* transitioning into womanhood, but because her physique still doesn't match the image of womanhood she constructed in her mind, she becomes disheartened. Esch's longing for a curvaceous figure underscores the history of the Black female body, however, which traces the transition of an enlarged buttocks and wide hips from being viewed as "grotesque" and "strange" to being coveted and emulated.

Much scholarship that examines the objectification of Black women centers the story of Sarah Bartmann, or Hottentot Venus, and her life as a traveling exhibit in nineteenth-century Europe. Bartmann was made a spectacle by white men due to her large buttocks and elongated genitalia. In "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," literary historian Sander L. Gilman explores the phenomenon of the figure of the Hottentot. Gilman loosely defines the Hottentot as a

representation of "the black female *in nuce*," or in a nutshell, embodying the finite set of characteristics ascribed to Black womanhood at the time (206). Gilman goes on to examine many depictions and examples of the Hottentot, but the most known Hottentot figure is Sarah Bartmann. On Bartmann, he declares, "It is important to note that Sarah Bartmann was exhibited not to show her genitalia but rather to present another anomaly which the European audience found riveting. This was the steatopygia, or protruding buttocks, the other physical characteristic of the Hottentot female which captured the eye of early European travelers. Thus, the figure of Sarah Bartmann was reduced to her sexual parts" (213). Bartmann's body served as a sort of circus attraction to people who had never witnessed such a shapely woman. Audiences were in awe of what they believed to be "primitive" sexual characteristics on a "sexualized Other" (218). After her untimely death, Bartmann's body was dissected and studied since she was such an anomaly. Thus, even in her death, she was reduced to a primitive, sexually exploited specimen.

In time, what was once viewed as primitive and strange became aspirational. Beauty standards began to transition from being predominantly Eurocentric to offering rewards for imitations of the Black female body. Black popular culture ushered in a subversion of what was once a silencing of the Black body when met by the white gaze, transitioning to a celebration of it through performance. In *Black Looks*: *Race and Representation*, hooks explores an example of this shift as she dissects the 1988 song by E.U. called "Doin' the Butt," a hit song from the soundtrack of Spike Lee's film *School Daze*. She notes:

> "Doin the Butt" fostered the promotion of a hot new dance favoring those who could most protrude their buttocks with pride and glee...They are not the still bodies of the female slave made to appear as a mannequin. They are not a silenced body. Displayed as playful cultural nationalist resistance, they challenge assumptions that the black

> body, its skin color and shape, is a mark of shame…"Doin the Butt" challenged dominant ways of thinking about the body which encourage us to ignore assess because they are associated with undesirable and unclean acts. Unmasked, the "butt" could be once again worshiped as an erotic seat of pleasure and excitement. (63)

This type of corporeal resistance is a hallmark of Black popular culture, from Josephine Baker's banana skirt, meant to draw attention to her hips and butt in a celebratory, erotic manner, to Destiny Child's "Bootylicious." The reclamation of the agency of the Black female body and the recuperation of the butt as an "erotic seat of pleasure and excitement" eventually became a commodity and, ultimately, a site of severe self-criticism for those who do not possess this particularly "womanly" shape.

Ultimately, Esch internalizes these perpetuated ideals and attaches her lack of a curvaceous body to a lack of romantic partnership. Though fictional, this is a mindset held by many young girls in real life, making Ward's characterization of Esch especially poignant. Her dissection of that aspect of womanhood persists through commentary on Esch's changing (or unchanging) body through puberty and pregnancy. Esch consistently checks in with her body to track the evolution of her figure since becoming sexually active. She articulates a correlation between sexual activity and womanhood as evidenced in her assessment of herself after her first time engaging in sexual intercourse. She recalls, "In the bathroom, I looked at myself in the mirror. Undressed and rinsed. Dressed again. My clothes fit the same. My stomach, my hips, my arms all fell in the same straight lines; there was nothing fine or curvy about me. I was still short and skinny, my hair big and curly and black, my lips thin" (Ward 23). In her mind, she felt like her hips should have spread a little more, her lips should look fuller, and her overall image

should be more aligned with the beauty standards that dictate the physical qualities of "true" womanhood, but she still fell short, ushering in a wave of disappointment and self-deprecation.

Another physical attribute that Esch equates with womanhood and desirability is well-maintained, "good" hair, conjuring respectability politics. Esch, being the only girl in a family full of boys living in a rather impoverished rural setting, does not have what she considers "good" hair because it is not as taken care of as she prefers. She does, however, have some sense of esteem for her hair stemming from her mother's celebration of her coils when she was younger. In the beginning of the novel, Esch acknowledges that her hair is her prized feature. She looks in the mirror and thinks, "I pulled my hair back in a ponytail. It was my one good thing, my odd thing, like a Doberman come out white: corkscrew curls, black, limp when wet but full as fistfuls of frayed rope when dry. Mama used to let me run around with it down, said it was some throwback trait, and since I got it, I might as well enjoy it" (7). Marking her corkscrew curls as both "odd" and something to celebrate suggests an adherence to problematic standards of beauty that plague Black women, however. Her mother convinced her that her hair is special, but as she matures, she concludes that she does not reap the benefits of having a loose curl pattern because she doesn't maintain it. Later in the book, she pulls her hair back again and declares, "Mama was wrong. I have no glory. I have nothing" (123). Up to the point of puberty, it seems that Esch was not as concerned with her hair being undone, a sign of her tomboyish mindset about appearances. However, as she grows more adamant about being desirable, her undone hair becomes a site of contention.

The relation between Esch's hair and her perceived femininity is rooted in respectability politics, however. Neatly coiffed hair has historically been a symbol of refined womanhood and upward mobility in the Black community, deriving from the idea that the closer one is to white

standards, the more opportunities they have for advancement. As communications scholar Robin M. Boylorn declares in her essay "Baby Hair: For Gabby, Blue Ivy, Tiana, and Me," "Internalized racism and internalized standards of beauty in Black communities lead to an obsession with Black girl hair that is tames, in order, slicked, down on the sides, wrapped around in braids, or covered in curls. We don't know what to do with Black girls whose hair is left to do what it will…" (118). Ward explores this idea through Esch, making her negative perception of her curly mane fit neatly into the long history of the policing of Black women's hair, both within Black communities themselves and in the world at-large. Ward pushes Esch to confront the ill feelings towards her hair and become comfortable with the way her curls naturally behave, the same way she had to find contentment with her natural body.

Lastly, colorism is brought to the forefront in Esch's self-criticism as she attributes her dark skin to her perceived undesirability. As Zora Neale Hurston states in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, "If it was so honorable and glorious to be black, why was it the yellow-skinned people among us had so much prestige?" Esch's experience in her small town of Bois Sauvage in 2005 is no different than what Hurston chronicles about her experience as a child in the early 1900s. The effects of colorism continue well into the twenty-first century and Esch's disdain for her dark skin, especially compared to the other light skin girls in the town, demonstrates this fact. For Esch, her skin tone is another barrier to self-actualization and full acceptance of who she is as a maturing young woman.

History proves that darker skin is a marker of inferiority, particularly in the United States. For this reason, a hierarchy of skin tone deems those who more closely align with whiteness more worthy of admiration and privilege and this practice spans centuries. Lines of demarcation between the enslaved were drawn based on skin color, granting special permissions to lighter

skinned captives. They were more valuable in several ways— perceived as more intelligent, more docile, and more physically appealing. Darker skinned individuals were viewed as physically stronger, thus more suitable for strenuous labor, but less intelligent. This social stratification was heightened by miscegenation, which brought forth generations of mixed-race children born to Black enslaved women and their white masters. Not only did those children typically have light skin and looser curl patterns, but their proximity to whiteness was undeniable given their paternal ancestry. Accordingly, they sometimes received certain privileges such as access to education and less taxing chores (Kerr 273). There were concrete benefits to having light skin and that practice became engrained in the psyche of the victims of chattel slavery.

The preferences shown to light skin proved to be divisive amongst the enslaved, establishing a type of psychological oppression that would persist long after emancipation. Undoubtedly, the effects of colorism are deeply entrenched in the current U.S. social landscape, but the impact is especially palpable within the Black community. In the post-Reconstruction era, various social groups were established by light-skinned Black people with the mission of preserving the status and privileges that are granted because of their skin tone. Blue vein societies, groups exclusively for people with skin light enough to reveal blue veins in their arms, were ubiquitous, for example. They practiced their own form of eugenics by only marrying people who were also blue veins, ensuring the same access was afforded to their offspring. Famed nineteenth-century author Charles Chesnutt, a bi-racial man, wrote extensively about this group of people, interrogating how they perpetuated racial stratification solely to uphold their status as more socially acceptable than their darker-skinned counterparts. In his 1898 short story, "The Wife of His Youth," he notes how the blue veins were "more white than black" and had a purpose of "establishing and maintaining correct social standards among a people whose social

condition presented almost inherited room for improvement." He was one of the firsts to expose colorism through fiction, shedding light on the tension between aspirations of social mobility and the enduring propagation of negative racial attitudes.

Respectability politics of the Jim Crow era continued these practices of exclusion and elitism, but by the 1960s, the Black is Beautiful movement ushered in a wave of having pride in one's dark skin and natural kinky hair. Advertisements and television shows began depicting Black women with afros and brown skin as signifiers of beauty for the Black community, countering narratives of inferiority that plagued Black people in the decades prior. This movement did not rid the world of colorism, however. Light-skinned Black women were still lauded as more aesthetically appealing than dark-skinned women, even during a movement meant to celebrate quintessential African phenotypes. Compliments were often met with qualifiers. As described by Boylorn, "When people tell me I'm pretty to be dark-skinned they insinuate that one is either pretty or dark-skinned, not both at the same time. They imply that the tendency to be both simultaneously is possible, but not likely, and requires the careful construction of culturally conditioned standards alongside dark skin. Their words suggest I am an anomaly" (252). Boylorn's experience with colorism demonstrates how admiration of dark skin is conditional and how the negative implications of colorism are salient well into the twenty-first century.

In *Salvage,* Esch's self-consciousness about how she, a brown-skinned girl, compares to the light-skinned girls in her town is a fictive manifestation of the hardships that young dark-skinned girls still face. Through Esch, Ward articulates how one's proximity to whiteness still holds cultural value today, especially when conversations about Black men's preferences for romantic partnership arises. Sociologist Jeffrianne Wilder explores this phenomenon in her book

Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st-Century. She leads by declaring, "In this age of theoretically color-blind, 'post-racial' society, my daughter—and countless other black women and girls like her—will inevitably deal with the subtle and at times blatant challenges attached to her race, class, gender, *and* skin tone" (5). The book outlines her findings after conducting several focus groups with 60 Black girls and women of varying ages to uncover their current thoughts and experiences with colorism. A darker-skinned twenty-one-year-old woman named Nia shared that she was "turned down for a second date with a young man because he *usually* doesn't date dark girls." She goes on to talk about how she used to hate light-skin women because they hold an air of pretentiousness knowing they are the "preferred" type (127). Similar narratives bleed from Wilder's studies, illuminating Black women's ongoing struggle with perceptions of femininity and desirability, ideals that inundate them from childhood forward.

Esch's experience as a brown-skin adolescent girl is grounded in the enduring effects of colorism. The reader is made aware of Esch's thoughts about skin tone when Skeetah is trying to name the puppies that his dog, China, just birthed. Esch's first thought is to name the dog Citronella after a girl she admires. She reflects, "She always had at least two boyfriends, lip gloss, and all her folders were color-coded to match her books. I used to kneel in the water up to my neck and watch her when we ran into her and her folks swimming at the river. She was golden as those candles, so perfect that I wanted to hate her. And I did some" (Ward 50). Citronella's golden skin tone becomes a site of both adulation and contempt since Esch does not share the same attributes but recognizes the value in having lighter skin. Unlike Esch, Citronella had *boyfriends*, not just sexual partners, and she ascribes this to her well-put-together, feminine appearance. Esch, however, is a rough-and-tumble tomboy who swims in muddy pools and gets her hands dirty. The juxtaposition between them is echoed in Esch's contrast to another girl in

town, Shaliyah. Esch incessantly compares herself to Shaliyah since she has *exactly* what Esch desires—Manny. She says, "I loved Manny ever since I saw him kissing that girl. I loved him before he started seeing Shaliyah, skinny, light-skinned, and crazy…He talks about other girls with Randall, but he always comes back to her" (56). Shaliyah is considered the epitome of desirable because of this and her light skin only reinforces Esch's dislike of her own. Shaliyah serves as the antithesis of Esch's perceptions of herself and she struggles to come to terms with it in her fight to be deemed worthy of true love and affection from the opposite sex. While Esch could always get a sexual partner, Citronella and Shaliyah, two light-skin girls, prove an ability to get *romantic* partnership, making her dark skin a factor that widens the gap between what she wants and what she receives.

Make Them Cur: Lessons on Fierce Womanhood and Motherhood

Although Esch often compares herself to other girls in Bois Sauvage, the primary point of comparison for her is China, Skeetah's dog. In the absence of a mother figure, Esch looks to China, a new mother herself, as a guide to what she will experience in the future. China is centered in *Salvage*, representing a fierce femininity, "known among the pit bulls in Bois Sauvage for locking on to dogs and making them cur," a power that Esch dreams of embodying (12). China skews expectations, as she is both violently savage at times but also relentlessly loyal and nurturing. Esch recognizes the value in watching and learning from her while she tries to gain her footing in her own womanhood. The book opens with narration about China preparing to give birth to her first litter of puppies. Esch closely observes her behavior as China transitions into motherhood. Esch reflects on witnessing her own mother labor, and ultimately dying from childbirth, and contrasts that experience with what China exhibits. Unlike her mother's, China's

birthing experience is violent, as she wails and bleeds when the puppies emerge one-by-one. When her labor and delivery is completed, Esch processes the way the new mother nurtures her puppies, saying, "China is licking the puppies. I've never seen her so gentle. I don't know what I thought she would do once she had them: sit on them and smother them maybe. Bite them. Turn their skulls to bits of bone and blood. But she doesn't do any of that. Instead, she stands over them, her on one side and Skeetah on the other like a pair of proud parents, and she licks" (17). In this moment, Esch realizes how transformational and complex becoming a mother can be. The reader gets a glimpse of the preconceived notions Esch has about maturity, womanhood, and motherhood. Despite China's typical aggressive behavior as Skeetah's protector (and now, as the protector of her puppies), she is soft when she needs to be, and this surprises Esch. She later witnesses China mangle and kill one of her puppies when it gets too close to her food. Though China wants to protect her puppies, she demonstrates the prioritizing of her own life since food was sparse. By observing China, Esch learns how femininity is pliable, and one can embody a certain type of ferocity that commands respect while maintaining a sense of gentleness.

Esch takes cues from other people's responses to China, applying what she observes to her future self. Later in the book, Skeetah and Manny verbally spare about who is the alpha dog in Bois Sauvage. China undoubtedly held the crown before, but Manny doubts her now that she has given birth. He says, "But you know China ain't as boss as she used to be…Any dog give birth like that is less strong after. Even if you don't think it. Take a lot out of an animal to nurse and nurture like that. Price of being a female" (96). Skeetah responds, "You serious? That's when they come into they strength. They got something to protect. That's power…To give life is to know what's worth fighting for. And what's love" (96). Despite Skeetah's contestation of Manny's beliefs about feminine fortitude, Esch is disheartened. At this point, Esch's pregnancy

is still a secret, so she ponders if Manny's sentiment would apply to her after she births their child. She wonders if he also feels that way about Shaliyah—if he ever demeaned her femininity in such a way.

Manny's assertions about China's weaknesses are quickly proven wrong, however, as they all bear witness to how powerful and resilient she really is. When they arrive at a local park, the battlegrounds for dog fighting, Esch notices that she is the only girl present. China similarly stands out. When Skeetah prepares China to fight, he repeatedly whispers in her ear, "Make them know." This statement sticks with Esch and reflects her own drive to prove to herself and others that she embodies the same mental and physical grit as China, who continued to fight even as her nursing breasts, her symbol of motherhood, bled profusely from battle. No matter how many times China's opponent, Kilo, sinks his teeth into her, she persists. "She is fire," Esch narrates, "China flings her head back into the air as if eating oxygen, gaining strength, and burns back down to Kilo and takes his neck in her teeth…He roils beneath her. She chews. Fire evaporates water" (175). China's fierceness is on full display. As predicted, she was stronger than ever even though she is a new mother. She is exemplary of Esch's aspirations—respected, nurturing, adored, cared for, and able to stand firm in her femininity even amongst men.

Further, Skeetah's adoration and care for China is admirable to Esch. In an interview, Ward notes how "[Skeetah and China] really are outsiders who exist in their own world, operate by their own rules, have an encompassing love" (Bonia). Because China is the type of "woman" Esch hopes to be, she envies the way China is cared for by Skeetah because she does not consider herself worthy of that same love. When China is preparing to give birth, Esch notes how "[Skeetah] is focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is" (Ward 3). There seems to be a mutual understanding between them, one that

Esch doesn't feel she has with Manny. Unlike Manny, Skeetah nurtures and protects China. He *sees* her needs and wants and responds to them accordingly. China's dominant femininity commands this type of attention, according to Esch. She reflects on how China developed over the years. From a puppy to being a full-grown dog, her strength proved undeniable even in the face of naysayers. Esch recounts, "Manny would talk shit whenever we were all out under the trees as if he could dim her. That he could convince us that she wasn't white and beautiful and gorgeous as a magnolia on the trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit, where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling" (94). Esch is a part of all that is struggling in the Pit, placing China on a pedestal far above her. Skeetah's undying commitment to China persists to the very end of the book, validating Esch's perception of China as a superior exemplar of femininity and power.

Comparisons to China persist less explicitly throughout the book through Ward's use of symbolism. On countless occasions, Esch associates pink with China, fortifying China's perceived femininity. Whether it be her pink muzzle, the pink mucus that drips from her as she gives birth, or her pink blood-stained coat after a fight, China is "pink" from the inside out, an attribute that Esch does not associate with herself. Out of over forty references to the color pink in the book, only on two occasions is it in reference to Esch, and both come towards the end of the novel, demonstrative of Esch's growth. In one instance, the storm subsides, and the Batistes are scavenging for food. In a loving embrace, Esch gets some of Skeetah's blood on her hands, blood from him getting cut by shards of glass in their struggle to survive and in his own struggle to keep China alive. She notes how her hands were pink from his blood and she washes them in a puddle of flood water. This moment signifies the passing of China's fierce feminine glory onto Esch. For the first time, she, too, could be "pink." The final words of *Salvage* reinforce Esch's newfound sense of empowerment in her impending motherhood and as a young woman. China is

ultimately lost in the flood. Though the reader doesn't know for certain whether she survives, Esch addresses her as she would an ancestor. She thinks, "[China] will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister…She will know that I am a mother" (258). In the final hour of the narrative, Esch comes to fully understand how much power she wielded all along. She fought for those she loves, she stood firm in her blossoming womanhood in a sea of men, and she is bringing new life into the world.

Ultimately, Esch's internal dialogue about China reveals her damaged self-image and her harsh self-criticism about her lack of femininity. Esch grants China permission to be imperfect but still worthy of love. After China's victorious fight, Skeetah tends to her wounds, bathing her and wrapping her in old bandages. Even though she is battered and covered in dirt and blood, Skeetah still loves her the same. Esch narrates, "Skeetah unwraps China's breast, and it hangs free, already bruised and wilted from disuse; it is a dark mark on her, marring what was once so white, so pristine. The scar makes what remains even more beautiful. Skeetah looks at China like he would dive into her if he could and drown" (192). China's beauty is tarnished in many ways, but she still receives the care she needs. Esch is similarly imperfect, but in her eyes, this makes her unlovable, less-than. At that juncture in her journey towards womanhood, Esch doesn't feel like she has the benefit of being desirable and esteemed unless she is pristine.

Though Esch emphasizes the fact that she falls short of certain standards repeatedly throughout the novel, by the end she recuperates a love for her tomboyish self that transcends her own understanding of feminine beauty. Her protruding pregnant belly redefines the types of curves that makes a woman beautiful and desirable. When her father finally notices that she is pregnant, she observes, "Daddy saw it, that second before he pushed me. My big T-shirt and my

shorts fitting me like a second skin, sodden with water. Where I used to be all sharp elbows and thighs straight as pines and a stomach like a paved road, my wet clothes showed the difference. Daddy saw the curve of the waist, the telltale push of a stomach outward. Daddy saw fruit" (234). The change that Esch wanted since the first time she had sex came to fruition in a way she could not have imagined. In that moment, she did not feel ashamed or frustrated by her figure, instead she felt *seen* for the first time. Unlike before, she didn't use negative words to describe her notably pregnant body even as it's covered in her boyish clothing. Her father grants her the male attention that she desperately desired. Further, her other apprehensions about her non-feminine appearance positively shift as well when Big Henry, a family friend, conveys to Esch that *he* will always be there for her and her baby. He reminds her, "Don't forget you always got me," when she expresses how the baby does not have a father. She ponders on how she wishes Big Henry had been there to help her long before this point with his "big hands" and "legs like tree trunks sunk in the earth" (255). In the end, her relationship with Big Henry, which was present throughout the whole story, made her realize that despite her appearance not aligning with certain standards of beauty and femininity, she is worthy of love, in all forms, regardless. She gains that relationship that she saw between Skeetah and China, she gains a sense of confidence that she envied in the other female figures in the book, and she gains pride in her impending motherhood without having to alter who she naturally is.

Savagery Realized: Esch's Fortified Self-Confidence

Esch breaks the limits of self-expression and self-making placed on her and emerges as non-monolithic southern Black theoretician, queering binaries and staking claim to her agency as a genderbending figure. As noted by Christopher W. Clark, "The Batistes serve as an atypical

model that actually subverts conventional ideas of how the American family is considered. They reflect large populations of the South who are often considered working-class, living in poverty, often unemployed, and uneducated." Esch, however, upsets these paradigms, demonstrating intellectual depth, frequently beckoning Greek mythology as a framework for navigating and processing her life's circumstances. She imagines she is like "Psyche or Eurydice or Daphne," as she longs for Manny's romantic reciprocity (Ward 16). She reads *Mythology* and thinks about how Medea wields divine feminine power with an ability to "bend the natural to the unnatural," yet Medea is still abandoned and ravaged by her love, Jason. Esch reflects, "I know her," because she feels she *is* her (38). She questions if Medea's experience of love and betrayal made her feel the same way she does when it comes to her own pregnancy with Manny. She compares China's killing of her puppy to Medea's murder of her children. She ponders, "Is this what motherhood is?" (130). She is not an unknowing character. She represents Black girlhood that can transcend preconceived notions and stigmas. She breaks the proverbial mold.

Esch is a daughter of the dust, so to speak.[9] The dirt that consumes her physical world represents birth, death, and remnants of the life one led between the two. In the chapter "The Third Day: Sickness in the Dirt," for example, Skeetah realizes his new litter of puppies may potentially die from parvo, a highly contagious virus passed amongst dogs. He suspects that one has already been infected and hypothesizes that the puppy "picked it up out the dirt," the same dirt in which his beloved China and her pups are covered (30). Meanwhile, Esch battles morning sickness and her swelling belly full of her secret pregnancy. She watches as Skeetah does

[9] I borrow this term from the 1991 Julie Dash film, *Daughters of the Dust*. The film's narrative traces a Gullah family's struggle with cultural retention when some members leave their Sea Island home for a better life on the mainland. The dust represents the history and traditions of their Ibo ancestors and the family's matriarch fears they will be lost when her family becomes disconnected from the land on which those traditions were established and upheld.

everything in his power to save the dog. Eventually, Skeetah kills the puppy as to not let it suffer any longer. After a day of fighting to keep it alive, he strips himself of his clothing, throws it all into a fire, and declares it all "contaminated." Picking up dishwashing liquid, he walks towards the murky Pit to bathe. Though the others watch in confusion, Esch, still fully clothed, joins him in the water. She narrates, "Where my brothers go, I follow" (53). She uses the dish soap to make her clothes white before placing them in a pile beside the water—in the dirt. Though they submerge themselves in the water to cleanse themselves of contaminants, the water itself is not clean. Esch and Skeetah bask in it, however, demonstrating a willingness to be covered in the land. Esch's drive to go where her brothers go, in her full, uncomfortably pregnant tomboy glory, is more evident than ever in this moment. Together, they don't seem to strive for cleanliness, for perfection, but for respite from the sticky, hot air and the day's hardships. Despite there being "sickness in the dirt," there is a familiar stillness in it, too—one that ushers in acceptance of imperfect beauty and untraditional femininity, one that makes the *Dirty* South feel like home.

Ch. 3

From the Quotidian to the Extraordinary: A Critical History of Black Tomboy Entertainers

> "More than a woman, real enough to rock the boat (Keep it real)
> I don't fit the status quo, blow they mind, Maseo (Keep it real)
> Really fine, I'm like another kind of fine you should know (Keep it real)
> Get you somebody that can still do both (Real)
> Back and forth, that's somebody that can play both coasts."
>
> - Rapsody, "Aaliyah"[10]

Though I tried to "perform" femininity as best as I could when I was in high school, I was uncomfortable with being someone I am not and my heightened desire for social acceptance and romantic partnership in my college years tightened that tension. I felt like my masculine presentation of self and other people's assumptions about my sexuality threatened my ability to succeed in either of those endeavors. Whereas my tomboy inclinations were written off as a phase when I was a child, in adulthood, people's inaccurate judgements about my identity deepened my self-consciousness. I was cognizant of how I defied socio-cultural norms as an adult Black tomboy on a Historically Black University campus in Atlanta. Georgia, however. Within that context, the confidence in my ability to construct my own type of womanhood quickly waned. If I wanted to belong, I needed to adhere.

The parameters for what *is* and *is not* acceptable behavior, attire, and desires for girls becomes substantially more rigid once one reaches adulthood. Unlike in childhood and adolescence, there is no presumed innocence when a woman is a tomboy. When a girl transitions into adulthood, social conformity becomes increasingly necessary for emotional, mental, and

[10] Rapsody is a Black female MC who prides herself on being a tomboy. In these lyrics, she references Aaliyah's tomboyism and how she "can do both," which is a colloquial phrase used to describe a dynamic woman who confidently presents herself as an embodiment of masculinity and femininity. This type of woman loves masculine attire but sometimes dresses more feminine and is beautifully cool regardless. The playing of "both coasts" in this sense is an ability to seamlessly occupy both sides of the gender binary.

sometimes physical survival. In adulthood, one's attire is solidified as more than a marker of self-expression, it becomes a marker of sexuality, status, culture, and a host of other aspects of one's identity. Most people would like to believe that how we visually present ourselves holds little weight when considered how we're treated or labeled by greater society, but unfortunately, that is an idealistic outlook on where we stand. As evidenced in the perpetual violence against Black people solely based on skin color and clothing choices, one's public presentation of self is not inconsequential. The stigmas associated with defining oneself *for* oneself is the cornerstone of the Black tomboy's lifelong story of circumventing social expectations as disrupters of gender conformity. Although fixed definitions of womanhood can be found within every culture, Black American women can trace major components of modern-day constructions of womanhood to a critical juncture— the onset of the hypervigilance of respectability politics.

Within the confines of the mores dictated by respectability politics, the shielding of one's private life became especially important. The tension between the public and private presentations of self was tightened under the guise of racial uplift. Contradicting these "rules" implied going against the strategy that was *supposed* to win true freedom. Consequentially, Black women leaned heavily into the use of privacy as armor, protecting them from societal pressures and violence as well as enabling them eschew judgment. Darlene Clark Hine's employment of the word "dissemblance" in her essay "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women" gives language to this type of social defense mechanism. She declares, "Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives" (915). Dissemblance is the "appearance of openness and disclosure" while simultaneously hiding one's inner, private self

from their oppressors (912). In the case of Black women in the early 20th-century and beyond, respectability politics begged for dissemblance, since it was marked as one of the only paths towards liberation.

Since the main goal of respectability politics is to upend the negative stereotypes of Black womanhood through "adherence to temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity" (Higgenbotham 193), sexual freedom and "unladylike" attire such as short skirts and cleavage-revealing dresses are viewed as cardinal sins of the piety-as-liberation strategy put forth by Baptist women, particularly during the Jim Crow era. Black tomboys like blues singer and pianist Gladys Bentley and drag king Stormé DeLarverie, who lived through its peak, are the antithesis of what was deemed acceptable because of this. Although they were not the only social disrupters of their time, they stand as exemplars of what can happen when one harnesses their agency to make the private public and dismiss adherence to the practice of dissemblance. With respectability politics historically galvanizing the policing of Black women, pushing them to dissociate from their sexual beings and be relegated to the private sphere, subverting this practice is a revolutionary act. Further, as an intergenerational phenomenon, entertainers like Bentley and DeLarverie carved a space for current Black tomboy entertainers like Queen Latifah to thrive and continue to shift social norms. These Black tomboys are located at the intersection of tomboyism, Blackness, and commodification as figures in popular culture. They are not simply subverting the overarching idea of what femininity is; they are subverting the common paradigms for Black women, in general, and do so on a worldwide stage. This chapter delves into their private and public lives to expose how their identity is suspended on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity, but still mutable. The struggles that Bentley and

DeLarverie faced ultimately contextualize Latifah's success in our contemporary world as a Black tomboy entertainer.

Externally Rich but Internally Damned: Gladys Bentley's Morally Corrupt Tomboyism

Known for her butch aesthetic and risqué lyrics about her lesbian lovers, Gladys Bentley may be a lesser-known Harlem Renaissance figure, but she broke many barriers for Black women entertainers. Although she is gaining more attention for her contributions, when people tell her life story, a critical detail is often neglected—the mental anguish that Bentley suffered because of her masculine presentation and vulgar performances. Despite her notoriety for being a Black tomboy at a time when performance of hyper-femininity was not only preferred, but crucial for a woman's survival, Bentley ultimately subscribed to the heteronormative paradigms of the time. Her trajectory from being a proud social disrupter to adhering to social norms is an important part of the history of Black tomboys as embodiments of resistance because it illuminates the difficulties that one endures when transgressing the status quo, thus fortifying the power the Black tomboy wields when she stands firm in the way she self-identifies.[11]

Born in Philadelphia in 1907, Bentley entered the world at a time when Black Americans were afforded certain freedoms, but socio-economic upward mobility was not in the realm of possibility for most. Having grown up in a financially unstable household, she left Philadelphia at sixteen years old and traveled to New York City to pursue a career in the entertainment industry. After a string of auditions and subbing in for musicians at bars and nightclubs, she got her first break when a club was in desperate need of a pianist, and she convinced them to give

[11] Bentley is often labeled as "butch" in publications about her at the time as well as in contemporary scholarship. Certain readings of her can place her in the "drag king" category as well. Here, she is classified under the umbrella of female masculinity, which denotes masculine-inflected identities including, but not limited to, queer or lesbian butch women, studs, tomboys, and drag kings.

her a chance. That opportunity segued into a legacy of being a powerhouse, sexually explicit, Black tomboy blues singer who challenged perceptions of womanhood in every way.

Bentley recounts in a 1952 article she penned for *Ebony* how she pushed the boundaries from the very beginning of her career. In the essay, "I Am a Woman Again," she says, "One of the unique things about my act was the way I dressed…I appeared in tailor-made clothes, top hat and tails, with a cane to match each costume, stiff-bosomed shirt, wing collar tie and matching shoes" (94). This type of stage presence stemmed from her defiance of stereotypical femininity starting at a very young age, citing her mother's disappointment in having a girl as a source for her personal disdain for "girly" attire. In the article, she notes how her preference for "boy" clothing was rooted in a deep-seated anger for feeling unwanted and unloved by her mother and envy of the attention her brothers received. She says, "When my two brothers were born, I began to hate them as we grew up…At the age of nine and ten, I stole their suits and wore them to school. I think I began wearing their clothes, feeling that I was getting even with them, but soon I began to feel more comfortable in boys' clothes than in dresses" (96). To Bentley, not wearing dresses and skirts was initially an act of rebellion that shaped her trajectory into womanhood. Her deviation was calculated, but she emphasizes her upbringing as what *made* her the way she was. She expresses that she felt like had she been loved properly back then, the "malignant growth" inside of her would not have prospered well into her adulthood (96). She was acutely aware of the tension between femininity and masculinity and the social implications of subscribing to one or the other. Regardless of the impetus, she was set path of pushing against the status quo, upsetting the binary that was the root of her self-proclaimed strained self-image.

Bentley transgressed social norms that were substantially more rigid in the early twentieth century than they are in the twenty-first century, especially for working-class Black

women. In addition to respectability being inextricably tied to Black liberation, marriageability was top priority for most women because that was their primary route to financial and social stability— she violated all the rules on a *public* stage. To defy these mores in the privacy of one's own home is one thing, but doing so in public, night-after-night, is another, making each performance a site of vulnerability to intense backlash. Scholar Saidiya Hartman casts Bentley as the villain in the narrative of respectability, especially given her increased visibility as a famed blues singer, when she briefly chronicles Bentley's life in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Hartman writes, "Bentley's queer masculinity ran roughshod over the righteous propagation that resided at the heart of every racial melodrama. Bentley trashed the gendered norms and family ideals central to the project of racial uplift—self-regulation, monogamy, fidelity, wedlock, and reproduction—and scoffed at the moralism of the latter-day Victorian, the aristocrats of uplift" (200). From her lyrics about anal sex to her gender-bending fashion choices, Bentley was located at the center of what many would consider moral depravity and she fueled the stereotypes that conservative Black women viewed as a barrier to social equality.

Inevitably, despite Bentley defying the odds of transcending her poverty-stricken childhood, making a name for herself in showbusiness, and being praised by other notable figures in Black entertainment, her tomboy image and raunchy performances were still met with criticism throughout the years, perhaps aiding in her eventual retreat from her "unwomanly" persona later in life. In a news article about the police shutting down an unnamed popular New York City nightclub, the author cites the presence of "the masculine-garbed, smut-singing entertainer" as the cause (qtd. in Wilson 177). Though harshly worded, the sentiment gives language to the widespread negative perceptions of sexually explicit entertainment and gender nonconforming women. Her masculine presentation of self went against respectability politics on

its own, but because it was coupled with her occupation as a woman blues singer, another layer of social aberrance was added to her profile.

In its beginnings, "the blues" was perceived as "devil music" mainly due to the often sexually explicit content of the songs. Birthed out of work songs and Negro spirituals in the mid-nineteenth century, the blues was about pouring out one's soul and inner sorrows. The blues afforded the freedom to express one's innermost desires and anxieties, inherently requiring a publicizing of one's private life and suggested a normalization of acts that were considered ungodly at the time. Angela Y. Davis traces the nuances of the commonly held beliefs about "the blues" as a controversial site of self-expression when she notes:

> The most pervasive opposition to the blues, however, was grounded in the religious practices of the historical community responsible for the production of the blues in the first place. The blues were a part of a cultural continuum that disputed the binary construction associated with Christianity. In this sense, they blatantly defied the Christian imperative to relegate sexual conduct to the realm of sin. Many blues singers therefore were assumed to have made a pact with the devil. (123)

The blues as a musical genre itself contradicts the mission of respectability politics, but Bentley's lyrics took the inherently "sinful" nature of the music and translated into an overt rejection of virtuous behavior, exacerbating her "villainous" status, as labeled by Hartman.

In 1928, her local popularity segued into her first major record deal with Okeh Records, with whom she released eight tracks. Her 1929 record, "Red Beans & Rice Blues" is exemplary of the way that Bentley expressed sexual desire both in her lyrics and performance. In this song, her food references operate as a double-entendre for her lack of sexual satisfaction with her lover. The song opens with bluesy piano refrain. Bentley's voice forcefully rips through the

sonically smooth tones of the piano, as she laments, “Red beans and rice, greasy bacon in the pot.” The first line is no indication of the story she is about to unfold, but a harkening to food that is meant to be side dishes suggests a sense of being unfulfilled. She repeats this opening line, and every line thereafter, as if to make sure her pain is heard and felt. Bentley continues, finally cluing the audience into a feeling of dissatisfaction, “Cold bread in the oven, coffee on the stove ain’t hot.” From that point, however, she unveils the source of her misery, citing the lack of money, gifts, and loving she receives from her lover. She declares:

> I don’t get no chicken, ham and eggs would poison me
> Why, he won’t buy no sugar just to sweeten his own tea
> Walked to work this morning because I only had one dime
> Wouldn’t spend it on myself, spent it on that man of mine
> He don’t buy no clothes, he don’t keep his laundry clean
> He short on his lovin’, stingiest man I’ve ever seen.

“Chicken,” a slang term for “money,” continues her use of double meaning and introduces another layer to her strained romantic relationship by positioning her lover as stingy in various ways, adding to her displeasure. Bentley chronicles how she sacrifices more than her energy and money, concluding with a statement about her greatest woe, the sacrificing of her sexual pleasures, as he comes up “short” in more ways than one. The song ends with a return to the initial exhortation, saying, “Red beans and rice, morning noon and every night/ I can’t keep on workin’ with only rice and beans in sight.” Bentley’s final refrain tells listeners that a sexual and romantic diet that consists of primarily “red beans and rice” is insufficient. The monotony, lack of excitement and exclusivity led her to a site of yearning, as evidenced in her gritty voice and repetitive lyrics. “Red Beans and Rice Blues” helped set the stage for Bentley, positioning her as

a fearless Black female entertainer and as a Black tomboy who transgresses the sexual repression that women were *supposed* to feel. With this record and other performances, she turned private sexual desire and longing into public outcry.

When examining the life of Bentley as a social disrupter, resisting heteronormative gender identifications and presentations of self, one must consider how the queer atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance precipitated and permitted her more liberated expression of self despite respectability politics. Although heteronormative social mores were woven into the fiber of America in the 1920s and 30s, the nation's response to Prohibition drove drinking, partying, and dancing underground and drove many entertainment-seekers to Harlem, specifically. Harlem, being predominantly Black at the time, was often ignored by police when cracking down on unlawful activity. James F. Wilson explores this phenomenon in *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* asserts, "Because one of the functions of the ghetto is to provide a controlled site for a certain amount of lawlessness–A.B. Christa Schwarz refers to Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s as 'New York's premier red-light district'–city authorities had a far more relaxed legal attitude in Harlem than they did in Midtown" (155). In short, Harlem was queer, which opened possibilities of more fluid and flexible presentations of self and an opportunity to open one's private self to the public imagination. By the mid-1920s, there were thousands of speakeasy clubs in New York City alone. "Illicit" activity had somewhat free reign since much entertainment happened in secrecy, thus, artists and entertainers who were typically marginalized could be praised in those spaces.

Bentley's presence as a queer Black tomboy easily fit into the happenings. Although her career started as a performer at the underground clubs and rent parties, she quickly ascended beyond those borders, emerging as a top-billed act in various clubs, including ones that

particularly appealed to queer audiences. A counterculture was thriving and so was Bentley as a respected blues singer and pianist who donned a tailored suit and top hat. She was sometimes billed as Barbara “Bobbie” Minton, a stage name that encapsulated her gender-bending identity. She was praised by her peers, including one of the most notable creative figures of the era, Langston Hughes. He explores the time when Harlem was a hotspot for white patronage, ultimately diluting the potency of its thriving Black culture. Despite this, he makes note of the entertainers who awed the crowd night after night, including Bentley. His first-hand account of her occupies multiple paragraphs in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, speaking volumes about her physical presence and musical acumen. He recounts:

> For two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat, and played a big piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping -singing songs like "The St. James Infirmary," from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm.
>
> Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy -a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard -a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm. (221)

Despite the overt colorism that bleeds through his statements when he conflates her dark skin tone with her masculine presentation, he sings her praises. She draws from the tension of her female masculinity in that space, rendering the audience awestruck. Hughes highlights a sense of freedom that echoed from her fingertips, through her voice, and filled the air. Her “powerful” presence was made possible by the queer scene of Harlem, giving her an opportunity to transgress without immediate judgement.

What is most important about the story that Hughes weaves together about the Black entertainment he witnessed during the Harlem Renaissance is the marked decline in the authenticity of the performances. With more white crowds flooding the streets as they seek respite from their highly regulated environments, a dilution of the art was inevitable. This downward spiral of the quality of the performances is noted as having negatively impacted Bentley's resonance with her audience, too. Her commodification as a dark-skinned, deep-voiced, extremely talented mannish woman came at the expense of the rawness of her presence and, ultimately, her proximity to the queer space that once served as her emotional and physical outlet. Hughes goes on to say:

> But when the place where she played became too well known, she began to sing with an accompanist, became a star, moved to a larger place, then downtown, and is now in Hollywood. The old magic of the woman and the piano and the night and the rhythm being one is gone. But everything goes, one way or another. The '20's are gone and lots of fine things in Harlem night life have disappeared like snow in the sun -since it became utterly commercial, planned for the downtown tourist trade, and therefore dull. (122)

The dampening of Harlem nightlife, advanced by mainstream success and gentrification, signaled Bentley's shift away from publicizing her inner, private self and offering a more palatable, seemingly diluted version instead. In *Ebony*, she admits that though she still performed in nightclubs and was enjoying success, there was not as much "sensational publicity" surrounding her anymore by the time she moved to Los Angeles, which can presumably be attributed to the "miracle" she claims to have experienced in giving up the life that she believed was morally depraved (94).

Soon after Bentley's career transitioned from the Harlem club scene to the national stage, the stock market crashed in 1929, spawning The Great Depression, and Prohibition came to an end by late 1933. As she transitioned to living in Los Angeles, California in 1938, the American cultural and social landscape was also quickly shifting, impacting commonly held ideals and sensibilities. Simultaneously, an intensified urgency for civil rights amid what seemed like a never-ending Jim Crow era sparked a greater need for the Black community to get in line with the principles outlined by leadership (primarily Black clergy). People like Bentley could no longer be celebrated without consequence. Bentley stood as the antithesis of a respectable Black woman. Since respectability and Black church culture were viewed as tools for social change, she technically stood in opposition, compromising the integrity of what was perceived as the greater good.

Her 1952 *Ebony* essay is evidence of how the years of criticism and the cultural shift towards conservative behavior in the Black community began to weigh on her more heavily than it had in her childhood. Bentley is noted as having attempted to revive her career several times throughout the years after leaving New York City, but she never ascended to becoming the superstar she had the potential to be, and this can be attributed to heightened pressures of respectability later in her career. Although the article was intended to be a celebration of Bentley's newfound happiness, it centers her life-long mental agony from not being *truly* socially accepted. She proudly wore her "badge of non-conformity" when there were queer spaces in which she could flourish, but 1950s America for a Black woman was not as welcoming, especially amid a major push towards equality that prioritized modesty to the highest degree.

Additionally, Bentley had been living in Los Angeles for several years by the time this essay was penned, a place that did not afford the same kind of freedoms as Harlem had at the

peak of her career. By the 1950s, California was in the middle of the Second Great Migration, with Black people primarily from Texas and Louisiana descending on cities like L.A. and San Francisco in search of gainful employment and new opportunities that were not provided in their deeply Southern and explicitly racist home states. According to historical records, in 1930, there were roughly 50,000 Black people living in California's major cities, but by 1950, that population had increased to over 250,000 ("The African-American Migration Story"). The influx of Black Southerners possibly resulted in a culture with heightened Christian sensibilities and one can deduce that Bentley got caught in the middle of that shift since he writes about how she became a "loyal believer in the teachings of Unity," a religion based on Christian concepts, when she moved to L.A. Her religious fervor colors the language she uses when she reflects on her previously immoral life in Harlem and her new virtuous life in California. She cautions, "Mine has been a story of what sociologists and psychiatrists would perhaps term extreme social maladjustment. I have strayed far from the social norm and because I have been a victim of my own sins, I cannot condemn and denounce those who defend deviation" (96). Categorizing her tomboy presence and lesbian relationships as sin reflects ideals of the Black church and Bentley's eventual compliance was her direct response to the conservative cultural norms of that period.

In "I Am a Woman Again" Bentley cites her less-than-ideal childhood and strained familial relationships as the genesis of her walking a path of moral depravity and self-deprecation earlier in her life. She poetically writes:

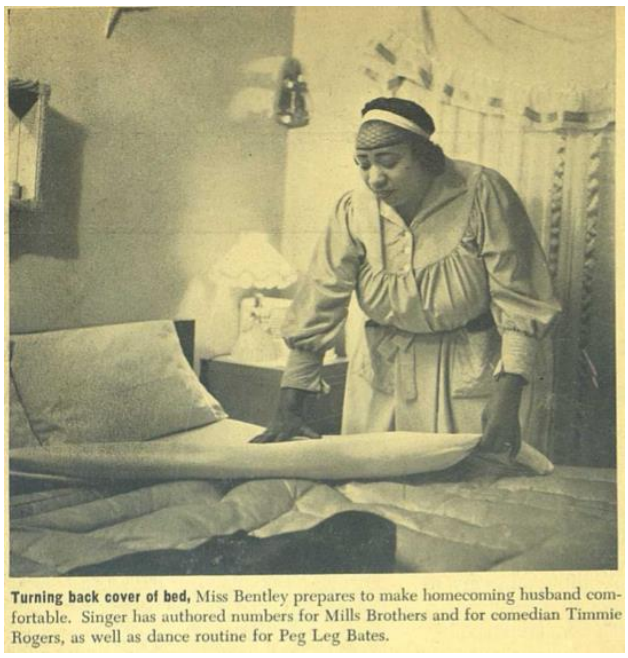
> Some of us wear the symbols and badges of our non-conformity. Others, seeking to avoid the censure of society, hide behind respectable fronts, haunted always by the fear of exposure and ostracism…The censure which rages all about us has the effect of

> creating within us a brooding self-condemnation, a sense of not being as good as the next person. (93)

This passage is an admission of her opting to shield herself from criticism by becoming the respectable woman she was *supposed* to be, but the ideas expressed in the article must be met with nuance, especially considering the state of her career at the time and social climate as determined by the Black church as they led civil rights efforts. In the introduction she says, "Today I am a woman again through the miracle which took place not only in my mind and heart, but also in my body. I am happily married and living a normal existence…I want to help others who are trapped in [the sex underworld's] dark recesses by telling my story" (94). For Bentley, her return to normalcy was choosing heterosexual partnership and gender conformity.

The pictures that are included in her editorial spread show her in a domestic capacity, reflecting her acquiescence to a stereotypically feminine role. She is captured making the bed and cooking dinner in a perfectly pressed dress.The caption reads, "Taste-testing dinner she has prepared for her husband J.T. Gipson, Miss Bentley enjoys domestic role which she shunned for years" (94). These images are a stark contrast to the ones that were taken when she was at her peak in show business, many of which showed her on stage or outside of a club in a tuxedo. Although she made many changes in her life by 1952, the title and the accompanying images makes the correlation between attire and perceived womanhood extremely evident (see figs. 6 and 7). Ridding herself of her tomboy presence was a way for her to visually mark becoming "a woman again." Moreover, it reveals how she was constantly negotiating between her private and public self. She separates the woman that she is at the time she pens this essay from the woman she was when she was in the years prior. She notes how she is "no longer Gladys Bentley in her private life" (95). She chose to embrace the life she once "shunned." She welcomed a life of

piety, a life of marrying and serving a husband as a homemaker, and a life where she did not have to present her moral depravity to the world.



Turning back cover of bed, Miss Bentley prepares to make homecoming husband comfortable. Singer has authored numbers for Mills Brothers and for comedian Timmie Rogers, as well as dance routine for Peg Leg Bates.

Taste-testing dinner she has prepared for husband J. T. Gipson, Miss Bentley enjoys domestic role which she shunned for years. She lives in modest, tastefully-appointed home directly in rear of similar home she purchased for her mother.

Fig. 6. and Fig. 7. Clippings from *Ebony Magazine* that capture Gladys Bentley making the bed and washing dishes in her Los Angeles home.

"I Am a Woman Again" is essentially Bentley's story about choosing to subscribe to heteronormativity after a lifetime of resisting adherence to respectability politics. This shift could have been due to her declining career as an entertainer (a public relations move meant to win the hearts of the masses), or it may have been spawned by a genuine change in mindset about what she should and should not *be* and *do* as a woman, but in the end, respectability was her way out of a dark place. In writing about Bentley's life, Saidiya Hartman concludes her life story by saying, "Alas, the villain cannot escape the end that awaits him. By the time *The End* rolls onto the screen, virtue's antagonist is long gone" (200). Her story is that of a relentless fight against societal standards. From childhood onward, Bentley felt it necessary to step out and make her

own declarations about who she is and what she stands for, even if it is a declaration of having made a transition from performing the blues to performing normativity.

Bentley's adhesion to a more stereotypical feminine presentation later in life does not negate how much of a social disrupter she was, however. From the onset of her career, she laid the foundation for Black tomboys to proudly defy the norms. From the conviction in her voice as she wooed crowds during the Harlem Renaissance, to the pride that beamed from her smile as she posed for pictures in her all-white tuxedo and top hat, Gladys Bentley gave permission to Black women to be unapologetically themselves no matter the stage on which they stand.

All Hail the King: Stormé DeLarverie's Passing Fashion

One of the women who built upon the foundation set by Bentley is Stormé DeLarverie. Unlike Bentley, DeLarverie's life is much less obscure, with much scholarship dedicated to documenting her contributions to LGBTQ liberation. Known as "the spark that ignited the Stonewall Uprising," spawning a massive movement for gay rights, her impact on how Black womanhood is defined and presented is often overlooked. As one of the first Black drag kings, DeLarverie also occupied an inherently queer space that opened an opportunity to define herself for herself, but it is her tomboy presentation beyond the walls of the drag show that aided in the nuancing of how Black women are represented and understood.

Born in 1920s New Orleans to a wealthy white father and a Black mother who was his servant, her biracial identity coupled with her family's wealth prompted a childhood filled with bullying, which was so intense that one instance left her with a permanent limp. In a 2001 interview, she shares, "The white kids were beating me up, Black kids were beating me up, everybody was jumping on me. If it wasn't for my father's money, it was because of being Bla–

," she pauses, "being a Negro with a white face. So, he told me if I don't stop running, I'd be running for the rest of my life. When I was fifteen, I stopped running and I haven't run a day since" ("A Stormé Life). DeLarverie's insistence on standing firmly in her identity committed her to a life of self-making.

Performance was DeLarverie's outlet from a young age. Her life centered a love for entertaining as she wowed crowds doing everything from riding horses for the Ringling Brothers Circus to touring with jazz bands. As the leading lady for the bands, she presented herself as stereotypically feminine but her deep baritone voice both captivated audiences and transcended their understanding of what a woman *should* be. She carried the soul of jazz and love of performance with her when she moved to Chicago in her 20s, and that transition opened opportunities for how she visually expressed herself. In the deep south in the 1920s and 30s, wearing attire that does not match one's gender is a potentially life-threatening act, so Chicago's northern sensibilities afforded her space to explore and lean into her true desires.

DeLarverie's world shifted yet again when she made her way to New York City and joined the Jewel Box Revue. The touring female impersonator company began as a local attraction in Miami, Florida in the 1930s. Established by two gay men, Danny Brown and Doc Benner, they were set apart from all of the other drag shows that were primarily operated by heterosexual men seeking to capitalize off of the "freakishness" of female impersonation ("Inside the Jewel Box Revue's World of Drag"). The Jewel Box offered a more welcoming environment because of this. With rising popularity and changing state laws prohibiting female impersonation shows in venues where liquor is sold, they started taking the show on the road by 1941. When DeLarverie joined, she was the only woman as well as the master of ceremonies. She invigorated clubs and theaters across the United States night after night from 1955 to 1969 and helped

cultivate a space where everyone, specifically the LGBTQ community, could be unapologetically themselves. In her decision to become the first, and only, drag king in the company, DeLarverie was urged to reconsider. In an interview for the *In the Life* television series, she recounts this distinct moment in time when she says, "Somebody told me that I couldn't do it, [be a drag king], and that I would completely ruin my reputation and that I had enough problems being Black. But I said I didn't have any problem with it, everybody else did." Despite pushback, she pursued what would become a highly successful career with the Jewel Box Revue.

As a drag king, DeLarverie's masculine performance aesthetic aligned her with performers like Bentley. Advertised as the "and One Girl" part of the show, she disrupted what was expected in the drag world and drew upon the legacy of gender-bending Black women, standing in agreement with queer sensibilities and in opposition to heteronormativity (see figs. 8 and 9). In *Queering Drag: Redefining Discourse on Gender-Bending*, Meredith Heller nuances DeLarverie's drag king presence by citing how the audience's reception of her varied depending on the location of the show. The shift in audience perspective impacted DeLarverie's legibility as a lesbian woman impersonating a man and the degree to which she was bending gender norms. Heller notes:

> At popular gay clubs, audiences might assume DeLarverie is 'family': a sexually queer, genderqueer, or trans person. If the show is at the Apollo or a locale connected to the historical Theater Owner's Booking Association circuit, audiences might associate DeLarverie's act with the expressive masculinity popularized by some Black women blues performers. But when performing for a majority non-Black and nongay crows, DeLarverie could be seen as something else…they took DeLarverie for what DeLarverie

> appeared to be, a cisgender, heterosexual man. Until DeLarverie showed them differently. (35)

The reactions from the majority straight, predominantly white, audiences added to the reach of DeLarverie's social disruption as they represent "mainstream" culture. The Jewel Box Revue *mostly* toured venues that attracted largely straight crowds, so with almost every tour stop, DeLarverie's gender-bending presence defied expectations. She exhibited the "ideological possibility that 'nonman' masculinity can be both attractive and comfortable" (119)

Although Heller states that there might have been more of a familiar bond between DeLarverie's drag king persona and Black audiences, specifically in Harlem, because of an already established love of performers like Gladys Bentley, there was still discord in cultural values. The Jewel Box Revue saw mostly white audiences on the road, which was unsurprising given their mostly white ensemble, but they also played to several all-Black audiences, including at the historic Apollo Theater where Black queens like Lynn Pace and king Stormé DeLarverie offered a recognizable type of entertainment. When their show opened at the Apollo, Black Muslims were said to have been protesting outside of the theater. In an interview with a former performer for the Jewel Box Revue, they say that they observed a sign that said, "Keep the queers out of Harlem!" on that night ("Inside the Jewel Box Revue's World of Drag")– a statement that is interesting given the fact that Harlem was once "as gay as it was Black." The pivot in cultural attitudes between the Harlem Renaissance and the 1950s and 1960s can be wrapped up in that one statement. A place that once had an ethos of self-exploration, self making, and creative expression succumbed to the more rigid social norms of the U.S. at the time.

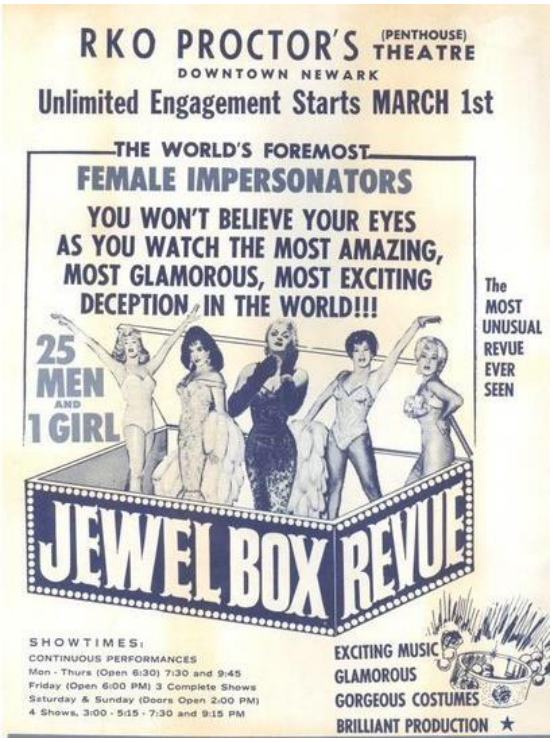


Fig. 8. Poster for the Jewel Box Revue from 1967.

Fig. 9. Stormé DeLarverié and three Jewel Box performers in 1953.

Beyond that sign marking a shift in Harlem, it reveals another construct that DeLarverie had to confront as a drag king and as a tomboy–the conflation of drag and homosexuality. Another former Jewel Box impersonator recounts the ongoing homophobic-centered protests as he states, "They had big, huge signs– 'Get the Faggots Out of Harlem!'– and we had to go out between shows to get food and eat, but because we were actors, we knew how to blend in. We just went to work, and nobody ever even blinked an eye at us." They were passing, in a sense, presenting a believable portrayal of femininity when out of the context of the theater in which they were performing. On stage, they were meant to be spectacular. They were not trying to portray "realness." In the streets, however, they were. Them being able to "blend in" is indicative of how their legibility as gender-bending performers was merely an imagined threat to the heteronormative ideals of the people in Harlem and, perhaps, the nation at-large. As evidenced in

the social and cultural shift that also impacted Gladys Bentley's trajectory as a gender-bending entertainer, the 1950s and 1960s was a time wrought with a drive to suppress what was considered sexually deviant behavior and female and male impersonators stood as easy targets because they were visually marked as such.

When inhabiting a queer space where one's identity is as fluid as they desire, DeLarverie was able to flourish as a drag king, but when she stepped into the world as her authentic Black self, she was met with systemic contempt. One part of her ongoing fight was spawned by laws and codes that criminalized cross-dressing. She explains how she tried to do the "proper" thing by wearing men's clothes only on stage and wearing women's clothes in the streets, but she was detained twice for dressing as a drag queen, despite her being a woman presenting as a woman ("A Stormé Life"). Even when her garb "matched" her gender, she was seen as a threat to social normativity in the eyes of the law. The 1950s "sought to enforce compulsory heterosexuality as a pervasive public policy," which was reflected in heightened surveillance of *seemingly* gay, lesbian, or queer people (Eskridge 7). Between the 1940s and 1960s, law enforcement drew upon legal codes against costumed dress, otherwise known as "masquerade laws," to target the LGBTQ community, effectively arresting people for cross-dressing in public. In New York, these codes date back to 1845, declaring it a crime to have your "face painted, discolored, covered or concealed, or otherwise disguised while in a road or public highway" (Ryan). In *Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*, Clare Sears notes, "Such laws were passed in over forty U.S. cities between the Civil War and World War I, with remarkably long lives, remaining in force until the 1970s…They also had immense effects, producing new definitions of gender normality and abnormality that haunt us today" (3). Origins of these prohibitions are not definitive, but Sears attributes the widespread

popularity of such ordinances with a crackdown on what could be classified as "public indecencies" and prostitution. Sexual defiance and cross-dressing went hand-in-hand in the eyes of the law, and it was their way of ridding the streets of people who were seemingly morally depraved because they had the mere desire to defy gender normative behavior, including DeLarverie.

All-in-all, the collapsing of their jobs as drag queens (and kings) with their sexual identity, although a common practice, was guided by a lack of understanding of what drag *really* is and it alludes to the power that a drag king like DeLarverie wielded while on stage, especially as the MC. Drag is another world and DeLarverie was the world-maker. The dramatic skewing of gender and sexuality through drag performance creates a space that defies categorization. To use the term that José Esteban Muñoz employs when examining minority performance, drag is a quintessential act of disidentification. Disidentification functions as a reworking of cultures that have been previously established and reified. It is a making of new worlds, not completely abstract, but simply different. Pointing to public performances like that of filmmaker Jack Smith and comedian Marga Gomez, Muñoz pinpoints examples of performers who have reworked hegemonic discourses to create new worlds that are intwined with those discourses. The theoretical aspect of disidentification rests in Muñoz's aim to use this process to develop a new way of seeing self and the world. He states, "*Disidentification* is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (8). Speaking directly to queers of color, he establishes a process of identifying one's own mode of ideology and ridding oneself of the rigidity of having their identity rest solely on one side of a binary or the other. Instead, there should be an understanding that the ideology to

which one subscribes can be grounded in ideas, experiences, and paradigms that are not clearly defined but still very real. The *using* of the very things that have been sites of distress, and for some, destruction, as sources of power and strength is at the core of disidentification and the hallmark of the drag world. Through her captivating MC abilities, DeLarverie ushered in a spirit of self-making, encouraging a queering of what was prescribed by mainstream society and culture.

Further, the conflation of one's attire with their sexual identity meant that DeLarverie stood as a social disrupter in various ways in her everyday life. DeLarverie's entire *being* represented a life suspended between masculine and feminine. Ditching the desire to do the "proper thing" by wearing women's clothing in the street, she eventually became known for her butch attire. Well-tailored suits from London and men's black leather jackets were her staples. In the twenty-first century, she is touted as an influential figure in fashion, being declared "Stonewall's Suiting Icon" in a 2019 *GQ* article, noting how "gender-fluid dressing has become a major force in fashion over the past few seasons, but DeLarverie's approach to style is an early, striking instance of it" (Tashjian). Like her presence as a drag king, she was suave, debonaire, and appeared especially masculine with her short hair and strong facial features. Still, however, she was noted has having maintained a "womanly" presence.

DeLarverie's partner of many years, photographer Diane Arbus, captured one of the most well-known images of DeLarverie eloquently titled "The Lady Who Appears to be a Gentleman." Arbus captured DeLarverie as her true self. In her suit, well-coiffed hair, and shined dress shoes, she is pictured sitting on a standard park bench in a way that is almost regal. Despite her men's attire, there is a warmth in her demeaner that balances her masculinity. Legs crossed; her gentle smile is inviting. Despite the beauty of the work, DeLarverie's appearance and what it

represented was still unwelcomed. As told in Patricia Bosworth's book, *Diane Arbus: A Biography,* this picture was a part of a collection by Arbus, where she photographed people who she considered "eccentrics." In her essay titled "The Full Circle—'who is it that can tell me who I am? (Shakespeare)" meant to accompany a collection of photographs, including the one of DeLarverie, Arbus writes, "These are five singular people who appear further out than we do; beckoned, not drive; invented by belief; each the author and hero of a real dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be" (qtd. in Bosworth). For Arbus, these pictures represented truth. DeLarverie was as example of what an unapologetic expression of self looks like. Titling it "The Lady Who Appears to be a Gentleman" spoke to the dichotomy that DeLarverie was upsetting (see fig. 10). Aside from her being labeled a cross-dresser by some, she was not *supposed* to be able to occupy both sides of the gender binary simultaneously. Simply stated, to Arbus, the "lady" was who DeLarverie was in character and the "gentleman" was who she was in presentation. After initial contestation by the editor-in-chief due to the rawness of the images and the type of people represented in them, the collection was finally published in the November 1961 issue of *Bazaar* sans DeLarverie, believing the image to be *too* "disconcerting" for their readership (Bosworth).

Arbus knew DeLarverie in the most intimate way as her partner of nearly 25 years, which makes her assessment of who she is particularly insightful and profound. Arbus once wrote, "[Stormé] has consciously experimented [with] her appearance as a man without ever tampering with her nature as a woman." Arbus quotes DeLarverie, saying, "If you have any respect for the human race, you know that nature's not a joke" (qtd. in Bosworth). Although "womanly" goes undefined in this case, much can be said about what DeLarverie considered to be "natural." One

can assume that she leaned into not only how she was biologically born, but there is a possibility that she was referencing a reverence for her natural inclination to behave in a womanly manner. That may not have been evident in her attire, her walk, or talk, but in how she approached caring for others—a softness. She was known by many as a caretaker of sorts, nurturing and protecting those around her, making it no surprise that she lived a life dedicated social disruption and activism, ultimately being the Black tomboy who set the world on fire.

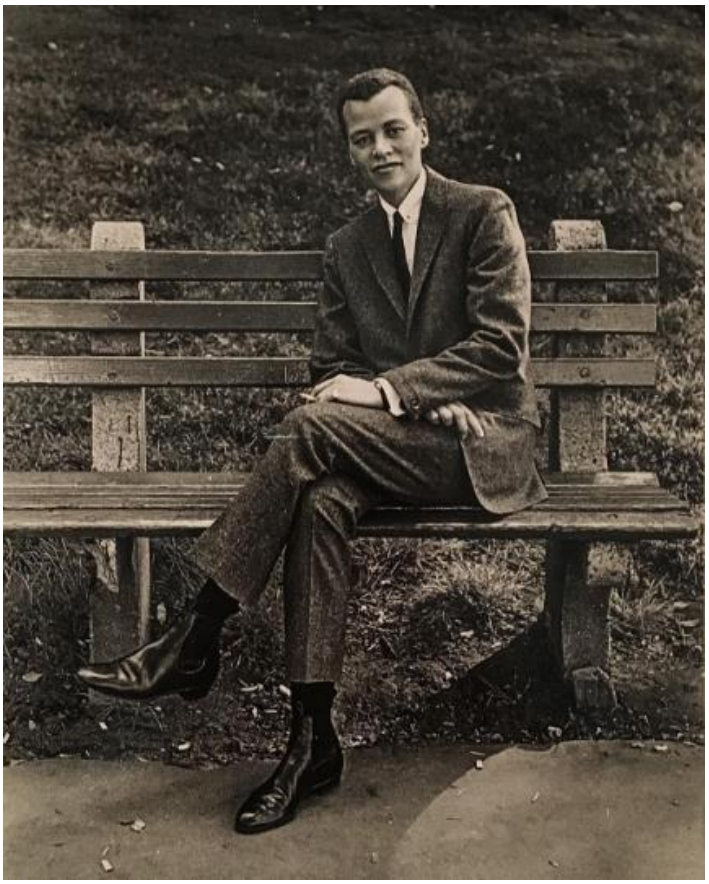


Fig. 10. “The Lady Who Appears to be a Gentleman” by Diane Arbus. (Eskenazi)

One can argue that DeLarverie’s decision to stop “running” in her childhood is the reason she confidently defied expectations as a Black tomboy while vehemently fighting for the rights of those who deserve to be able to live in their truths in her adult life. She actively participated in communities that were deemed criminal by virtue of being oppositional to heteronormative

values. She found herself in one of the epicenters of LGBTQ life in 1960s New York City, placing her in the position to, once again, be the social disrupter. The 1950s and 60s ushered in a rise in LGBTQ community-building and action despite a long history of punishing those who don't subscribe to social norms. Michelle Ann Abate documents this era as a critical shift in liberation efforts as she notes:

> While the 1950s are commonly considered a period of moral wholesomeness and sexual repression, they were also a time of dissident desires and alternative value systems. Not far beneath the era's surface of smiling conformity lurked a subversive underbelly. Forming a powerful counterpart to the throngs of housewives populating the nation's suburbs, lesbian communities emerged in many of its urban areas. Initially formed during the Second World War, they remained in cities like New York and San Francisco after the end of the conflict and became the locus of not only the nations nascent homosexual population but also its fight for social and political rights. (171)

On one hand, there was a fascination with gay and lesbian populations, marking them as "freaks" and relegating them to a sphere of only being acceptable as entertainment. On the other, the incessant need to fight against those ideals still roared.

One of those fights, quite literally, is said to have been sparked by DeLarverie. The Stonewall Uprising of 1969 is heralded as one of the most pivotal moments in LGBTQ history. A police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a gay club in New York City, resulting in six days of protests after an unidentified woman struck a police officer in self-defense. The woman's identity remained obscure (technically still does), but many believe that DeLarverie threw the punch that snowballed into days of unrest and galvanized gay rights organizations that went on to make substantial social and political strides. Between the description of the woman and the type of

person DeLarverie is said to be, this is not farfetched. In many ways, DeLarverie effectively harnessed the force within her that Audre Lorde identifies as a useful tool for combatting racism and hatred towards Black and gay people—anger. DeLarverie's close friend, Lisa Cannistraci, recounts how protecting her community was important for DeLarverie. She posits, "You know, I think her experiences as a young person and being, you know, beat up and being not accepted for who she was, I think all that lived inside her. And she turned it around to protect the community. Like, she recycled it - all that anger - you know, and she used it for good" (*They Don't Say Our Names Enough*). In Lorde's speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Lorde replies to being asked to ignore the anger that swells within her when she is confronted by hatred because it makes others uncomfortable. Lorde posits that by shifting anger from being merely an emotional response to negative life experiences to being a tool for liberation, we can move towards solving the problems that plague our society. Ultimately, Lorde believes that "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies" (127). When applied to the life and story of DeLarverie's commitment to her community, the punch that shook the nation was her realizing her "power to envision and to reconstruct, anger by painful anger, stone upon heavy stone, a future of pollinating difference and the earth to support our choices" (133).

Though one's gender and sexual identity is often reduced to visible markers such as physical features and clothing, DeLarverie and Bentley created a tension between perception and reality by tearing down the false dichotomy of masculine/feminine. Their suave yet tough exterior coupled with her gentle and loving nature subverted all understanding of what it means

to be "ladylike." DeLarverie's unapologetic presentation of self is a manifestation of the Black *feminist* radical tradition that reimagines what resistance looks like. When tracing a history of rebellion, grand gestures are most applauded, but it is the resistance in the everyday that inches us closer to being able to live freely, especially for Black women. DeLarverie and Bentley chipped away at respectability and the patriarchal standards for Black womanhood by confidently wearing what was most comfortable to her, not what was socially acceptable. Her attire did not render her less of a woman, instead, it accentuated her feminine prowess—turning heads with an ethereal beauty while exuding a depth and strength that nourishes and fortifies.

The Queen has Arrived: Queen Latifah's Black Tomboy Reign

DeLarverie and Bentley's gender non-conformity as Black women in entertainment has a direct correlation with Black tomboys in hip-hop in the late twentieth century and into the present. Hip-hop, though a part of popular culture *today*, is rooted in the desire to carve a space for Black creativity to thrive. Hip-hop culture is inherently innovative and boundary-breaking, a sonic representation of disruption, which is fertile ground for self-making. Admittedly, this reading of the culture is the antithesis of the common perception about hip-hop. To many, it is merely a space dominated by misogynistic cishet men. Undoubtedly, Black manhood is the epicenter of the culture, so voices from anyone who is not a straight male get relegated to the margins, deemed illegible. This is not wholly disparaging, however, because from the subject position of illegibility, Black tomboys can fashion their own mode of being. As scholar Gwendolyn Pough posits, "Black women participants in hip-hop culture have developed key survival skills and formulated various ways to bring wreck to the stereotypes and marginalization that inhibit their interaction in the larger public sphere…These women are attacking the

stereotypes and misconceptions that influenced their lives and the lives of their foremothers" (87). Continuing the legacy of Black tomboy entertainers who came before them, female MCs such as MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Da Brat, and Missy Elliott can more confidently take center stage on a global scale. The Black tomboys located in the queer space of hip-hop culture have a unique opportunity, albeit still arduous, to challenge restrictive paradigms of Black femininity through performance.

One of the most accomplished Black tomboys in popular culture today is Dana Owens, better known as Queen Latifah. Owens was born and raised in 1970 in Newark, New Jersey, so she witnessed the rise of the new music genre, hip-hop, first-hand. By the time she was a teenager, hip-hop culture was in full swing, and she wanted to be a part of the movement. In 1988 when she started gaining her footing in rap, there was already a wave of women MCs paving the way for her. By that time, rappers such as MC Lyte and Salt-N-Pepa were already powerful voices in hip-hop and Latifah decided her voice was valuable, too. Her first album, *All Hail the Queen*, was released in 1989 and her superstar status was immediately solidified. In her debut, she delivered politically charged messages with feminist overtones, "taking her place in that court as the first lady of rap–a liberating slap at male hip-hop" (Marlowe). She did so on her own terms, often donning men's clothing on the covers of her albums and in her music videos (see fig. 11). A 1993 interview for *Ebony*, "A Royal Rap: Queen Latifah Reigns On and Off TV," reveals how empowered she feels in her tomboy attire. The author notes that Latifah was "clad in overalls, hiking boots and a sweatshirt" as she "grabs a helmet, tosses her sandy hair, jumps on her motorcycle and zooms off" (Collier 118). Latifah responds to this by saying, "Some girls would not wear this at all. They would feel boyish. I feel comfortable and I wear what I like. Some people place femininity on the exterior, but it's inside" (118). The way she

situates femininity not only reflects the way figures like Stormé DeLarverie defined womanhood for herself in the 1950s and 60s, but Latifah's emergence in the 80s marks continuity in the strides taken by Black tomboys like Gladys Bentley as far back as the 20s. Latifah brings wreck to hip-hop and the public sphere by staking claim to her right to be there *exactly* as she is.[12] Through her lyrics and performance, she simultaneously upsets and redefines Black womanhood by rupturing a space that was built by machismo.

Fig. 11. Cover of Latifah's *All Hail the Queen* album.

One of the female MCs who set a precedent for Queen Latifah and impacted her overall reception was MC Lyte. In 1988, MC Lyte became the first solo female MC to release a full-length studio album. Like Latifah, Lyte often presented herself in masculine attire. The narrative

[12] Hip-hop generation Black feminist scholar Gwendolyn Pough defines "bringing wreck" in various ways. In this case, it is "a rhetorical act that can be written, spoken, or acted out in a way that shows resistance." In *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, she explores the speech acts and expressive culture of Black women in hip-hop to unpack the ways in which they disrupt masculine discourse as well as the greater public sphere.

for her "Lyte as A Rock" video is framed by a depiction of a little girl dressed in pink and playing with dolls. She opens a door and reveals a time portal. She enters the portal and the video proceeds to show Lyte transitioning through several historical moments, sometimes wearing more tight-fitting, revealing clothing. In the end, however, she emerges as a true tomboy, in an oversized windbreaker and pants. This is Lyte's declaration of her true self, setting her apart from what was beginning to be popularized at the time when it came to female rappers—sex appeal. Lyte's debut album, *Lyte as a Rock,* was not notably commercially successful, and that may have been due to the foundation that was laid by Salt-N-Pepa, a female hip-hop duo, who had already solidified themselves as some of the most commercially successful female rappers of all time as well as the sexiest.

Releasing their song "Push It" as a single in 1988, Salt-N-Pepa set the tone for how globally successful female MCs could be. "Push It" is a sexual anthem and propelled their debut album, *Hot, Cool & Vicious,* to double-platinum status. Members, Salt, Pepa, and Spinderella, take control of their sexuality and command male attention as they command, "Yeah, you come here, give me a kiss / Better make it fast or else I'm gonna get pissed / Can't you hear the music's pumpin' hard like I wish you would?" In performance, they often wore tight leggings and sports bras to show their figure while pairing it with large, colorful, leather jackets, to show their allegiance to hip-hop culture and style. Salt-N-Pepa represent freedom of expression and sexual agency, both of which are not typically afforded to Black women. As hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose observes when examining Salt-N-Pepa's similarly sexually liberating video for "Shake Your Thang," Salt-N-Pepa's visuals are an "inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders Black women's bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive" (168). Through their music and visuals, they circumvented what was considered "ladylike" in their own way, but because

their rise to fame cannot be divorced from their overt sexual declarations, one must attribute their debut album's success to their sexy take on Black womanhood.

By most accounts, Latifah's mainstream success as a rapper defies expectations when coupled with her tomboy presentation. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* bell hooks explores the complexities of how "sex sells" when applied to the commodification of the Black woman entertainer. In the chapter "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," hooks points to the careers of women like Josephine Baker and Tina Turner as examples of how Black women accentuating their physical attributes during performances is what leads to their popularity with mainstream audiences. She observes how Black women singers are "undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the Black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant" (66). On the surface, many of the world-renown female rappers fall into this category, particularly because the hip-hop arena offers a space for Black women to be sexually liberated. As Rose declares, hip-hop is a "relatively safe free-play zone where [female MCs] creatively address questions of sexual power, the reality of truncated economic opportunity, and the pain of racism and sexism," centering "sexual politics" in their lyrics (146).

Through an extremely legible sexuality, rappers like Salt-N-Pepa subvert notions of respectability. From their scantily clad bodies to their overtly sexual mannerisms, they captivate the male gaze, rendering their desirability undeniable. Ethnomusicology scholar, Cheryl Keyes, categorizes them as "Fly Girls," or "party-goers, independent women, and erotic subjects rather than an objectified object." In contrast, Keyes labels Queen Latifah "Queen Mother," defining that category of female rappers as ones who "demand respect not only for their people but for

Black women by men" and draw upon African-centered iconography (189). Compared to the Fly Girls, Queen Mothers are maternal and mature. When met with her tomboyism, her sexual appeal is far less legible than that of the Fly Girls they saw before. However, her sexuality was still potent. Instead of demonstrating her sexual prowess through her attire and mannerisms, Latifah let her lyrics paint the picture, ultimately upsetting the masculine-feminine binary when coupled with their outward appearances.

From the beginning, Latifah's presence in hip-hop offered a distinct lens through which the world could see Black womanhood that expanded what was already being presented by the rappers who came before her. One of Latifah's most notable tracks on *All Hail the Queen* is "Ladies First," featuring Monie Love. What is important about this song is the stance they take not only as female rappers, but as Black women in general. In the opening lines, Latifah asserts, "A woman can bear you, break you, take you / Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to / A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream." Admittedly, Latifah is reinscribing the notion of a woman's most powerful asset being an ability to bear children. This idea is repeated in the song when Love declares, "We are the ones that give birth / To the new generation of prophets because it's ladies first." Though suggesting that women are the beginning of life, therefore, the world's greatest men would not exist without them, isolating the line "we are the ones that give birth" places emphasis on an ability to do so. Latifah herself doubles down on the message in another song on the album, "A King and Queen Creation," when she states, "The mother of civilization will rise / Like the cream and still build the strong foundation / Secondary but necessary to reproduce." Latifah's rhetoric postures her alongside her male counterparts who would agree with this assessment of a woman's inherent value. Ethnic studies scholar Charise Cheney explores this in her 2005 publication, *Brothers Gonna Work It Out*, as she notes:

> Even Queen Latifah, who is hailed by many rap scholars as a feminist-nationalist, propagated a masculinist position on female subordination. Despite her strong voice and imposing cult-nat stature, Latifah revamped the campaign for separate spheres endorsed by her nineteenth-and twentieth-century black nationalist sisters when she identified her role in the hip-hop movement as 'secondary but necessary to reproduce.'(115)

As the only female members of the afrocentric hip-hop collective Native Tongues, Latifah and Love stood as the sole representatives of Black womanhood and conceded to their roles as "secondary." On the lyrical plane, they still subscribed to what their "brothers" were preaching in their lyrics under the guise of the message being a positive affirmation of a woman's contribution to society. When the lyrics are coupled with visuals, however, Latifah's Black tomboy presence lays the foundation for what would become her signature look, defying "ladylike" expectations as she occupies the male-dominated world of hip-hop.

The "Ladies First" video begins with a slideshow of pictures of radical Black women from Harriet Tubman to Angela Davis. When the hard-hitting beat of drums and a cymbal sonically cuts in, the video also cuts to a scene of Latifah donning her somewhat oversized pants suit and lowcut hair. A soft sunset of purple and pink hues fills the screen, echoing the soft tones of Latifah's singing voice. "Oooooo, ladies first, ladies first" is repeated with melodic harmony, accented by a quintessential 1980s hip-hop beat. The juxtaposition of Latifah's tomboy attire to the feminine backdrop mirrors the juxtaposition of the beat and the vocals, operating as a visual and sonic representation of the ways Latifah disrupts commonly held notions of womanhood. The tone of voice she takes in the first verse reflects the classic 4/4 hip-hop cadence, placing her on par with the top lyricists of the time. On the fifth line, however, Latifah begins another 4/4 stanza as she says, "A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream," but abruptly passes

the lyrical baton to Love, where she finishes the scheme by saying, “Ayo, let me take it from here, Queen.” In solidarity, Love continues in her quickened tempo, elevating the energy in the scene while dancing in her oversized clothes.

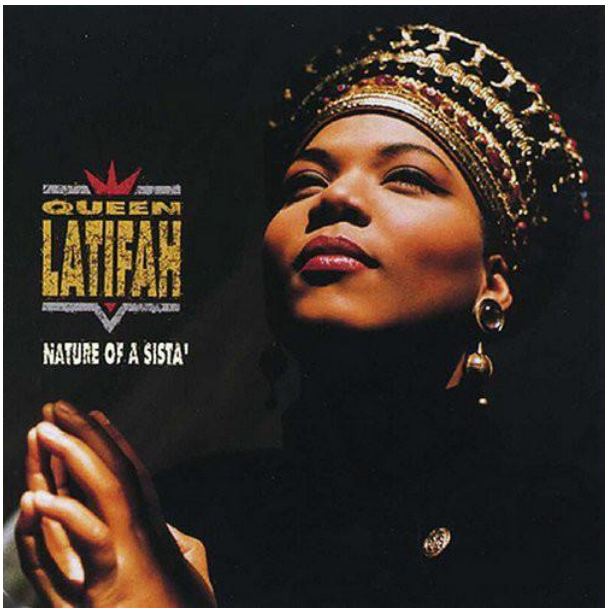


Fig. 12. Cover of Latifah’s *Nature of a Sista’* album.

Latifah released her second studio album, *Nature of a Sista’*, in 1991 but its success was far less notable than that of her first, which was partly due to the experimental nature of it. Many of the songs borrow from jazz, reggae and house music, rendering the album much less cohesive as a hip-hop project.[13] In a *Rolling Stones* review, writer Diane Cardwell provides a summary of what seemed to be the consensus about the album as she states, “Latifah is still feisty, exploding stereotypes and defining womanhood for a generation of sisters and the brothers who disrespect them…*Nature of a Sista’* samples a wider range of the Queen’s prodigious talents and musical styles than did her first album, and while that in itself is a good thing, it also proves to be a problem. The album cover itself even portrays a softer angle of Latifah as it is a portrait of her in

[13] In 1991, Latifah toured as an opener for Ziggy Marley, which is indicative of the type of sonic vibe *Nature of a Sista’* had.

a light that casts an ethereal glow and highlights her gentle smirk (see fig. 12). The regality of the cover is like what was given in *All Hail the Queen* but is much less disruptive. The contrast between her first two albums and the third, however, upsets what was expected of Latifah.

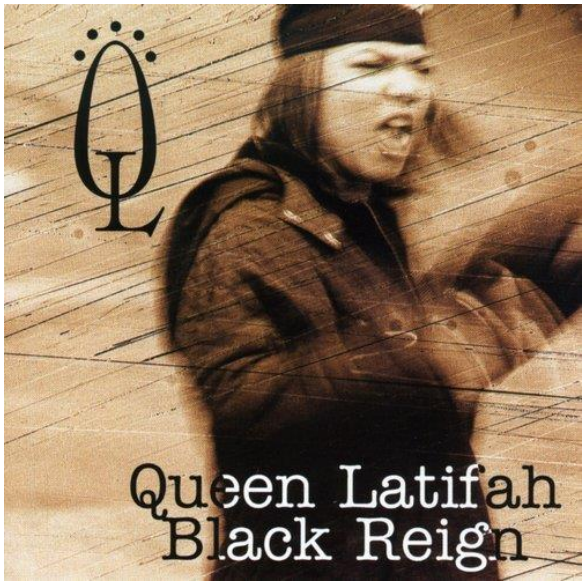


Fig. 13. Cover of Latifah's *Black Reign* album.

If *All Hail the Queen* and *Nature of a Sista'* were her knocking on the door, *Black Reign* was her kicking it down. As her third studio album, *Black Reign* is exemplary of the way she nuances what it means to be feminine. Unlike the previous albums, the cover art is the antithesis of regal (see fig. 13.). The image captures her in an angry expression, brows furrowed, mouth ajar as if she is scolding a passerby. Part of the image is blurred, suggesting that she was caught in motion. The colors are muted as the image is masked in sepia. Although she appears to be dressed in all black streetwear, the colors are earthy. Most noticeably, there are "cuts" across the image, including her face. Visually, the cover has an air of rawness and toughness. As a still shot from one of the music videos from the album, it captures a new era of Queen Latifah.

The most notable record from *Black Reign,* and perhaps her most popular record to-date, "U.N.I.T.Y.," Latifah spits hard-hitting, gut-punching lyrics meant to disrupt the notion that

women are supposed to be docile and passive. In her oversized shirt, bucket hat, and mean-mug, she delivers a blow to the dominant masculine discourse in hip-hop as she narrates:

> That's why I'm talkin', one day I was walkin' down the block
> I had my cutoff shorts on, right? 'Cause it was crazy hot
> I walked past these dudes when they passed me
> One of 'em felt my booty, he was nasty
> I turned around red, somebody was catchin' the wrath
> Then the little one said, "Ha ha, yea me, bitch," and laughed
> Since he was with his boys, he tried to break fly
> Huh, I punched him dead in his eye and said,
> "Who you callin' a bitch?"

With this refrain, Latifah paints a picture of a scene that is far too familiar. What is significant is her specificity with what she is wearing that day—cutoff shorts. Latifah does not differentiate herself from the "Fly Girls." Though she is not considered a particularly sexualized female MC, her lyrics point to the idea that regardless of what one is wearing, a pants suit or short shorts, disrespect is not tolerated. She uses her platform to make sure this message is heard loud and clear. This imagery extends to the visual for the song, too. In the video, she wears a leather biker jacket as she rides through the streets on her motorcycle with a parade of other bikers behind her. Another scene depicts her performing the song on a metal apparatus that is suspended by a crane in the middle of the street while men seemingly berate her from the windows of an apartment building. Latifah stands firm on her pedestal and responds, "Trying to make a sista' feel low / You know all of that gots to go!" Latifah's tomboyism gives her license to match the masculine energy that dominates hip-hop and stand as a protector of not only her own body, but all the

women who occupy the same space. U.N.I.T.Y. is a rallying cry for violence against women to end, from domestic violence to sexual harassment on the street, Latifah urges Black women and men to love one another "from infinity to infinity."

U.N.I.T.Y.'s gritty but powerful message and presentation is immediately followed by a love song on *Black Reign,* a shift that serves as a sonic representation of how Latifah skews the masculine/feminine dichotomy. After the bass-heavy track, "Weekend Love" ushers in a soft melody as Latifah showcases her singing voice. She serenades the listeners in a mellow tone as she sings to a lover who is too busy to spend quality time with her throughout the week. She dreams about the time they will eventually spend together when she says, "I tenderly imagine me/ Resting in your arms/ But you've got things to do/ And I've got things too/ So I'll catch you on the weekend." This is a stark deviation in tone and content from the previous song where she tells a story about assaulting a man for disrespecting her. On the surface, these two songs conflict with one another, but they are actually complementary. They seem to be strategically placed in the narrative arc of the album. The sonic and thematic experience is jarring, making the rift in the flow between "U.N.I.T.Y." and "Weekend Love" provocative. In that break, Latifah severs the idea that she can be defined in simple terms. She presents herself as a complex Black woman who comfortably thrives somewhere in the middle of the masculine/feminine spectrum.

Latifah's Black tomboyism reflected the times in many respects, since it was fashionable to wear baggy clothing in the late 80s and early 90s, but that doesn't negate the presence of the same respectability politics that Bentley and DeLarverie had to combat. In *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion,* Tanisha C. Ford closely examines her own fashion evolution and the heavy influence of hip-hop culture on what was popular throughout her teenage and adult years. She writes about how "the goal was to look just like everyone in the

magazines and music videos," but laments her struggle with trying to balance what was popular and what was socially acceptable beyond her peer group (23). Ford reflects on a period around 1992 or 1993 when she was becoming a young lady and hip-hop culture was dominating the mainstream. She reflects:

> The tomboy femme look would become a thing in the next few years because of singers like TLC and Aaliyah, who popularized baggy clothes on girls. I was ahead of the trend on this one: I was already into wearing "boy" clothes. Mom's own style and personality were definitely androgynous, so this wasn't odd to me. But I was nearing puberty, and it was becoming clear that outside of my household, little girls who 'acted the part' were labeled well-behaved, and girls like me who were brash and loud and tomboyish were seen as a problem. (39)

Ford had always been drawn to boy's attire beyond the trends because she often dressed in her boy cousin's hand-me-downs, but she became acutely aware of the social implications of not subscribing to a specific brand of womanhood. Like Halberstam declares in *Female Masculinity*, tomboyism is only truly acceptable in adolescence, and for Black girls, adulthood arrives much sooner. This adds to the impact of Latifah's visibility as a Black tomboy. As Ford notes, it was the women in media who made it more acceptable to be tomboys and Latifah was a strong force in that movement long before the singers like TLC and Aaliyah found stardom. Through her attire, she was an example of what an adult Black tomboy looks like, granting license to the girls and women who followed. Latifah's impact as an MC was only the beginning, however. Her career as a film and television star is what solidified her as an aspirational figure for Black tomboys everywhere.

Ch. 4

Living Single but Setting It Off: Queen Latifah as Tomboy Disrupter in Television and Film

> "I'm clearly not cut out to work for you, so I'm going to have to figure out how to work for myself because I need to have the power to design my life. People bled and died so that I could have that opportunity. I'm going to take it."
>
> - Queen Latifah

I was fortunate. By the time I started meaningfully engaging with popular culture in the 1990s, sitcoms depicting a wide range of Black life and love were in full rotation. Beyond seeing tomboy artists like Missy Elliott, Aaliyah, TLC, and Da Brat in the music videos I watched obsessively on The Box, a television channel that played music videos all day, every day, I got to see a music-loving, Black tomboy journalist and CEO living an exciting life with her friends every Thursday night on *Living Single*. Seeing these Black women on my television screen made me feel seen, feel powerful, and feel like there was plenty of space in the world for girls like me. Though I did not always have the fierce confidence they have, they demonstrated what I could achieve if I stayed true to myself.

"Representation matters" is the crux of endless debate about the types of people who are deemed worthy of being depicted in film and television. Cishet white men and women are the dominant group on screen and in the writing rooms, therefore, viewers who do not fit into those categories are inundated with characters and worldviews that may not be relatable. In some respects, movies and tv shows are fantasy, requiring the audience to suspend reality and be enveloped in fictional worlds that are starkly different from their own. However, varying depictions in popular culture add depth to how we connect and understand communities and cultures that are not our own. More importantly, though, seeing oneself reflected in mass media

is validation that one's underrepresented identity is not marginal, is not abnormal, and is worthy of mainstream visibility.

For Black actresses, the consequence of a lack of diversity in roles available to them meant feeling obligated to proliferate racist ideals if they wanted to be successful in the industry. Often portraying the Mammy, Jezebel, or Sapphire stereotypes, it was uncommon for Black actresses in the early and mid-twentieth century to be cast as characters who did not fit within those paradigms in one way or another. The Mammy stereotype was particularly pervasive as it represents the most palatable form of Black womanhood. The first Black person to win an Oscar was Hattie McDaniel for her role as Mammy in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, for example, which is telling of how mainstream audiences positively receive that type of characterization of Black women. The perpetuation of this stereotype in film and television continued into the latter half of the twentieth century, with actresses like Esther Rolle taking on the role of a maid in the 1970s sitcom *Maude* and later starring in a spinoff, *Good Times*, where her character, Florida Evans, slightly nuanced this archetype, but ultimately upheld its foundational qualities. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry explains, "Mammies had no personal needs or desires. She was a trusted advisor and confidante whose skills were used exclusively in service of the white families to which she was attached…Because Mammy is docile and maternal, she remembered as big, fat, soft, dark-skinned, and unfeminine" (73). Mammies are not threatening or abrasive to the white imagination, thus, McDaniel and Rolle's success in Hollywood is unsurprising given their acquiescence.

By the 1990s, more roles for Black women were made available, largely due to the rise of the Black sitcom. With the success of shows like *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, both of which offered alternative narratives about the Black family and Black friendships, networks

became increasingly interested in offering their own spin on those stories. Expectedly, Black producers and writers were equally as eager. In the book *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution of Black Television*, Kristal Brent Zook deep-dives into this phenomenon and explores the cultural significance of the strides Fox took to provide a more nuanced image of Black life. She declares:

> Black productions of the 1990s were individual autobiographies as well as communal outpourings of group desire—collective rememberings not unlike slave narratives. During this period, Black producers and consumers engaged in awkward modes of resistance and representation. It seems that we wanted both capitalism and communalism; feminism as well as a singular, authentic self; patriarchy plus liberation, Africa the motherland *and* the American dream. (3)

It is from this framework that more varied representations of Black womanhood were born, and because of that transition, actresses like Queen Latifah were able to shine and offer complexity to representations of Black women.

Though Queen Latifah's music career was highly successful, her acting career is what made her a household name. In 1991 when she made her acting debut, she had minor roles in films *Jungle Fever* and *House Party 2*, then went on to guest star in multiple episodes of the hit NBC sitcom, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. In her movie roles, she was somewhat typecast, ultimately bringing her Queen Latifah hip-hop persona to the silver screen. In *Jungle Fever*, she plays a pro-Black waitress who wears African headwraps and scolds a Black man, Flipper (Wesley Snipes), for being on a date with a white woman. In *House Party 2*, she plays Zora Henderson, a pro-Black roommate of Sydney (Tisha Campbell). Zora is socially conscious, urges Sydney to take courses on feminism, and organizes protests contesting the cutbacks in the

school's Ethnic Studies Department. She is viewed as a man-hating sidekick to her thin, light-skinned roommate, but she behooves Sydney to think for herself when it comes to love and life, mirroring what she advocates in her music. Lastly, on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, she plays Dee, a less conventionally attractive, always the homegirl, never the lover, friend of Will (Will Smith). Will turns to her for advice as he pursues a modelesque, light-skinned girl at school, only to realize that he was being shallow by overlooking Dee as a potential romantic partner. At every turn, Latifah was relegated to being a less attractive supporting character. Her minor roles did not allow for depth and nuance, but as she went further in her career, opportunities to positively shift how Black women are portrayed in media unfolded and her tomboyism served as an alternative mode of exemplifying feminism.

Regarding the power of resistance that encapsulates Black tomboyism, as evidenced in the previous chapters, the same proves to be true when examining the Black tomboy figures who show up in popular visual culture. More specifically, Queen Latifah's media presence as a real-life tomboy *and* fictional tomboy gives way to what Nina Cartier describes as process of becoming, how "imagining that what we see on-screen might both reflect our screen fantasies and refract our lived realities" in the article "Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts" (152). Cartier outlines the idea of Black women on-screen as "future texts," a phrase that captures the essence of why representation is especially important for that community. Cartier notes:

> As a future text, the Black woman participates in a triple signification of the past, present, and future: she is trapped by the deviant sexuality of the past (always a whore or strangely asexual); she lives her own present in contention with current conventions of both black and white female beauty (or lack thereof); and she strives toward a future in which her body is her own to embody or transcend, unfettered

> from the binaries of too black or not black enough (among many others) where she can be however she is—sexual not sexualized, desirous and desired—and free. (153)

In many ways, Latifah's roles in television and film double-down on Cartier's assertions. Not only does she transcend past and present constructions of womanhood through her Black tomboyism, but she also forges new definitions that Black tomboys can inhabit and employ in practicing self-definition. In her roles in television and film, she is an exemplar of the positive impact that on-screen representation can have on one's understanding of how they fit into society at-large and the possibilities of self-making. Through an examination of Latifah's Black tomboy roles as Khadijah James on *Living Single*, Cleo in *Set It Off*, and Leslie Wright in *Just Wright*, one uncovers the depth in which Latifah forges new paths for Black women in media. In these fictional portrayals, she leverages her platform to defy expectations of what a feminine presence should look like by proudly being Black woman who does not have a thin figure, who can athletically hold her own against men, and who prefers to be adorned in more masculine clothing. By many standards, she should be deemed undesirable and unladylike, but she demonstrates how desirability and stereotypical femininity are not inextricably tied.

Living Single but Never Lonely: Khadijah James' Redefinition of Desirability

A closer look at Latifah's characterization on *Living Single* as the workaholic businesswoman, Khadijah James, reveals the many ways she was challenging the pervasive stereotypes about Black women and reconstructing womanhood through her tomboy presence. With Latifah as the leading role, the hip-hop sensibilities that were critical in her music career were woven into the narrative, replicating the queer space that hip-hop culture occupies,

allowing her self-making abilities to flourish, even in fiction. Through her hip-hop inspired attire, career as a journalist and founder of a publication dedicated to urban Black culture, and mannerisms that evade gender homogeneity, she demonstrates how tomboyism can be an asset.

Given the history of Black female caricatures in film, television, and radio, when one tunes into *Living Single* on any given day, an encounter with Khadijah James' character may prompt one to falsely categorize her into the role of a motherly, mammy-like figure, a fictional extension of the "Queen Mother" persona that Latifah embodies in the hip-hop sphere. She is a heavyset, somewhat asexual caretaker. She handles business as the owner and founder of *Flavor Magazine* and is a matriarch figure for her close friends. As the star of *Living* Single, her role as Khadijah is seemingly less interested in chasing men than her friends, although her romantic partnerships are still centered from time-to-time, and she is certainly viewed as a "homegirl" type to the men on the show. However, with further investigation, one will uncover how Latifah's mammy-like characterization is often upset by revelations of romantic desire from her male suitors, freeing her from the asexual stereotype and propelling her to a historically unexpected status of heterosexual desirability of a Black tomboy.

Khadijah typically wears a pants suit to work and oversized sweatshirts, jerseys, and t-shirts otherwise. Mirroring how she dresses in real-life, she adheres to a hip-hop inspired style, which, on *Living Single*, set her apart from her female friends. Her entire character was built around a love for hip-hop culture, and it is exemplified in both in her career as the founder of *Flavor Magazine*, an urban publication that highlights music and stories about figures in the Black community, and in her clothes. Often wearing jerseys from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other athletic teams, she embodies the "cool" Black tomboy image (see figs. 14 and 15). Oversized HBCU clothes were especially popular in the 1990s, and

Khadijah's wardrobe fit neatly into what other Black characters on television were wearing, such as Martin Payne (Martin Lawrence) on Fox's *Martin* and Will on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Those shows were also heavily influenced by hip-hop culture, with Will Smith being a rapper himself and *Martin* often incorporating various hip-hop stars into the narrative. Being the leading lady of *Living* Single at a time when men like Martin and Will were absolutely dominating television made her a part of the boy's club, so to speak, and she certainly kept up with them.


Figs. 14 and 15. Stills from *Living Single* depicting Khadijah James in her tomboy attire.

Khadijah's career as a successful businesswoman and boss who created a publication *for* the people, *by* the people made her connection to the style she presented in her everyday life more authentic, enhancing how viewers perceived her. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of her and the other women on the show paints a vivid picture of Khadijah's deviation from a hyper-feminine presentation of self. Further, to the show's credit, this is rarely, if ever, a topic of discussion on the show itself. There is a sense of normalization in the fact that her attire is never a point of contention, but a source of pride. Khadijah's tomboy attire would normally be deemed

less provocative and enticing within the confines of stereotypical femininity, yet she maintains a strong sense of comfort with who she is and what she has to offer.

Khadijah's power to upend what is considered desirable and feminine is on full display in in the first season of the show. In a two-part storyline across episodes 18 ("Love Thy Neighbor") and 19 ("Mystery Date"), three women, Khadijah, Maxine (Erika Alexander), and Regine (Kim Fields) encounter a handsome new tenant, Hamilton (Morris Chestnut), as he moves into their apartment building. In a trance-like state, the women greet him. They are stupefied by his attractiveness. The women continue to chat about him when he leaves, but collectively decide not to pursue him since they all equally want to date him. "Love Thy Neighbor" ends on a cliffhanger. In the opening scene of "Mystery Date," the storyline reveals how the pact is short-lived. When he walks back into the building, they strike their best pose as if they are on display. They introduce themselves in a flirtatious manner as he passes between them. When he departs again, they transition inside their apartment and proceed to give dating advice to their other roommate, Synclaire (Kim Coles). The main takeaway from the conversation is, "There's no sense in getting worked up over a man." Shortly after that statement, they hear a bump at the door, assume it is Hamilton, and the squabble for his attention resumes when they jump over tables and couches to get to the door first. The scene exudes desperation as they fix their ruffled clothing after the scuffle. At this moment, they begin competing with one another to see who wins his affection.

The women employ varying methods of flirting with Hamilton to get his attention, which reveals the contrast between Khadijah's tomboyism to the other women's more quintessentially feminine presence. Firstly, Maxine sees Hamilton in the foyer of the building and attempts to connect with him on a personal level. She deviates from her usual forthright, blunt persona (one

that reflects her profession as a cut-throat lawyer) and takes on a more welcoming, gentle demeanor while they share memories about their hometown of Philadelphia. Maxine's shift in disposition marks her recognition of needing to appear "softer" if she wants to gain Hamilton's affection. She breaks from this character when he walks away and he says, "Hope to see you soon." Max whispers, "Hope to see you naked," a response that is explicitly sexual charged, but on-par with how she typically converses with potential male suitors beyond this instance. In a later scene, Regine also leans into her feminine prowess to reign him in. The scene depicts her in the kitchen making pasta while donning an apron, carefully styled hair, and a tight lace dress. Synclaire enters, troubled by her own relationship problems and Regine declares, "I told you, if you go after a man too aggressively, you're only going to scare him off." Synclaire proceeds to ask Regine what she is making, and she replies, "A man trap. Hamilton likes Italian," as she waves a kitchen towel over the pasta to waft the aroma towards an open window that faces their shared courtyard. She preys on Hamilton's interests in the same manner as Maxine, but her particularly "domestic" approach is her self-declared, fool-proof tactic. She is aware of men's typical attraction to domestic labor, and she plays into this problematic practice. Her plot *does* work, however. Hamilton knocks on the door to see what she is cooking, and he is immediately drawn to how she "knows her way around the kitchen." They briefly flirt with each other, then he departs. Maxine and Regine's methods appear effective. They harness their sexiness, their softness, and their domestic capabilities to demonstrate how they are ideal partners for Hamilton.

Khadijah's opportunity to woo Hamilton takes on a slightly different tone, however. In another scene, Hamilton is moving some sports equipment into the building, and he accidentally drops his basketball. Khadijah happens to be exiting her apartment as Hamilton is about to retrieve the ball, so she intervenes. Instinctually, she begins to dribble the ball around the foyer,

demonstrating her ball-handling skills (see fig. 16). Hamilton is noticeably impressed as he exclaims, “Good hands! You don’t meet a lot of women who can dribble like that.” Khadijah retorts, “You don’t meet a lot of *people* who can dribble like that,” as she gleams with pride. They banter before engaging with an impromptu, but particularly physical, game of one-on-one. Khadijah intentionally presses her body against his and girlishly giggles, but nevertheless, she shows that she is competitive. The moment is disrupted as Maxine and Regine enter the building with consternating expressions because the attraction between Khadijah and Hamilton is clear. In this instance, Khadijah’s engagement with Hamilton as her tomboyish self seems especially desirable to him and it is palpable.

Fig. 16. Image of Khadijah and Hamilton’s encounter in the “Mystery Date” episode.

Eventually, the women decide to solve their issue by inviting Hamilton to a party being thrown by their neighbor and friend, Kyle (T.C. Carson). The plan is to present Hamilton with all his options, Khadijah, Maxine, and Regine, and let him choose. The women enter the party in

their best attire. Regine and Maxine wear their tight-fighting, cleavage-revealing, notably feminine dresses, and Khadijah wears a nice pants suit. The scene shows the women silently standing around, impatiently awaiting Hamilton's advance. When Hamilton finally gets up to ask his "choice" on a date, the camera cuts to Khadijah as she smiles in victory. The studio audience erupts in applause, suggesting that she was perhaps some sort of underdog that they all wanted to win the game. Possibly, the audience's response stems from a recognition of how Khadijah did not rely as heavily on a stereotypical feminine prowess to attract Hamilton, which may have positioned her as less desirable than Regine and Maxine, even to onlookers. Further, Regine and Maxine's characters are known to be extremely flirtatious and man-crazed while Khadijah tends to take a more laid-back approach. Perhaps the applause was just because she's the star of the show. Regardless, the writer's decision to allow a tomboy to prevail in a pursuit of romantic, heterosexual partnership time and time again on national television was impactful.[14]

Much can be said about the show's centering of women contending for a man, however, as it places the man's desires on a pedestal, but this ebb and flow of women's empowerment and desperation for romantic partnership is what network executives envisioned for the show. The women's quest to attract a handsome man is the primary plot in the "Mystery Date" episode, even after they admit that chasing men is problematic. Even though Khadijah, Maxine, and Regine have flourishing careers and active social lives, they go to the extent of competing with one another to "win" a man, and that does a disservice to what the show's creator, Yvette Lee Bowser, who was the first Black woman to create a successful primetime series for network television, had in mind when she first introduced the concept to Fox. Initially, the show was

[14] There is anecdotal evidence of Fox prompting viewers to call in and vote for who they want to "win" the date with Hamilton. If true, it was the viewers who picked Khadijah, not the writers, which also explains the vehement applause from the audience. This voting system plays into the fact that there was a strong desire to see women like Khadijah flourish in this way.

supposed to be called *My Girls*, but pressure from executives who feared "male alienation" from the title resulted in not only the name change to *Living Single*, but a shift in narrative as well (Zook 67). As the title *Living Single* suggests, the show is specifically about the plight of single women searching for love. This concept was borne out of the recent success of similar narratives such as what is represented in Terry McMillan's 1992 novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, which can explain the decision to shift the show's focus. In a 1996 interview with *Ebony Magazine*, Bowser addresses these intentional parallels when she says, "*Exhale* was definitely an inspiration for the networks to realize that there was a voice out there that people wanted to hear, a black female voice in particular. The popularity of the book helped pave the way for this show" (qtd. in Collier 26). McMillan's book similarly chronicles the friendship and quests for love of four successful Black women in Phoenix, Arizona. The book remained on the *New York Times* Bestsellers list for 38 consecutive weeks and has since sold millions of copies. The overwhelmingly positive public reception of *Waiting to Exhale* and the tropes represented in the novel sheds light on why *Living Single* centers Black women's quest for romantic partnership.[15]

In the book *Color By Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, Kristal Brent Zook explores the complex relationship between Bowser, network executives, and how they envisioned the character arcs in *Living Single*. Zook writes:

> In television, of course, there is no such thing as absolute creative power—Black, female or otherwise. So Bowser's *conscious* intention to represent Black female desire did not

[15] In a 1998 study, "'Waiting to Exhale' or 'breath(ing) again': A search for identity, empowerment, and love in the 1990's," Tina M. Harris and Patricia S. Hill interviewed single, professional Black women about their perception of the stereotypes presented in the film adaptation of *Waiting to Exhale* to "show the effectiveness of Black feminist thought as a framework for examining the general role socialization of Afro-American professional women."[15] Findings from the study state, "As their opinions illustrate, the characters [in the film] are socialized and conditioned to be relationship focused, even at the risk of numerous brief sexual encounters not leading to long lasting relationships. The need for validation from men is very apparent…"[15] If the success of this book served as an example, the pivot towards this same concept for *Living Single* comes as no surprise.

> always succeed. In this case, there were other forces involved in the production and reception of *Living Single* that interacted with and, at times, overshadowed [Bowser's] autobiographical vision. One was the popular narrative of the desperate Black woman; another was the radical womanism inspired by Queen Latifah. (66)

This makes the "Mystery Date" episode not an anomaly, but quintessential. The ensuing competition at the mere sight of a handsome man is birthed from a deep desire for partnership, which is the very intentional cornerstone of the entire show. Despite this, however, the latter point in what Zook expresses allows for a recuperation of a sense of empowerment—the "radical womanism" is also prominent in *Living Single*, and one manifestation of this is the way in which Khadijah disrupts preconceived notions about what tomboys do and do not deserve and/or attract when it comes to heterosexual desirability.

Khadijah tends to fall less into the "passively waiting to be chosen" category and more into the "actively doing the choosing" category, which amplifies her role as a "radical woman" amongst the others. A quintessential example of Khadijah's position as a woman in power occurs in season three, episode nine, "Baby I'm Back…Again," when Khadijah's on again, off again beaux, Scooter (Cress Williams), unexpectedly returns to Brooklyn to reenter her life. The episode begins with Khadijah in a quick-change sequence where she concludes a date with one man and immediately rushes off to another. Her roommates look on as they are left at home having a spa night instead. Regine laments, "Man, that used to be us! Now look at us, manless." Although Synclaire and Maxine are in relationships, this scene juxtaposes Khadijah's flourishing dating life with their seemingly boring happenings. The next scene reinforces this as Khadijah saunters down the stairs heading to yet another date. Once again, Regine angrily notes, "Are you going out again? What is this, your third date in sixteen hours? It's gotta be some kind of

record!" Khadijah beams as she basks in her status as an incredibly eligible bachelorette. As a Black tomboy, she occupies a unique space in this episode because she is swamped by potential suitors and is the envy of her friends. She simultaneously disrupts the trope of the desperate Black female and the notion of tomboys being undesirable.

This moment is disrupted when Khadijah opens the door and finds Scooter standing in the doorway. Her and Scooter are childhood friends who discovered a sexual attraction between them in season one. They decided to embark on a romantic relationship that ended up strained by their long distance once Scooter started touring the world as the manager of an R&B group. Frustrated by the idea of him leading a robust and exciting life while she hopelessly sat waiting on his return, Khadijah decided to date other men. Scooter's reemergence and his declaration of "Baby I'm back!" suggests that he is solely in control of whether or not their partnership resumes, but Khadijah unsettles his expectations as she coldly averts his kiss and proceeds to go on her date. When she later encounters Scooter, in an act of desperation he asks her to marry him, and she reluctantly accepts. Ultimately, they *both* decide that marriage is not best for them, and they dissolve their relationship for good. Despite Khadijah slightly wavering when she accepts Scooter's proposal, her autonomy in this episode is demonstrative of a sense of empowerment that she did not always have. The dynamic between Khadijah and men is inverted, shifting from the men wielding the power to her being the one who gets to choose. She is awakened when she realizes that she *can* control those situations. Not only does she not need to dilute who she is as a person by purposely being softer, more feminine, she does not have to be passive to be desired. In her full tomboy glory, she is enough.

Queering the Gangsta: Cleo's Feminine/Masculine Balancing Act in *Set It Off*

As a natural progression for a budding Hollywood star, Latifah began taking on major movie roles during filming for *Living Single*. With her heightened visibility as an actress came more opportunity to impact how Black womanhood is defined, and in 1996, Latifah embarked on a journey in her biggest silver screen role yet as Cleo in the F. Gary Gray film, *Set It Off*. Unlike lighthearted *Living Single*, *Set It Off* is dark. Compared to Khadijah, Cleo is not a college educated businesswoman living in a brownstone in Brooklyn, New York. In fact, Cleo is the antithesis of what Khadijah represents—a butch woman dedicated to a life of crime in crime-ridden Los Angeles, making Latifah's ability to portray both characters simultaneously an exercise in her range as an actress. In a 1996 *Essence* article that was published ahead of the debut of *Set It Off*, Cleo was described as "a brazen, street-tough lesbian, [packing] a whack sense of humor and a .45-millimeter machine gun" (D.G. 56). The author of the article, D.G., emphasizes an anticipation of backlash against Latifah for playing a butch lesbian woman. Latifah responds, "A lot of people are wondering why I would play a lesbian when there are so many rumors about my being one. For the record, Cleo isn't me" (56). Although the backlash would *not* have been warranted, Latifah expresses a sentiment of defying what was deemed acceptable for her at that juncture in her career, especially given the juxtaposition of Cleo and Khadijah. Cleo's drive to sacrifice herself out of a deep love for her friends and her soft, loving relationship with her partner is balanced by a violently masculine temperament in a woman who loves muscle cars and guns. Latifah's boldness in portraying a butch lesbian at a time when such representations were completely taboo demonstrates her dedication to shining light on the full spectrum of Black womanhood. In playing Cleo, Latifah demonstrates how one can destroy heteronormative ideals of masculinity and femininity by beautifully embodying both.

As a byproduct of a growing number of films that center ghetto Black life in the early 1990s, *Set It Off* is part of a cinematic lineage that depicts Black life through the lens of Black filmmakers. Most importantly, Gray's project upset what was already established as a winning formula in Black cinema. He effectively melded Terry McMillan's success with narratives that depict Black women in search of love with the rising success of ghettocentric "gangsta" movies, making *Set It Off* fertile ground for the presentation of a different type of Black womanhood. Beginning around 1991 with Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City,* the creation of ghettocentric films skyrocketed. "Ghettocentric" refers to movies that interrogate the poverty-stricken terrain that many Black families must navigate. Following the widespread popularity of John Singleton's 1991 Oscar-winning film, *Boyz in the Hood*, *Set It Off* offers a glimpse into the impact of the perpetual cycles of poverty in the Black community but does so through the lens of four Black women (the film is sometimes referred to as *Girlz in the Hood* for this reason). Before *Set It Off,* ghettocentric films only had Black boys and men as the protagonists with lives fraught with violence and a general sense of hopelessness. Infused with hip-hop sensibilities, ghettocentric films mirror rap in that they are "Black idiom[s] that prioritizes Black culture and that articulates the problem of Black urban life," as articulated by Tricia Rose in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (4). Negative criticism of these films often cite the depictions of violence and misogyny as contributors to the proliferation of violence of all sorts in the Black community, but that is an oversimplification of what is achieved, or not, in ghettocentric film. In *Framing Blackness,* Ed Guerrero states:

> Rather than think of these films as the cause of violence, we should view them as vehicles through which society's racial contradictions, injustices, and failed policies are mediated. They are the artist's examination of, and dire warnings about, a society in

> which African Americans are, in terms of statistics, worse off today than before the civil rights movement. And though the news is bad, the blame resides with the social order in its totality, not the cinematic vehicle that delivers the news. (189)

Set It Off is no exception to the way ghettocentricity illuminates not only the violence that is a result of hardship within the community, but the state violence that perpetuates the cycle, too.

Set in Los Angeles, *Set It Off* is a product of its environment. As Robin D.G. Kelley states, "The generation who came of age in the 1980s were products of devastating structural changes in the urban economy…While [Los Angeles] as a whole experienced unprecedented growth, the communities of Watts and Compton faced increased economy displacement" (191). The economic strain experienced by those who were systemically oppressed by capitalism and racism gave rise to a subgenre of hip-hop that could speak directly to their plight. With this, "gangsta rap" was born, with acts like Compton's own N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudez) at the forefront of the genre's mainstream success. With hits like "Fuck tha Police" leading the charge, N.W.A. spoke out about the realities of their circumstances in South Central L.A., including constant harassment by the police. Though gangsta rap's origins go back much further than N.W.A., they stand as exemplars of the genre being a site of resistance. By the time *Set It Off* was released, the influence of gangsta rap was solidified and the influence of solo acts like Ice T, Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, and Ice Cube established Los Angeles as an epicenter for what was considered "gangster" activity. Spawning from the pervasive gang culture, violence, drugs, and crime, L.A. became the backdrop to those early ghettocentric films infused with gangsta rap sensibilities, from *Menace II Society* (1993) to *Set It Off*.

F. Gary Gray's take on the hardships that drove the narratives in West Coast hip-hop and cinema moved Black women from the margins to the center, granting them agency in their own

liberation. The film follows close friends Cleo, Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith), Frankie (Vivica A. Fox), and T.T. (Kimberly Elise) as they plot and execute bank robberies. As coworkers at Luther's Janitorial Services, they become fed up with their financial circumstances and aspire for a life where money is no longer a burden for themselves and those they love. Cleo suggests that they rob a bank after Frankie is unjustly fired from her job as a bank teller. Initially apprehensive, the other women join the scheme after enduring a series of unfortunate events. They successfully pull off the heist, but their money is eventually stolen by their chauvinistic boss, Luther (Thomas Jefferson Byrd). To rectify the situation, Cleo declares the need to rob another bank so they can be redeemed. Though they get away with the cash, law enforcement tracks them down, leaving two of them dead and one in custody while one successfully runs to Mexico to start a new life. The film has no shortage of gun violence and death, rendering the women complicit in the violence they seek to leave behind, but in their journey, the film captures the internal and external turmoil that drives individuals to crime. They are not depicted as "bad seeds." Instead, they are complicated people who simply want more for themselves than what life naturally offers people like them.

Though the film chronicles the lives of several Black women, Cleo stands out as a unique character, not only because she is a dominant force in any room she is in, but because she enacts violence in ways that her counterparts do not. Unlike Stony, T.T. and Frankie, she is an ex-con, locating her at the intersection of marginal identities—lesbian, butch, criminal. One scene especially paints a vivid picture of how Cleo is set apart from the other women. When preparing for the first robbery, the women visit Cleo's associate, Black Sam (Dr. Dre), to acquire weapons. The scene opens with the women practicing their shooting skills in a gun range as the camera travels from woman-to-woman, demonstrating their level of comfortability with a firearm. T.T.

is timid and afraid, Frankie and Stony are more confident, then the camera pans to Cleo wielding two guns, firing in rapid succession with ease. She demonstrates familiarity with crime throughout the film. She is the one who leads them to the gun supplier, steals all the getaway cars, and is unwavering in her stance as a protector of her friends.

Further, Cleo is not only physically violent at times, but she also violently disrupts gender expectations. She is the "other" in the group, thus, illegible and a master self-maker. She is located outside of heteronormativity in every way possible, from her masculine appearance to her lesbian relationship. This location frees her from the rigidity of socially normative behavior, giving her space to play with how she wants to be perceived by others. Such characterization is radical for the time in which this film was released. Up to that point in Black cinema, portrayals of queer relationships were not commonplace. In fact, there is a sense of erasure of those types of figures altogether.[16] By the early 1990s, the inclusion of a character like Cleo is a notable contribution to cinema at-large, especially given the ease in which she flourishes as an out lesbian. Her public displays of affection with her lesbian lover, Ursula (Samantha MacLachlan), throughout the film normalizes the act, which is radical within the context of West Coast hip-hop culture. Cleo's sexuality is not cited as a point of contention by other characters nor is it something that she must defend at any point in the film. Unlike the circumstances of far too

[16] A notable example is the controversial creative direction taken by Steven Spielberg in directing the 1985 film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. While the book details an erotic queer relationship between Celie and Shug Avery, a notably sexually liberated woman, the film does not depict it. In a 2011 interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Spielberg contends, "There were certain things in the [lesbian] relationship between Shug Avery and Celie that were very finely detailed in Alice's book, that I didn't feel we could get a [PG-13] rating. And I was shy about it…I basically took something that was extremely erotic and very intentional, and I reduced it to a simple kiss. I got a lot of criticism for that."[16] Many would argue that Spielberg's unwillingness to include such a groundbreaking depiction of queer love and desire coupled with his white, cishet lens rendered him unfit for such a production, but above all, his directorial decisions were indicative of a widespread erasure of queer romance that did not begin nor end with him.

many queer people in real life, Cleo is allowed to just "be" but still maintains an air of a willingness to fight for her right to do so if anyone tries to impose their rules on her.

Although she breaks the social and legal rules, Cleo's nonconformity is a source of pride. She is the most confident of them all, often being the first to defend herself and others against wrongdoing. There are drawbacks to such characterization, however. In many ways, Cleo reifies the Sapphire stereotype as a fiercely independent, cantankerous, and unfeminine figure. The Sapphire label for these types of Black women was adopted from the character Sapphire Stevens, played by Ernestine Wade, in the *Amos n' Andy* radio sitcom and television show in the 1940s and 50s. Cleo is an extension of this as she is deemed by some as a quintessential "angry Black woman." What nuances this portrayal, however, is that the viewer is cued in on the motivations for her behavior. Her anger stems from a life of turmoil and injustice, so being labeled an angry Black woman vilifies her for being a part of an oppressive system, which is an unfair assessment that reifies a negative image of Black womanhood.

Moreover, her anger contributes to her casting as what is considered a crucial component to ghettocentric worldmaking in film—a male protagonist. In "'Ghetto Heaven': *Set It Off* and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality," Kara Keeling posits that Cleo's characterization is an important element in how the film establishes itself as being aligned with ghettocentric ideals. In the absence of an integral male protagonist, the film positions Cleo as *the* dominant masculine figure to emphasize the feminine presence of the other Black women in the movie, undergirding the way the film inverts common portrayals in that cinematic subgenre. Keeling notes, "*Set It Off* funnels into Cleo's character so much of the 'black masculinity' which is one of ghettocentricity's fundamental mechanisms for rationalizing and reproducing ghettocentric social reality…Cleo carries the burden of 'black masculinity' so that the film's

other perceptibly 'female' characters can be recognized as simply 'black women'" (37). Being released on the heels of an influx of ghettocentric dramas, most of which centered Black men and their plight, *Set It Off* is different in that Black women are the lead characters, but is the same in the ways it depicts misogynistic men who commit violence against women. The women are confronted with sexist attitudes and coerced into sexual exploitation out of a need for money to stay afloat. Though they are slightly empowered to speak out against the physical, emotional, and mental violence imposed on them by several men in the film, they are still trapped in a cycle of abuse by virtue of their poverty. She is the foil through which T.T., Frankie, and Stony's more aggressive behavior can be read as less intense because of their juxtaposition to a much more *overtly* masculine figure, Cleo.

Cleo presents an alternative representation of masculinity, however. She keeps others in check but is still vulnerable. Her masculinity is substantial to the point that the women's unscrupulous boss repeatedly greets them collectively as "ladies and gentlemen," with a snide nod towards Cleo. Yet, she indicates a deep-seated passion for her friendships and is willing to put those emotions on full display. At one point in the film, a disagreement causes a rift in her friendship with Stony. As lifelong friends, they both exhibit a range of feelings after an intense argument about whether they should plot another robbery or not. Cleo is vehement about her desire for more money but Stony does not want to continue to put their lives at risk. In a rage, Cleo presses the barrel of her gun to Stony's cheek, suggesting a dominance over her. Stony does not surrender, however. She says, "Cleo, you are real high and you actin' real stupid. You need to get that gun out my face," and Cleo backs down. Stony proceeds to slap Cleo in the face and threatens, "Don't you EVER fuckin' raise a gun to me again." Stony checks Cleo's attempt at hypermasculine dominance when surrounded by four other women. In that moment, Cleo is not

the “man” in a patriarchal sense of the word, but an equal. After their argument, Cleo spirals into a fit of disappointment, frustration, and sadness about the rift that is growing between her and Stony, demonstrating a love and appreciation for the bond they have and a leveling out of what Cleo represents in film as a queer, butch lesbian.

Though Cleo is positioned to soften the femininity of her friends, Cleo’s girlfriend, Ursula, serves as a foil for Cleo’s masculinity *and* femininity, illuminating her masculine strength as well as her feminine gentleness. The audience often sees Ursula in extremely close proximity to Cleo to the point that their characters nearly collapse into one another, offering a visual representation of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity as one. Anytime Ursula is present, she is physically *on* Cleo, creating a stark visual contrast between the two (see fig. 17). In relation to Cleo, Ursula presents as a sexy, feminine, thin, conventionally attractive Black woman—Cleo’s antithesis. Their butch-femme dynamic is not uncommon outside of cinema, but Ursula’s consistent presence in the movie *feels* more intentional when considering Cleo’s hyper-masculinization. Ursula’s character is flat and peripheral. She never utters a word throughout the entire film and though this is odd to the other characters (at one point Frankie asks, “She don’t talk?”), her silence allows her to be a vehicle for Cleo’s feminine self. Unlike other cinematic moments when the woman is silenc*ed*, Ursula is not forced into submission, she simply chooses not to speak, exhibiting her own agency and ownership of the energy she does or does not expend. She is a vessel through which Cleo’s erotic fantasies can become reality and where Cleo can thrive in her masculine-feminine duality.

There is a less overt component to Cleo and Ursula’s dynamic, however. Cleo prides herself on her muscle car and it serves as a symbol of her masculinity, her phallus. Ursula cares for it—washes it, waxes it—while Cleo is typically inside of it or on top of it. In one scene, Cleo

is laying on the hood of the car while Ursula's legs straddle her as she does an erotic dance in lingerie. In another, Cleo is in the driver's seat, blasting music and toying with the hydraulics, as Ursula prances around the car. Cleo watches her through the windshield like she is at a peep show. Ursula tends to her erotic desire. Even though the car can be viewed as an extension of her masculinity and is certainly an extension of her being a product of the male-dominated West Coast hip-hop culture, Ursula's presence as a physical manifestation of Cleo's femininity means these images are a collapsing of the two into one. They both tend to the needs of the car in the same way that they both tend to the physical and emotional aspects of their relationship, almost always moving as a unit. As Cleo's counterpart, her presence yields balance.

Fig. 17. Cleo and Ursula in a loving embrace in *Set It Off*.

Ultimately, Cleo, particularly when juxtaposed to the other Black women in *Set It Off*, represents what can be perceived as contending masculine and feminine inclinations, but they are harmonious. Her vulnerability and commitment to friendships complement her masculine presence and one of the final scenes of the film brings this to the forefront when she sacrifices herself to save Stony and Frankie. When the women's last heist fails, they embark on a police chase. They temporarily evade the police cars and helicopters who are feverishly searching for them after they flee the scene with Cleo as the driver. Eventually, however, the police close in on them. In that moment, Cleo decides that it would be best if they split up. She tearily tells Stony and Frankie to go on without her and they reluctantly get out of the car. They all understand that Cleo plans to be the diversion while they get away—they understand that she will probably die in this effort. Cleo's car is eventually surrounded by police. When they command her to surrender, she slams her foot on the gas in a last-ditch effort. Her car gets riddled with bullets. Finally, she is forced to a stop and appears to be dead. When the police are slowly approaching her, she quickly gets out of the car, guns blazing. She is immediately shot to death. Cleo's dedication to the people she loves culminates in her sacrificing her own life to save theirs, but she does not go quietly. Up to her last breath, she loudly stands firm in who she is—a rambunctious woman with a fierce devotion to her loved ones. As a Black tomboy, Cleo transgresses the notion that one must be *either* feminine *or* masculine and embodies this balance to the end.

Homie to Lover: Queen Latifah's Recuperative Desirability in *Just Wright*

As Latifah's acting career begins following a similar trajectory to her music career, transitioning out of appealing primarily to Black audiences to appealing more to the mainstream, she takes on starkly different types of roles compared to her breakout cinematic role as Cleo.

After *Set It Off* and the conclusion of *Living Single*, she released what would be her last hip-hop album, *Order in the Court,* in 1998. Latifah goes on to release more albums, but they showcase her R&B, jazz, and soul artistic capabilities. Although she still plays roles in films that are infused with hip-hop sensibilities such as *Brown Sugar* (2002) and *Barbershop 2* (2004), she demonstrates her range as an actress by taking on roles in movies that are not quintessentially "Black." Latifah leans heavily into her love for jazz and blues as Matron "Mama" Morton in the film rendition of the classic Broadway musical *Chicago* (2002), for example, but also plays M'Lynn in a 2012 remake of *Steel Magnolias*. By the early 2000s, Latifah fully solidifies herself as an actress worthy of any role that may come her way, but even through this transition, Latifah maintains her drive to disrupt paradigmatic Black womanhood by portraying characters who are not *typically* centered in mainstream films. One of those women is Leslie Wright, the Black tomboy protagonist in the 2010 romantic comedy, *Just Wright*.

Leslie is like Khadijah James in that she is a full-figured woman who loves basketball and is characterized as a less feminine counterpart to the other women around her. What is different is Leslie's lack of romantic companionship. Whereas Khadijah had men scrambling for her, Leslie lives her life as a single woman focused on her career as a physical therapist. On the surface, Leslie is yet another Black woman who is not feminine enough to attract true romantic partnership, but a deeper dive reveals how this film positively shifts how Black women are portrayed in cinema, especially in the romantic comedy genre. Directed Sanaa Hamri, a Black woman, Latifah's role as Leslie positions her as a Black tomboy who upsets what was once a nearly obligatory factor in a rom-com—a conventionally attractive, albeit quirky, white woman. There are notable deviations from this formula that ushered in the possibility of Latifah being centered in a movie like this, including Latifah's previous role as Georgia Byrd in the 2006 rom-

com *The Last Holiday*, but the Black women who contributed to laying that foundation still fit into a Hollywood archetype of a "perfect" woman. Actresses like Gabrielle Union with her modelesque stature and Sanaa Lathan with her gentle feminine demeanor ushered in a new era of what women protagonists can look like in the genre, but they also had features that made their "worthy of love and romance" characters believable and aspirational. As Georgia Byrd, Latifah disrupts the homogeneity of Black women in the genre but not to the extent of what is offered in *Just Wright*, where her tomboyish presence is crucial to the plot, opening opportunity for a most extensive rewriting of what a viable love interest looks like in romantic comedies.

Just Wright chronicles the life of Leslie Wright, a physical therapist in New York City takes on a job working with a professional basketball star for the New Jersey Nets. Tasked with rehabilitating their franchise player, Scott McKnight (Common), she bears witness to her close friend and godsister, Morgan (Paula Patton), successfully plot and execute a plan to reign in Scott in so she could live out her dream of being a trophy wife to a rich athlete. Leslie watches Scott fall in love with Morgan and propose to her despite Morgan's clear lack of genuine interest in who he is as a person. Ultimately, Morgan leaves Scott because he is no longer has the status and fame he once had due to an unforeseen enduring leg injury. Leslie remains his confidant and physical therapist, and over time, their attraction to one another grows. In the end, they become lovers and live happily ever after.

There is much that can be unpacked about Leslie's journey from therapist, to confidant, to romantic partner, but the most notable is how Hamri contrasts Morgan's performance of hyperfemininity to attract wealthy male suitors to Leslie's nearly gender-neutral presence and authentic approach to love and life. Both of their positions are setup within the first few minutes of the film. The movie opens with Leslie making breakfast for the household before rushing out

to work. Her status as a caretaker for those around her is in the forefront, relegating her to "Mammy" status and one of the primary laborers while Morgan is viewed as someone too delicate to work. When asked about her plans to get a job since she has no money and no car, she responds by saying that her plan to attract a wealthy athlete *is* her job. In contrast to Morgan, Leslie demonstrates an explicit lack of interest in material gain. She drives an extremely rusty, battered Ford Mustang that she affectionately named Eleanor because she finds beauty in its imperfections. At a basketball game, Leslie boisterously yells at the players to the point that the other people in the section tells her to "shut up" while Morgan uses binoculars to look at what the players' wives are wearing. The juxtaposition of Leslie's hardworking mentality to Morgan's desire for a man who can take care of her financially translates into a masculinization of Leslie. She is hardened by having career goals that transcend her desire for partnership. Though longing for true love, she never fully prioritizes that type of companionship in the way that Morgan does, yet she is constantly reminded that she must be more feminine, like Morgan, if she wants to get married soon.

As the scene ends, Latifah laughs at Morgan's aspirations and her painstaking efforts to achieve them. Morgan declares, "It takes good bait to catch a fish," then Leslie looks at her cleavage and responds, "I must be fishing in the wrong river." In this moment, there is an acknowledgement that Leslie feels as if she has all the right "tools" to attract quality men, but because she is not packaged the same way Morgan is, her "bait" is not enough. Leslie's lack of confidence in herself is evident because the previous night, she had a date with a man that ended in heartbreak. The scene depicts her entering work wearing sneakers and jeans but leaving in a form-fitting dress and heels with her "bait" on full display. She goes to dinner with the handsome, accomplished man and they talk for hours. Afterwards, Leslie suggests that they go to

a movie or to a Nets game for their next date. At that point, her date proceeds to say, "You are such an amazing woman. Any man that gets you is going to be beyond lucky." He says that he is not ready for a relationship, however. She finishes his statements, suggesting that she heard this exact speech many times before. He finishes, "I am so happy you get it…we can still hang out. You're good people." She repeats "you're good people" in unison with a visibly deflated countenance. She returns home from the date and Morgan asks how her date went. After Leslie recounts the series of events, Morgan remarks, "You *do* have 'homegirl' written all over you." Leslie responds, "I'm just being my regular self." There is a stark disconnect between their outlooks on the value of being one's true self in any given situation. Morgan adheres to the philosophy that a woman revealing her authentic self to potential mates does not lead to partnership. Leslie, however, feels incapable of being anyone other than who she truly is. While this may seem somewhat unimportant, this idea is significant when considering how many romantic comedies involve some sort of physical transformation of the not-so-put together, quirky woman into the epitome of feminine beauty. In this case, however, Leslie resists the notion of molding herself into being more acceptable to others. She resists the push towards denying her tomboyism, her interests, and her perspective on life and love. Ultimately, she resists becoming another Morgan.

The constant comparison to the very feminine Morgan in *Just Wright* becomes more explicit as the film continues, illuminating more ways that Latifah's character is supposedly less desirable (see fig. 18). When preparing to go to a Nets game, Leslie wears typical sporting event attire—basketball jersey, jeans, and sneakers. When her mother sees her, she disappointingly says, "How you gonna get a man dressed like that?" She suggests that any outing is an opportunity for her to "catch" a man so she should dress accordingly. Shortly thereafter, her

mother returns, beckoning Leslie to look at Morgan's attire. Morgan emerges in a tight cocktail dress and heels. Leslie's mother twirls Morgan around so she can model what she considers appropriate attire for the occasion and exclaims, "Now THIS is how you get a man!" This is not the only moment when Leslie's lack of feminine presence and subsequent undesirability is questioned, however. Later, her mother helps Morgan and Leslie prepare to bait men at a party that will be full of basketball players. While making sure Leslie looks the part by fixing her full face of makeup, her mother proclaims, "You are going to find a husband tonight" as she stares at her in awe.

Fig. 18. Still from *Just Wright* depicting Morgan (far left), Scott (center), and Leslie (far right).

This one time, Leslie tries to contort herself into who the other women want her to be. Although she wears dresses and heels on her own accord, this time it is specifically to appease her mother and Morgan. Despite the pride that her mother has, however, she still demonstrates doubts about Leslie's ability to attract men. She shows them a pair of diamond earrings given by Leslie's grandmother, citing them as being the earrings she wore when she met her husband. She states, "You wear these and they will be falling at your feet," then proceeds to give the earrings to Morgan to wear. The earrings are symbol of a softer femininity that Leslie doesn't exhibit as

much as Morgan does. She does not consider Leslie a worthy recipient of them because she would not put them to good use. To her, they supplement one's inherent desirability, that which Leslie did not *appear* to have.

Though Leslie's relegation to "Mammy" status through most of the movie can be disheartening to viewers who hope to see a figure like Latifah break from this type of characterization, there is a recuperation of her desirability by the end of the film, and it plays out through her and Scott's budding love. Prior to Morgan's relationship with Scott, Leslie first demonstrated an attraction to him. Initially meeting by happenstance at a gas station, Leslie helps Scott find the gas tank on his new luxury car. She proves to be more car savvy than Scott, which is an unexpected attribute in a woman. He invites her to his party. At the party, Leslie somewhat beelines towards Scott and strikes up conversation. As they engage in friendly banter, Morgan strategically inserts herself into their space, a part of her plan to bait him. Scott takes the bait which renders Leslie nearly invisible from that point forward. Morgan's sexy, more stereotypically feminine appearance won.

Leslie goes on to work with Scott during his rehabilitation from his injury and Morgan breaks up with him after rumors about him never playing in the NBA again begin to spread. Leslie does not severe her relationship with Scott, however, and she vows to get him back to playing the sport he loves the most. She naturally becomes *his* caretaker the same way she cares for the other people in her life, nurturing him beyond the scope of her job. She consoles him after he slips into a depression and brings him food to make sure he eats. Leslie becomes a second mother. This dynamic is rather short-lived, though. After having spent so much quality time with Leslie, Scott begins to develop feelings for her. Their roles get reversed when she gets sick and he vows to nurse her back to health. He treats her to dinner as a celebration for her successfully

helping him make his NBA return. As she descends the stairs dressed in a floor-length gown, he is awestruck. They go to dinner and he reveals that he restored her car, Eleanor, while preserving the dent in the door that she says reminds her of her grandfather's dimple. When he pulls back the car covering, he pulls back Leslie's, too, revealing her imperfectly perfect beauty. For the first time, Leslie receives the adoration that she wanted all her life and she did not have to be like Morgan to do so.

After Scott and Leslie's proclamations of love, Morgan returns and is welcomed with somewhat open arms. Scott demonstrates an enduring adhesion to a standard of beauty and womanhood that he is *supposed* to have as a wealthy basketball player. His teetering behavior between Morgan and Leslie is borne out of a tension between what he wants and what is acceptable in his social circle and beyond. Though he ultimately decides to leave Morgan for good and nourish his romantic relationship with Leslie, the tug-of-war that had to take place before he could confidently make that choice reveals the stronghold that ideals of desirability have on him, which is one of the strongest attributes of the film. In the end, Scott could have gotten his trophy wife. He did not *settle* for Leslie, he made an active decision to return the love that Leslie actively decided to give, too.

Leslie is rid of her Mammy-like characterization by the end of the film without having to undergo a physical transformation. In a 2010 review of the film, Andrew Barker writes, "Even in the femme-skewing world of romantic comedy, one is still far more likely to see a physically perfect woman opt for a chubby, schlubby older man than vice versa, and *Just Wright* deserves some plaudits for reversing the trend. Though Latifah can hardly be described as schlubby here…[she] seems to be enjoying the chance to play a more vulnerable, outwardly feminine role than usual." Though more outwardly feminine than her previous role as Cleo,

Queen Latifah as Leslie Wright was scrutinized through the duration of the film for her tomboyism. *Just Wright* is one of the few rom-coms that does not attempt to draw a female audience by presenting a standardized type of feminine beauty that is worthy of mainstream adoration. Romantic comedies typically present unrealistic love stories through unrealistic characters. The extent of relatability is often limited to the protagonist's longing for love since their physical attributes are still unobtainable for the common viewer. Leslie, however, is relatable. Though she is not constructed as an "ugly-duckling" figure because of her physical features, her tomboy attire and behavior mark her as undesirable in a similar manner. In the end, her femininity and sexuality are recuperated while she maintains her tomboy presence. Equally as important, she becomes one of an extremely small number of female physical therapists for the NBA, exhibiting how she thrives both in her romantic life and professional life. She stands as a testament to how Black womanhood exists on a spectrum and how one can flourish in all aspects of life despite not adhering to rigid social norms. From Latifah's roles as the undesirable homegirl to being a rom-com queen, her acting career reflects how she revealed a host of possibilities for what girls and women can represent without having to subscribe to stereotypical femininity.

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