

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: HAPTIC LISTENING: ANALYZING BLACK WOMEN'S WITNESSING, FUGITIVITY, AND REFUSAL IN THE 1990s AND EARLY 2000s

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The 90s through early 2000s was an era marked by vociferous noises. This noise included Black popular cultural expansions in art, sonic waves of resistance via protests against police brutality, the crackling of arson fire expressing the Black community's rage in response to anti-Blackness, and calls for reproductive justice for poor Black women among other sounds. While this era maintained the loudness of both prosperity and protest, it also nurtured quiet resistances against the U.S. carceral State. Specifically, Black women's and girls' vociferous and less discernible practices of refusal situated within film, literature, and music videos also propelled narrative resistance against the atmospheric violence of the State.

What were the quiet and less discernible ways that Black women and girls challenged the U.S. carceral State during the 90s and in the early 2000s? What are the lenses or methodologies that make this resistance legible? What Black feminist scholars have already practiced the method of listening to that which is illegible or does not exist? What do Black girls and women

gain when we can see their quiet refusal in this way? What is at stake if we cannot see this refusal? These are some of the questions that underscore this dissertation.

In my dissertation I argue Black women and girls vociferously and quietly challenge the 1990s and early 2000s U.S. carceral State in film, fiction, and music videos. I maintain that the excavation of their less discernible (or “quiet”) practices of refusal within these cultural texts require a focused attention to detail and a counterintuitive practice of listening to that which is illegible, indiscernible, or hidden. In this way, Black popular culture is a site for the emergence and existence of resistance that brings to the forefront the efforts of Black women and girls who are often marginalized in resistance discourses. Drawing from Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” and Tina Campt’s *Listening to Images* at the intersection of Haptic Media Studies, I use a framework—haptic listening—for discerning and excavating their practices of refusal that are illegible to cursory analyses.

Following my introduction chapter, in chapter two I center my analysis on Leslie Harris’ film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992) and F. Gary Gray’s film *Set It Off* (1996). Through haptic listening, I trace a cartography of witnessing informed by Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, Dwight McBride’s *Impossible Witnesses*, and Angela Ards’ *Words of Witness*. I argue that specific instances of witnessing that reify Black women’s and girls’ subjection, fracture Black kinship, and disrupt Black futures are the catalysts for their resistance to the carceral State.

In chapter three I examine protagonist Winter’s fugitive journey in Sister Souljah’s 1999 novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Drawing from Fred Moten’s *Stolen Life*, Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds*, and Jennifer Nash’s “Black Maternal Aesthetics,” I argue that her fugitive journey begins and ends with her own vociferous haptic encounters—a process I call Circular

Fugitivity. In the end, I trace a panoptic cartography that honors the emergence of her own political potential as she attempts to escape the grasp of the carceral State.

And finally in chapter four I analyze the music video performances of Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003). Drawing from the work of Tina Campt in *Listening to Images* at the convergence of haptic media studies, I argue that their transformative practices of refusal are legible within and imbued by their identificatory photographs in each music video. These aesthetic practices of refusal, made obvious through haptic listening, appear throughout the music videos signaling the movement toward freedom. In the end, my project honors the less discernible practices of resistance by Black women and girls during the 1990s and early 2000s.

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2024

Dedication

For
My grandmother, Lillie
My mother, Betty
My younger sister, Doreen
And
My baby sister, Denise

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It was the late 90s or early 2000s, a few years after F. Gary Gray’s iconic film *Set It Off* was released in theatres. My mother, Ms. Betty, sat my two younger sisters, Doreen, Denise, and me down in our grandmother’s living room to watch the film on VHS. We were joined by our older cousins who had already seen the film but wanted to rewatch it with us for the thrill. I remember looking onward, witnessing characters Frankie, Stony, Tisean, and Cleo mirror many of the challenges I saw Black women endure in my own proximity—being unjustly fired from their jobs, losing their sons to police violence and the carceral State, living under the hyper-surveillance of Child Protective Services (CPS), and having their own conflicts with police officers stationed in our community. The cacophony of their resistance sounds in the film clashed with the sounds of us sitting in the living room shouting, “Get him, Stony!” “Run, Frankie!” “Aw, dang, they ain’t have to do Cleo like that”. The flashing images in the film, the sounds, and the noisiness of our living room complemented the atmospheric vociferous noises that emerged in the 90s and ran through early the 2000s. This noise included sonic waves of resistance via protests against police brutality, the crackling of arson fire expressing the Black community’s rage in response to anti-Blackness, and calls for reproductive justice for poor Black women among other sounds.

While this era maintained the loudness of both prosperity and protest, it also nurtured quiet resistances against the U.S. carceral State. If, as Franz Fanon says, violence is atmospheric,¹ then so is the violence of the U.S. carceral State. It is a violence that fills the atmosphere, and creeps through the cracks and crevices of our homes for us to inhale, digest, excrete, or exhale back into the atmosphere. It is a violence that is at once tangible and illegible

¹ Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth.*, Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.

to the naked eye, conversely transforming my family's shouts at the TV screen into a kind of atmospheric resistance against this violence. This memory-image of my encounter with the film undergirds my motivation for my dissertation.

While many of the efforts to push back against the U.S. carceral State during the 90s and early 2000s often overlooked the concerns and voices (or noise) of Black women, I ask, what were the quiet and less discernible ways that Black women and girls challenge the U.S. carceral State during this decade and in the early 2000s? Where are the spaces in which this lesser discernible resistance exists? What are the lenses or methodologies that make this resistance legible? Are there any necessary identities required to see, hear, feel or *listen to* their resistance? What Black feminist scholars have already practiced the method of listening to that which is illegible or does not exist? What do Black women and girls gain when we can see their quiet refusal in this way? In this dissertation I argue Black women and girls vociferously and quietly challenge the 1990s and early 2000s U.S. carceral State in film, fiction, and music videos. I maintain that the excavation of their less discernible practices of refusal within these cultural texts require a focused attention to detail and a counterintuitive practice of listening to that which illegible, indiscernible, or hidden. In this way, Black popular culture is a site for the emergence and existence of resistance that brings to the forefront the efforts of Black women and girls who are often marginalized in resistance discourses. Specifically, I analyze Leslie Harris' 1992 film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, F. Gary Gray's *Set It Off* (1996), Sister Souljah's 1999 novel *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and music video performances by Charli Baltimore in "Down Ass Chick" (2002) and Meagan Good in "21 Questions" (2003).

A Noisy Decade

The 1990s marked a vibrant and noisy² era in U.S. Black popular culture. Take for example the increase in TV representation for African Americans. Bountifully bursting onto the scene at the start of the decade was Keenen Ivory Wayans' very own *In Living Color* (1990). *In Living Color* was a sketch comedy series that broadcasted the comedic talents of many Black actors including the Wayans siblings, David Alen Grier, Jamie Foxx, T'Keyah Crystal Keymah, Kim Coles, and Tommy Davidson among others. The show aired for four years and during its short tenure, it established the Wayan's family and the other comedic actors as talented forces in the industry. In the same year, creators Andy and Susan Borowitz debuted *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990) starring Will Smith. This sitcom follows the life adjustment of the lead character, Will Smith, after moving from the inner city of Philadelphia to live with his more well-off family in wealthy Bel-Air. In 1992, the eponymous *Martin* debuted and took Black popular culture by storm as many of his characters on the show (Mrs. Payne, Tyrone, and Sheneneh, to name of a new) and his co-stars Tisha Campbell, Carl Anthony Payne II, Tichina Arnold, and Tommy Mikal Ford left indelible pop culture references upon their fandom as they navigated love and friendship throughout the series. The following year, Yvette Lee Bowser's *Living Single* (1993) debuted, continuing the theme of navigating love and friendship (among other themes) this time with a majority Black women leading cast. And later, shows like *Sister, Sister* (1994), *The Wayans Bros.* (1995), *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1996), and *Moesha* (1996) would debut and

² I use "noisy" and "loud" interchangeably in this project. For me, "loud" Black cultural texts are texts that challenge the U.S. carceral State and its varying manifestations of anti-Blackness. These manifestations of anti-Blackness include but are not limited to stereotypes that dehumanize and criminalize Black people. Moreover, I recognize that using the term "loud" to describe Black people and/or their cultural productions can be problematic as the term is often used to portray Black people and their protests in a pejorative manner. However, my intention is not to reproduce this violence, rather, I intend to acknowledge and praise the direct (and indirect) confrontation that these Black cultural texts posed to the virulent anti-Blackness that plagued the decade via racist representations, policies, and policing. Additionally, I juxtapose the loud with the quiet or less discernible practices of resistance to emphasize the necessity for haptic listening to make these practices legible.

captivate Black audiences with their portrayals of love, family, work, and humor. This decade expanded and introduced varying representations of Blackness and established that “it was the 1990’s that truly began the golden age of [B]lack television and film” (with respect to the 1970’s Blaxploitation era).³

Likewise, the 90s concurrently experienced a Black film explosion. Director Reginald Hudlin kicked off the decade with his iconic 1990 film *House Party* starring rap duo Kid ‘n Play. This film hilariously details the hardships that the character Kid faces after sneaking out of the house to attend his friend’s, Play’s, party. Marion Van Peebles⁴ and John Singleton⁵ in their directorial debut introduced us to the iconic Nino Brown and Tre, Doughboy, and Ricky in 1991. In 1992 Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* and Ernest Dickerson’s *Juice* hit the mainstream and gave hope for a future of Black women’s directing and cinematic storytelling, while portraying a tumultuous friendship between four young Black boys that ends in tragedy, respectively. In ’93 and ’94 Leslie Harris, Spike Lee, The Hughes brothers, Doug McHenry, and John Singleton gave us *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (the U.S. debut), *Crooklyn*, *Menace II Society*, *Jason’s Lyric*, and *Poetic Justice*. Directors Forest Whittaker, The Hughes brothers, and John Singleton kept the momentum going in 1995 with *Waiting to Exhale*, *Dead Presidents*, and *Higher Learning*. Specifically, *Waiting to Exhale*, the film adaptation of Terry McMillan’s 1992 novel by the same name, presented representations of successful middle class Black women as they navigated love, family life, and friendship. In maintaining the theme of the four-women lead, 1996 was a

³ See Rivers, Kendall. “Black Excellence: Why the 90’s and Early 2000’s Were the True Golden Ages for Black Film and Television.” *Medium*, Medium, 18 Feb. 2021, [kendallrivers.medium.com/black-excellence-why-the-90s-and-early-2000s-were-the-true-golden-ages-for-black-film-and-c50044711039](https://www.medium.com/black-excellence-why-the-90s-and-early-2000s-were-the-true-golden-ages-for-black-film-and-c50044711039).

⁴ McHenry, Doug, et al. *New Jack City*. Directed by Mario Van Peebles, Two-disc special edition, Warner Home Video, 2005

⁵ Nicolaidis, Steve, et al. *Boyz N the Hood*. Edited by Bruce Cannon, Directed by John Singleton and Bruce Bellamy, 4K Ultra HD + Blu-ray [edition], Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2020.

breakout year for the culture with F. Gary Gray's legendary *Set It Off*. This film, which I later analyze in this project, intervened⁶ in the 1990s Black film renaissance (specifically in the gangsta film genre) by offering Black women leading roles in an organized crime-heist movie and centering narratives of Black women characters' experience with the U.S. carceral State. In '97 Theodore Witcher, George Tillman Jr, and Kasi Lemmons gave the culture *Love Jones*, *Soul Food*, and *Eve's Bayou*. Hype Williams kept the crime thriller genre alive in 1998 with *Belly* before Malcolm D. Lee closed off the decade with *The Best Man* (1999). These films, which is by no means an exhaustive list, solidified the 90s as seminal decade for Black popular culture.⁷

As if the television and film industries were not enough to carry Black popular culture during the 1990s, popular and urban literature by Black authors blossomed during this era as well. Authors like Teri Woods and Terry McMillan published groundbreaking novels in 1992. Woods' *True to the Game* chronicles the journey of a young girl, Gena, during the crack epidemic of the 1980s as she navigates the relationships with her drug kingpin boyfriend, Quadir. Terry McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale* gave the culture Bernadette, Gloria, Savannah, and Robin. Their stories of love/relationships, friendship, and family resonated with so many Black women and helped to catapult McMillan's success as an author.⁸ In the following year, Omar Tyree offers another coming-of-age story set during the 1980s crack epidemic via the character Tracy in *Flyy Girl* (1993). McMillan returns in '94 with *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and landed another film adaptation of her work in 1998, directed by Kevin Rodney Sullivan.

⁶ See Smith-Shomade, Beretta E. "Rock-a-Bye, Baby!': Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2003, pp. 25-40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566514> for more.

⁷ The hip-hop/ rap genre and its accompanying genre, music videos, also popularized during the 1990s. See Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. University Press of New England, 1994. for more on the popularization and importance of rap music.

⁸ See Richards, Paulette. *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion*. Greenwood Press, 1999

Additionally, authors like Zane, Eric Jerome Dickey, Sapphire, and Sister Souljah kept the erotic and urban fiction genres alive with their literary contributions to the culture. Such contributions expanded the possibilities of publishing for these genre authors, especially following the 1992 publication of Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, which as Tracy Sherrod says, influenced "Trade publishers to [jump] on the bandwagon and [attempt] to publish into this niche; the result launched such careers as those for Bebe Moore Campbell, Connie Briscoe, [and] Tina McElroy Ansa..."⁹ This decade marked a major turning point in cultural history for Black people in the U.S.

The Black cultural vibrancy of the 1990s and early 2000s did not exist within a cultural production vacuum, instead, many of the cultural texts, specifically the ones I examine in my project (*Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992), *Set It Off* (1996), *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), "Down Ass Chick," (2002) and "21 Questions" (2003)), follow a Black women's resistance narrative genealogy beginning at least during the 1970s. Specifically, Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*¹⁰ (1970) practices what I understand as reconfigurative geography when she writes Pecola Breedlove's insanity, represented through the belief that she acquires blue eyes and has a "relationship" with her imaginary friend, as a psychological refuge for her unfortunate experiences culminated at the intersection of racism, sexism, poverty, and the generational trauma. I extend my understanding of reconfigurative geography in chapter three with an

⁹ Sherrod, Tracy. "Black Publishing in High Cotton." *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 19 Apr. 2022, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/88995-black-publishing-in-high-cotton.html.

¹⁰ In offering this story about Pecola's experience of incest and subsequent shame by her own community during the 70s, Morrison illustrates what GerShun Avilez describes as suspicion—"questions of trust about interpersonal relationships that weaken bonds of real or imagined kinship" (Avilez 63). On the one hand, Morrison figures Black girls' unique experiences with intracommunity violence in the Black nationalist era where Black women's (and girls') experiences were often overlooked to fulfill the goals of Black nationalism. On the other hand, Morrison demonstrates the ability for an oppressed Black girl to reconfigure psychological geography to create a refuge from such intracommunal violence.

analysis of Sister Souljah's novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. Likewise, Octavia Butler in *Kindred* (1979) represents Black women's ability to traverse through time and space to escape the threat of the carceral State, manifested by enslavers. This ability for Black women to disrupt temporality in search of freedom from captivity continues through the early 2000s as I later argue in chapter four with an analysis of Meagan Good's music video performance in "21 Questions".

During the 1980s Alice Walker and Terry McMillan continued the resistance narrative genealogy. In 1982, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* details the transformative power of visual and experiential witnessing of violence that lend way to character transformation. This is most apparent through her protagonist, Celie, who violently (and justifiably) confronts her abuser of many years, Mr., by the end of the novel. I discuss the transformative power of witnessing for Black women and girl characters in chapter two with my analyses of *Set It Off* and *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* Another notable novel that continues this work is Terry McMillan's 1987 novel *Mama*. This novel follows the lives of protagonist Mildred Peacock and her five children: Freda, Money, Bootsey, Angel, and Doll. In the beginning of the novel Mildred becomes a single mother after divorcing her abusive and cheating husband, Crook. Afterwards, she is forced to live a life of struggle to support her family on her own, often confiding in alcohol, anti-depressants, and casual sex to ease the pain of her reality. Freda, her eldest daughter, witnesses her mother's struggles and this inspires her desire to live a better life than her mother. This kind of witnessing (by Freda) also represents what GerShun Avilez calls disruptive inhabiting, "a desire to be connected to a community [that] appears alongside and is infiltrated by feelings of distrust about such affiliations" (Avilez 62). This is represented by Freda's love for her mother (desire for community) and her later relocation from their Michigan hometown to Los Angeles

(feelings of distrust) to create a life that deviates from the trajectory of proximity to her mother. Though these seminal texts in the preceding decades set the narrative stage for the texts I examine in the 90s and early 2000s, the sociohistorical culture of the preceding decades also shaped the narratives of the texts I analyze in this project.

90s popular Black cultural texts (tv shows, films, literature, rap, music videos, etc) existed alongside and were responding to a legacy of anti-Black State violence that sought to demonize and criminalize Black people in the U.S. via racist policies and representations. I trace a brief genealogy of this criminalization beginning in the 1980s through the early 2000s with respect to how these policies and representations effected Black women. This historical genealogy is important to my larger dissertation since the cultural texts that I examine (*Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, *Set It Off*, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, “Down Ass Chick,” and “21 Questions”) debut during the 1990s and early 2000s and are influenced by and respond to the sociohistorical implications of the decade.

Sociohistorical Genealogy

1980s

In 1981 Ronald Reagan’s presidential tenure began and marked a decade that would plague the poor, urban Black community for decades to come. Reifying the “law and order” rhetoric of his predecessor, Richard Nixon, Reagan deployed a cadre of policies that sought to criminalize Black people under the guise of restoring order to the nation following the social unrest of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and the 1970s anti-police resistance of the Black Panther Party (Alexander 60).¹¹ In 1982, only a year into his presidency, he declared a national

¹¹ Alexander, Michelle, and Cornel West. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Tenth anniversary edition, The New Press, 2020, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2088758>.

War on Drugs to begin the process of criminalizing poor Black people in the U.S. As Michelle Alexander notes in her article “The War on Drugs and the New Jim Crow,” this war was less about solving a drug issue and more about penalizing poor Black people to assuage White resentment for expanded social policies for Black people. Alexander writes, “From the outset the war had little to do with drug crime and nearly everything to do with racial politics. The drug war was part of a grand and highly successful Republican Party strategy of using racially coded political appeals of issues on crime and welfare...” (Alexander 76). Additionally, many Black people, especially men, sought crack dealing as a legitimate form of economic prosperity and survival in tandem with the closing of many inner-city factory jobs due to deindustrialization and globalization. For example, in *The New Jim Crow* Alexander notes there was a 42% decrease in the number of Black people working blue-collar jobs from 1970 to 1982—the height of the crack epidemic (Alexander 62). Black people who were socioeconomically coerced into the drug trade economy were vulnerable to Reagan’s war on drugs. As such, poor Black communities were the primary target of subsequent policies and violent media representations. Alexander explains the significant increase in budget by the millions for federal law enforcement agencies such as the FBI, Department of Defense, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) from the 1980s through the early 2000s (Alexander 63). Their increased budget for the war on drugs gave them license to further weaponize tactical methods (undercover operations, informants, perpetual surveillance, etc) that were used during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the disbanding and criminalizing of the Black Panther Party (Alexander 53). Such surveillance and tactical operations as I later discuss in chapter two are represented in the film *Set It Off* when Stony’s younger brother, Stevie, is ambushed and murdered by police for a crime he did not commit. The criminalization of drug users and sellers (instead of addressing this as a public health crisis) led

to a mass increase in incarceration for many Black people in these communities. In effect, Black families were destroyed by the hyper-policing and increased incarceration of Black men while many Black women were left to support themselves and their families alone.¹²

To legitimize the guerilla tactics used on poor urban Black communities, the Reagan administration approved mass media representations of the effect of the crack epidemic. One such media image that heavily circulated during this decade was that of “crack babies”. The image often circulated in news clips showing infants born to poor mothers (many who were Black) who used crack during their pregnancy, trembling violently in neonatal wards and NICUs.¹³ These overwhelming circulated images created national fear for a growing public health problem (crack/cocaine addiction) that was portrayed as a morality issue surrounding poor Black motherhood. Dr. Claire Coles, an Emory University medical researcher for the “crack baby” epidemic during the 1980s, offers a scientifically backed counter-narrative for the mass representations of newborns with the tremor symptoms. In *The New York Times* video report “Crack Babies: A Tale from the Drug Wars,” she explains:

The effects [of crack in babies] didn’t seem consistent with the action of the drug itself. Many of the children who were the so-called classic cocaine babies were premature babies, and the symptoms that were seen on the videos, on television, the, you know trembling arms and all that, that was prematurity. You could have taken any premature baby and gotten the same image. I think that people got very focused on “cocaine is the cause” of this rather than thinking substance abuse is the cause of this, maternal lifestyle is the cause of this, social issues are the cause of this (4:00- 4:51).

¹² In chapter four of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins explains how the single mother/matriarch stereotype scapegoats Black women for being responsible for the extreme disparities of wealth distribution that characterizes American capitalism (Collins 76). Under this false accusation against Black matriarchs, Black single mothers are blamed for their kids’ failure with the law, which makes their children more susceptible to crime and increases the likely hood of being swept into the carceral system during the Reagan administration.

¹³ “Crack Babies: A Tale from the Drug Wars | Retro Report | The New York Times.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 21 May 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWtLAFw1Ses&rco=1.

However, Dr. Claire’s study was no match for the widespread popularized circulated media representations fueled by the “crack/cocaine is the cause” narrative. These images were part of a cadre of Reagan’s weaponry against poor, Black communities during the 1980s. And as such, poor Black women were both demonized and criminalized as unfit and abusive mothers. In *Torn Apart*¹⁴ Dorothy Roberts discusses this gendered parental criminalization that began under the Reagan administration. She writes:

The war on crack cocaine in Black communities in the 1980s and 1990s included testing Black pregnant women and their babies for drugs and reporting them to child welfare authorities at high rates. The government’s main source of information about prenatal drug use was hospitals’ reporting of positive toxicologies to law enforcement of child welfare agencies...The researchers found that, despite similar rates of positive test results [as White women], Black women were almost ten times more likely than white women to be reported to government agencies...News stories typically blamed their “crack-addicted” mothers for abandoning them, failing to mention that most of the babies languishing in hospitals had been taken from their mother at birth (Roberts 2).

As such, Roberts summarizes how Reagan’s War on Drugs did not merely begin or end in the crack infested streets or in “crack houses,” his policies infiltrated and subsumed hospitals and child welfare systems as part of the perpetual surveillance of the carceral State. In turn, Black women were targeted in vulnerable spaces at their most vulnerable moments—post-childbirth at the hospital—and criminalized as unfit parents not worthy of custody of their children.¹⁵ I explore this theme in chapter two with my discussion of the character Tisean and her son Jajuan in *Set It Off*. I also analyze how the protagonist Chantel in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* challenges this perpetual surveillance and criminalization of Black mothers during the 1990s. Additionally, in chapter three I analyze how Reagan’s war on drugs infiltrates the Santiago

¹⁴ Roberts, Dorothy. *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families--and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*. 1st ed., Basic Books, 2022.

¹⁵ See chapter four of Roberts, Dorothy E. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. 1st ed, Pantheon Books, 1997. for more about the incarceration of pregnant Black women suffering from crack addiction and removal of their children from their custody during the mid 1980s through the 1990s.

family and leaves a teenage Winter to fend for herself against the surveillance and capture of the Bureau of Child Welfare. As such, I maintain that the texts I examine in my dissertation are part of a larger sociohistorical context beginning in the 1980s.

1990s

As if Reagan's war on drugs and subsequent criminalization of Black women via the "crack babies" image were not violent enough, Reagan also introduced another derogatory image of Black women to the public sphere that lasted through the 1990s—the Welfare Queen. The welfare queen is an updated and more violent version of the welfare mother image that popularized during the 1960s and 1970s under former President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. In the 1960s and 70s, Black women earned increased access to U.S. welfare state entitlements via "Social Security, unemployment compensation, school feeding programs, fellowships and loans for higher education, affirmative action, voting rights, antidiscrimination legislation, child welfare programs, and the minimum wage" (Collins 79). This increased access to state's rights for Black women was met with backlash in the form of accusations of laziness, abusing welfare benefits, rejecting work, and passing these alleged poor values to their children; thus contributing to their social degeneracy (Collins 79). In this way, the welfare mother image characterized poor, working class Black women as antitheses to the values and customs of the U.S. economy. During the 1980s this message was usurped and reconfigured into the welfare queen image which continued to have detrimental effects on Black women throughout the 1990s.

The 1980s welfare queen image haunted Black women throughout the 1990s via the continuance to criminalize Black mothers and control their fertility. Scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, and Elizabeth Jekanowski document this criminalization and punishment that poor Black women faced in the 90s. Since Black women were deemed a

catalyzing deterioration of the U.S. State because of their perceived usurpation of Americans' hard-earned taxpaying money¹⁶ to support their "bad" habits and growing families, local state governments sought to intervene in their fertility to control their use of their welfare benefits. One major example of the government intervening in the reproductive rights of poor Black women is the weaponization of the Norplant birth control device during the 1990s. According to medical doctors Donna Shoupe and Daniel Mishell, Norplant "offers long-term contraception through the use of subdermal capsules filled with levonorgestrel. The six capsules are implanted in the inside part of the upper arm. The levonorgestrel is released from the capsules gradually, providing contraception for about 5 years. The primary mechanism of action of Norplant is suppression of ovulation."¹⁷ As such, this long-term contraception was considered ideal for the State to control the fertility of poor Black women, especially those on welfare.

Elizabeth Jekanowski discusses this government coercion in "Voluntarily, for the Good of Society: Norplant, Coercive Policy, and Reproductive Justice". She ties together the government's desire to control Black women's use of welfare benefits with its desire to control their reproduction. Jekanowski writes, "Within these economic and social constraints, Black women at the beginning of the 1990's were significantly more vulnerable to government-sanctioned reproductive coercion than other communities."¹⁸ One such method during this decade included codifying eugenics-like policies to make poor Black mothers dependent on

¹⁶ See page 80 in Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2000.

¹⁷ Shoupe, D, and D R Mishell. "Norplant: Subdermal Implant System for Long-term Contraception." *American journal of obstetrics and gynecology* vol. 160,5 Pt 2 (1989): 1286-92. doi:10.1016/s0002-9378(89)80014-6

¹⁸ Jekanowski, Elizabeth. "Fall 2018 Journal: Voluntarily, for the Good of Society: Norplant, Coercive Policy, and Reproductive Justice - Berkeley Public Policy Journal." *Berkeley Public Policy Journal - A Graduate Student Publication from the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley*, 24 Aug. 2018, bppj.studentorg.berkeley.edu/2018/08/23/norplant-coercive-policy-and-reproductive-justice/.

Norplant in order to continue to receive welfare benefits. As Jekanowski continues to explain, throughout the 1990s Black women who were also welfare recipients were targeted by punitive bills passed by state legislators that coerced these women to take Norplant by paying them to do so (Jekanowski 2018). In effect, the state criminalized Black women for childbearing and maintained control over their reproductive choices. In 1991 and 1992, states incentivized poor Black mothers to obtain Norplant. Too, they were compensated for the insertion of the contraceptive and offered additional monies for every year that they kept the device in their arm. Moreover, state lawmakers such as Oklahoma's Department of Health made it costly to remove¹⁹ the device citing they would not cover the cost for its removal before the 5-year mark (Jekanowski 2018). The only exception? In the case of medical necessity. However, medical necessity did not include Black women's decision to remove the device simply because they may have wanted it removed. In effect, Black mothers on welfare were not only coerced into taking the contraceptive, but they were also forced to keep it in (since they likely could not afford the costs to have it removed) and this forced prolonging of contraceptive-use illuminated the eugenics-like component of government coercion. The weaponization of Norplant, a device that requires an incision and may leave scarring/wounds, thus became a haptic terror that plagued poor Black women on welfare. As I later discuss in chapter two (via Chantel in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*) and chapter three (via Mrs. Santiago and Winter in *The Coldest Winter Ever*), the State's haptic terror intervened in the lives of Black mothers leaving them to find alternative ways for resisting this State violence to survive.

¹⁹ Norplant could only be removed by a medical professional since it included an incision in the arm for implantation.

Early 2000s

Another way in which the U.S. State criminalized Black women occurred via forcible removal of Black men (and other Black women and people) from society, and this forced removal reverberated through the early 2000s. This subsequent funneling of Black people into prisons was legalized during the 1990s when former President Bill Clinton signed the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This act was the “the largest-ever crime bill in the country's history, providing for 100,000 new police officers and allocating \$9.7 billion for prisons and \$6.1 billion for prevention programs.”²⁰ The act was Clinton’s response to the increasing crime that plagued the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s following the introduction of crack into inner-cities (where majority of the residents were Black, Latinx, and/or poor). In addition to increased funding for police and prisons, under this act certain assault weapons were banned, mandated life sentences were instituted for people convicted of three or more violent felonies, including drug crimes, and this mandate became known as the three strikes law.²¹ As Lord Windlesham notes in *Politics, Punishment, and Populism*, “By the early 1990s, crime depicted by President Clinton as “the great crisis of “the spirit that is gripping America today,” was firmly established at or close to the top of the list of issues of greatest public concern. It was also the most politicized, dominating the electoral landscape” (Windlesham 11). Again, like in the 1980s, public health/safety issues affecting mostly inner-city residents were politicized and resulted in the hyper-criminalization of mostly poor, Black (and Latinx) people. Clinton’s 1994 crime bill was a catalyst for what Beth Richie calls a prison nation informed by a “neoliberal,

²⁰ “50 Years of Building Solutions, Supporting Communities and Advancing Justice: 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act.” *1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act*, Office of Justice Programs, 14 Feb. 2020, www.ojp.gov/ojp50/1994-violent-crime-control-and-law-enforcement-act.

²¹ Farley, Robert. “Bill Clinton and the 1994 Crime Bill.” *FactCheck.Org*, 12 Apr. 2016, www.factcheck.org/2016/04/bill-clinton-and-the-1994-crime-bill/.

law-and-order-oriented social agenda” that engendered “the political process whereby enforcement strategies, criminal justice policy, the creation of new laws, and mass incarceration [were] used strategically as part of a larger social agenda aimed at maintaining the power of economic elites through the control of marginalized groups” (Richie 103). And though dominant narratives surrounding the building of the prison nation importantly center the incarceration rates and experiences of Black men,²² I focus briefly on the way this system impacted Black women during the early 2000s.

Black women continued to reap what the 1994 crime bill sowed in the early 2000s. They were among the surplus population²³ disproportionately funneled into the prisons during the 90s and “were [also] denied parole, which resulted in prison overcrowding and its related economic and health effects.”²⁴ As Dorothy Roberts writes in *Killing the Black Body* (1997), “Approximately half of the nation’s crack smokers are female,” and Black women were disproportionately represented as the faces of female crack addicts while being disproportionately incarcerated for their addiction. Additionally, “while the incarceration rate for Black women in state and federal prisons fell by nearly 31% between 2000-2009, Black women [were] still nearly 3 times more likely to be imprisoned than their White counterparts,”²⁵ a discrepancy that began with the criminalization of Black women during the Reagan

²² See Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*

²³ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. University of California Press, 2007, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.c534fp64h>.

²⁴ #teamEBONY. “Black Women and the Crime Bill, 20 Years Later.” *EBONY*, 18 July 2022, www.ebony.com/black-women-and-the-crime-bill-20-years-later-403/.

²⁵ #teamEBONY. “Black Women and the Crime Bill, 20 Years Later.” *EBONY*, 18 July 2022, www.ebony.com/black-women-and-the-crime-bill-20-years-later-403/.

administration. In this way, the legacy of the war on drugs and crime policies implemented in the 1980s and 1990s continued to punish Black women in the early 2000s.

One specific example of this effect on Black women in the early 2000s is represented by the story of Kemba Smith. Smith, who is now an award-winning public speaker, advocate, and author of *Poster Child*,²⁶ had a very different reality when she was arrested in 1994 and sentenced to 24 and a half years in prison without the possibility of parole. Smith was in an abusive relationship with a man who participated in the drug economy during the war on drugs and crime bill eras. After her partner was murdered, she was held accountable for his crimes as a witness with conspiracy to sell cocaine, though she never used or sold drugs herself.²⁷ Paradoxically, she was denied State protection in 1994 when the crime bill was signed into law, thought it contained a Violence Against Women Act. Smith's case was unique in that it represented the way Black women continued to be haunted by the war on drugs and crime bill policies, and it reified how the *perceived* criminalization of Black women resulted in their *literal* incarceration. In the year 2000, the efforts of the Legal Defense Fund and other activists succeeded in obtaining clemency for Kemba Smith (ironically granted by former President Bill Clinton).

However, her release and the subsequent discourse that followed reveals how Black women who were incarcerated due to the 1980s war on drugs and 1994 crime bill policies continued to be haunted by the effects of these policies in the early 2000s (and beyond). As *EBONY Online* reports, "Kemba Smith was granted clemency by President Clinton in December 2000; but there are many women who are still in prison—serving life sentences for drug and

²⁶ "Kemba Smith." *American Civil Liberties Union*, 20 Apr. 2023, www.aclu.org/bio/kemba-smith-pradia.

²⁷ "Kemba Smith: Black Women and Mass Incarceration." *Legal Defense Fund*, 20 Mar. 2024, www.naacpldf.org/case-issue/kemba-smith-black-women-and-mass-incarceration/.

other offenses—without consideration of their victimization.”²⁸ Smith acknowledges this effect on incarcerated women when she says, “I don’t think that domestic violence is given enough value...My crime was that I chose the wrong relationship... I’ve been out 14 years, but there are still so many ‘Kembas’ still trying to come home.”²⁹ So, women (many who are disproportionately Black) who were incarcerated under the crime bill are most affected by this in the early 2000s because of their continued incarceration (since they received hefty sentences). Additionally, as Kemba Smith notes there are (Black) women who are serving time under the crime bill for crimes their partners committed. This highlights an interesting mode in which women, and Black women in particular, are funneled into prisons because of their proximity to drug crimes. And finally, as Susan Burton, Executive Director of A New Way OF Life Reentry Project,³⁰ notes in *EBONY Online*, incarcerated women often do not get the educational support they need in prison to offer them an easier reentry when they are released. As such, women incarcerated under the crime bill who were released in the early 2000s, continued to experience the effects of the carceral system making reentry into society extremely difficult.

It is this carceral positioning of the Black woman—the partner and co-conspirator of (Black) men in the drug/crime economy—that I center in my fourth chapter. In chapter four I explore Black women’s transformative power for refusing these carceral and gendered post-incarceration outcomes in the early 2000s. As such, I analyze Charli Baltimore’s and Meagan

²⁸ #teamEBONY. “Black Women and the Crime Bill, 20 Years Later.” *EBONY*, 18 July 2022, www.ebony.com/black-women-and-the-crime-bill-20-years-later-403/.

²⁹ #teamEBONY. “Black Women and the Crime Bill, 20 Years Later.” *EBONY*, 18 July 2022, www.ebony.com/black-women-and-the-crime-bill-20-years-later-403/.

³⁰ #teamEBONY. “Black Women and the Crime Bill, 20 Years Later.” *EBONY*, 18 July 2022, www.ebony.com/black-women-and-the-crime-bill-20-years-later-403/.

Good's music video performances in "Down Ass Chick" and "21 Questions," respectively. In "Down Ass Chick," Charli is the accomplice to Ja Rule during a diamond heist. Unfortunately for her, she is captured at the scene of the crime and imprisoned while Ja Rule escapes and avoids capture. As I later argue, Charli is imbued with a power of refusal that empowers her to reconfigure her prison geography to her advantage until she is eventually released from prison. After, she reconnects with Ja Rule and they enjoy their new wealth and freedom. Similarly, in "21 Questions" Meagan accompanies 50 Cent as he hides and flushes his drug money before the officers raid their house. Meagan's aesthetic practice of refusal in the beginning of the video, I argue, continues throughout the music video as she accompanies 50 Cent through the prison system, not as a female inmate, but as a free woman. I maintain her transformative power of refusal actualizes by the end of the video when they are transported back to the beginning of the video where they learn the police are not raiding their home, but the next-door neighbor's home.

My analyses of Stony's, Frankie's, Tisean's, Cleo's, Chantel's, Charli's, and Meagan's power to challenge the U.S. carceral State requires close-reading practices that first makes legible the State's invisible, or atmospheric, power. Secondly, my analysis rests upon a counterintuitive mode of "listening" for their resistance and power which I discuss in the next section of this chapter.

Framework: Haptic Listening

As I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the 1990s was a very "noisy" decade with its Black cultural renaissance emerging in the face of a lingering war on drugs from the 1980s and another emerging carceral atmosphere with the introduction of the 1994 crime bill. Shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990) challenged the poverty and crime ridden popular images of Black people by situating the protagonist Will in a wealthy Black family. *Martin*

(1992) and *The Jamie Foxx Show* (1992) restored dignity to the racist popularized image of the Black male employee during the 1990s through their portrayals of protagonist Martin as a radio host and married man, and Jamie as a hotel clerk. Other shows and films like *Living Single* (1993), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), and *Mo'Nisha* (1996) challenged the welfare queen images drawn by the carceral State by emphasizing the success of middle-class Black women and teenaged girls in nuclear family units. The gangsta film genre provided an intimate perspective of the people (namely Black men) who were detrimentally affected by State violence. Rap music, R&B/neo-soul and their complementary music videos brought a kind of luxury counternarrative to Black representations with their artistic capabilities, vibrant music videos, and restoration of love (neo-soul specifically) to dominant narratives of Blackness.

And still, several social and resistance movements maintained the noise of the 1990s. For example, the 1992 Los Angeles riots created a literal and figurative atmosphere of noise following the acquittal of four White officers for their brutally injurious beating of Black motorist Rodney King—a visual and material representation of the employment of the U.S. carceral State’s haptic terror.³¹ Additionally, the Reproductive Justice Framework was formally introduced in 1994, garnering a “conceptual shift from family planning to reproductive health and a women-centered, rights-based focus.”³² This included a focus on cultural and economic factors that affected women’s reproductive lives. The framework, inspired by universal human rights concepts, resulted from the discourse surrounding the expected impact of U.S. health care

³¹ “Los Angeles Riots Fast Facts.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 6 July 2023, www.cnn.com/2013/09/18/us/los-angeles-riots-fast-facts/index.html.

³² Onwuachi-Saunders, Chukwudi, et al. “Reproductive Rights, Reproductive Justice: Redefining Challenges to Create Optimal Health for All Women.” *Journal of Healthcare, Science and the Humanities*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2019, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9930478/.

reform proposals on Black women's lives and their communities.³³ Moreover, activists of the HIV/AIDS epidemic movement organized and demanded government officials to take the epidemic seriously, provided resources to people affected by the virus, and led grassroots efforts to protect vulnerable communities.³⁴ And still other calls for justice surrounding police brutality, post-incarceration reentry, and the demands of third wave feminism were attendant to the noise of the 1990s.

While many of the aforementioned efforts to push back against the U.S. carceral State often undermined the concerns and voices (or noise) of Black women, I ask, what were the quiet³⁵ and less discernible ways that Black women and girls challenge the U.S. carceral State during this decade and in the early 2000s? Where are the spaces in which this lesser discernible resistance exists? What are the lenses or methodologies that make this resistance legible? Are there any necessary identities required to see, hear, feel, or *listen to* their resistance? What Black feminist scholars have already practiced the method of listening to that which is illegible or does not exist? What do Black girls and women gain when we can see their quiet refusal in this way? What is at stake if we cannot see this refusal? These are some of the questions that underscore this dissertation.

I propose a method for listening to the less discernible practices of refusal by Black women and girls—a process I call haptic listening—that is situated at the intersection of Saidiya

³³ NCJW. *NCJW and Reproductive Justice*, Nov. 2014, www.ncjw.org/act/action-resources/ncjw-and-reproductive-justice/.

³⁴ SisterLove. "Black Herstory Month: How Black Women Have Fought the HIV Epidemic for Decades." *SisterLove, Inc.*, SisterLove, Inc., 3 Feb. 2022, www.sisterlove.org/post/black-herstory-month-how-black-women-have-fought-the-hiv-epidemic-for-decades.

³⁵ Kevin Quashie also considers the meaning of quiet as it relates to Blackness and resistance. See Quashie, Kevin Everod. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813553115>.

Hartman's work, Tina Campt's work, and Haptic Media Studies. Specifically, I draw inspiration from Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" and Campt's *Listening to Images*. In "Venus in Two Acts" Hartman offers a recuperative method for listening to the unsaid and misconstrued words of Black girls in the Atlantic slavery archive. She asks:

How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? How does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from "the locus of impossible speech" or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to "exhume buried cries" and reanimate the dead?³⁶

Her series of questions lead us to alternative ways of listening and imaginative ways of recording the groans, cries, and undecipherable songs of Black girls in narratives. And as such, her questions motivate a practice for listening to that which is illegible or does not exist.

Similarly, Campt offers a counterintuitive method of listening to images that also requires counterintuitive definitions of "quiet" and "sound". This methodology is informed by her visual encounter with a series of African state ID photos at the Gulu Real Art Studio in Uganda, and her haptic encounter with other mundane and extraordinary archival photos of Black people across the diaspora. She defines listening to images as:

A description and a method... It is a method that opens up the radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook, by engaging the paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce" (Campt 5).

In this way, listening to images requires a close attention to detail for discerning and interpreting the way Black subjects within the photos "rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes" (Campt 5).

³⁶ See page 3 of Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2, 2008, p. 1-14. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

Two definitions that are central to this method include quiet and sound. She defines quiet as something that “must not be conflated with silence. Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention” (Campt 6). She defines sound as “an inherently embodied process...[that] need not be heard to be perceived. Sound can be listened to, and, in equally powerful ways, sound can be felt; it both touches and moves people. In this way, sound must therefore be theorized and understood as a profoundly haptic form of sensory contact” (Campt 6). In this way, quiet is not the absence of sound, and sound goes beyond an audio reception to include an affective or *felt* reception of sound. As such, I extend my understanding of sound to acknowledge that the hapticity of sound is not only *transmitted to* us as receivers, we can also *attend to* the feeling of sound, including in the digital medium.

Drawing from the convergence of Hartman and Campt, I define haptic listening³⁷ as a methodology for discerning Black women’s and girls’ refusal of the U.S. carceral State in visual and literary culture from the 1990s and early 2000s. I describe this methodology as a four-step process: (1) I situate myself within a literal quiet space. The quiet spaces often included my graduate student office, my home, and the Moving Image and Recorded Sound (MIRS) division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. It was necessary to be in a literal quiet space, like Campt at the art studio, for reasons beyond the need to focus on the texts. These spaces allowed me to feel the intensity of the quietness that surrounded my text-to-image pictures, drawing my attention to the frequencies or indiscernible stories written within the texts.

³⁷ John A. McDowell and Dermot J. Furlong discuss a different form of haptic-listening. See McDowell, John A, and Dermot J Furlong. *Haptic-Listening and the Classical Guitar*, www.nime.org/proceedings/2018/nime2018_paper0062.pdf.

Specifically, the quietness of the MIRS division at the Schomburg Center allowed me to see the interwoven connections between 50 Cent's lived experiences expressed in the G-Unit documentary that I viewed there, *G-Unit: Bullets Can't Touch Us* (dir. Mark D. Ware, 2008), and 50 Cent's music video, "21 Questions" that I later discuss in chapter four. Working within literal quiet spaces gave me the opportunity to put into practice what Tina Campt calls listening to images in her book.

(2) Haptic listening requires picturing the Black women's and girl's refusal narratives via the creation of text-to-image pictures. By this I mean this step demands a literal transformation and "picturing" of their narratives via drawing maps, symbols, and hieroglyphics (markings only discernible to the author) on sticky notes or other small four-by-four papers to recreate the author's/viewer's understanding of the text. Also required is a preceding close-reading of details in the text that are deemed important to their resistance. I rework and redraw the pictures with every re-reading and re-watching of the texts to create a more discernible image for the characters' refusal practices.

(3) Using haptic listening, I physically encounter these text-to-image pictures to read and look for the "radical interpretive possibilities" (Campt 5) of these newly created images. In other words, I listen to the images via my haptic encounter with these narratives. By touching the newly created images, I listen for and interpret the sounds, silences, refusals, surrenders, connections, modes of survival, hauntings, traversals through time and space, performances, haptic connections within the texts, portals, transmutations of lives, etc that I see, hear, and *feel* only after physically connecting with my images. This third step is heavily influenced by Tina Campt's theory of listening to images.

(4) Since I work with visual texts that exist within the digital medium (films and music videos on streaming services), this methodology also intersects with haptic media studies³⁸ as I intimately engage media devices to listen for images. In chapter two, my haptic connection manifests in the constant pausing and rewinding of specific scenes using my MacBook. For example, my chapter two analysis of the historical gynecological hauntings within the OBGYN office during Chantel's first visit in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* is only made possible through the constant rewinding and pausing on specific medical instruments captured in the shots. The use of my media device in this way allowed me to listen to the image of this scene before transferring the scene to the text-to-image picture for further analysis. Likewise, in chapter four I engage my media device again to pause and listen to the introductory images of Charli Baltimore and Meagan Good in their respective music videos. This haptic connection to my MacBook (and iPhone when I rewatched the videos on my phone) allowed me to (a) capture the image of Meagan in her one-second freeze-frame shot and (b) make still Charli's introductory photo so that I could listen for both of their aesthetic practices of refusal. In this way, their practices of refusal in the digital medium are first made legible through haptic encounters with media devices.

Haptic listening is also a performatively subversive methodology that appropriates the haptic—a common method for enforcing U.S. carceral State power—to make legible the resistance to the State. As I discuss in chapter four, the State often uses haptic connections to enforce its power. This includes, frisks, slapping handcuffs on a detainee, beating someone with

³⁸ In Parisi, D., Paterson, M., & Archer, J. E. (2017). Haptic media studies. *New Media & Society*, 19(10), 1513-1522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817717518>, Parisi et al. reference several scholars who make up the growing field of haptic media studies. See article for more.

a baton, placing an arrestee in a chokehold, tasing a suspect, etc. I use the haptic to listen for the ways that Black women and girls fight back against the power of the State and in some cases (in chapter four) subvert and undo the State's grasp in their life. In this way, haptic listening is a method in and of itself that performatively challenges the haptic power of the State.

In this dissertation I argue Black women and girls vociferously and quietly challenge the 1990s and early 2000s U.S. carceral State in film, fiction, and music videos. I maintain that the excavation of their less discernible (or “quiet”) practices of refusal within these cultural texts require a focused attention to detail and a counterintuitive practice of listening to that which is illegible, indiscernible, or hidden. In this way, Black popular culture is a site for the emergence and existence of resistance that brings to the forefront the efforts of Black women and girls who are often marginalized in resistance discourses. Specifically, in chapter two I analyze the resistance of Chantel in Leslie Harris' film *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992), and the Black women protagonists in F. Gary Gray's film *Set It Off* (1996). In chapter three I close-read Sister Souljah's novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) to examine protagonist's Winter's challenge to the carceral system via her fugitivity. In chapter four I turn my attention toward music videos to focus on the transformative aesthetic practices of refusal by Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003). I maintain all of their practices of refusal became evident via a framework of haptic listening—a method that requires a transcription of, physical connection to, and close-reading of their practices.

I draw from Saidiya Hartman, Dwight McBride, Angela Ards, Frantz Fanon, Dorothy Roberts, Fred Moten, and Nick Gill et. al to define the U.S. carceral State as I understand it across the texts. As such I define the U.S. carceral State as the atmospheric violence of anti-Blackness that seeks to hyper-surveil, capture, usurp agency from, transport, incarcerate, and

unalive the subjects living in the State. This atmospheric violence, as Fanon terms it, is the manifestation of the legacy of U.S. chattel slavery and a cadre of 1980s- 2000s polices meant to dehumanize and subjugate Black people in the U.S. I use the terms “State” and “U.S. carceral State” interchangeably throughout my dissertation. The State is represented by police officers and their brutality, Child Protective Services (CPS), the FBI, Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW), the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), and actual prisons across all the texts. The next section of this introduction offers the chapter synopses.

Chapter 2: Just Another Girl About to Set It Off: Witnessing as a Catalyst for State Resistance

This chapter analyzes Leslie Harris’ 1992 film *Just Another Girl the I.R.T.* and F. Gary Gray’s 1996 film *Set It Off*. I argue that specific instances of Black women’s and girl’s witnessing of U.S. State violence that reify their subjection, fracture Black kinship, and disrupt Black futures serve as a catalyst for their mobilized resistance. I draw from the work of Saidiya Hartman, Dwight McBride, and Angela Ards to outline a cartography of witnessing that illustrates a multifunctional phenomenon for the various sensory modes of understanding experiences that lend way to character transformation. These different levels of witnessing include subject witnessing, bystander witnessing, and film witnessing. Subject witnessing is further demarcated between visual witnessing, experiential witnessing, and affective witnessing. Moreover, visual and affective witnessing lead to a transformational blood-stained portal that makes it possible for their resistance to emerge, a resistance that includes the transmutations of carceral deaths of characters Cleo, Tisean, and Frankie. In the end, I also encourage readers to consider how the protagonists across both films are situated within historical legacies of Black women’s resistance through reproductive justice and the resistance of the Black Panther Party women, respectively.

Chapter 3: A Panoptic Cartography of Incarceration: Tracing Fugitivity in Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999)

This chapter analyzes the literary representation of resistance through fugitivity in Sister Souljah's novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999). I consider the teenage protagonist, Winter Santiago's, political potential for refusing the surveilling and usurping power of the U.S. State while she is on the run. In constructing my understanding of fugitivity, I turn to Fred Moten. In *Stolen Life*, he defines fugitivity as “a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression” (Moten 131). I draw from Moten to understand Winter's journey toward freedom as an embodiment of the “spirit of escape” that unfortunately, never arrives at freedom.

I define Winter's fugitive journey of displacement as Circular Fugitivity—an enclosed journey that intersects with the possibilities of liberation, but never actually achieves freedom. I draw from Hortense Spillers to argue that Winter's fugitive journey begins with the hieroglyphic maternal flesh—the gunshot wound on her mother's, Mrs. Santiago's, face that forces Winter to go on the run. I consider Jennifer Nash's work to define the next locus on her fugitive journey, the emergence of Winter's Black Maternal Aesthetic. This aesthetic is represented by her commitment to sartorial performances of luxury as a means of disrupting her looming social death. After, I turn to Katherine McKittrick's philosophical reading of space and posit that Winter employs what I call Reconfigurative Geography. This geography manifests in the discursive, psychological, and physical rearrangement of social processes to challenge the dehumanizing efforts of the carceral spaces she encounters. In the end, Winter returns to the starting locus of her fugitive journey when her face gets slashed with a glass bottle, thus carving her own hieroglyphic maternal flesh before her incarceration. Ultimately, I trace a panoptic cartography of incarceration that does not arrive at freedom, but still champions her practices of refusal.

Chapter 4: Haptic Listening: Analyzing Practices of Refusal by Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003)

This chapter is a comparative analysis of the music video performances of two prominent performers in the early 2000s: Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003). Specifically, I analyze the way Charli and Meagan disrupt and escape the grasp of the U.S. carceral State. Both women are introduced in their respective videos via introductory photos in the form of wanted posters and a freeze-frame image. Through a method of haptic listening (informed by Tina Campt) at the intersection of haptic media studies, I argue that their introductory and identificatory photographs in each music video simultaneously represent their aesthetic practices of refusal and imbue them with the transformative power to escape the State. This practice of refusal is first informed by the way Charli and Meagan rebuff the photographic subjection by smirking in a mugshot (Charli) and refusing the camera’s identificatory practice by looking away from the criminalizing freeze-frame (Meagan).

I maintain this practice of refusal continues throughout each of the videos. For Charli this practice manifests in her clothing during the diamond heist, her rejection to “snitch” on her partner Ja Rule after she is caught during their heist, her transformation of the social geography of the prison when she is caught, and the freedom she allows Ja Rule and herself following her release from prison. For Meagan, this practice is represented by her jail phone call to 50 Cent, her visit to see him in prison, the weaponization of her sexuality during a special non-surveilled conjugal visit, and her backward traversal through time and space to undo 50 Cent’s imprisonment. Though these women work on behalf of Ja Rule and 50 Cent, respectively, they do not merely buttress shields of protection for their partners, they exhibit a transformative power to “rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them” (Campt 5). As such, I

maintain that these women possess the power to disrupt the carceral state, and this power is only made legible through haptic listening.

Chapter 2:

Just Another Girl About to Set It Off: Witnessing as a Catalyst for State Resistance

It is 1992 in Brooklyn, New York City. In the dead of the summer night, Chantel, a young Black teenager, goes into labor in her boyfriend's Tyrone's bedroom. Frantically, Tyrone attempts to deliver their premature child at her instruction; she refuses to go the hospital in order to maintain the secrecy of their pregnancy. Clueless about delivering a baby but still refusing to call 911, Chantel dials her social worker, Paula, for assistance. Paula informs Chantel that she needs to be taken to the local hospital and calls the emergency hotline against Chantel's wishes. Unfortunately, the 911 dispatcher informs her that there are no available ambulances to transport Chantel to a nearby hospital. Paula knows it is not a matter of unavailable ambulances, but rather the emergency system's refusal to provide support for this poor community. At once, this moment represents the State's neglect of Chantel's community and Chantel's attempt to circumvent this neglect by refusing to bear a child in an already deprived system.

While waiting for Paula to arrive at Tyrone's residence, Chantel gives birth to their daughter and demands that Tyrone dispose their child in a black garbage bag on the curb. Tyrone protests against this demand saying, "Chantel we can't just abandon the baby..." (1:26:59). Refusing the likely tumultuous life as a poor Black mother, Chantel retorts, "Look, I don't want to get stuck with this baby! I want to do things. I want to have a nice life. I don't want to end up like—I don't want to end up like my parents. Oh, no. No fucking way!" (1:27:17). Their exchange results in Tyrone reluctantly carrying their newborn daughter in a black trash bag to the curb with the adjoining garbage. This black bag simultaneously represents Chantel's resistance against the perpetual harm of the State that is likely to unfold for her, and her hope for a better alternative future.

Approximately 2,300 miles away and four years later in southern California, Frankie, a Black woman, attempts to join her sister-friend and accomplice, Stony, to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. They both attempt to flee the U.S. to avoid armed robbery and murder charges following the failure of their last bank heist that resulted in the murders of their other sister-friends, Tisean and Cleo. Fortunately for Stony, she slips on a sombrero, blends in with the boarding coach bus passengers heading to Mexico, and avoids capture. Looking from the window of the departing coach bus, Stony sees that Frankie has been caught by police and she watches the scene unfold.

The arresting officer, Detective Strode, a White man, projects a false power dynamic between himself and Frankie as he catches Frankie and confronts her before she meets Stony. He says, “Francesca, Frankie, listen to me. I’m taking it off, here. I’m not carrying,” as he disarms himself, ostensibly surrendering to her. “Okay, okay, I got nothing” he continues to say as he spins around with his arms perpendicular to his body attempting to assuage Frankie’s fear and rage so she can surrender (1:51:20). On one hand, his white shirt, coupled with his body language suggest that he surrenders to Frankie. However, on the other hand, this same gesture against the backdrop of an armed police force reinforces the truth that he is armed with his Whiteness, his fellow officers, and his social capital designated by the State.

In the next moment, Frankie continues to resist capture knowing the likelihood of spending the rest of her life in prison. In a quick turn, she draws her gun to Strode’s neck to momentarily usurp some power and instill the same powerlessness in him that he instilled in her at the beginning of the film. Frankie then turns away from Strode and continues to run toward Stony’s coach bus with her black duffle bag of money and belongings. She is shot twice and dies at the scene as Stony visually witnesses her murder. Like Chantel in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, Frankie in *Set It Off* attempted to resist the U.S. State after experiencing and witnessing its

violence in her life. In her final moments, Frankie carried her escape on her shoulder contained in a black bag. For both characters, the black bag represents their refusal of the State choreographing the rest of the lives and they opted for a future wherein Black women are more in control of their fate.

I begin this chapter with these ending scenes not only because they are two of the most striking representations of Black women resisting U.S. State violence in film, but also because of the visual emphasis on the power of witnessing to transform Black women. I argue that specific instances of Black women's and girl's witnessing of U.S. State violence that reify their subjection, fracture Black kinship, and disrupt Black futures serve as a catalyst for their mobilized resistance. I draw from the work of Saidiya Hartman, Dwight McBride, and Angela Ards to outline a cartography of witnessing that includes various sensory modes of understanding experiences that lend way to character transformation. I maintain the protagonists' resistance is situated within their character transformations by the end of the film, including the transmutations of carceral deaths of characters Cleo, Tisean, and Frankie. To that end, I encourage readers to consider how U.S. State violence during the 1990s intimately affects various Black women and induce major character transformation via similar modes of resistance.

Contextualizing *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off*

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.

Leslie Harris' first film debut, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992), marked a hopeful turn in the film industry for Black women movie directors, however, mixed reception of the film left both Harris and Chantel's cinematic lived experience in a precarious state. In *Contemporary African American Cinema*, Sheril D Antonio captures the tumultuous discourse that surrounded the film following its debut. Antonio's dissertation chapter, "Just Another Girl on the IRT,"

brings together an amalgamation of critical responses to the film. She notes that most of the initial reception was negative citing film critics like Terrance Rafferty in *The New Yorker* who claimed “Chantel is no more than a collection of traits meticulously arranged to advance the picture’s didactic agenda. She isn’t a person, she’s a counter-stereotype...” (Antonio 171). Additionally, Antonio notes David Denby’s injurious commentary on the film quoting, “The trials of a teenage black girl is a great movie subject and this film betrays it... Harris from the evidence of *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T* doesn’t have a clue” (Antonio 171). Both Rafferty’s and Denby’s reviews hint towards a rhetorical fragmentation of the Black female body. This fragmentation occurs in two ways: (1) Chantel is separated from humanity by Rafferty’s assertion that she “isn’t a person,” and (2) Harris is fragmented from a connection with Black girlhood by Denby’s assertion. These kinds of reviews not only collapse Chantel’s character, but they refuse cinematic witnessing of poor, urban Black girls’ stories in the 1990s, especially since these stories were not unusual in real life during this decade.³⁹

Despite this initial negative reception, Antonio also brings forth positive reviews of the film. For example, she quotes Amy Taubin who offers a recovery reading of Chantel, and by extension, Leslie Harris. Antonio quotes Taubin stating:

As the first African American pop film about female subjectivity, it deserves, at the very least, the attention afforded Spike Lee’s 1986... *She’s Gotta Have It*... The reaction to Chantel as a character suggests the kind of unconscious racism that refuses to acknowledge that a girl from the hood could be intelligent, ambitious and vulnerable, let alone intelligent, ambitious, and vulnerable, and, though painfully confused, capable of saving her life (Antonio 173).

³⁹ Cardenas, Jose. “A Cry to Save Lives of ‘Dumpster Babies.’” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 31 Dec. 2000, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-dec-31-cl-6641-story.html.

Here, Taubin hints toward a systemic issue that encapsulates Chantel’s lived experience as noted by her declaration that the film is about “female subjectivity”. Keeping in line with recognizing Chantel’s subjectivity, a more contemporary review by Richard Brody in *The New Yorker* (2020) offers another recovery reading that also confirms that the reception of the film grew over time.

Brody writes:

In effect, “Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.” is a documentary of subjectivity, an outward view of the inner life of a young black woman—of a person who, by the sheer fact of those three descriptors, is subjected to relations of power and of control, and faces conflicts of a political nature in the course of her daily life.⁴⁰

I agree with both Taubin and Brody that Harris’ film is one about subjectivity. I extend my reading of subjectivity in my chapter to also include a method for seeing the subjectivity—Witnessing—while also attending to the legible and nearly illegible ways that Chantel refuses her subjectivity. I situate my chapter analysis within an ongoing discourse about the usefulness of this film as it relates to challenging the U.S. carceral State.

Set it Off

Following its explosive release in 1996, *Set It Off* took the film industry by storm, garnering the attention of the larger U.S. Black community and catapulting the four protagonists (Jada Pinkett-Smith, Queen Latifah, Vivica A. Fox, and Kimberly Elise) to new heights. Reportedly, the film grossed more than \$8,000,000 during its opening weekend and amassed \$41.5 million dollars worldwide.⁴¹ *Set it Off* helped to solidify director F. Gary Gray as a recognizable force within the film industry, at the mere age of 27, and has earned him the 1997

⁴⁰ Brody, Richard. “The Still Astonishing ‘Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.’” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 24 Jan. 2020, www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-still-astonishing-just-another-girl-on-the-irt.

⁴¹ “Set It Off.” *Box Office Mojo*, www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0117603/

Acapulco Black Film Festival Award, and recognition by the NAACP Image Awards in the same year (though he did not win the NAACP Image Award, the lead actresses did and this is also a nod to his success as a director). Though the film was acclaimed for its action-packed, edge-of-seat sitting thrills, I draw my attention to the fact this film was led by Black women protagonists/actors and the larger cultural meaning of their roles.

Several film reviews and analyses highlight the importance of the Black women protagonists in the film. For example, Kara Keeling in “Ghetto Heaven: Set It Off and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality” draws our attention to the film’s narrative conventions and its ties to earlier Black film eras. This article discusses at length the ways in which the film continues and departs from Black nationalist informed ghettocentrism during the 1990s Black film cycle. Keeling relies heavily on analyses of Cleo to read her “female masculinity” and subsequent “spectacular” death as characteristics of ghettocentrism while also attending to the film’s unique contribution to ghettocentrism via Cleo’s queerness. Keeling writes

Set It Off removes much of ghettocentrism's blatant sexism and homophobia from view by putting issues affecting "black women" at the center of the film's framing of ghetto-centric reality and revealing something new in the cinematic image of ghettocentrism-"female bank robbers." Released a couple of years after the ghetto action film cycle seemed to have run its course and in the midst of a burst of films consolidating and targeting "black women," Set It Off introduces a new image of ghettocentrism” (Keeling 36).

Her analysis of the film via a focus on Cleo centers the intervention that the film makes for Black women characters, the 1990s ghetto film cycle as well as Queer representation in film via Cleo and her partner Ursula. In this way, the film is considered a disruptive, barrier-breaking force deserving of our attention and recognition.

Similarly, Beretta Smith-Shomade comments on the film's disruptive potential as it relates to Black women characters and the transformation of the film genre. Smith-Shomade writes:

By including African American women as subjects and participants, the traditional view of the gangster genre was complicated and changed. I call this new genre the hip-hop gangsta film. The hip-hop gangsta film differs from the traditional urban-crime movie and even from the popular "boyz-n-the-hood" type in that it centers crime as a business and defers to black cultural norms by including black women in critical roles" (Smith-Shomade 26).

Here, Smith-Shomade recognizes their identity and their performative labor in the film as transformative attributes for a film genre. One example of performative labor that helped to redefine the film's genre for Smith-Shomade is the fact that all the protagonists occupy legal jobs (which differs from general gangster movies), and the inclusion of Detective Waller (Ella Joyce) and Ms. Wells (Anna Maria Horsford) as Black women workers of the State and government, further nuancing Black women's roles in the gangsta film. Moreover, another transformative attribute she centers is their clothing saying, "In fact, they wear clothes that completely cover their bodies to fend off unwanted attention. Cleo's performance gives the most credence to this... masculine aesthetic of power" (Smith-Shomade 35). I focus on these points of her film analysis because in my own analysis of the film, I draw attention to their labor and clothing, not so much as it relates to the film's genre, but as it relates to the significance of their resistance in the film.

While other film reviewers like Andy Webster⁴² and Lisa Schwarzbaum⁴³ write about the protagonist's survival through female bonding, and their tragic ending in their attempt to secure their "ticket out," respectively, I go beyond analyses of their sexuality (Cleo), sisterhood,

⁴² Webster, Andy. "Four Women Fight the Power in F. Gary Gray's 'Set It Off.'" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18 Jan. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/movies/four-women-fight-the-power-in-f-gary-grays-set-it-off.html.

⁴³ Schwarzbaum, Lisa. "Movie Review: 'Set It Off.'" *EW.Com*, Entertainment Weekly, 8 Nov. 1996, ew.com/article/1996/11/08/movie-review-set-it/.

and attempts to escape the system. In my analysis, I use a method of Witnessing that allows for a microscopic view of the U.S. carceral State that subjects the women to their circumstances. I draw from the aforementioned critics to advance an analysis that understands their flight not merely as an escape of their current circumstances, but also a genealogical performance of Black women's resistance practices beginning with Black Panther women. In the end, I refute Schawarzbaum's "tragic ending" and Smith-Shomade's notion that "almost no one survives in the end" (Smith-Shomade 33-34) and opt instead for an Afrofuturist reading that acknowledges the lives and afterlives of all the women.

The remaining sections of this chapter develop my argument across both films. First, I begin with my methodology section—Witnessing. I draw from Saidiya Hartman, Dwight McBride, and Angela Ards to outline a cartography of witnessing that defines modes of witnessing that operate across both films. Part of the cartography of witnessing is a blood-stained portal which I argue is a cinematic device that enables transformation and indicates Black women's agency in contexts that seek to destroy them. Second, I employ my witnessing methodology to *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off*. I argue that specific instances of Black women's witnessing of U.S. State violence that reify their subjection, fracture Black kinship, and disrupt Black futures serve as a catalyst for their mobilized resistance. This resistance is visually and dialogically represented by their sartorial performances, elaborate plans to resist the State, their character transformation, and the actual escape from the threat of the State. In the end I maintain that Harris' and Gary's films have webs of affiliation⁴⁴ to the

⁴⁴ Colbert, Soyica Diggs. *Black Movement : Performance and Cultural Politics*. Rutgers University Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813588544>.

reproductive justice movement of the 90s and Black Panther Party women’s resistance, respectively.

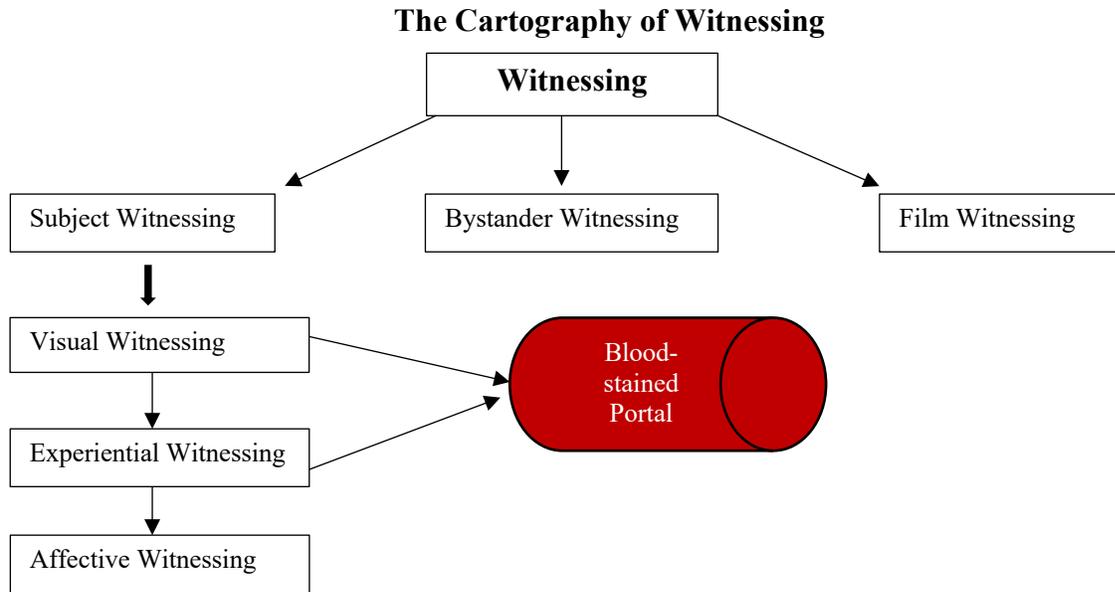


Figure 1. The Cartography of Witnessing

Witnessing is central to my consideration of *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off*. In my analysis of both films, witnessing is a multifunctional phenomenon that in part, provides the Black women protagonists the opportunity to resist the U.S. State via its transformative power. I define witnessing as the act of seeing, experiencing, feeling, and being transformed by a particular event, specifically U.S. State violence. Witnessing in this context is historically rooted in U.S. chattel slavery and continues and manifests in what Saidiya Hartman calls the afterlives of slavery. As such, I engage the works of prominent scholars who theorize about witnessing during chattel slavery in the U.S. The complexity of witnessing that I map in this section goes beyond a simple first or second-hand account of a particular event. This is especially important to note because witnesses are typically considered people who have personally observed or physically experienced an event, and this standard definition excludes people who witness events

in other ways. I draw from the works of Saidiya Hartman, Dwight McBride, and Angela Ards to map the various types of witnessing across both films.

Acknowledging multifunctional witnessing in both films helps viewers consider the atmospheric violence that makeup the socially constructed marginalized experiences of the Black women protagonists. As such, I contend that witnessing occurs in three primary ways: (1) via the subject (the protagonist/ primary witness), (2) the bystanders in the film, and (3) the viewers of the film. Subject Witnessing is further demarcated into three sub-types. The subject can (1) visually witnesses an event, (2) experientially witness an event, and (3) affectively witness an event. *Visual witnessing* occurs when the subject is present and sees a particular act or manifestation of violence that may lead to an encounter with blood. I adopt Saidiya Hartman's retelling of the inaugural the blood-stained gate in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* to describe what I prefer to call "blood-stained portals" via the visual witnessing and experiential witnessing in both films. A gate refers to a separation intended to contain space or property. While a gate may open, or one may trespass the gate, the purpose remains to mark the perimeter of a particular space. I refer to the defining and transformative gruesome events visually or experientially witnessed by a protagonist (whom I interchangeably refer to as a subject and consider to be distinct from the enslaved that Hartman refers to) as blood-stained portals because these events mark space as a transformation for the protagonists. Unlike returning from a walk through a gate, one may not return after entering a portal to a different world, and if they do, they are likely to be transformed, much like the characters in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off*. As such, the blood-stained portal is a cinematic device that enables transformation and indicates Black women's agency in contexts that seek to destroy them. In sum, visual witnessing encompasses the protagonist *seeing* specific

acts of U.S. State violence that may prompt character transformation and seeing horrid acts that lend way to blood-stained portals serves as catalyst for resistance.

Experiential witnessing is similar to but departs from visual witnessing. Experiential witnessing occurs when the protagonist experiences particular anti-Black violence orchestrated by the State. These experiences include the quotidian and mundane violence of living in impoverished neighborhoods, unique and personal experiences with State violence, and memories of such violence. Like visual witnessing, experiential witnessing also involves seeing but is not limited to optics. Through this kind of witnessing, the protagonist's body is corporeal proof of the anti-Black violence of the State. This proof may manifest through trauma, the subject's recounting of their experience, physical scars, and an encounter with blood. In Dwight McBride's *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony*, he describes the meaning of the slave body in the context of abolitionist discourse. He states, "The slave is the material—the real, raw material—of abolitionist discourse. The slave is the referent, the point, the very body around which abolitionist discourse coheres and quite literally "makes sense"" (McBride 6). Again, I am not suggesting that the Black women protagonists are slaves; however, I do recognize them as subjects of the State (like formerly enslaved Black people). Therefore, I adopt McBride's discussion to consider how the material conditions experienced by the protagonists help to make sense of their transformation and resistance. In sum, experiential witnessing contains the subjects' daily and shared experiences with violence, personal experience with violence, and memories of State violence which render their bodies corporeal evidence of and catalysts for resistance to anti-Black State violence.

Furthermore, *affective witnessing* accounts for the protagonist's *feeling* of State violence. What is unique about this level of witnessing is that the feeling/ affective state is not limited to

the protagonist's own experience or perception of violence; affective witnessing also accounts for the subject's ability to *feel* another characters' witnessing of State violence without seeing the violence unfold or being present at the scene of violence. A primary example of affective witnessing occurs in *Set It Off* when Stony feels her brother's murder at the hands of police though she does not visually or experientially witness his murder because she is not present at the scene. Affective witnessing is important to my consideration of both films because it challenges the historical racist assumption and exploitation of Black insentience that often minimized the degradation of Black people. In the introduction of *Scenes of Subjection* Saidiya Hartman discusses how White enslavers exploited Black sentience by using it to facilitate subjugation, domination, and terror via the economy of enjoyment in chattel slavery (Hartman 5-7). Affective witnessing not only challenges notions of Black insentience but reclaims Black sentience for articulations of Black experiences and provides an alternative form of witnessing not limited by optics or the physical body (while affect is a part of the physical body, affect itself is not tangible so it is also separate from the physical body). The reclamation of Black sentience for articulations of Black experiences challenges the authenticity of the performative and precarious empathy that White and non-White people attempt to embody to understand and articulate Black experiences. An early example of this questionable and performative empathy is illuminated in Hartman's "Innocent Amusements" chapter when discussing John Rankin's (a White man) mimetic display of empathy in attempt to convince his slaveholding brother to become an abolitionist (Hartman 17).⁴⁵ This mimetic empathy occurs again in *Set It Off* when Detective Strode confronts Frankie and begs her to surrender. Affective witnessing then, is

⁴⁵ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

instrumental in reclaiming Black sentience and shortening the gap between the witness and the experience of violence.

To summarize, the first level of witnessing-- Subject Witnessing-- is categorized by three sub-types: (1) visual witnessing, (2) experiential witnessing, and (3) affective witnessing. *Visual witnessing* is when the subject is present and sees a particular act of violence that may also include a blood-stained portal. *Experiential witnessing* captures the subject's experiences with State violence in the mundane, in unique experiences, or via memory. These experiences may manifest in various ways in the physical body and it includes but is not limited to visual witnessing. *Affective witnessing* accounts for the protagonist's *feeling* of State violence. The protagonist may feel their own experience or another characters' experience, highlighting a shared experience among characters. Affective witnessing challenges Black insentience, the exploitation of Black sentience, and allows for alternative articulations of Black experiences. Subject witnessing prioritizes the account of the protagonist and renders them the most truthful witness.

The second primary type of witnessing is that of the bystanders in the film. I name this level of witnessing Bystander witnessing as opposed to second-hand witnessing to emphasize the spatial proximity of the bystander to the subject witness. While a second-hand witness may witness an event up close, they are not always near the event experienced by the subject. Sometimes, for example, they may hear the event at a distance but the bystander witness, however, is usually within earshot and *near* the scene of event. Bystander witnesses in the films include Tyrone in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T* and all of the protagonists and some secondary characters in *Set It Off* as they are near the events of violence that unfold for each protagonist. Bystander witnessing is similar to affective witnessing but it differs because it requires proximity

when affective witnessing does not. Also unlike subject witnessing which is in part a relationship between the subject and the event, Bystander witnessing is a relationship between the subject, event, and the bystander. In this way, Bystander witnessing encompasses a level of staging that Subject witnessing does not. I return to Dwight McBride's *Impossible Witnesses* to understand how the Bystander witness makes sense of their account of the subject witness' experience. In discussing the audience of abolitionists for the enslaved/formerly enslaved Black person speaking on stage, McBride writes:

This is also not unlike the staging of abolitionism, the carting of black bodies onto the stage to bear witness to their authentic experiences of slavery. It was, after all, common for the slave narrators to deliver their testimonies orally on the abolitionist "lecture circuit" before the accounts were committed to paper and published as narratives (McBride 4).

McBride's description of the abolitionist circuit captures the theatricality of a subject witness displaying their truth to bystander witnesses. While I do not read the protagonists and secondary characters in the films as slaves and abolitionists, respectively, I do believe this framework outlined by McBride is helpful in understanding how the bystander witness inadvertently creates staging for the subject witness and the violence that they experience. Too, it is worth noting that the bystander witness is less reliant than that of the Subject witness not because they cannot empathize with the Subject witness, but because they are once removed from the experience of the subject witness. In sum, Bystander Witnessing is similar to and different from Subject Witnessing and this kind of witnessing creates a stage for the subject witness wherein their experience with State violence is also understood and articulated by secondary characters.

The third and final type of witnessing that I outline in this chapter is Film Witnessing. The film witness in my analysis includes the individual and collective audience watching the films. Like the subject witness, the film witness may see and relate to the subject's experience

with State violence but because they are not the subject and are twice removed from such violence, they differ. Too, the film witness is like the bystander witness in that they also aid in the creation of staging; however, the stage through which the film witness sees is filtered through a window that separates the viewer from the diegesis of the film—that window is the film itself. In this way, the Film witness is twice removed and like the Bystander witness, less truthful because they are not the primary witness and they may lack overall relatability and empathy for the subjects depending on their identity and beliefs. However, I am careful not to completely render the film witness useless as they are important in understating the complexity of the protagonists' experiences (after all, this chapter would not be possible without film witnessing!). In sum, Film Witnessing makes it possible to further understand and articulate the subject witness' experiences with State violence. Moreover, all types of witnessing are interconnected and work together to make possible the reclamation of Black sentience in each film, add to the discourse of Black women's reproductive justice, and add to the legacy of Black women's roles in Black Power Movement.

Arguably, audio witnessing is a distinct form of witnessing, however, for the purpose of this chapter I maintain that audio witnessing is imbued in all the other forms of witnessing that I have outlined. In the scenes that I analyze across both films, audio witnessing is central to Black women's experiences, but it is not distinct from other forms of witnessing. As such, audio witnessing is entangled within the cartography of witnessing that I have mapped in Figure 1. If Witnessing is a circuit connecting different *types* of witnessing, then audio witnessing is the electricity that travels through the circuit (after all, the cylinder-shaped blood-stained portal in Figure 1 also mirrors a battery/power source). If witnessing types are landmarks on a map, then audio witnessing is the oceanic water that flows within and between the landmarks, connecting

them to one another and weaving together the cartograph. In sum, audio witnessing is microscopically located within the arrows and white spaces in the Cartography of Witnessing.

Though my understanding of Witnessing in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off* is important for understanding the complexity of Black women's resistance in both films, there are some limitations to my framework. First, empathy is important for valuing the protagonists' acts of resistance in each film. While the stories of these Black women are heart-wrenching for many film witnesses and secondary characters, their stories may not always induce empathy from the film witness (and even other characters) so witnessing in this context may be ineffective for preserving the lives of the protagonists and including them within larger discourses of the U.S. Reproductive Justice Movement and the Black Power Movement. Second, film witnesses are not limited to Black women or Black people so non-Black viewers run the risk of performing mimetic empathy. Mimetic empathy is an ineffective method for taking these films seriously and it runs the risk of co-opting the protagonists' experiences. Third, my framework for Witnessing centers Black witnessing of Black experiences and this does not allow for reverse-witnessing. By this I mean non-Black characters cannot be the subject witness and while they may only be the bystander or film witness, their accounts do not add to Black sentience since they risk performative empathy. The next section of this chapter employs the multifunctional witnessing framework to analyze the protagonists' experiences with State violence and document their character transformations necessary for resistance.

Witnessing in *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*

Leslie Harris' independent film, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992) centers the story of Chantel, a 17-year old Black girl from Brooklyn, New York during the 1990s. Chantel witnesses her parents financially struggle to take care of herself and her two younger brothers

while living in housing projects. While balancing her role as a daughter, older sister, student, friend, and employee she attempts to reserve some time for her own pleasures by entering a new relationship with her boyfriend, Tyrone. Though she indulges in the newfound pleasures of their relationship, she still prioritizes school as she vows to never end up like her mother—a Black working-class woman struggling to make ends meet in part because she has three kids to look after—and prepares to go to college a year early while in her junior year of high school.

Unexpectedly, Chantel and Tyrone become pregnant.

Chantel proclaims she will not allow her pregnancy to deter her dream of going to a four-year university to procure a socioeconomic future that is different from her parents' status. After she confirms her pregnancy at the OBGYN, she navigates a psychological space between denial of her pregnancy and hiding her pregnancy, and eventually she decides to neglect her newborn altogether. In my discussion of this film, Chantel is transformed by witnessing specific events surrounding the harsh realities of motherhood for many poor, Black women and girls in NYC during the 1990s. Her witnessing accounts subsequently reveal that her decision to leave behind her child was less an act of neglect and more so her attempt to use her agency to reject a motherhood that is violently orchestrated by the State.

The first scene that Chantel witnesses introduces her to the hardships of Black teenage pregnancy and represents a disruption of Black futurity for a poor teenage parent. The scene unfolds when Chantel and her best friend Natete sees their former schoolmate Denisha and her child, Imani, at the train station (7:57). Natete claims that Imani looks like her father Derek, and Imani responds, “Too bad, right, ‘cause I ain’t see his sorry ass since I had the baby...Yo check this out, he give me some dollars but he don’t want to put in no time. It’s a lot of work taking care of a fucking baby...I’m in the projects living with my mother. If it wasn’t for my moms I

don't know what I would do" (8:14). In this scene, Chantel is a bystander witness to the violence of poverty and single motherhood. She hears Denisha's testimony regarding her experience with motherhood and she sees how vulnerable Denisha is—carrying an infant child on the train by herself—and understands for the first time the reality of a young, poor teenage mother trying to care for herself and her child. Denisha's testimony sets the stage for the film's social construction of poor, single motherhood: the poverty that plagues motherhood is generational as she and Imani lives with her mother in low-income housing, and the father is mostly absent as shown by her own father's absence from her mother's house and Derek's absence from Imani's life.

Though Chantel witnesses Denisha's experience closely, she remains visually separated from this event. Noticeably, there is a gray door in the background of the subway platform which appears to divide her from Denisha as she discloses her new experience with motherhood. This division appears again on the train when they stand on opposite sides of the holding pole as Denisha recalls her traumatic birthing experience in the hospital. These visual lines of demarcation reinforce that Chantel is a bystander witness to single-motherhood—she is separated from the birthing and rearing experience of motherhood though she sympathizes with Denisha. Her understanding of Denisha's traumatic experience ultimately represents a disruption to Black futurity when Chantel exclaims, "Mm Mm. Dead issue. She ain't coming back" in response to Natete asking her if she believes Denisha will return to school (9:51). The subway meeting with Denisha is a definitional moment for Chantel—she witnesses the way a hopeful future becomes a "dead issue" when interjected by unplanned motherhood.

Chantel experientially witnesses her own precarious futurity when she conceives her daughter with her new boyfriend, Tyrone. She meets Tyrone at a party where she is allured by

his charm, his maturity, and his car. After a date night, they return to Tyrone's apartment where he initiates sex (39:20). Their sexual encounter simultaneously encapsulates the juxtaposition of Chantel's reclamation of her bodily autonomy and the legacy of Black women's reproductive control. As an oldest sibling, stand-in mother, employee, and student Chantel is burdened with many responsibilities, but she maintains some agency via her friendships and her romantic interests. Her relationship with Tyrone represents this reclamation of her agency, however, their first sexual encounter represents the vulnerability of Black women's reproductive control. Before they have sex Chantel attempts to exert her agency during this sexual encounter:

Chantel: "You got any rubbers?"

Tyrone: "Yo, yo, it's cool. I'll pull out"

Chantel: "Ty, I just started the pill. Come on. I think we should wear one just in case. Please?"

Tyrone: "Come on. Come on. Come on. Next time. Next time. I promise we'll use something."

Chantel: "Ty, I don't know".

Tyrone: "We'll use something. I promise."

Chantel: "No, Ty. I don't know."

Tyrone becomes aggravated and yells at Chantel.

Tyrone: "Don't bust it. At the party you seemed like such a tough girl. Yo, what was that? Just an act or what? What?"

Chantel: What? Hells no. I don't act for nobody!"

Tyrone: "So What's the problem then?"

Chantel: Yo, there's no problem. You got a problem? (39:24- 40:15)

Afterwards, Chantel acquiesces to his desire for unprotected sex which results in her pregnancy. On the one hand, this encounter with Tyrone represents her attempt to reclaim agency, to use her (sexual) labor for her own pleasures—unlike the labor of being a stand-in mom, store employee with rude customers, or a student at odds with her History teacher. On the other hand, this sexual

encounter is a manifestation of what Saidiya Hartman calls the economy of enjoyment.⁴⁶ Chantel is coerced to participate in *unprotected* sex with Tyrone, and this coerced agency reifies her marginal position in an environment where both her autonomy and agency are already compromised.

Tyrone and Chantel's first sexual encounter also continues the legacy of Black women's reproductive control. In the first chapter of Dorothy E. Roberts' book, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, she discusses the brutality of forced reproduction for enslaved Black women and traces this history to the contemporary control of Black women's reproduction. In this discussion she links sexual exploitation (rape and sexual coercion) to reproductive control. Roberts asserts, "Because rape can lead to pregnancy, it interferes with a woman's freedom to decide whether or not to have a child. In addition, forced sex and forced procreation are both degrading invasions of a woman's bodily integrity; both pursue the same ultimate end—the devaluation of their female victim" (Roberts 57). In this way, Tyrone's coercion for unprotected sex invokes the violence of the State upon Chantel and forces her to experientially witness this legacy of Black women's reproductive control. This legacy materializes for Chantel when she eventually becomes pregnant from this sexual encounter.

Chantel's pregnancy prolongs her experiential witnessing of State violence when she is confronted by the historical legacy of Gynecology during her first maternal OB/GYN visit (48:31- 50:03). The scene begins with a closeup shot of Chantel's face as she frantically waits for Dr. Travis to enter the room (48:33). The closeup shot jumpcuts to a point-of-view following shot revealing all the medical equipment in the room, interjected by closeups of Chantel's

⁴⁶ In "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance," the first chapter of *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman argues in part that the forced enjoyment of the enslaved on plantations served as a site of reenactment of subjection via coerced agency and simulated contentment (Hartman 7).

nervous face (48:40). After, the camera jumpcuts to an overhead shot revealing that she is alone in the room while waiting on the examination table (48:58). The overhead shot presents Chantel, wearing a white hospital gown, in a very vulnerable position to the film witness, reminiscent of the typical white lab mice used in experimental lab enclosures. After, the camera captures Chantel rolling her eyes and deep sighing before Dr. Travis enters the room. The camera shots preceding Dr. Travis' entrance to the room serves two purposes: (1) it encapsulates Chantel's experiential witnessing of this daunting visit and it (2) conjures the historical memory of Black women and Gynecology via Chantel's affective witnessing of this history.

The multi-functioning shots are key to extending Chantel's experiential witnessing of State violence. The closeup of Chantel's worrisome face and the overhead shot of her anxious body shaking (48:33) present her experiential witnessing of the discomfort many Black women and girls, especially those that are poor, feel while visiting OB/GYN offices. The closeup shot simultaneously represents her experiential witnessing and the invocation of the film witness to partake in this experience by centering our attention to the unavoidable image of her discomfort. Chantel's very apparent angst dominates the mise-en-scene and this closeup shot forces the film witness to sit with her distress as if it were our own experience. Also, potential Black women film witnesses who can empathize with her affective state help to reify Chantel's experience.

Furthermore, the point-of-view following shot that illuminates the medical equipment— illustration charts, urine containers, long Q-tips, unrecognizable bottles, a first aid kit, etc— conjures the historical memory of Black women's vulnerability as patients of Gynecology. Gynecology offices, especially those servicing poor Black women, are already imbued with the historical legacy of Black women's vulnerability as part of the founding of modern Gynecology. In chapter one of Deidre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of*

American Gynecology, Owens details how prominent White male doctors in the 19th century like Ephraim McDowell (“father of Ovariectomy”), Francois-Marie Prevost, (“father” of Cesarean Section) and James Marion Sims (“father” of American Gynecology) used enslaved Black women to test-run gynecological procedures, thus intertwining U.S. chattel slavery and modern gynecology (Owens 26). The focus on the medical equipment paired with the preceding shot of Chantel’s worry calls to mind these White male gynecologists and their Black women patients, wherein the obscure medical equipment is a metaphorical landmark⁴⁷ for the memory of doctors like Prevost and Sims while Chantel stands in for the Black women gynecological patients. This conjured history is best described at what Frantz Fanon calls atmospheres of violence.⁴⁸

Chantel’s purpose for visiting the OB/GYN office is to inquire about her missing menstrual cycle and confirm her pregnancy. As such, she currently represents an “issue” to be resolved, much like the enslaved Black women at the hands of practicing gynecologists. In her account of this gynecological history wherein White male doctors tried to solve the reproductive “issues” of enslaved Black women, Owens inadvertently highlights the silences surrounding these Black women patients when she writes, “Such doctors [like James Marion Sims] engaged in innovative experimental medicine; many relied on a disproportionately large population of enslaved women; and many published their findings in medical journals” (Owens 37-38). In this way, 19th century gynecological medical literature centers Black women as subjects but prioritizes the voices of the White male doctors. The voices and true representations of these

⁴⁷ In *Impossible Witnesses*, Dwight McBride refers to specific memories of slave torture as mappings that mark the terrain of memories of slavery.

⁴⁸ In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses violence at length, recognizing its paradoxes and transmutations. Violence is both colonization and decolonization, sensible and non-sensible, corporeal and detached from the body, omnipresent and absent, a historical haunting and a present haunted, etc. These transmutations of violence all make up the atmosphere in which it exists. As such, Dr. Travis’ office is haunted by the historical past of gynecology and this past is made sensible via Chantel’s presence.

enslaved Black women remain obscure as Owens mentions, “the medical notes and articles of white doctors who treated black women highlighted the disdain they had for this group in sometimes unsettling language” (Owens 39). Hidden within and between the “unsettling language” are the archival silences and authentic representations of the enslaved women.

Scholars and cultural critics like Fred Moten and M. NourbeSe Philip wrestle with the silences and utterances of enslaved Black women and people, while other scholars like Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts” attempt recuperative methods with the archival silences of enslaved Black girls. I turn to Saidiya Hartman’s theory of *critical fabulation*⁴⁹ in “Venus in Two Acts” to offer the possibility for reading Chantel as a voice or an imagining that challenges the archival silences of enslaved Black women patients in gynecology. Since Chantel is situated within an atmospheric space imbued with the legacy of violated enslaved mothers, is it too implausible to consider Chantel as part and representative of this legacy? I think not. In her essay Hartman asserts, “As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (Hartman 4). Drawing from Hartman’s assertion I offer Chantel’s experiential witnessing in the OB/GYN office as the embodiment of a present that is interrupted by the past. This interruption of the present by the historical legacy of enslaved Black mothers under the duress of 19th century White gynecologists offers the possibility for momentarily witnessing the affective state of the enslaved. This moment transforms Chantel into a vessel that

⁴⁹ Hartman defines critical fabulation as the labor of painting “as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible”. She asserts this gesture is both “straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive” and “enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration” (Hartman 11). She turns to this methodological process to gain a fuller understanding of Venus, an enslaved Black girl who was murdered by a White captain aboard the *Recovery* slave ship.

links the past with the present, and this linkage is made sensible through Chantel's experiential and affective witnessing.

Hartman cautions the limitation of critical fabulation as a possible means to replicating the grammar of violence, but I maintain the legitimacy of the recombinant narrative of the OB/GYN scene. In considering the limitations of critical fabulation Hartman asks, "What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counter-history, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (Hartman 4). I contend that this scene effectively revisits the scene of subjection because it is eclipsed by and merged with a new scene that suspends the grammar of violence.

Chantel lies on the examination bed in preparation for Dr. Travis' physical exam (49:00- 50:03):

Dr. Travis: Chantel, just lay back on the table. That's it, stretch out. Now put your feet in the stirrups.

Chantel looks nervously and confusedly at Dr. Travis. He taps and readjusts the stirrups to reaffirm his order. Chantel places her feet in the stirrups.

Dr. Travis: That's a girl.

Dr. Travis wheels around on his examination chair and positions himself in front of her open legs.

Dr. Travis: I see you missed two or three of your menstrual cycles.

Chantel: Um, I'm not sure but I think it was only two.

He puts on his latex gloves.

Dr. Travis: Oh, that's alright. We'll find out what's going on.

Chantel nervously takes a deep breath before Dr. Travis physically examines her vaginal area.

He pops his latex glove over his right hand before spreading her legs apart. The camera jumpcuts

to Chantel's face. Her eyes are closed and she uncomfortably moves her head to the right side to avoid seeing Dr. Travis examining her vaginal area.

Paula: Yeah, I know. The meetings are a part of my job. Okay, I'll be there.

Paula, the social worker hangs up the telephone.

Paula: Now—

Chantel: Aagh. I can't go through nine months carrying my baby, going through a labor, and then giving it up for adoption?

Chantel's physical examination is eclipsed by the following scene where she is catapulted into a social service office. The film refuses to show Dr. Travis' examination of Chantel thereby also refusing to replicate the grammar of violence that narrates the shrieks, utterances, and subjection of Chantel and the former enslaved Black women she is affectively enmeshed with.

Merging the OB/GYN scene with the social service scene also refuses the film witness to participate in and reproduce this atmospheric violence that encompasses Chantel and the conjuring of formerly enslaved Black women patients of gynecology. While arguably violence permeates both scenes, the specific grammar of violence surrounding the OB/GYN office is refused by this merging. In sum, the OB/GYN scene emphasizes Chantel's subjection via her experiential witnessing of State violence, transforms her into an affective witness for the conjuring of enslaved Black women, and allows the film to effectively revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence.

Chantel's intimacy with State violence is further extended when she gives birth to her daughter and this birth is the catalyst for her resistance to the atmospheric violence of the State. Her birthing scene occurs in Tyrone's bedroom in the middle of the night (1:19:02). Chantel awakens to growing and unbearable contractions. She walks to the bathroom in pain and Tyrone helps her back to the bed, shocked at realizing she is in labor. Once on the bed Chantel instructs

Tyrone, “Go in my backpack. There’s a book in there about pregnancy. Hurry up! Quick!” (1:20:19). Chantel’s request for the book marks the beginning of her resistance. She turns to a self-help book before incorporating the State (via the medical system) in her birthing process. Tyrone insists on calling 911 and Chantel refuses. He continues to grab items he believes will help her have a safe delivery in his home. Red light emanates from the right side of the mise-en-scene, foreshadowing Chantel’s passage through the blood-stained portal. Chantel continues to scream in distress and Tyrone insists on taking her to the hospital (1:22:16):

Tyrone: Yo, yo, yo, yo. I’m taking you to the hospital.

Chantel: No!

Tyrone: Yo, hold on! Hold on! I’m taking you to the hospital.

Chantel: No!

Tyrone: I’m taking you to the hospital. Come on you got to go to the hospital.

Chantel: No!

Tyrone: I don’t care what you say. I got to get you some help!

Chantel upholds her refusal to be taken to this hospital. Tyrone leaves the room to search for his car keys. She searches for Paula’s business card and calls her while Tyrone is in the other room. The scene jumpcuts to Paula’s house; the mise-en-scene is midnight blue. The blueness simultaneously represents the night and an opposing temperament to Chantel’s environment. If the red light in Chantel’s mise-en-scene represent terror and a blood-stained portal, Paula’s space represents peace and stillness. The meaning of the blueness is affirmed by Paula’s ensuring words when she answers the phone (1:22:50):

Paula: Chantel, its Paula. Chantel, are you alright?

Chantel: No. Paula please help me. My water broke. Oh, Paula, I’m so scared.

Paula: Sweetie, how far apart are your contractions?

Chantel: It’s about every five minutes.

Paula: There’s going to be a lot of pain but that’s natural, just relax. Okay, listen to me. Are you alone?

Chantel: No, I’m at my boyfriend’s house, Ty.

Paula: Okay. Relax, relax. Let me speak to him.

Paula represents a mediator between Chantel and the State. Though Paula is a State worker, she is a social worker in a federally funded organization, she works outside the parameters of the State to assist Chantel. In this way, Chantel's reliance on Paula during her birthing scene maintains her resistance to the State.

However, Paula remains faithful to the State so Chantel resists the atmospheric violence of the State manifested through her pregnancy and birthing by neglecting her child. Chantel hands the phone to Tyrone and Paula tells him to call 911. Per Chantel's wishes, Tyrone refuses. Paula informs Tyrone that Chantel is in premature labor and she needs emergency medical assistance. Tyrone still refuses so Paula gives him basic instructions for ensuring a safe birth delivery at home. Paula's and Tyrone's back-and-forth represents Paula's allegiance to the State, though she cares for Chantel's health. Afterwards, Paula calls 911 (1:25:05):

Operator: 911.

Paula: Yes. I'd like an ambulance sent to 220 Brooklyn Avenue. It's an emergency.

Operator: We don't have anything available.

Paula is in disbelief.

Paula: You don't have an ambulance available in that area?

Operator: Forty-five minutes to an hour.

She becomes upset.

Paula: It'll take you forty-five minutes to an hour?

Operator: Please hold.

Paula: Hello? Hello!

She angrily hangs up the phone.

Though Chantel refuses the help of the State, this exchange between Paula and the emergency operator confirms how violent and neglectful the State is to Chantel and other poor Black people living in this area. Paula recognizes this when she says, "Shit! They don't want to come to our

neighborhood” (1:25:23). Paula prepares to travel to Tyrone’s house with her partner to personally check on Chantel.

The following scene catalyzes Chantel’s resistance when she experientially witnesses the transformational blood-stained portal. Tyrone returns to the bedroom with a bottle of water and towels, surprised to find Chantel further along in labor. Her vaginal blood covers the bed now that her body is prepared to push out her baby. Chantel looks at her blood-covered hands and this marks the moment where her experiential witnessing takes her through the blood-stained portal for transformation. The delivery scene unfolds with the diegetic cacophony of her agonizing cries, shrieks, and squirmishes blended with Tyrone’s encouraging words for her to push. This scene is captured through close-up jumpcuts between Chantel’s face and Tyrone’s face. The omission of the actual birth from view solidifies that this is an experiential witnessing and not a visual witnessing. Both Chantel and the film witness only have access to the experience of her delivery and not the actual view of their baby coming through her vaginal canal.

Once the delivery is completed, Chantel maintains experiential witnessing by refusing to look at her child, thereby enabling her resistance to being a mother (1:26:26). They successfully deliver their child:

Tyrone: Oh, shit. It looks like a little girl! It is!

Tyrone shockingly delivers the afterbirth.

Chantel: Oh, shit! Just take it away! I don’t want to see it!

Tyrone: Oh, shit. Come on Chantel, you can at least look at it!

Chantel: Just take it away. Take it away where someone never finds it. Just take it away, please.

Tyrone: No, you can at least look at it!

Chantel: Look, just take it out of here. Nobody knows I had this baby.

Her refusal to look at their child reinforces that this is an experiential witnessing and not a visual witnessing. Her refusal of optics allows her to resist motherhood in this way despite the pressure from Tyrone to keep their child.

Tyrone: You can't just abandon a baby like that!

Chantel: Look, we got to do something you understand me?

Tyrone: No, no, no, you can't—

Chantel: Nobody knows I had this baby except you and Paula!

Tyrone: You cannot abandon a baby like that someone might see me go out with the baby!

Chantel: Damn, it! Just take it out in this!

She hands him the black garbage bag. Tyrone's awareness of the omnipresent threat of the State is illuminated when he challenges her resistance to keeping their child.

Tyrone: No, Chantel. Listen to me! Someone might see me taking it out and we can get arrested.

Chantel: Look, I don't want to get stuck with this baby! I want to do things. I want to have a nice life. I don't want to end up like—I don't want to end up like my parents. Oh, no. No fucking way!

Tyrone: Are you sure you want to go through with this?

Chantel: Yes!

Tyrone: Okay, okay, okay. Alright, alright, alright. I'll take it out there. I'll take it out. I got everything under control.

The scene then returns to the beginning where film witnesses see Tyrone carry a black trash bag to a pile of garbage on a curb. Chantel is transformed by the blood-stained portal of her birth and delivery experience. She resists visually witnessing what Saidiya Harman might call the terrible spectacle (in this case, their newly born daughter). In this way, her refusal of optics is simultaneously a refusal of subjection. Chantel professes to “have a nice life” and “not end up like [her] parents” and this assertion is a reach for a futurity that is uninterrupted by the State and its manifesting violence. This resistance and claim to an alternative futurity is only made possible through her experiential witnessing of the blood-stained portal. Though, the film witness

later sees Tyrone fortunately retrieve their child from the garbage before the State (via policer officers) confiscates the baby, Chantel's resistance remains valid though unrealized.

Chantel is transformed by witnessing specific events surrounding the harsh realities of motherhood for many poor, Black women and girls in NYC during the 1990s. She visually witnesses the vulnerability of her classmate Denisha who is a young single mother whose future is compromised by the hardships of motherhood. Chantel experientially witnesses motherhood through a conception wherein her autonomy was compromised by her partner. The vulnerability of motherhood continued during her first daunting OB/GYN visit which was enmeshed with the historical legacy of Black women and the field of Gynecology. She continues to experientially witness the terror of State-orchestrated motherhood when she gives birth at Tyrone's house, refusing to visually witness the terror as an act of resistance. Her witnessing accounts subsequently reveal that her decision to leave behind her child was less an act of neglect and more so her attempt to use her agency to reject a motherhood that is violently orchestrated by the State.

Witnessing in *Set It Off*

Set It Off is a 1996 film that illuminates the lives of four working-class Black women. Frankie, Stony, Tisean (TiTi), and Cleo all work to secure a better economic future for themselves and their families. However, the social pressures do not subside for these women as they experientially witness the atmospheric violence of poverty and anti-Blackness. The protagonists begin a downward spiral following Frankie's termination from the bank for false accusations for robbery collusion. The other women attempt to assuage her circumstances by inviting her to work with them at *Luther's Janitorial*. After the other women attempt to improve Frankie's circumstances, they begin to experience the crushing weight of the atmospheric State

violence: Stony's brother, Stevie, is murdered by police for mistaken identity; Child Protective Services confiscate Tisean's son, Jajuan, when he is accidentally poisoned at their job because she could not afford a babysitter, and Cleo is later wanted for a murder she did not commit.

Overwhelmed and exhausted by the blowback of their upward mobility efforts, the four women turn to organized crime for relief. They rob banks to enjoy some economic freedom and eventually move out of their Los Angeles neighborhood. However, only Stony survives their last foiled heist and escapes to Mexico in the wake of their resistance. For this section of my chapter, I argue that like Chantel, the four protagonists attempt to adhere to the State but they are transformed into Black Revolutionary Women (BRM) after they intimately witness State violence and pass through a blood-stained portal. Like *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, witnessing is the framework that makes the atmospheric violence sensible and their resistance legitimate. Though most of them die by the end of the film, I maintain that their resistance, unlike Chantel's, is realized via the Flying Africans Narrative.⁵⁰

Black Revolutionary Women & Set It Off



⁵⁰ I turn to Soyica Diggs Colbert's discussion of the Flying African Narrative in *Black Movements* to recognize an alternative ending for the deceased protagonists.

Figure 2. (left photo) Images of Black women during the Black Panther Movement ⁵¹

Figure 3. (right photo) Tisean, Stony, and Cleo in *Set It Off*⁵²

I situate *Set it Off* in a genealogy of what Kara Keeling calls cinematic appearances of the Black Revolutionary Woman. I recognize that the four Black women protagonists simultaneously embody the Black Revolutionary Woman and depart from this trope. In, ““We Just Have to Get Guns and Be Men”: The Cinematic Appearance of Black Revolutionary Women,” Keeling contends that the image of the Black Revolutionary Woman derives from circulating cinematic images of the Black Panther Party in the post-1968 period. She says “... for the Black Revolutionary Woman, the process of self-identification was predicated on the appearance of Blacks as blacks with guns” (Keeling 80). Though, at cursory glance, this statement privileges masculine representations of resistance and excludes Black women’s participation in the resistance (the Black Panther Party sported afros, black berets, leather jackets, and guns—all racially and gender coded as Black and male/masculine), she counters this argument of exclusion when she deems “blacks with guns” as inclusive rather than exclusive of Black women in the late sixties (Keeling 80). To support this claim she posits, “This is so in part because hegemonic conceptualizations of femininity are not visible in the black woman as “natural” attributes...” (Keeling 80). In this way, Keeling acknowledges that Black women, historically, have been denied “true womanhood” (as Patricia Hill Collins calls it) so reading Black women’s sartorial performances of resistance through masculinity does not exclude Black

⁵¹ See Tracy. “24 Powerful Images of Black Women and Children During the Black Panther Movement.” *Atlanta Black Star*, 22 Sept. 2014, atlantablackstar.com/2014/09/22/24-powerful-images-of-black-women-and-children-during-the-black-panther-movement/.

⁵² See Brown, Sherronda J. ““Set It Off” and the Black Feminist Lessons It Still Holds for Us.” *The Black Youth Project*, 16 Aug. 2020, blackyouthproject.com/set-it-off-and-the-black-feminist-lessons-it-still-holds-for-us/.

women's resistance, rather, this reading recognizes that Black women are masculinized through their Blackness and this masculinization still holds the potential for their resistance.

I focus here on the cinematic image of the “blacks with guns” as it relates to *Set It Off* because this image privileges Black women's sartorial performance (including their guns) as a visual marker of their resistance. This is important to my analysis of the women in *Set It Off* because I recognize their costume—sun glasses, wigs, guns, flannel shirts, janitorial jumpsuits, and their natural hair during their last bank heist—not merely as protection against State recognition, but as a visual marker of their transformation to Black Revolutionary Women. Also, their sartorial performance is a visual cue that represents a cinematic continuation of Black women's historical performances of State confrontation. The remainder of this section analyzes how each protagonist intimately witnesses State violence that eventually pushes them through the blood-stained portal and transforms them into Black Revolutionary Women.

Frankie

The introductory scene diegetically situates Frankie as a subject who aligns with the State via dialogue and her sartorial performance. In this scene, Frankie's White female coworker asks her to cover her next work shift so she can go on her honeymoon. Frankie responds, “Oh, a week in Hawaii! Alright, I'll fill in for you... yeah, you just take your lil' honeymoon before I change my mind, alright?” (00:00:46). This statement captures Frankie's participation in keeping the bank, a State entity, running smoothly for its noticeably majority White customers. While, ostensibly, Frankie's agreement to cover her white female coworker's shift is of no major significance, I argue that this agreement, especially during the first scene in the film and before the first bank robbery occurs, signifies the historical use of Black women's extended labor for

White women's homemaking in advancing the U.S. capitalist State.⁵³ This agreement simultaneously allows her White female coworker to perform one of the characteristics of mainstream (White) feminism—to be a working woman and still be a wife/homemaker (and thus a “true woman” as Patricia Hill Collins might argue), and introduces Frankie as a loyal worker of the U.S. capitalist State. In her agreement to cover her coworker's shift, she continues labor production on the job and avoid idle “off-time” in which her labor produces no capital. Thus, the dialogue between Frankie and her White female coworker represents Frankie's alignment with State values that introduces her as a “good” character in the film.

Additionally, Frankie's dialogue with her neighbor, Darnell (an organized crime member), and her sartorial performance solidifies her alliance with the U.S. State. Darnell and his crime partner, Lorenz, rob the bank during the first scene of the movie (00:00:57). The left-panning camera shot displays the majority White customers in the bank before pausing on Darnell (a Black man) and jump-cutting to his two Black male accomplices in the bank. Noticeably, Darnell, Lorenz, and their third accomplice are wearing all dark hoodies, dark sweatshirts, and khaki pants. In this scene, their clothing signifies deviance, rebellion, criminality, and this is solidified by their anti-State robbery. In contrast, the only other Black man captured in the mise-en-scene—a client—sports an all-black business suit, and Frankie, the fifth and final Black character in this scene, wears a gray business suit. Arguably, all the Black characters are positioned outside of the U.S. State because of their Blackness; however, I argue that Frankie's and the Black male client's attire marks them as alliances to the State. Their

⁵³ In *Black Feminist Thought* Patricia Hill Collins discusses at length how the devaluing and exploitation of Black women's labor advances the U.S. Capitalist project. This manifests in Black women's domestic work in White homes (wherein White women were relieved of much of their domestic work) and what she calls “mammy work” in the professional labor market. Frankie's devalued labor becomes apparent when she is fired from the bank for a crime she did not commit.

costumes do not signify deviance or criminality, rather, their costumes signify an attempt to visually assimilate with the surrounding White characters.

Frankie maintains this State alliance via her refusal to help the robbers. When Darnell commands her to empty the money draw, she protests, “Hell no. I don’t want nothing to do with this” (00:01:45). Noticeably, there is an American flag hanging behind her when she rejects his demands. He insists, while threatening to shoot a hostage. Frankie reluctantly surrenders to his demand, but her assistance never materializes because Darnell shoots and kills the hostage anyway before his accomplice demands another bank teller to put the cash in the bag. The murder of the hostage marks Frankie’s entrance into the blood-stained portal. The blood-stained portal is marked by the hostage’s bright red blood splattered on Frankie’s face and her gray suit. The exchange between Frankie and Darnell is captured in a shot-reverse-shot which visually produces a dichotomy between them: Frankie represents the loyal citizen backed by the American flag, and Darnell represents the anti-citizen confirmed by his robbery attempt. In effect, Frankie’s sartorial performance and her protest to Darnell’s anti-State resistance represents her alliance with the U.S. State in this scene.

After the completion of the robbery, Frankie experientially witnesses the inevitability of Black criminalization when she is falsely accused of being an accomplice. After Frankie fails to assist them, Darnell and his accomplices proceed with the armed robbery anyway. During the robbery, Darnell and his accomplices kill several people in the bank, and only Lorenz successfully escapes with the stolen money. Later, Frankie is questioned by Officer Strode while still covered in the blood of the woman that Darnell shot in front of her. This interrogation advances her passage through the blood-stained portal. Frankie is not questioned merely as a

witness, but as a suspect as well. Officer Strode and the bank manager imply that Frankie was in collusion with the robbery (4:10- 5:24):

Officer Strode: Okay, okay. Why don't we take it from the top.

Frankie: I thought we covered everything—

Officer Strode: How well did you know the perpetrator?

Frankie: I just know Darnell from around the way, that's all. We live in the same projects.

Officer Strode: Frankie, will you do me a favor? Just tell me one thing and we'll get out of here.

Frankie: Sure.

Officer Strode: What's the procedure when you're being robbed?

Frankie: Look, sir. I—

Frankie tries to defend herself from the implicit accusation.

Officer Strode: Stop. Stop. Stop! Now! What's the procedure when you're being robbed?

Frankie: You pull the money clip from your right-hand drawer and then you signal with the left hand.

Officer Strode: You signal with the left. So you know the procedure.

Frankie: Yes, like I said, the procedure has been told to me over a million times!

Officer Strode: So why is that that if that procedure has been told you, why didn't you follow the procedure?

Frankie: Because he had a gun! And I went for my clip but her shot her. He shot her right in front of me.

Frankie's boss chimes in the conversation.

Mr. Zachary: I'm afraid, Ms. Sutton, we're going to have to let you go. The fact that you knew the perpetrator doesn't sit well with us.

Frankie is fired because she knows Darnell, not because she did not follow the procedure. Her termination implies an inherent tie to criminality, and this is deemed more deserving of punishment than failing to follow employee procedures. Of course, Frankie did not follow the procedure in the moment because she was fearful. Officer Strode's false accusation against Frankie (even with video surveillance confirming her innocence) is also a denial of her sentience, which subsequently marks Frankie as criminal. Denying Black people's fear when confronted with the threat of being shot—whether this fear is channeled through fight, flight, or inaction—

inadvertently marks them as criminal to reify their assumed criminality and legitimize subsequent punishment. This false accusation and subsequent termination represent Frankie's experiential witnessing of State violence that reifies her subjection (despite her initial attempt to align with the State) and disrupt her economic future.

Frankie's termination advances her revolutionary persona, and this is expressed in her dialogue and embodied sartorial performance. While the sister-friends sit in a parking lot,⁵⁴ reflecting on Frankie's termination and Lorenz's (short-lived) success robbing the bank, Cleo suggests that they rob banks to alleviate their financial insecurities. Though they all dismiss the idea after Stony fervidly objects, Frankie reconsiders the idea. In response to Stony's rejection to rob banks, Frankie says, "You right. We ain't gon' rob no bank. Mm mm. Let's just go in there and blow it the fuck up!" (00:14:17). This sentiment illuminates an ideological shift in Frankie. At this point, she is no longer invested in protecting a State entity (the bank), and noticeably, this sentiment directly contrasts her earlier refusal to participate in the bank robbery. Additionally, her costume visually marks the beginning of her transition to a Black Revolutionary Woman. Frankie's attire is similar to the clothing she wears during their robberies later in the film—baggy jeans, and regular shirt, and her short hair—which all signify the Black Revolutionary Woman because of the more masculine aesthetic. Her new masculine clothing juxtaposed with her former gray business suit visually informs the viewer that Frankie embodies a new persona before she ever verbally expresses her change in attitude. In contrast to the first bank heist scene, this scene reintroduces Frankie in the film as an anti-State revolutionary. In sum, Frankie's

⁵⁴ Frankie's ideological change is visually accompanied by an urban mise-en-scene. The cinematic urban scene, or "ghettocentric imagination" as S. Craig Watkins coins it, represents a socially constructed space of repression and entrapment (Watkins 212). Situating Frankie within an urban mise-en-scene while expressing anti-State sentiments discursively represents her resistance to her environment and its violent manifestations.

experiential witnessing of State violence that denied her innocence and reified her subjection serves as a catalyst to her resistance.

Frankie's final confrontation with Officer Strode represents her voyage through the blood-stained portal and completes her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman (1:50:57- 1:52:40). At this point in the film, Detective Strode and his partner, Detective Waller, interrupt their final bank heist and Tisean is shot by a security guard in the standoff. Stony and Cleo shoot their way out of the bank dragging Tisean to the getaway car with Frankie. Unfortunately, Tisean dies in the car while they are on the run from police. The remaining three women switch cars and Cleo later suggests they separate to increase their chances of crossing the U.S-Mexico border. Stony successfully board the departing Mexico-bound coach bus. Frankie, however, does not make it.

Frankie experientially witnesses the final blow of the State when she is murdered for her refusal to surrender. Her murder represents her complete passage through the blood-stained portal and her final transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman. Detective Strode and his accompanying precinct catches Frankie as Stony's departing bus leaves the station.

Detective Strode: Francesca, Frankie, listen to me. I'm taking it off, here. I'm not carrying.

He disarms himself, ostensibly surrendering to her.

Detective Strode: Okay, okay, I got nothing. Frankie, Tisean is dead. Cleo's dead, she's dead. All you got is you. And now you got to save you, do you understand me? Now I need you on the ground. Frankie, I need you on the ground.

Detective Strode attempts to reverse-witness the pain and agony that Frankie feels by offering this performative painstaking monologue under the guise of giving her a better option. As I've stated in my framework section, reverse-witnessing is not possible for non-Black characters. Black sentience cannot be co-opted by non-Black characters. Frankie recognizes the falsity of his

sentience because she visually witnesses his Whiteness, his armed fellow officers, and his social capital designated by the State. Triggered by his audacity and the memory of Detective Strode's former accusation against her, she draws her gun to his neck.

Frankie: So, what's the procedure when you got a gun at your head, huh? What's the fucking procedure when you got a gun at your head?!

She momentarily usurps some power and instill the same powerlessness in him that he instilled in her earlier in the film. The camera jumpcuts to a close-up shot of her gun at his neck and her red nail-polished finger on the trigger. The close-up shot of her gun represents her final transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman (her flannel shirt and gun aimed directly at Detective Strode's neck conjures the "blacks with guns" image) and her red nail polish foreshadows her passage through the blood-stained portal.

Frankie: It's over.

Frankie turns and runs toward Stony's departing bus. Stony shakes her head "no" through the bus window knowing Frankie's refusal to surrender will end in her murder. An officer shoots her twice in the back and a cloud of red particles emanate from her chest. This red cloud illuminates the staining of the atmospheric particles of violence surrounding her as she completes her passage through the blood-stained portal. Frankie falls face down on the ground trembling in her final moments of life. She dies with her gun in hand and finger still on the trigger. Her hand appears to be a half-formed Black power fist, interrupted by the possession of her gun and the ground. This final image of Frankie's lifeless body represents the completion of her passage through the blood-stained portal and her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman.

Stony

Following Frankie's termination, Stony discursively maintains her alliance with the U.S State even after she affectively witnesses Frankie's unjust termination. The four women sit

outside of their Acorn Housing Projects, reflecting on Frankie's termination and Lorenz's (short-lived) success robbing the bank. Cleo suggests they rob a bank to alleviate their financial insecurities (13:30:00- 14:33:00):

Cleo: Do you know Lorenz and 'nem got away with twenty grand?

Stony: Twenty G's, damn.

Cleo: See that's what the fuck we need to do—rob a bank.

Tisean: That's crazy.

Cleo: No, really, though. The four of us could take a bank. If that crackhead Darnell could rob a bank, we could take a bank!

Stony: Twenty G's would save my life right now. Stevie needs tuition—well, too bad we ain't some hard-up crackhead muhfuckas like Lorenz and 'nem. Then, sure, we could do some suicidal shit like rob a bank. But we ain't crazy, so we can't [rob a bank].

A close-up camera shot captures Stony's rejection to Cleo's proposal. Stony's close-up shot serves two purposes: (1) she represents the rational one by acknowledging that usurping capital from the State is "suicidal" and "crazy". Stony's association of bank heisting with disability ("crazy") places Cleo outside of normative ways of being which ultimately ends in death, much like way disabled people have historically been deemed non-normative and suffered premature deaths because of their marginalization.⁵⁵ Secondly, her retort filmed in a closeup, single shot presents her argument as the dominant narrative during this scene. The film witnesses are forced to sit with Stony's argument during this shot as we do not have access to the other women's facial or bodily responses as she makes her claim. Too, Stony informs Frankie that she will provide her with a job reference for *Luther's Janitorial*—the company her, Cleo, and Tisean work for. Though she sympathizes with Frankie, she still rejects the idea of robbing the bank. Her rejection, her referral for a formal job, and their subsequent agreement, proves her attempted alliance with the U.S. State and much like Frankie, introduces her as an upstanding citizen.

⁵⁵ Disability Studies scholars like Sami Schalk write extensively about the violent ways disabled people are marginalized and prevented from full participation in society.

However, Stony changes her political stance when she affectively witnesses the State murder her younger brother, Stevie, and fracture their Black kinship (26:30:00- 27:40:00). Shortly after Lorenz's bank heist, Stevie goes to Lorenz's house following an argument with Stony, unaware that militarized police will raid his apartment moments later. While visiting Lorenz in Acorn Projects, Lorenz gives Stevie his signature haircut styled with the letters "AP" and a bottle of champagne as congratulatory gifts for his college acceptance. As Stevie leaves the Acorn Projects with Lorenz's signature haircut, the film witness sees/hears the police misidentify him as Lorenz. The following shot of the police appearing out of hiding and surrounding him highlights the scenographic space,⁵⁶ one of the components of S. Craig Watkins' theory of the ghettocentric imagination. In his chapter, "The Ghettocentric Imagination," Watkins argues, "Moreover, the ghettocentric imagination also produces representations of the urban ghetto as a theater for state coercion and militarization" (Watkins, 215). This scene illuminates this "theater" wherein the cacophony of demands for Stevie to "Get down!" is the script, the armed police are the coercive and militarized State actors, and the film witness is the audience. Stevie's entrapment⁵⁷ and powerlessness is emphasized in a point-of-view 360 tracking shot, interrupted by a series of jumpcuts between the overwhelming amount of officers approaching with guns, and a closeup of Stevie's fearful and confused face. Taken together, the 360 tracking shot, theatrical yelling by the police, and Stevie's enclosure underscores the State's militarization.

The atmospheric violence of State militarization is made sensible through Stony's affective witnessing of Stevie murder. Following the FBI's demands, Stevie lays on the ground in cooperation then tries to take the champagne bottle out of his jacket to lay more comfortably

⁵⁶ S. Craig Watkins contends that the scenographic (urban) space consists of both visual and auditory cues—imagery of the post-industrial ghetto, and the sounds of police sirens and helicopters among other film elements.

⁵⁷ Watkins also contends, "one of the most persistent themes that give shape to the ghettocentric imagination is the representation of the urban ghetto as a site of repression and entrapment" (212).

on the ground. One of the officers screams, “he’s got a gun!” and they all fire their weapons. As the excessive bullets pierce his helpless body, this scene jumpcuts to Stony, still sitting at home in their living room, her head rising suddenly with frantic eyes (27:07:00). It is unclear if she audio witnesses the gunshots, but the shot-reverse-shot from the attack on Stevie’s body, to Stony, then back to Stevie being murdered represents Stony’s affective witnessing of Stevie’s murder. This shot serves as a point of connection between Stony and Stevie, catapulting her to the site where the State has orchestrated their fatal attack, severing Stony’s and Stevie’s kinship. With Stevie’s last convulsions, comes the slippage of his life from his body, and so too slips away Stony’s belief in a system that’s just “fucking [them] all anyway” (as Frankie says later in the movie).

Stony’s visual witnessing of Stevie’s murder marks the beginning of her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman. When she arrives at the site of his murder, one bystander witness attempts to prevent her from running towards Stevie’s lifeless body. She breaks away from the woman’s grip, just before the detective separates the other bystanders with yellow caution tape. Distraught, Stony runs to Stevie’s bloodied, dead body. When she holds Stevie’s body, she transitions from a bystander witness to a visual witness. This distinction is visually demarcated by the yellow caution tape that separates the bystanders (those watching this scene play out from behind the caution tape, with no familiarity or emotional attachment to Stevie) from the visual witness, Stony, who has a proximity and affective attachment to Stevie’s body. This marks her entrance to the blood-stained portal that will eventually transform her to a Black Revolutionary Woman.

Stony holds Stevie and repeatedly cries out to the police officers, “what have you done?” (28:48:00). Her cries conjure the historical callings to bear witness to the atrocity of State

violence at the abolitionist circuit. In *Impossible Witnesses* Dwight McBride asserts that the position of the madman in Michel Foucault's "The Discourse on Language" is related to the situation of the slave narrator. In his comparison between the madman and the slave narrator, McBride writes:

This relates to the staging of slavery at the auction block and the use of corporal punishment. This is also not unlike the staging of abolitionism, the carting out of black bodies onto the stage to bear witness to their authentic experiences of slavery. It was, after all, common for the slave narrators to deliver their testimonies orally on the abolitionist "lecture circuit" before the accounts were committed to paper and published as narratives (McBride 4).

I compare McBride's staging of the abolitionist lecture circuit to the scene where Stony encounters Stevie's body. The site of Stevie's murder is the stage, Stevie is the carted out Black body, Stony channels the slave narrator, the investigative police report is the published narrative; and the police, bystanders, and film witnesses all makeup the audience. As such, Stony's repeated cries to the police officers is not merely a question that yearns an answer—it is a demand for the officers to recount their behavior and admit the violence of their own hands, it is a testimony to the pain induced by State violence, it is a sonic force ripping through the particles of atmospheric violence, and it is a summon for the bystander and film witness to remember the truth before Stevie's murder is committed to paper and published as a narrative (via the police report).

The beginning of Stony's transition to a Black Revolutionary Woman is not limited to her entrance into the blood-stained portal; it is also marked by her sartorial performance, and her tie to an actual Black Panther Woman's legacy that is paradoxically enmeshed with freedom and fugitivity. During her encounter with Stevie's lifeless body, she sports a flannel shirt and baggy jeans—the performative costumes later used to carry out her first bank heist. Therefore, her clothing signifies a rebellious spirit and foreshadows her later transition to a Black Revolutionary

Woman. Her complete passage through the blood-stained portal and her full transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman is later represented by her success in all three of their bank heists. Unfortunately, Frankie, Tisean, and Cleo all die by the end of the movie. Stony, however, escapes to Mexico on a coach bus.⁵⁸ Her new life in Mexico⁵⁹ as a Black Revolutionary Woman escaping police pursuit in a culturally Latin American country is reminiscent of Assata Shakur,⁶⁰ an actual Black Panther Party member. Stony's cinematic tie to Shakur's legacy of anti-Sate rebellion and freedom via fugitivity solidifies her Black Revolutionary Woman persona.

Tisean

Like her sister-friends, Tisean attempts to align with the U.S. State via her employment at *Luther's Janitorial*. Luther enters the scene in his eponymously named truck to confront Stony, Tisean, and Cleo about their failure to properly recycle (10:05). He is immediately disrespectful after he exits his truck to greet them.

Luther: Good afternoon, ladies... and gentleman [reference to Cleo]. Alright, listen up! Now these good White folks are out here trying to recycle all of their glasses, plastics and aluminum, and you bitches putting all this shit in the dumpsters. You gots to recycle. Who had 104?

Tisean: I did.

Luther: You didn't empty the cans in 104, I'm docking your pay.

Cleo: Hey, come on now, that ain't right.

Luther: Who are you supposed to be? Goddamn Mighty Morphine fucking Power Ranger? What you gonna do? I'm docking her pay!

Tisean: Speaking of pay, I thought you said that you was gonna pay me under the table. They're taking taxes out of my check and I ain't got enough to pay for my babysitter—

⁵⁸ Though Detective Strode sees and makes eye contact with Stony on the departing coach bus, he does not interfere with her escape (1:52:50). At this point in the film his officers have just killed Frankie, and he was also responsible for the police team that murdered Stevie. His refusal to capture her (probably due to his guilt for murdering her innocent brother) does not undermine her success in fleeing the country.

⁵⁹ Historically, Mexico was a refuge for African Americans/ Black Seminoles escaping slavery in the U.S., particularly in the 19th century. Kenneth Wiggins Porter et al. discuss the historical significance of Mexico in the African American quest for freedom in *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-seeking People*.

⁶⁰ Assata Shakur, a Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army member, fled to Cuba to escape life imprisonment for allegedly abetting the murder of a White state trooper in 1982. Cuba, Mexico, and Latin America broadly served as sites for transhistorical fugitives ranging from Nazis in Germany to enslaved Africans in the U.S.

This scene introduces Tisean as a loyal citizen with a contentious work position. On one hand, Tisean fits within the normative U.S. capitalist hierarchy as a *Luther's Janitorial* employee. She works to take care of her family and afford a babysitter despite her boss' condescending and exploitative behavior. On the other hand, Tisean is enmeshed with the underground economy when she attempts to evade State taxation (and therefore State participation) by requesting to be paid "under the table". Her relationship with the underground economy is represented in the mise-en-scene; this scene takes place in what appears to be an underground space/garage with dim lighting. The scenographic space reflects her relationship with the underground economy by representing her labor/employment status "out of sight" from public view and State surveillance. However, Luther forces her to participate in the State despite his former agreement to "pay her under the table".

Luther: On this good earth, there are three people I don't mess with: the I the R and the S.

Tisean: But I got my babysitter—

Luther: Look, if you don't like working for *Luther's Janitorial*, why don't you just take your broke ass home? Otherwise, shut the fuck up and get back to work!

Luther inadvertently forces Tisean to align with the State, and though it is not her intention to participate in the State in this way, she still does. In the end, Tisean is introduced in the film as a citizen who aligns with the U.S. State.

Tisean's transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman begins when she experientially witnesses the State rupture her family when Child Protective Services (CPS) confiscate her son, Jajuan (36:47- 38:15). Unable to afford childcare for Jajuan, Tisean brings him to a worksite at *Luther's Janitorial* where they clean the homes of rich White people (35:27- 36:25). Tisean momentarily turns her attention away from Jajuan to complete her cleaning tasks. She sets him on the floor in the living room and joins her friends in the adjoining room to clean. Moments

later, the scene cuts to Jajuan crawling out of the living room to meddle with bottles of cleaning fluid. The camera cuts back to the women cleaning in the next room, and Jajuan cries in agony, off-screen, because he swallows cleaning fluid. After, the camera cuts to the protagonists and paramedics rushing Jajuan on the hospital elevator for treatment. Finally, the sister-friends sit in the visiting area, anxiously awaiting an update on Jajuan's health. Herein enters the State.

The doctor appears before the sister-friends with an update, and he is accompanied by a CPS worker, Ms. Wells. Tisean is excited to reconnect with her son, only to learn that the State will soon intrude this reconnection.

Doctor: I think your son is going to pull through just fine.

Protagonists: Oh, yes!

Tisean: Can I see him?

Doctor: Well, you need to speak to Ms. Wells with Child Protective Services.

Stony, now aware of the State's presence (via CPS), becomes concerned.

Stony: No, no, no. I know you ain't fitting to take her son.

Ms. Wells' presence in this scene represents the formal and tangible introduction of the State's presence to Tisean. In Dorothy Roberts' book *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*, she illuminates the connection between CPS (whom she recognizes as a family policing apparatus) and the State, a connection she terms "carceral entanglements."⁶¹ Suddenly, Cleo recognizes this carceral entanglement and she intervenes.

Cleo: Wait, now hold the fuck up! That was a[n] accident. I mean, we was right there. We was looking right at him. Wasn't even like two seconds before—

⁶¹ Roberts recognizes carceral entanglements as a component of a larger carceral web. She writes the carceral web is a "symbiotic relationship between family policing and criminal law enforcement" (28). Roberts lays out the "multiple ways the child welfare system fits into a cohesive carceral apparatus that includes police and prisons" (28). She further outlines the carceral web when she says, "CPS staff not only act like police officers; they also work hand-in-hand with police officers. Local child welfare and law enforcement authorities increasingly enter into contracts to create various types of collaborations—from sharing information to engaging in common trainings, cooperating in investigations, and jointly responding to reports" (191).

Ms. Wells ignores Cleo's intervention and continues to subsume Tisean in the carceral web.

Ms. Wells: I need to talk to the mother *alone*... Ms. Williams the boy has been severely poisoned. I'm sure it was an accident but we're going to retain custody just to be sure the child isn't suffering from neglect.

Tisean: That's my son. I would *die* for him.

Ms. Wells: He was in an unsafe environment. He shouldn't have been at the workplace with you.

Tisean: Well I didn't have a choice, I don't have money for a babysitter.

Ms. Wells: Well now you're going to have to prove you can take care of him

Tisean: But kids—kids get into poison everyday—

Ms. Wells: Not in the workplace! To us that spells neglect. Now Jajuan will remain in our custody until you can pay for proper childcare.

Tisean: Well, what if I can't come up with the money?

Ms. Wells: Like I said, you will get a court date. At that time, the judge will decide what will happen.

Ms. Wells walks away as Tisean pleads⁶² for Jajuan and this represents the benevolent terror that the State enacts on vulnerable (Black) families. In *Torn Apart* Roberts describe benevolent terror as “state violence inflicted in the name of child protection” (Roberts 24). She emphasizes this violent fracturing of the family when she writes, “Far from promoting the well-being of children, the state weaponizes children as a way to threaten families, to scapegoat parents for societal harms to their children, and to buttress the racist, patriarchal, and capitalist status quo” (Roberts 24). Ms. Wells' nonsensical expectation for Tisean, a poor working mother, to “pay for proper childcare” by her approaching court date scapegoats Tisean for her socioeconomic disenfranchisement that makes it impossible for her to afford a babysitter in the first place. Tisean's experiential maneuver within the Cartography of Witnessing is at once a movement through the carceral web. Webs are sticky traps intended to capture prey moving

⁶² While pleading for Jajuan, Tisean exclaims, “I'm gon' die without my baby”. She foreshadows her carceral death caused by her family rupture. This anticipated death also represents a manifestation of benevolent terror. Dorothy Roberts writes, “Termination of parental rights, as this permanent dissolution is called, ends a parent's physical custody as well as the right to ever communicate with or regain custody of the child. It is the death penalty of the family-policing system—the ultimate punishment the family court can impose” (23). Tisean never regains custody of Jajuan before she dies, thus, bringing her carceral death to fruition.

through the atmosphere. Tisean gets stuck within the carceral web when Ms. Wells implicates the State in her family, when she starts robbing banks to get the money for her court date, and when she fails to prove herself at court because after she is murdered. This carceral web is rhizomatically⁶³ entangled within the Cartography of Witnessing. Unlike a normal spider's web which has a start point and is beautifully patterned, this cinematic carceral web is an ugly haunting that shows no sign of beginning or end, providing little space for movement. Though Tisean is entrapped within this web, she persists to fight the violence the State inflicts upon her life by eventually agreeing to rob banks with her friends.

Tisean advances her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman after their second bank heist. During this heist Tisean played the role of a distressed bank hostage while surveilling under cover security. In her role she stopped a security from shooting Stony. This directly contrasts to her character during the first heist where she abandoned them because of her own fear. Following their second heist, the women hide their money in a wall vent at their worksite. They plan to continue working at *Luther's* for a few days to avoid suspicion before skipping town. When they show up to their worksite the day after hiding the money in the vent, they are informed by their new boss that Luther has quit the janitorial business (1:20:50). Frankie and Cleo quickly recognize there is only one reason Luther would have suddenly quit the business--- he found their money in the wall vent. They run to the wall vent in a panic. Tisean runs behind them and they search the vent only to confirm the money is gone (1:22:22). The three of them visit Black Sam, the underground arms dealer, for protection before they scout Luther to confront him. This visit back to the underground space advances Tisean's transformation. Her sartorial

⁶³ Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

performance— industrial janitorial clothing—mirrors the industrial jumpsuit she wears during their final and her most radical heist. Too, she returns to the “Blacks with guns” image that defines the Black Revolutionary Woman as machine guns litter the scenographic space of Big Sam’s underground gun shop (1:22:20). This underground space radicalizes her in preparation for their confrontation with Luther.

Tisean completes her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman when she visually witnesses herself become a killer after she enters the blood-stained portal. Cleo, Frankie, and Tisean storm Luther’s motel room where he indulges a sex worker (1:22:33). The room’s mise-en-scene is lit by a red neon light and this red light foreshadows the blood-stained portal. Cleo bursts through the door and hits him in the back of the head with her gun. She confronts him about the stolen money and instructs Frankie and Tisean to look for hidden money in the room. The camera pans the scenographic space and reveals the expensive jewelry and items he bought with their money. While Cleo is distracted examining his purchases and looking for the money, Luther draws his gun on her. Cleo surrenders, two shots rang, and Luther suddenly falls to the floor revealing Tisean as the shooter behind him. Here, she enters the blood-stained portal. Her shock and disbelief in shooting and killing Luther consume her face as Frankie slowly disarms her. Tisean’s disbelief suggests her killing is a visual witnessing and not an experiential one. Shooting Luther was a reactionary out-of-body experience for her, though she *sees* herself shoot him. This killing takes her through the blood-stained portal and transforms her to a Black Revolutionary Woman. This transformation is later emphasized during the final heist where she

confidently embodies the persona of a revolutionary for the first time, before she is shot during a standoff with the police and later dies her carceral death.⁶⁴

Cleo

Like Tisean, the film introduces Cleo as a citizen who paradoxically aligns with the U.S. State via her sartorial performance and her work. In the beginning of the film, Stony hosts a 70's themed high school graduation party for Stevie (6:50). The scene begins with a camera focus on closed-down factory on the right side of a white fence before panning left to reveal Stevie's party guests outside their home on the other side of the fence dancing in their 70's themed costumes to the diegetic sound of "Flashlight" by *Parliament* (7:00). This introductory scene invokes the postindustrial ghetto with the Black Funk/Soul era, creating a temporal oasis in the 90s ghettocentric imagination.⁶⁵ Stony, Tisean, Stevie, and the other party goers don beautiful Black 70s funk aesthetics. Cleo emerges in the party scene sporting her natural afro, black sunglasses, an oversized black sweatshirt, and baggy jeans (7:24). Her clothing is the quintessential 90s Black urban masculine aesthetic and she thereby refuses convergence with the 70s oasis that Stony creates with this party. Moreover, her clothing signifies a sartorial connection with the deviance/criminality associated with this Black masculine aesthetic and represents her queerness as a butch lesbian (though the film witness does not know she is queer so early in the movie). At once, Cleo's introductory sartorial performance and presence is a representational refusal of the U.S. State and an alignment with State values (via celebrating Stevie's graduation).

⁶⁴ Her standoff with the police also conjures the historical memory of Black Panther Women in shoot-outs with the police.

⁶⁵ See Keeling, Kara. "'ghetto Heaven': Set It Off and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2003, pp. 33–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2003.11413202> for an extended discussion on how this scene ties the film to the 1970s Blaxploitation era.

Her contentious alignment with the State is further drawn out by her work experience. First, the film witness sees her formal employment at *Luther's Janitorial* during Luther's introductory scene (10:05). When Luther accosts Tisean for improperly recycling, Cleo defends her saying, "Hey, come on now, that ain't right! ...Aye, you know you one cold-hearted motherfucker, Luther" (11:40). Cleo's defense represents her attempt to maintain employee rights in the workplace and thus her ability to be an upstanding citizen. Second, her enthusiasm for bank heisting following Frankie's unjust termination indicates she is not loyal to the State and is willing to deviate at a moment's notice (13:30). Third, Cleo's entanglement with the carcel web reveals her misalignment with the State. This entanglement manifests in her prior convictions for stealing cars for Black Sam and her assumed guiltiness for killing Luther (though Tisean was shooter) which results in her participation in a forced lineup for murder⁶⁶ (1:25:06). Together, Cleo's ebb and flow between formal work and the underground economy (carjacking, armed robbery, bank heisting) illuminates her contentious relationship with the State.

Cleo's affective witnessing of Jajuan's removal and Tisean's murder advances her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman. After Ms. Wells inform Tisean that the State will retain custody of her son, she walks away leaving Tisean distraught and pleading for her child (38:15). The film witness sees Cleo hurt, angry, and upset about Jajaan's removal and Ms. Wells' cold demeanor. The fracture of Tisean's family is also a fracture in Cleo's kinship with Tisean and the others. Returning to Dorothy Roberts' *Torn Apart*, she explains the domino effect of family separation. She writes, "Family destruction has historically functioned as a chief

⁶⁶ Following Luther's murder, Detective Strode demands Cleo participate in a lineup stating, "Which one of you girls smoked Luther? I'm thinking it was you Cleo because you're the only one with any priors" (1:25:14). Though anybody could have killed Luther (the sex worker did not reveal the murderer), Detective strode assumes it is Cleo because of her proximity to Luther and her criminal tie to the carceral web via her "priors".

instrument of group oppression in the United States. The family is the critical social institution that serves as a caring shield around its members to protect them from totalitarian dictates of government officials... Rupturing families within a group is a means of oppressing the entire group” (Roberts 87-88). In this way, CPS’s removal of Jajuan fractures the protagonist’s kinship, and Cleo’s revolutionary resistance emerges from the crevices of this fracture. This emergence is reified when she grabs Tisean and says, “Fuck this shit. You know what you gotta do. You know,” before storming off in anger (38:20). Jajuan’s forced removal advances her revolutionary transformation.

Likewise, Cleo’s visual and affective witnessing of Tisean’s murder advances her transformation and pushes her through the blood-stained portal (1:34:20- 1:41:26). Their final and most risky heist is induced by their fear of imprisonment for killing Luther. Detective Strode is closer to concurrently solving Luther’s murder case and uncovering their identities in their prior two heists. As such, Detective Strode ends his briefing⁶⁷ session at Downton Federal Bank where Stony’s new lover, Keith, works just before the protagonists enter the bank (1:34:05). Cleo, Stony, and Tisean successfully grab the money and make their way toward the exit as Frankie sits in the get-away car (1:37:02). Suddenly, Detectives Strode and Waller appear from behind a pillar and demand they surrender (1:37:07). The protagonists enter a stand-off with the police. This represents the most transformative revolutionary advancement for the protagonists as the “blacks with guns” image reemerges (See Figure 2). Detective Strode performs affective witnessing using performative empathy to persuade their surrender. He exclaims:

Detective Strode: Stony! Don’t do this! Don’t do this! Cleo. No! No! Stony, I know the deal, I do. And I’m sorry about your brother. I’m sorry about Stevie. I’m sorry he’s dead. I swear to God. But don’t do this. Stevie was enough! He was enough. No more killing.

⁶⁷ Detective Strode and his precinct warns several banks in the area about the four-woman organized gang who successfully robs banks. He analyzes the security tapes for the bankers so they are aware that they are vulnerable.

Put the weapon down. Stevie was enough. Stony, put it down. Come on. There you go. Cleo, come on. Come on. (1:37:07).

Stony and Tisean slowly surrender; Cleo, however, refuses. Her refusal signifies her loyalty to the “blacks with guns” revolutionary image. In an unexpected turn of events, two security guards run in front of the detectives and shoot Tisean in the chest, twice, as a red cloud of blood emanates from her chest (1:38:07).

Here, Cleo enters the blood-stained portal, and this further advances her transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman. Immediately, Cleo begins shooting at the security and detectives with tears in her eyes. Her tears confirm that she also affectively witnessed Tisean’s shooting. After Stony empties her clip in the shootout, she grabs Tisean and drags her out of the bank. Cleo continues to shoot her automatic weapon screaming, “Ah! Mutherfucker!” with her shots filling the cacophony of the diegetic sounds (1:38:20). The camera cuts to Frankie sitting in the get-away car across the street, alarmed by the gunshots before she initiates a hard U-turn in front of the bank (1:38:26). Stony drags Tisean into the stolen get-away car, Cleo grabs the bag of money, and hops in the car, too. She continues shooting out of the window at the detectives as Frankie reverses the car from the scene. Cleo maintains her “blacks with guns” persona and their escape officially mark them as fugitives, much like actual Black Panther women. They drive to their connecting stop to switch cars and while Cleo and Frankie start Cleo’s car, Tisean dies in Stony’s arms (1:41:00). Cleo drives up to the get-away car and bursts into tears when she sees Tisean’s lifeless body (1:41:26). This is the *first* moment the film witness sees Cleo’s vulnerability in this way. Her affective and visual witnessing of Tisean’s death transforms her.

Cleo completes her transformation and passage through the blood-stained portal during her last standoff with police (1:47:00). During the chase, Cleo stops in a tunnel and tells Frankie and Stony to exit the car and run in the opposite direction, she intends to draw the police away

from them and promises to “catch up with y’all later” (1:45:07). Reluctantly Frankie and Stony leave the car to escape in the opposite direction while Cleo drives off. Eventually, the police catch up to her and block her passage. The bird’s eye 360 rotating camera view emphasizes Cleo’s entrapment. She begins to cry and light a cigarette and her tears evoke her affective witnessing of State violence and her connection to the blood-stained portal (1:47:57). Surprisingly, Cleo does not surrender, instead, she drives through the police vehicles and stops shortly once she escapes their circular entrapment. They pierce her vehicle with a barrage of bullets and she is assumed dead.

Suddenly, the driver door opens, Cleo emerges from her car with the automatic gun in hand (1:49:07). Cleo shoots at the police officers and they return fire, piercing and jolting her body with excessive bullets as she experientially witnesses the final lashings of State violence. The same red atmospheric cloud (representing blood) that emanated from Tisean’s chest bursts through Cleo’s chest and signifies her complete passage through the blood-stained portal. The excessive bullets force her body to about-face and land on her open driver door. She clenches both fists—visual markings of Black Power—to grasp the bit of remaining life in her body. Christopher Young’s song, “Up Against the Wind” partially mutes the diegetic cacophony of gunshots, forcing the film witness to sit with the image of Cleo’s murder and orchestrating our affective reaction to her death. The opening lyrics of the song read: “Day after day/ Seems like I push against the clouds”. The extra-diegetic music exemplifies the audio witness account of Cleo’s resistance to the atmospheric violence of the State. Day after day, she pushed against the atmospheric cloud of the State until her carceral death.⁶⁸ In her final moment, she dies on her

⁶⁸ I argue Cleo’s excessive and spectacular death was a result of her contentious convergence of Blackness, masculinity, and queerness, which by the State’s measure, demands an orchestration of excessive State violence. In the film her body is a cultural marker of incivility, and thus evokes an overly aggressive response from the State. See Kara Keeling’s essay “Ghetto Heaven” for more on Cleo’s spectacular death.

back with both fists partially closed like Frankie. Cleo's transformation to a Black Revolutionary Woman and her passage the blood-stained portal are complete (1:49:54).

“Still, I Will Get By”⁶⁹: Atmospheric Transmutations of Carceral Death

This section of the chapter is a ponderance and refusal to accept Tisean's, Frankie's, and Stony's deaths. As a film witness who sympathizes with and champions the protagonists, I could not let them die. As such, I return to the image of the small red clouds of blood that emanate from the trio's chests when they are fatally shot. I do not consider these red clouds as mere imperfect movie props that signify blood, or visual markings of the blood-stained portal. Instead, I suggest that these red clouds are atmospheric transmutations of their lives and not the finality of a carceral death. All the Black women discussed in this chapter pass through the blood-stained portal, including Chantel. However, Chantel's and Stony's (via Stevie) bloody encounter is not characterized by particles, but streams of liquid. And, neither of them dies after their bloody encounter. What if Tisean, Frankie, and Cleo did not die either?

I suppose their final bloody encounter characterized by the red clouds, is an atmospheric transmutation of their lives. To support my consideration on the interruption of death, I turn to Soyica Colbert's *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*. In her first chapter, “Flying Africans in Spaceships” she posits “the Flying African narrative—a storytelling form of black movements—interrupts the finality of black death produced through processes of dehumanization in the Americas.”⁷⁰ In other words, this narrative is “fundamentally about theft of life from the social and physical death of slavery” (including the afterlives of slavery) (Colbert

⁶⁹ This is a lyric from the film's soundtrack song, “Missing You”. The song plays at the end of the film as Stony, the lone survivor, reflect on the memories of her deceased friends. The song affirms that Stony “will get by” despite the traumatic events that have unfolded. In this section, I toy with the possibility that Tisean, Frankie, and Cleo “get by” as well in their afterlives.

⁷⁰ Young, Dominique. “(Book Review) Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics, by Soyica Diggs Colbert.” *Women's Studies*, vol. 48, no. 6, 2019, pp. 639–642.

23). According to Colbert, the “Flying Africans Narrative contains four pivotal moments: [1] the depiction of exhausting labor, [2] a confrontation with a brutal figure expressing coercive power, [3] an enunciation on the part of the African gifted with supernatural powers, and [4] a vision of an African or a mass of Africans flying away” (Colbert 23).

As such, I place Tisean, Frankie, and Cleo within this narrative framework to reconsider their carceral deaths: (1) the film witness sees the depiction of their exhausting labor at *Luther’s Janitorial*, (2) the protagonists confront the brutal coercive power of Detective Strode, (3) their two successful amateur bank heist represents their supernatural powers, and (4) if dying becomes flying and thus the prolonging of life, the red clouds signify their transmutational flying from their unalived bodies. Their atmospheric blood-stained portal scenes confirm that the transformation of their characters also meant they were threats to the State. In turn, their witnessing scenes are simultaneously the State witnessing their agency and refusal to relinquish their power. In the end I hold on to the possibility that Tisean, Frankie, and Cleo, are still alive and like Chantel and Stony, their resistance is successful by the end of the film.

Conclusion

Just Another Girl on the I.R.T. and *Set It Off* both explore the atmospheric violence that surrounds the lives of the Black women and girl protagonists. For Chantel, this violence lingers within her living environment, her OBGYN’s office, and in the State’s orchestration of her birthing process. In the case of Frankie, this violence surrounds her at the bank and in her later confrontation with Detective Strode. For Stony, this violence lives in the interstices between her life, Stevie’s life, and her friends’ lives. Tisean’s witnesses this violence in the hospital when CPS confiscates her son, and again when she is shot and killed at the bank. The violence that surrounds Cleo became most apparent in her final death scene. Witnessing is the framework that

makes this violence sensible, magnifying the violence from invisible particles to tangible matter. Witnessing acknowledges blood shed as transformational portals that lend way to a legitimized resistance. Both Chantel's and the four-women clique's challenge to the State's violent orchestration of motherhood and poverty, cinematically continues the legacy of Black women's fight for reproductive justice and the resistance of the Black Panther Party, respectively.

Chapter 3:

A Panoptic Cartography of Incarceration: Tracing Fugitivity in Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999)

The word that niggas wanna murk you is in the air.
--Jadakiss, "New York" (2004)

The concept of fugitivity highlights the tension between the acts or flights of escape and creative practices of refusal, nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant.
--Tina Campt, *Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity* (2014)

Paranoid mind, I'm still under the watchful eye of the law...
--Pusha T, "So Appalled" (2010)

I begin this chapter with a meditation on the literary tradition of Black women and girls taking flight. I am not merely concerned with *why* they have gone on the run nor am I only concerned with *where* they intended to arrive. I focus my attention on the physical spaces these Black women and girls have encountered on their fugitive journey and the way these spaces have supported or interrupted their journey toward an Elsewhere. How does Harriet Jacobs' time spent in her grandmother's garret interrupt the haptic terror of Dr. Flint? What powers in the outhouse imbue Janie with the ability to fatally shoot her lover, Tea Cake, to protect herself from his rabid madness? What makes up the geography of *Happy's* that shields Ursa from Mutt's violence inside of the bar as opposed to the outside? Is it the sonic waves of the blues music? What structures lend way to Harker and Nathan freeing Dessa from the cellar? Why are oppressive spaces like the Bureau of Child Welfare girls' home easier to manipulate for Winter than are free spaces?⁷¹

⁷¹ In my consideration of physical spaces and fleeing, I situate *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) within a brief literary genealogy starting with Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1862), Gayle Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), and Sherley Ann William's *Dessa Rose* (1986).

My consideration of space with Black girls and women fleeing is the theme that underscores this chapter. Specifically, I turn my attention to 16-year-old protagonist, Winter, in Sister Souljah's novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999). Popular readings of this novel center themes involving coming-of-age stories, sex and romance, street life, and hip-hop discourses. However, this chapter departs from the popular coming-of-age readings and builds on the will-to-survive narrative. I consider the importance of physical spaces for the developing political potential of Winter for pushing back against the surveilling and usurping power of the U.S. carceral State. In this chapter I argue Winter embodies the spirit of a fugitive and uses intending oppressive physical spaces to negotiate and reclaim some power while she is on the run. Though her fugitive journey does not end in freedom, I maintain the importance of her journey in that her emerging political potential draws a cartography of incarceration that highlights Black feminist efforts in search of freedom.

The next section offers a brief literature review of popular readings on *The Coldest Winter Ever*. After, I introduce my framework to understand the sequence of events in Winter's journey. I begin this framework acknowledging the signification of Winter's mother, Mrs. Santiago, getting shot in the face during a drive-by attack against her drug kingpin husband, Ricky Santiago. After, I analyze the importance of Winter's commitment to her sartorial performances of luxury as a fugitive. Following this analysis, I turn to my next section of the chapter, focusing on physical spaces. In this section I analyze specific scenes in the novel where Winter uses State-owned spaces to usurp power and guide her journey to freedom. I begin with the space of the Santiagas' new Long Island home as a representation of spatial freedom before Winter is catapulted into fugitivity. After the FBI raids the Santiago house and incarcerates

Ricky on a RICO charge, Winter's nuclear family structure disintegrates and forces her to flee for survival.

In her movement toward freedom, Winter uses the space of luxury retail stores to upkeep a sartorial performance of freedom, she reconfigures the space of the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW) to lie about her identity to avoid capture, she alters the geography of the BCW-owned girls group home (when she eventually gets captured) to hustle her House of Success co-inhabitants to make money outside of her government-allotted allowance to buy her freedom, and she exploits the BCW's psychiatrist's office to escape surveillance by offering a fabricated story of psychological disability. Winter manipulates oppressive State spaces to her own advantage and conversely, freedom spaces (her father's house, her aunt's house, public spaces) fail to prevent her capture. It is on the State's terrain where Winter's true fugitive political potential emerges. Though Winter's escape and freedom fail by the end of the novel, I maintain the importance of calling attention to Winter's political potential, as a Black girl, in search for freedom in 1990s popular culture.

Contextualizing *The Coldest Winter Ever*

Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) has long been discussed as a novel about the NYC urban landscape, as a representation of hip hop feminism, iconography of street literature, Black love, and a coming-of-age story for a young Black girl growing up in the crime ridden streets of 1990's Brooklyn. In writing about the novel, scholars like Stephane Dunn, Kimberly A. Kollins, and Shahara'Tova Venece Dente have contributed to the rich discourse surrounding Souljah's work and they have also contributed to the canonization efforts by writing about her novel in formal, academic mediums. In "A Hip Hop, Afro-Feminist Aesthetic of Love: Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*" Stephane Dunn argues for the recognition of the afro-

feminist aesthetic of love and its link to African diasporic consciousness. In her essay she writes, “[Souljah’s] aesthetic of love here engages discourse about love as a radical spiritual, political, and social force for black people in the late twentieth century which have been articulated by such black critical thinkers such as bell hooks and Cornel West, and James Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr. before them” (Dunn 40). Here, Dunn situates *The Coldest Winter Ever* within a canonical literary tradition that engages the meaning of love for Black people. Kimberly A Collins in *Expanding the Canon*⁷² and Shahara’Tova Venece Dente in *Creeping into the Conversation*⁷³ continue canonization efforts in their thesis and dissertation by situating the novel alongside the work of Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Lousie Meriweather. They posit the “continuities and discontinuities in themes across other Black women’s canonical and non-canonical texts,” and contend that Souljah’s novel lays a foundation for Hip Hop literature by highlighting community and family amongst African American women while also centering African American girls, respectively. Other scholars like Aneeka Ayanna Henderson in *View and Vow*⁷⁴ and Shakima Wells in *Black Female Sexuality*⁷⁵ posit the novel illuminates how Winter’s anti-revolutionary desire for hypergamy leads to the same tragic fate as Black women who “marry down,” and the novel also reflects alternative versions of Black female sexuality, respectively.

⁷² Collins, Kimberly A. “*Expanding the Canon*”: *Sister Souljah and Sapphire, Two Non-Canonical Black Female Writers Carving out Space to Shape the Black Female Image Within the Tradition of Black Female Writer*. Proquest Information and Learning Company, 2008.

⁷³ Dente, Shahara’Tova Venece. *Creeping into the Conversation: Tracing Hip Hop Literature from Margin to Center*. ProQuest LLC, 2016.

⁷⁴ Henderson, Aneeka Ayanna. “Marrying Up.” *View and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2020.

⁷⁵ Wells, Shakima, and Lovalerie King. *Black Female Sexuality in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Sula (1973) and the Coldest Winter Ever (1999)*. 2004.

I align with Collins' and Dente's efforts to pay closer attention to *The Coldest Winter Ever* not merely as a practice of canonization efforts, but also as an effort to champion and value the lives of "problematic" Black girls from the hood. In continuing their efforts for this novel, I highlight Winter's political potential in her journey rather than focus on her limitations and I avoid harsh critiques of Winter (who is just a minor born into an environment she had no control over). By doing this, I situate Winter within a Black feminist discursive genealogy. Simultaneously, I also consider this chapter a tangential part of the growing field of Black Girl Studies, though I do not engage works from the field directly. The next section of this chapter outlines my framework for understanding Winter's story in the novel.

Circular Fugitivity

Fugitivity is central to my understanding and analysis of Winter's attempted escape from the carceral State in the novel. I draw from the works of Fred Moten, Hortense Spillers, and Jennifer Nash to define her journey as Circular Fugitivity, a phrase that reflects the overlap of Winter's beginning and end points in her journey toward freedom. In constructing my understanding of fugitivity in *The Coldest Winter Ever*, I turn to Fred Moten's discussion of fugitivity in *Stolen Life*. Among several definitions of fugitivity in the book, Moten defines fugitivity as "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument" (Moten 131). As such, this definition of fugitivity acknowledges a freedom that does not exist in the present or the inside, as Moten implies—it exists in a future, on the outside. I draw from Moten to understand Winter's escape and journey to freedom as an embodiment of the "spirit of escape" that unfortunately, never reaches "the outside".

I define Circular Fugitivity as a journey in search of freedom that does not end in the possibility of freedom or an elsewhere.⁷⁶ Instead, it is a fugitive journey that begins and ends with hieroglyphic maternal flesh. I borrow Hortense Spillers' term⁷⁷ here to consider the implication of Winter's fugitive journey beginning with her mother, Mrs. Santiago, getting shot in the face and ending with Simone, a former friend of Winter, slashing her face with a broken glass bottle. I contend Mrs. Santiago's and Winter's shared hieroglyphic maternal flesh—the laceration and wounding of the face—marks the beginning and end of Winter's fugitive journey with Winter being incarcerated after this fight with her former friend (Souljah 276). Mrs. Santiago is shot in the face in an attack against her drug kingpin husband, Ricky Santiago. As a result, Ricky is incarcerated for his retaliation and related charges, and subsequently their house and properties are seized, and their youngest three children are taken by the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW). The shooting marks the catalyst for Winter's escape from BCW while helping her mother secure her father's and her siblings' freedom from the carceral State.

The circularity of Winter's journey that I emphasize in my framework is not intended to trace a perfect circular regional path of her escape, rather, it emphasizes that like a circle, her path begins and ends at the same locus. Winter's hieroglyphic maternal flesh by the end of the novel links her to Mrs. Santiago's hieroglyphic maternal flesh and catapults her back to the beginning of her fugitive status: a wounded face with the looming threat of incarceration. In

⁷⁶ Other scholars who have written about Black fugitivity include Saidiya Hartman, Angela Davis, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Katherine McKittrick, Tina Campt, and Damien Sojoyner to name a few.

⁷⁷ In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" Hortense Spillers defines "undecipherable markings on the captive body [as a] kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh" (67). While I am not reading Mrs. Santiago nor Winter as enslaved captives, I do recognize they are held captive within the carceral web as shown by their inability to escape by the end of the novel. Though Spillers recognize the hieroglyphics of flesh on ungendered Black bodies in captivity, I maintain the importance of gender in my reading of hieroglyphic maternal flesh as it is the wounding of the mother figures—Mrs. Santiago and Winter—that catalyzes and interrupts Winter's fugitive journey.

other words, Winter's hieroglyphic maternal flesh redirects her fugitive journey back to the original locus, hence the "circular" in *Circular Fugitivity*. Moreover, like a circle, Winter's journey is intersected by different loci that illustrate her political potential for freedom before her journey's return to the beginning. These additional loci on her path include an emergence of political sartorial performances, and paradoxical relationships to State-governed spaces.

I turn to Nash's reading of Serena Williams' and Beyonce's attempt to circumvent the "ur-text of Black death" associated with Black motherhood (Nash 552) to emphasize the importance of Winter's fugitive sartorial performances. In "Black Maternal Aesthetics" Nash contends, "that this black maternal aesthetic—one that at times takes up, and at times refuses death as the condition of black maternal life—uses its explicit commitment to aesthetics to cloak its political and ethical work" (Nash 553). Here, Nash acknowledges the power of aesthetics to interrupt the concomitant social death of Black motherhood. Winter becomes a mother-figure the moment she enters her fugitive status as she is responsible for supporting her newly disabled mother and securing the freedom of her father and younger siblings. She also embodies the mother-figure literally when she becomes pregnant later in the novel. As such, reading Winter as a mother-figure lends to an analysis of her performance of Black maternal aesthetics. As I later argue in this chapter, her Black Maternal aesthetic is represented by her commitment to wearing designer and fashionable clothes on her fugitive journey. Winter's sartorial performance is not merely a façade of composure in the face of homelessness; I contend this performance is a Black maternal aesthetic of refusing the ur-text of death that accompanies her fugitive journey. In other words, this aesthetic is a politicized sartorial performance that both attempts to refuse ensuing (social) death and censor the process of social dying.

The remaining loci that appear in *Circular Fugitivity* before returning to the locus of hieroglyphic maternal flesh are the oppressive State spaces where Winter's political potential continues. These spaces include the Macy's interrogation room, the State-funded House of Success girls home, and the psychiatrist's office. I draw from Katherine McKittrick and Cathy Cohen to consider how oppressive State spaces paradoxically imbue Winter with the political potential for freedom, and conversely, Winter employs what I call Reconfigurative Geography. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick calls philosophical attention to human geography. In her analysis of space, she articulates the instability of space and its vulnerability to everchanging meanings (McKittrick x). She grounds this theory in her analysis of the materiality of the slave ship. McKittrick writes:

To return to my earlier example, the slave ship is not stable and unchanging; it is a site of violent subjugation that reveals, rather than conceals, the racial-sexual location of black cultures in the face of unfreedoms. The physicality of the slave ship, then, contributes to the *process* of social concealment and dehumanization but, importantly, black subjectivity is not swallowed up by the ship itself. Rather, the ship, its crew, black subjects, the ocean and ports, make geography what it is, a location through which a moving technology can create differential and contextual histories (McKittrick xii).

In other words, colonized spaces are not stable and unchanging, they produce *processes* of dehumanization. As such, these unstable processes can be reconfigured to produce alternative meanings that may end in “[B]lack resistance, and in some cases, [B]lack possession”

(McKittrick xi).

Similarly, in “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics” Cathy Cohen calls for a focus on the oppositional politics that emerge in the space of poor, Black communities. She asserts:

Scholars, especially those interested in the evolving nature of Black politics, must take seriously the possibility that in the space created by deviant discourse and practice, especially in Black communities, a new radical politics of deviance could emerge. It might take the shape of a radical politics of the personal, embedded in more recognized Black counter publics, where the

most marginal individuals in Black communities, with an eye on the state and other regulatory systems, act with the limited agency available to them to secure small levels of autonomy in their lives (Cohen 30).

In this way, Cohen recognizes “deviant spaces” and their accompanying Black actors (citizens) as architects of a radical politics catalyzed by their limited agency. I situate the reconfiguring work Winter does in State spaces to reclaim some of her power on her fugitive journey at the intersection of McKittrick’s and Cohen’s considerations of space. By extension, I define Reconfigurative Geography as the act of usurping and exploiting the interstices within the processes of dehumanization located in these oppressive spaces. It is a geography that is not merely unfixed or unsettled, it is a geography in motion. Winter’s usurpation and exploitation of power in these spaces represent her emerging political potential. As I later discuss, for example, her ability to exploit the insecurities of her co-inhabitants in the BCW group home does not merely represent her cleverness or skill for survival; this ability represents her reconfiguration of the social processes meant to keep her contained in the group home. The geography in “Reconfigurative Geography” refers to a human geography that McKittrick calls “[B]lack women’s geographies (such as their knowledges, negotiations, and experiences)” (McKittrick x). Taken together, Winter’s ability to bend the power of the State at once represents her ability to reconfigure space, design new human and spatial geographies, and assign new meanings to these alternative productions.

In sum, Circular Fugitivity is an enclosed journey that intersects with the possibilities of freedom. This kind of fugitivity begins with the hieroglyphic maternal flesh and its accompanying “phonography or deviant recordings”⁷⁸ (Moten 130): the unmentioned sound of

⁷⁸ Moten, Fred. *Stolen Life*, Duke University Press, 2018. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umdcp/detail.action?docID=5455684>.

the gunshot aimed at Mrs. Santiago's face and the sound of Winter's muffled cries after learning her mother was shot (Souljah 32). This phonograph recording (the sound of the injurious gunshot) metaphorically represents a starter pistol, directing Winter on her race against time on her fugitive track/ journey. The next locus on the circular fugitive journey is the emergence of Winter's Black Maternal Aesthetic—her commitment to sartorial performances of luxury as a fugitive. After, Winter employs reconfigurative geography when she is present within State governed spaces. This geography manifests in the discursive, psychological, and physical rearrangement of social processes. And finally, after Winter has exercised her political potential, she is brought back to the starting locus by the “deviant recording” of the broken glass bottle aimed at her face, thus carving her hieroglyphic maternal flesh before her incarceration. This is the journey of Circular Fugitivity in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999). The next section of this paper analyzes specific scenes in the novel that traces Winter's fugitive journey.

Tracing Fugitivity in *The Coldest Winter Ever*

Before Winter enters her circular fugitive journey, the Santiago family indulges a spatial freedom marked by their move from Brooklyn, New York to Long Island, New York. Santiago moves his family to a Long Island suburb to protect them from his drug kingpin operation in Brooklyn. Winter, though dissatisfied with their relocation, reluctantly accepts their new house.

She says:

Oohs and aahs were the only sounds anybody could hear as my three little sisters were completely won over by the drive through the fancy big-money Long Island neighborhoods. As my dad's Lexus zoomed up the winding tree-lined driveway, the clean snow dropped onto the car windows, adding to their amazement. The way I figured it they were young so they were quick to betray Brooklyn. The huge doors to our new home looked more expensive than our entire old apartment. The warmth in the house invited us in, yet and still Santiago lit the fireplace. More like a museum, there was enough space in this joint to fit seven or so families. It was so wide we could even park our cars indoors if we wanted. The floors were made of white marble, huge three foot by three foot squares, to hell with tiles and linoleum. Momma sprawled out on top of the white mink rug that poppa had laid out in front of the fireplace. The way she

sunk into that fur and the way her eyes were twice their normal size made me know we were here to stay. The icing for Momma was when Santiago said, “It’s all for you to decorate any way that you like”. Although I wanted to be in Brooklyn, I could see that this is the way a man like Santiago is supposed to live” (Souljah 13).

This elaborate description of their new house reveals two functions of their relocation. Firstly, the new house represents rootedness and attachment to space as illustrated by “the warmth in the house invit[ing]” them in (Souljah 13). As McKittrick contends in *Demonic Grounds*, “earth is also skin and...a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with” (McKittrick ix). Their relocation to this new house also characterizes their possession of the street, and thus a grounding to a place. This attachment juxtaposes their family’s later displacement when Santiago is incarcerated and their family separates.

Secondly, this new house illustrates their spatial freedom. This freedom is emphasized through the largeness of their home and the whiteness that adorns the house (white snow outside, white marble floors, white mink rug). The large and relatively empty house imbues Mrs. Santiago with the power to employ reconfigurative geography as highlighted by Santiago saying “It’s all for you to decorate it anyway you like” (Souljah 13). I read Mrs. Santiago’s ability to decorate their home beyond a simple furnishing. In this space she orchestrates the “designers, carpenters, locksmiths, and tailors” (Souljah13) to create a haven for their family in a new, empty space, and thus exhibits an arrangement of social processes that produce safety. Though the racist and discriminatory legacy⁷⁹ of White suburban Long Island haunts their new home (and perhaps contributes to the reason why their home is later seized by the Feds), Mrs. Santiago uses reconfigurative geography to secure a temporary freedom for their family.

⁷⁹ Keogh, Tim. *In Levittown's Shadow: Poverty in America's Wealthiest Postwar Suburb*. University of Chicago Press, 2023

However, their temporary freedom is upended by the wounding of Mrs. Santiago's face. Annoyed with her husband's command to stay out of Brooklyn, she demands to travel with Santiago on his next drive to Brooklyn. Tragically, Santiago's enemies shoot Mrs. Santiago in the face during a planned drive-by. After Mrs. Santiago is taken to the hospital to undergo surgery, Midnight, Santiago's protege, drives the Santiago girls to the hospital where he informs Winter of the news:

"Come here, I got to tell you something... Your mother is in the hospital. She's been shot." My whole mind went blank. It was like someone took an eraser, the type they clean the blackboard with in school, and just wiped everything out. One second later my mouth was screaming. My mind was blank. My body was cold (Souljah 32).

I return to Fred Moten's definition of fugitivity in *Stolen Life* to analyze Winter's response. I contend this is the first scene where the reader witnesses what Moten coins the "spirit of escape" (Moten 131). Winter's description of "someone" erasing her mind until it is blank characterizes the spirit of escape subsuming her body after she learns of Mrs. Santiago's shooting. I maintain, her mind is "blank" because it is the consciousness of the spirit of escape that has taken over, a consciousness that she does not have access to (yet). Furthermore, the actual escape manifests in the phonograph recording that accompanies her shock. Moten describes these "phonograph and deviant recordings" as fugitivity and rebellion manifested in sound—a resistant aurality, a murmur laden with a history of complaint (Moten 130- 131). In this way, I read Winter's scream as the attendant phonetic marking of the beginning of her fugitive journey. Her screams exemplify the spirit of escape as she differentiates *my mouth was screaming* as opposed to saying "*I was screaming*". This differentiation parallels her blank mind—both the disconnected consciousness and the differentiated screams are evidence of the spirit inducing her physical body to go on the run. Taken together, Mrs. Santiago's hieroglyphic maternal flesh and Winter's accompanying screams trace the beginning of her fugitive journey.

Winter's haptic connection to Mrs. Santiago's hieroglyphic maternal flesh initiates her predetermined end-locus in her journey. Her mother returns to their new home for the first time after her life-saving surgery. Mrs. Santiago's youngest children are dismayed by her new face.

Winter, however, attempts to assuage her mother's insecurity:

Mother was out of the confinement of her room and moving slowly throughout the house. Her mouth was still crooked and her face stiff and slightly swollen. She wouldn't go outside because of the embarrassment of her appearance... I knew she was feeling bad... "Momma, you're looking good today," I lied. "I can see where you're healing." I touched the left side of her face with two fingers (Souljah 49).

At cursory glance, Winter's touch is an assuring motion for Mrs. Santiago to feel better about her new human geography.⁸⁰ However, I advance this reading of Winter's touch to argue that this physical connection with her mother's face is a haptic connection to her own flesh. I turn to the work of Annette-Carina van der Zaag to help me think through the possibilities that emerge when one touches the wounds of another. In "Touching Wounds: On the Fugitivity of Stigma," Zaag contemplates the ways in which "hieroglyphics of flesh give us knowledge of ourselves and others..." (Zaag 37). She leads her essay with a philosophical question, "What does it mean to think of the wound as an opening of the body onto and into other bodies—a haptic fleshiness that weaves a fabric through which we might find one another?" (Zaag 38). I situate my understanding of Winter's hieroglyphic maternal flesh and eventual incarceration in the answer to Zaag's question.

To think of the wound as an opening of the body onto and into other bodies is to consider the touching of Mrs. Santiago's wound as a teleological gesture for Winter's own hieroglyphic

⁸⁰ As McKittrick argues, geography manifests in the human form, and as such, I read Mrs. Santiago's new face as the result of a different kind of Reconfigurative Geography—one wherein the bullet and the doctors' scalpels have rearranged the materiality of her face to create new meaning.

maternal flesh and ensuing incarceration.⁸¹ Winter touches her mother's face with two fingers. This two-finger stance is a common gesture that doctors use to hold a patient's flesh taut before making an incision.⁸² As such, she does not merely create comfort for Mrs. Santiago by touching her wound, Winter also haptically weaves a fabric through which she finds her mature self in the same fate. And in this way, Mrs. Santiago's wound is a fleshy portal that disrupts temporality, transporting Winter through and across her mother's interior flesh only to emerge from the exteriority of her own fleshy laceration by the end of the novel. In other words, Winter's two-finger gesture is a mimetic incisional tracing of her own indelible wound and journey that ends with her mirroring hieroglyphic maternal flesh and incarceration. It is through the haptic fleshiness of Mrs. Santiago's wound, as Zaag calls it, that Winter finds her later self.

Her political fugitivity continues in her intentionally disruptive sartorial performances informed by Mrs. Santiago's own Black maternal aesthetic. In the aforementioned scene where Winter first touches Mrs. Santiago's wound, she also ensures her mother that she will return to a sense of normalcy following her assault. Winter says:

Later that evening, while Santiago was out, I pushed my mother's door open and quietly walked in. "What's up, Momma. How you feeling?" She was responding but her words were slurred. She sounded like an old-style wax record with the needle dragging on it. "OK, Momma, don't talk," I said, holding my hand up and smiling wide to make her feel comfortable... "Oh and Santiago, he's like a puppy without his woman... Don't worry, Momma. If there's anything you need, I'll get it for you. We gonna get it together." I leaned over and gave her a kiss on the forehead, then whispered in her ear, "We bad bitches, remember? Bad bitches don't die." (Souljah 47- 48).

⁸¹ Marisa Parham in *Haunting and Displacement in African American Culture* also names the phenomenon of experiencing the pain of others. She writes, "Haunting names how we experience the pain of others or, even more specifically, how the pain of others shades our own subjectivities. As a conceptualization of human relation that fundamentally depends on a sense of the individual, it also understands "individual" as a touched and tainted category, as captured in Stuart Hall's sense of the sociological self, or in Lacanian psychoanalysis' sense of selves who only come into being vis-à-vis their relations to others, through identification" (Parham 7).

⁸² Parker-Pope, Tara. "Getting Used to the Gruesome." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 Apr. 2009, archive.nytimes.com/well.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/30/getting-used-to-the-gruesome/.

Here, Mrs. Santiago literally embodies Moten's theory of the fugitive phonograph recordings via her "old-style wax record" slurred speech. Also, her slurred speech and subsequent tears signify concern for the way her new human geography affects her relationships as a wife and mother. I return to Jennifer Nash's work to consider Winter's proclamation, "bad bitches don't die," as a discursive representation of her intentionally disruptive Black maternal aesthetic. In "Black Maternal Aesthetics," Nash centers the representation and politicization of Black motherhood.

She writes:

Yet, my reading offers a critical response that centers on the representation and politicization of black motherhood, reading abundance as a politicized counter-aesthetic to the language of crisis, as the production of an additional black maternal politics that does its work through circuits that are often not understood as political precisely because the terrain of black maternal political life is so closely tethered to grief, crisis, and death (Nash 550).

Using Nash's theoretical framework, I read Mrs. Santiago's aesthetic persona of the "bad bitch" as the politicized counter-aesthetic to the language of crisis—in this case, the crisis of her wound and how it affects her motherhood. Winter describes her mother's bad bitch/Black maternal aesthetic earlier in the novel:

She was fourteen when she had me. Folks said she looked great during pregnancy and would switch her ass around the neighborhood flowing easy, like water. She would wear her fine Italian leather stiletto heels even in her seventh month. Moms had everything by the way of clothes and anything else you could think of. Her mahogany skin was smooth as a Hershey's chocolate bar. When she went anywhere she was well coordinated. If she had on a zebra skin hat, she'd sport the zebra skin pants and would have a zebra skin pattern on all ten nails. She'd even have the Victoria's Secret zebra panties and camisole...She made it clear to me that beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of. She would whisper in my ear, "I'm just a bad bitch!" (Souljah 2-3).

Mrs. Santiago's Black maternal aesthetic began disrupting the death ur-text associated with Black motherhood during her perinatal period. In Winter's claim, "she made it clear that beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of," Mrs. Santiago subverts the tethered grief, crisis, and death (Nash 550) associated with Black motherhood and reclaims care for herself. Unfortunately, the attack on Mrs. Santiago temporarily unbinds the protection of her motherhood

from her children (she almost lost her life in the shooting and subsequently fell into an isolating depression after she did survive). However, Winter's insistence on purchasing the "perfect all-leather red Adrienne Vittadini suit for [her]" and "red driving gloves that go with it real nice" (Souljah 47) simultaneously enforces her mother's Black maternal aesthetic and characterizes her own discursive politicized sartorial performances. Subsequently, Winter encourages Mrs. Santiago to dress beautifully again, regain her confidence, and fight for her family after the State confiscates her husband and younger children (Souljah 65). For Winter, indeed, "bad bitches don't die," they undress the inimical death that cloaks Black motherhood.

Winter transitions from a discursive practice of Black maternal aesthetics to a literal practice of this aesthetic on her fugitive journey. After her father's arrest, her siblings are taken by the State and her mother is left to try to piece her family back together. Winter temporarily resides with her mother's sister, Aunt B, in the interim while Mrs. Santiago attempts to get her family back. That is, until, Aunt B informs the State that Winter is staying with her and the Bureau of Child Welfare (BCW) subsequently snags Winter from her home (Souljah 120).

Winter continues to politicize (sartorial) aesthetics to advance her fugitive journey. During a wild recess from The House of Success (the BCW girls' group home), she visits a Macy's store:

Anyway, by 10A.M. I would be standing outside of Macy's on 34th street. I'd get some new shoes, maybe a moderately priced dress, then I'd toss this depressing disguise. Why should I go shopping when Lashay was going to bring my clothes? Because I wouldn't give her the pleasure of seeing me down and out. Besides looking tired, she would never know what happened to me last night, I wouldn't be caught dead in this getup by anybody that knows me (Souljah 156).

This sentiment expresses Winter's commitment to her Black maternal aesthetic for disrupting both a social and physical death. The day before her Macy's visit, Winter marginally escapes the physical threat of her former friend, Simone, and crew (Souljah 151). After Simone is arrested for stealing clothes on Winter's behalf, Winter never receives the stolen fashionable clothes, and

Simone seeks revenge when she is released from jail. Therefore, Winter wears the same tacky clothes from the day before and she visits Macy's to rewrite the narrative of her fugitive journey. Her assertion "I wouldn't give her [Lashay, her co-inhabitant] the pleasure of seeing me down and out" and "I wouldn't be caught dead in this get up by anybody that knows me" is at once a discursive practice of a culture of dissemblance⁸³ and a sartorial refusal of death as the condition of Black maternal life (Nash 553).

Winter continues to use the space of the Macy's store to develop her Black maternal aesthetic and exercise her power of reconfigurative geography. While shopping in the store, Izzy, a White male security guard, surveils her as she searches for an outfit. Frustrated with being racially profiled, Winter confronts Izzy:

I said firmly, "Yes, can I help you?"

At first he tried to have a blank look on his face. Then he stepped to me and said in a repulsively mild and courteous tone, "Do you mind If I take a look in your bag?"

"You're damn right I mind," I snapped, my natural reaction (Souljah 156).

This exchange is followed by Izzy's dilemma: search her bag or call the authorities on her.

Winter acquiesces to a bag search, fearing the legal consequences of confrontation with the police. Izzy takes advantage of Winter's vulnerability while searching through her belongings:

"Take off your skirt".

"What?"

"Take off your skirt."

"See now, you're bugging. I ain't taking off my skirt. What do you think I have, a pair of high heels hidden in my panties?"

"I've seen all types of things happen before, miss. I'm just doing my job." I looked down at this man's little hard dick poking through his pants.

"I think you're doing a little more than your job" (Souljah 158).

⁸³ Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 912–20. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692>.

Here, Izzy does not merely search Winter's bag for "stolen" merchandise, he attempts to disrupt and uncloak Winter's Black maternal aesthetic and disassemble her culture of dissemblance by demanding her to undress.

However, Winter employs reconfigurative geography to disfigure the exploitative power that Izzy exercises over her. He interrogates her in a room that mimics interrogative law enforcement/ State spaces:

"Come with me, miss." He walked me into a back room, one you wouldn't notice if you were just an ordinary customer like me, I thought.

"Sit down," he ordered. I sat in the chair right next to a silver two-way mirror. I could look out and see the customers, but I knew they couldn't see me. "Now I would like you to volunteer for me to look in your bag" (Souljah 157).

The geography of this room is a mimetic oppressive State-space (a police interrogation room) that imbues Izzy with the power to exploit Winter for his own sexual gratification. However, Winter acts as a wizard and defends herself by physically reconfiguring the room's geography during her unlawful and perverted strip-search:

Just then a lady security officer short and fat with cat woman glasses, opened the door with her key.

"Hey, what ya got in here, Izzy?" she asked, like Izzy was her best pal.

"Nothing," I answered for Izzy. I gave him a threatening look, letting him know I'd blow the whistle on his little perverted party. "We're finished right?"

"Yes, everything seems to be in order," he said. I brushed by the lady security officer and walked out swiftly and kept going until I got out on the street (Souljah 158- 159).

Prior to the lady security arriving at the scene of her strip search, Winter was under the duress of Izzy's exploitative demands. However, she employs reconfigurative geography to exploit the lady security's inquiry as a shield of protection against Izzy. The first act of reconfigurative geography is physical—the contortion of Winter's face that manifests in a "threatening look" (Souljah 159). The act of twisting her face is also an act of reconfiguring her human geography to create new meaning, in this case, a meaningful threat to usurp Izzy's power from him.

Secondly, she discursively employs reconfigurative geography when she answers, “Nothing...we’re finished right?” (Souljah 159). In this way, Winter dialogically usurps power from Izzy in a threatening manner, interrupts his intending haptic terror, and secures her freedom to leave the interrogation room.

LaMonda Horton-Stallings’ *Mutha’ is Half a Word*⁸⁴ is useful for thinking through the complex work that Winter does in this interrogative space to defend herself. In *Mutha’ is Half a Word*, Horton-Stallings discusses the trickster figure and trickster-troping as it relates to exploring radical Black female subjectivity (Horton-Stallings 9). Drawing on the work of William Hynes she defines the trickster as having traits that are “concepts of fluid and unfixed attributes... Each characteristic of trickster enables various acts of creation that could alter time, place, or a person... Troping is the figurative or metaphorical speech or conversation... Trickster-troping defers the privileging of one difference over another” (Horton-Stallings 10). As such, I also situate Winter’s discursive practice of reconfigurative geography within the trickster-troping framework that Horton-Stallings illustrates here. The very essence of reconfigurative geography is a concept of “fluid and unfixed attributes.” It is geography in motion, a geography that temporarily settles until its attributes are usurped and rearranged to create new meaning. Winter’s threat against Izzy momentarily defers their power differential and alters the place of the interrogation room. In this way, she creates a new temporary meaning of freedom as he is forced to let her go before concluding his strip search.

Winter’s discursive reconfigurative geography first appears on actual State terrain, and this sets the precedent for the way she alters the meaning of space to advance in her fugitive

⁸⁴ Horton-Stallings, LaMonda. *Mutha’ Is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*. Ohio State University Press, 2007.

journey. After the Feds raid the Santiago estate and confiscate Winter's younger siblings, her and Mrs. Santiago visit the Bureau of Child Welfare to regain custody of the kids (Souljah 75).

Unfortunately for Mrs. Santiago, BCW denies the return of her children but demands custody of Winter:

“Oh, I see, OK. Anyway, Mrs. Santiago, we are willing in the meanwhile to place you in a women's shelter while you try to pull things together. Sometimes it's better to check into a shelter than to move into another problematic environment. The girls tell me, and our records show, that there is another child, one Winter Santiago. Is that you?” she asked, eyebrow raised.

“No, I'm Rosie, a friend of the family,” I lied.

“We'll need to know the whereabouts of the other child. Legally she is still a minor and we are responsible for her. We can place her in a group home with lenient rules and regulations since she is an older child” (Souljah 76).

This exchange represents both the attendant geographies (in this case, the BCW office) that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession (McKittrick 3), and the discursive way Winter undoes this dispossession via reconfigurative geography. I return to McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* to situate the social worker's response to Mrs. Santiago's request for custody of her kids. In her consideration of the relationship between spatial geography and domination McKittrick states, “...it is important to highlight first the understanding that racial domination and human injustices are spatially propped up by racial-sexual codes, particularly bodily codes, such as phenotype and sex. That is, racism and sexism produce attendant geographies that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession” (McKittrick 3). In this way, the sex(ism) and race(ism) of Mrs. Santiago's kids (Black, girls) attend to their human dispossession, in this case, BCW's guardianship over them. And as such, this attendant geography can be reconfigured to produce new meanings.

It is in Winter's response to the social worker that I locate Winter's reconfigurative geography of the BCW office. I posit her response, “No, I'm Rosie, a friend of the family,” (Souljah 76) is more than just a lie to protect herself. It is a discursive practice that reconfigures

the geography of the BCW office. As it were, the spatial geography of this office is one of interrogation (“...our records show, that there is another child, one Winter Santiago. Is that you?”), surveillance/ marking of fugitivity (“We’ll need to know the whereabouts of the other child”), dispossession (“we are willing in the meanwhile to place you in a women’s shelter while you try to pull things together”), and usurpation (“We can place her in a group home with lenient rules and regulations since she is an older child”) (Souljah 76). However, Winter’s performative persona (Rosie, the “family friend”) and momentary disassociation from the Santiago family is at once a practice of refusal and a usurpation of the discursive geographical interstices of the grasp of the State. I turn to Trimiko Melancon’s *Unbought and Unbossed*⁸⁵ to better understand Winter’s performative refusal. Melancon defines these kinds of Black women’s performances of refusal as transgressive. She defines transgressive/transgressive behavior/transgression as:

the ways black women characters operate out of a particular and strategic politics, agency, and deliberateness that challenge or, at the very least, call into question what constitutes “normativity,” while simultaneously destabilizing conventional paradigms governing race, gender, and sexuality (Melancon 9).

Reading Winter’s performative persona of refusal additionally as an act of transgressive behavior lends way to understanding that her discursive reconfigurative geography “destabilizes the conventional paradigms governing” the BCW office. Her quick-witted lie is a smooth and seamless rearrangement of the social power of the State—she shields herself against further interrogation and surveillance, while temporarily untethering her fugitive marking, and thus avoids capture. It is in this oppressive State terrain that Winter’s discursive reconfigurative geography becomes most apparent.

⁸⁵ Melancon, Trimiko. *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation*. Temple University Press, 2014.

Winter's fugitivity is momentarily suspended when she is eventually captured by BCW and placed in the House of Success girls group home (Souljah 120). However, she continues to practice reconfigurative geography to seize fleeting moments of freedom. Winter physically reconfigures human geography to hustle one of her Haitian American co-habitants, Claudette, for part of her \$60 living stipend with a promise to make the very religious girl "feel better than [God] can" make her feel (Souljah 129). She transmits this transformative affect to Claudette with a makeover:

I gave her finger waves. If I say so myself, it looked fly. I gave her a facial, unclogged all the Vaseline and that cheap one-dollar drugstore makeup she wore. I busted out my nail kit, gave her tips, a French manicure and pedicure. I made her take off that red skirt with tube socks and sandals and told her that, because I liked her I would let her take a quick look in my suitcase...

From what I could tell she was stuck in a state of shock... (Souljah 129- 130).

I return to McKittrick's work to analyze the significance of this makeover for Winter's freedom. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick contends that poet Dionne Brand in her collection of poetry, *Land to Light On*, writes the land by poetically tracing a map that "does not easily follow existing cartographic rules, borders, and lines" (McKittrick ix). She writes, "And Brand gives up on land, too. She not only refuses a comfortable belonging to nation, or country, or a local street, she alters them by demonstrating that geography, the material world, is infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing: rooms full of weeping, exhausted countries, a house that is only as safe as flesh" (McKittrick ix). I situate the utility of Winter's makeover within this narrative framework that McKittrick illustrates for Brand's poetry.

Winter does not merely give Claudette a new look, she alters and reconfigures her human geography. She "refuses [Claudette's] comfortable belonging to nation or country" (McKittrick ix) when she cuts Claudette's hair short to give her fingerwaves and provides her a facial, thus altering the "dogged-out, uneven, jheri curl with all the grease activator... colliding with the

Vaseline on her face” (Souljah 123)—aesthetic and geographical markings of Haiti/being Haitian, according to Winter. When she promises to make Claudette feel better than God can make her feel, she demonstrates that “geography, the material world, is infused with sensations” (McKittrick ix) and thus exploits these sensations to reconfigure Claudette’s appearance and redirect this sensation from Claudette’s God to herself. Winter continues to exploit and usurp the interstices of this State terrain (the BCW group home)—the girls’ insecurities, their longing for a change, or “rooms full of weeping” as McKittrick says—to capitalize from her newly gained dependence:

I charged her sixty dollars. She paid me. I watched as she got an extra switch in her walk. For another sixty, I convinced her to buy a pair of my jeans and a blouse, shit I got from the Banana Republic... That was week two in the House of Success and I already had a hundred and twenty dollars plus my sixty-dollar stipend...

Things took off quickly. I had what everybody needed *at better prices than they could get it themselves*... At the end of twenty-one days, I had two thousand five hundred dollars in my pocket and I had never left my room (Souljah 130- 131).

In this way, she reconfigures her co-inhabitants’ human geography to her own advantage, proving that “a house...is only as safe as flesh” (McKittrick ix).

Winter psychologically reconfigures the House of Success psychiatrist’s assumptions about her identity to maintain control over herself. She is required to regularly meet with a social worker, Kathy, and a psychiatrist as a resident of this group home. In her first meeting with the psychiatrist, the psychiatrist assumes access to Winter’s interior life:

After a box lunch, I saw the institutional psychiatrist. She was a nut. She asked me all kinds of questions about my mother and father. Did my father touch me, did I ever want to have sex with him, did my mother ever beat me. No matter how many times I told her ass no she would put the question another way but still be asking me the same shit. She asked me dumb things like how did I feel when they took my sisters away (Souljah 126).

At cursory glance, the psychiatrist asks routine questions, questions that guide the stories of many of the girls at the group home. However, I read further into the psychiatrist’s questioning

as a means of surveillance and a nod toward a conception of a non-human or disabled person. I draw from Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*⁸⁶ to articulate my understanding of the psychiatrist's questions as an assumed "knowing" of Winter's ontology, one that is made up of racialized and gendered assemblages of dysfunction, rape/incest, physical violence, and displacement. I posit, because the psychiatrist works for the State and have likely encountered several Black girls in "rooms full of weeping" (McKittrick ix), these questions come to (inaccurately) substitute a common-sense knowing⁸⁷ of Winter's private life experiences. This assumed dehumanizing common-sense knowing of Winter's life simultaneously marks her as a disabled subject. Her assumed disability, however, is not necessarily a medical diagnosis, but a social one insofar as her Blackness is read as disability. Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined*⁸⁸ helps to ground my understanding of Winter's assumed disability. In her book Schalk acknowledges the demand for "terminology that can account for the nonrealist representations of new or altered people, societies, and worlds" (Schalk 5). One such term she uses in the framework of her argument is bodymind. She defines bodymind as:

a materialist feminist disability studies concept from Margaret Price that refers to the enmeshment of the mind and body, which are typically understood as interacting and connected, yet distinct entities due to the Cartesian dualism of Western philosophy... The term *bodymind* insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases... (Schalk 5).

⁸⁶ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014.

⁸⁷ Keeling, Kara. *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Duke University Press, 2007.

⁸⁸ Schalk, Samantha Dawn. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Duke University Press, 2018.

In this way, the psychiatrist's assumed knowledge of Winter's physical conditions of abuse, presumably orchestrated by Blackness and poverty, produces assumptions about her psychological state, thereby making her as a psychologically disabled person.

Nevertheless, Winter uses psychological reconfigurative geography to interrupt this assumed common-sense knowledge about her life:

I looked at her like, lady, do you really think me and your old ass is gonna sit here and have girl talk? To entertain myself, I started making things up—I break out in a rash when I'm in the room with more than two people. I'm a virgin and would like to be one until I'm thirty. I masturbate to the sound of the washing machine—I was cracking myself up. She was sitting there with a long yellow pad actually trying to come up with an explanation for all the gobbledygook I was giving her (Souljah 126).

Like the lie she told the worker at the BCW office, these lies suspend further surveillance from the State (in this case, represented by the psychiatrist). Winter psychologically reconfigures and shields her interiority by redirecting the psychiatrist to an elsewhere, an elsewhere that does not actually exist. In doing so, she momentarily usurps the common-sense knowledge power from the psychiatrist as shown by her attempt “to come up with an explanation for all the gobbledygook” (Souljah 126). Winter seizes some temporary freedom using her psychological reconfigurative geography.

However, the psychiatrist reattempts to access her interiority and Winter continues to psychologically reconfigure this space to protect herself. In the following days, Winter meets with the psychiatrist again:

My session with the psychiatrist revived me. Not because of anything she did, because of what I did and said. The story I told her just made me laugh inside and that helped to take away some of the depression I felt. I told her I had a best friend named Natalie and ever since childhood we had been connected. We were so connected that when she cried, I cried, when she was sick, I was sick. When she was happy, I was happy. Even when we were separated I could still feel Natalie's emotions and she could feel mine. Natalie had made one of her other friends angry by telling some of her personal business, so the girl beat Natalie unconscious. The reason I was stuck in bed for three days was because I was unconscious like Natalie (Souljah 136).

Winter's extravagant lies to the psychiatrist is another example of her protective reconfigurative geography. She exploits the psychiatrist's naiveté (naiveté caused by Winter's former lies) to create another protective false narrative about her life. In doing so, she expropriates the State's surveillance grasp and redirects this oppressive power to an eponymous Black girl that does not exist. Moreover, this psychological geography untethers the psychiatrist's projected bodymind character. Winter continues to deny access to this woman while reconfiguring an interior and exterior life. Her story about her hyperempathy and telepathic connection to Natalie bifurcates and reconfigures the bodymind character. Winter redraws the geography of the bodymind character, creating a new one that exists across two people—Winter and Natalie. In doing this, she uses a performance of psychological disability to interrupt the psychiatrist's racialized and gendered common-sense narrative of disability. In effect, these lies she tells are transformed to strategic maneuvers that protect her interiority. In the end, she usurps some freedom from the State before she officially flees from the House of Success to create a new life.

Indeed, Winter does create a new life for herself after she flees the group home and reconnects with her ex-boyfriend, Bullet. She returns to her life of crime-driven luxury and popularity, until she accompanies Bullet on a drug run in Brooklyn (Souljah 273). Winter waits in the car per Bullet's request. Suddenly, the now crack-addicted Mrs. Santiago sees her in the car and demands she acknowledges her. Mrs. Santiago produces prison letters from Santiago to persuade Winter to get out of the car. Bullet returns and demands Mrs. Santiago leaves but she refuses. Winter exits the car and confronts her mother, "I lunged at her. She fell on the ground. I fell on top of her. I grabbed the envelopes out of her weak fingers, clenched into a fist" (Souljah 275). She returns to the car with an assumed triumph over her mother. However, at this moment,

Winter reinitiates a haptic connection to her mother and weaves the ending of her own fugitive journey:

I didn't even have time to turn my head a little bit. A brick came crashing through the window of the passenger side of the rental.

"You stupid fucking bitch. You had the nerve to bring your ass back round here." The car door swung open. Simone charged in. With her heavy hands around my neck, her weight was holding me down on the front seat...

Next thing I know, we both fell out of the car into the street...Simone took advantage of that split second when I looked away. Her big arm came swinging down, slicing a seven-inch gash on the left side of my face. I felt my face open up, I grabbed my head and blood was all over my fingers...Bullet shot the gun in the air, everybody started running...

He sat me down in the car. For seconds, he just kept saying, damn, damn, damn. Then whoop, whoop, police sirens...

I opened the door on my side and tried to get out, but the cops was up on me (Souljah 275- 77).

In this scene, Winter's haptic connection to her mother reifies her earlier mimetic incisional tracing that now ends with the bloody laceration on the left side of her face. The cacophonous sounds of the brick crashing through the car window, the glass bottle slicing her face, Bullet's gunshots piercing the air, and the police sirens are the attendant deviant recordings (Moten 130) that mark the end of her fugitive journey and sonically catapult Winter back to her beginning locus. The description of the gunshot in this scene contrasts the elision of the gunshot that injures Mrs. Santiago in the beginning of the novel (Souljah 32). In effect, the differing phonograph recordings (Moten 130) create a contrast in their hieroglyphic maternal flesh (beyond the obvious gunshot wound vs laceration wound). Mrs. Santiago's hieroglyphic maternal flesh is drawn by the bullet. Though the doctors suture her remaining facial skin together, this shattering of her flesh and blood by the bullet calls to mind the shattering of Tisean's, Cleo's, and Frankie's flesh-blood in *Set It Off*. If shattered blood (and flesh) equals a transmutation of carceral death as I've argued in chapter two, then Mrs. Santiago's hieroglyphic maternal flesh marks a transmutational carceral death as well. Her transmutational death manifests in her social death

via her crack addiction followed by her literal death at the end of the novel (Souljah 282). On the other hand, Winter's hieroglyphic maternal flesh is a laceration carved by a broken glass bottle that festered into a scar/wound. And as Annette-Carina van der Zaag reminds us, the wound is an opening of the body onto and into other bodies (Zaag 38). In this case, Winter's scar is simultaneously an opening or a portal into her incarcerated body/self. Though their wounded flesh is orchestrated differently by sound, they are similar in their incarceration geographies. Winter is sentenced to 15 years in prison for the crimes she committed along her fugitivity journey, and thus, she never arrives at "the outside" (Moten 131).

Conclusion: Panoptic Enclosure

Winter's wounded flesh and incarceration by the end of the novel does more than end her circular fugitive journey. Her return to the initial locus is a mimetic tracing of carceral architectures. Michel Foucault's "Panopticism from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison" is useful for drawing a parallel between Winter's journey and prison. In his essay, Foucault draws parallels between 19th century procedures of quarantine and carceral punishment. He describes the geography of the panopticon:

Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy (Foucault 5).

My conception of circular fugitivity in the novel cartographs an iteration of the 19th century panopticon. As such, the loci on Winter's fugitive journey, namely her Black maternal aesthetic and reconfigurative geography—are the "prison cells" where the possibility of freedom emerges

but is eventually usurped by the surveillance of the center tower. In this case, the center tower represents the Feds, Winter's aunt (Aunt B), BCW, and the House of Success group home.

Chapter 4:

Haptic Listening: Analyzing Practices of Refusal by Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003)

And to make it better, baby got the nina’ Beretta tucked low and I’m two cars back with
the four-four
--Ja Rule, “Down Ass Chick,” (2002)

If I got locked up and sentenced to a quarter-century, could I count on you to be there to
support me mentally?
--50 Cent, “21 Questions,” (2003)

Two FBI agents, played by Eric Roberts and Clarence Williams III, read the file in the manilla folder containing information about fugitives, Ja and Charli, “The Untouchables”. While reviewing their list of successful heists and criminal escapades, Williams dubs them the “new Bonnie and Clyde”. Roberts looks over his glasses at Williams and proclaims, “Let’s go get ‘em”. Williams replies, “Let’s take them down”. They exit the scene and the instrumental for “Down Ass Chick” (2002) plays as the text overlay, “Murder Inc. Presents” appears on the screen while the camera zooms in on Ja Rule’s and Charli Baltimore’s pictures on the detective board. Charli Baltimore stares straight into the camera lens with a half smirk in her “Wanted” photo. Her soft lashes wisp out in opposite directions to reveal the confident stare in her eyes. Charli’s bright red hair, muted by a filter, is pulled back into a low bun to accentuate the fullness of her face encapsulated in the photograph pinned on the detective’s board. The identificatory sign underneath her photograph reads “DOWN ASS CHICK”. This sign simultaneously labels Charli’s relation to Ja Rule in the video and represents the title of the song and video.

In “21 Questions” (2003) Meagan Good sits on her couch, and flips through a magazine as her boyfriend 50 Cent enthusiastically counts and rolls money in rubber bands at the nearby table. She looks admirably at him as they both laugh. Suddenly, the diegetic sounds of police sirens and screeching tires cut through the scene signifying the illegality of the money that 50

Cent possess. He quickly gathers the money and runs to hide it in a secret floor in a closet while Megan flushes what appears to be contraband.⁸⁹ The camera cuts to the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) officers outside preparing to break the door open with a battering ram. The camera zooms in on the “knock knock” sign written on the edge of the battering ram, just before the police burst the door open. The scene freezes as the instrumental of the song starts to play. Meagan stares anxiously to the left of the photographic freeze-frame at the officers she believes are breaking into her and 50 Cent’s home. The frame captures her bangs in motion, swayed to the right side of her face, seemingly attempting to comfort her paranoid stare. Meagan’s face is paused in front view while the light from the right side of the frame reveals most of her face. Though her full face is captured in front view, her right-looking side eyes sort of refuse photographic capture, much like Charli’s smirk in her “Wanted” photo.

I juxtapose these two Black women because I am curious about the significance of the photographs⁹⁰ in the music videos. Each of the women are first introduced in this visual medium while they accompany their partner through criminality and incarceration. This leaves me with a few questions: What is the significance of introducing them in this way? What is the purpose of the photographs within the music video? What meaning does this create for the female characters in their respective videos? What is the relationship between these Black women, the

⁸⁹ This opening scene, while largely performative for the sake of the music video, has intimate ties to rapper 50 Cent’s actual lived experience. In August 1994, he was arrested for selling crack cocaine to an undercover officer. Weeks after this arrest, police raided his home and found drugs, illegally acquired money, and a gun. He was sentenced to three to nine years in prison but opted out to the SHOCK program instead. See: Allah, Sha Be. “Today in Hip Hop History: 50 Cent Arrested on Drug Charges 28 Years Ago - the Source.” *The Source - The Magazine of Hip Hop Music, Culture and Politics*, 23 Aug. 2022, thesource.com/2022/08/23/today-in-hip-hop-history-50-cent-arrested-on-drug-charges-28-years-ago/

⁹⁰ While I recognize that Meagan Good does not technically appear in a photograph at the beginning of the video like Charli does, I read her freeze-frame shot as a still image/ photographic introduction that is interjected in the music video.

photographs, their partners, and the State? These are some of the questions that undergird this chapter.

Haptic Listening

In my consideration of the importance of introductory and identificatory photographs in these videos, I turn to Tina Campt's *Listening to Images* to help me think through the purpose of introducing Charli and Meagan this way. In her book Campt grapples with the usefulness of images, namely ID photographs, for building a radical visual archive of the African Diaspora that "centers the disaffected, the unruly, and the dispossessed" (Campt 3). She confronts the visual exhibit/archive of discarded cutouts of serial African identity photos at the Gulu Real Art Studio in Uganda (Campt 18). During her visit, she details the loud (or "humming") silence in the art studio as it is just her and the curator there (Campt 18). This silence enthralls her attention to the photographs in ways that illicit alternative readings of the pictures. In studying these pictures (and other mundane and extraordinary photographs of Black people across the diaspora), she asks an important central question: "How do we contend with images intended not to figure black subjects, but to delineate instead differential or degraded forms of personhood or subjection—images produced with the purpose of tracking, cataloging, and constraining the movement of blacks in and out of diaspora?" (Campt 3) To answer this question, Campt defines a methodology for "listening to images" that relies on counterintuitive definitions of the "quiet" and "quotidian".

Drawing inspiration from Ariella Azoulay to "watch" photographs (as opposed to look at them), and inspiration from Paul Gilroy's "politics of transfiguration," (Campt 6) Campt traces a self-proclaimed "counterintuitive" methodology--listening to images. She defines listening to images as "a description and a method... It is a method that opens up the radical interpretive

possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook, by engaging the paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce” (Campt 5). In order to gauge the radical interpretive possibilities for images, Campt relies on a mode of “quiet” that lends way to various interpretations. She explains this counterintuitive definition of quiet noting, “The foundational counterintuition that serves as my first point of departure is a contention that, contrary to what might seem common sense, quiet must not be conflated with silence. Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention” (Campt 6). Here, quiet is not the absence of sound, it is a “lower frequency” (Campt 6) that commands and demands our attention—much like the quiet in the space of the art studio that called her to hyperfocus on the serial images. Conversely, Campt’s methodology also demands an alternative definition of sound. As such, she theorizes sound:

I theorize sound as an inherently embodied process that registers at multiple levels of the human sensorium. To invoke another counterintuition that serves as a second point of theoretical departure, while it may seem an inherent contradiction in terms, sound need not be heard to be perceived. Sound can be listened to, and, in equally powerful ways, sound can be felt; it both touches and moves people. In this way, sound must therefore be theorized and understood as a profoundly haptic form of sensory contact (Campt 6).

Campt’s counterintuitive meaning of sound emphasizes the varied sensorial ways that we receive sound. She goes beyond an audio reception of sound to include an affective or *felt* reception of sound. As such, I extend my understanding of sound to acknowledge that the hapticity of sound is not only *transmitted to* us as receivers, we can also *attend to* the feeling of sound, specifically, in the digital medium.

While I draw heavily from Campt’s method of listening to (archival) images, I also situate my methodology at the intersection of Haptic Media Studies. Attending to the feeling of

image-sounds for Campt means listening for the vibrations and frequencies of photos when one visually confronts these images at art studios or physically confronts images in other archival spaces. Attending to the feeling of image-sounds as I understand it in my project requires a haptic connection to certain digital technologies (my MacBook, my iPhone, and the computers at the Moving Image and Recorded Sound (MIRS) Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). I turn to Parisi's et al. overview of Haptic Media Studies in their introductory article, "Haptic media studies" to further explain attending to the feeling of digital image-sounds. They attempt to bridge the gap between seemingly disparate scholarship that engages haptic media studies by offering scholarship across various fields in a mini-anthology. Moreover, they posit a broad definition of haptic media studies that allows for a greater recognition of the field across disciplines. Parisi et al. write:

The concept of haptic media, in short, prompts a productive orientation to touch's role in mediation systems. Haptic media encourage an attention to those vital—and frequently neglected—points of physical intersection between media object and subjects' bodies, situating touch at the center, rather than at the margins, of an investigative program. It brings new objects, practices, and histories within reach of Media Studies, demonstrating the value that rethinking the field through can have for current and future media scholarship (Parisi et al. 1517).

I draw from this definition to articulate a practice for listening to digital images. Tina Campt reminds us that images/photographs have (infra)sound that can be "*felt* in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body... It is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact" (Campt 7). How, then, do we access the haptic sounds of digital images? I posit the way I listen to the digital images of Charli and Meagan occurs via my literal touch of my MacBook mouse pad, my iPhone interface, and the mouse of the computers at the MIRS division at The Schomburg. First, because the images exist within moving media (music videos), it becomes necessary for me to pause the videos to "capture" the image. Secondly, my pausing of the videos via the haptic connection to media devices/interfaces creates

both literal and figurative senses of quiet, and as Campt informs us, quiet is the modality that “registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention” (Campt 6). The literal quietness (of the paused videos and in the space of *The Schomburg*) create an intensity that makes it permissible for me to listen for the radical interpretive possibilities in the images, much like the way Campt does in her book. Third, my haptic connection to these media devices allows me to attend to and interpret Charli’s smirk and Meagan’s side eye as aesthetic practices of refusal that are necessary for the way they continue to refuse the State throughout their respective videos.⁹¹ Finally, the importance of my interpretation of their aesthetic practices of refusing the State becomes more apparent with the recognition that the State often relies on haptic connections to enforce power (both in the videos and in real life). These dominating haptic connections occur via the use of handcuffs, the police bullets aimed at a human target, the baton wielded against someone, the taser that jolts the flesh of a detainee, the mace that temporarily blinds the police’s target, the pat down, the physical restraint, the frisk, etc. In sum, listening to these digital images requires a haptic connection to media devices that makes it possible to read their aesthetic practices of refusal.⁹²

I use a methodology of listening to images at the intersection of haptic media studies to interpret the meaning of Charli’s and Meagan’s introductory photographs in their videos—a process I call haptic listening. In this chapter I argue that the introductory and identificatory

⁹¹ In *Listening to Images*, Campt defines the quotidian practice of refusal as “a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy” (Campt 32). I draw from Campt’s definition in my analyses of Charli’s and Meagan’s practices of refusal.

⁹² Additionally, as Marisa Parham notes, the practice of listening to digital images requires the use of electricity. Since media devices require electricity to run, and haptic connections between touchscreen digital interfaces and humans are mediated through electrical impulses, electricity is also embedded in my method of haptically listening to digital images. However, the limitations of this chapter does not include an analysis of the use of electricity.

photographs in each of the music videos are aesthetic markings of a practice of refusal, a practice that simultaneously represent and imbues both video actresses with the transformative power to disrupt and momentarily escape the grasp of the U.S. carceral State. This practice of refusal is first informed by the way Charli and Meagan rebuff the photographic subjection by smirking in a mugshot/Wanted photo (Charli) and refusing the camera's identificatory practice by looking away from the criminalizing freeze-frame (Meagan). I maintain these practices of refusal continue throughout each of the videos. For Charli this practice manifests in her clothing during the diamond heist, her rejection to "snitch" on her partner Ja Rule after she is caught during their heist, her transformation of the social geography of the prison when she is incarcerated, and the freedom she allows Ja Rule and herself to have following her release from prison. For Meagan, this practice is represented by her jail phone call to 50 Cent, her visit to see him in prison, the weaponization of her sexuality during their special non-surveilled conjugal visit, and her backward traversal through time and space to undo 50 Cent's imprisonment. Though these women work on behalf of Ja Rule and 50 Cent, respectively, they do not merely buttress shields of protection for their partners; they exhibit a transformative power to "rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them" (Camp 5). As such, I maintain that these women possess the power to disrupt the carceral state, and this power is only made legible through haptic listening.

The remaining sections of this paper puts into practice haptic listening to analyze music videos "Down Ass Chick" (2002) and "21 Questions" (2003). First, I begin with a brief overview of the discourse surrounding the presence of Black women as video vixens in rap music videos. I explain how my reading of Charli Baltimore and Meagan Good fits within existing discourses and underscore how my reading departs from these conversations. Second, I analyze Charli

through a methodology of haptic listening, arguing that she imbues her initial performative practice of refusal (via her smirk in her “Wanted” photo) throughout the video to secure her and Ja Rule’s freedom from incarceration. I explain how she first exists within a liminal carceral space where her refusal reemerges before she is formally incarcerated. After, her transformative power reifies at the convergence of their diamond heist scene and her subsequent interrogation scene. During her interrogation, Charli practices discursive refusal that parallels a legacy of Black feminist performances of silence. Her silence during the interrogation results in her imprisonment where she rearranges the social geography of the prison space, thus confirming her transformative power. And finally, her disruption of the carceral circuit actualizes in her release from prison and reconnection with Ja Rule.

Third, in my analysis of “21 Questions” I argue Meagan’s aesthetic practice of refusal is legible in her introductory freeze-frame shot. I explain how she continues to transmit her disruptive powers into the prison space after 50 Cent is formally incarcerated. Meagan’s practice of refusal continues to create freedom for 50 Cent at the convergence of their visitation and conjugal sex scenes. Additionally, I argue that their interjected conjugal sex scene instrumentalizes Meagan’s sexuality as an addendum to her disruptive powers. Meagan’s power of refusal reifies by the end of the video when the plot returns to the starting locus. I maintain that 50 Cent’s own practice of refusing the photographic subjection of the State by the end of the video is attributed to his haptic encounter with Meagan during the former visitation scene. After this adoption, 50 Cent is transported back to the beginning of the video where he and Meagan learn they are not the targets of arrest. I read this as a backward traversal through time and space—Meagan’s power of refusal disrupts temporality and transports them back to the freeze-

frame moments. In the end I maintain that both Charli's and Megan's paradoxical capacity to rupture the sovereign gaze, as Campt puts it, is actualized by the end of the music videos.⁹³

Black Women Vixens in Rap Music Videos

The Video Vixen archetype, situated in popular culture at large, has long been a contested site of representation for Black women. Scholar Murali Balaji summarizes some of this contestation in "Vixen Resistin': Redefining Black Womanhood in Hip-Hop Music Videos". He draws from bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Tricia Rose to note that "Black women face the dilemma of negotiating their subjugated racial and gender identities in popular culture representation" (Balaji 6). In this way, Black women gain visibility in popular culture (where they might not experience this broad visibility elsewhere) at the expense of having their subjugated racial and gender identities reproduced for consumption. Conversely, Balaji also notes critics and scholars who recognize the potential of Black women performers in hip hop music videos. Citing Robin Roberts and Rana Emerson he explains, "women artists have been able to define themselves within the constructs of male domination, eschewing the tendency to play an accommodating role to men" (Balaji 8). And still adding to the contested discourse surrounding the video vixen, Balaji offers:

But a surface interpretation of how Black women are presented in music videos can be reductionist and can fail to account for the idea of the body and sexuality as instruments of identity negotiation... which is why analyses of music videos must interpret the subtext when seeking to examine the level of agency and self-definition by Black women (Balaji 9-10).

⁹³ As La Marr Jurelle Bruce notes, (pop) music videos always already represent the sovereign gaze within capitalist productions. Though I argue that Charli and Meagan rupture the sovereign gaze by the end of their respective music videos, I acknowledge that this is a contested process that does not rupture the sovereign gaze that exists outside of the diegesis of each music video.

I draw from Balaji's call to "examine the level of agency" by Black women music video performers to situate both Charli Baltimore's and Meagan Good's performances within a sociohistorical genealogy of the Video Vixen.

Generally, the video vixen archetype is tethered to the 90s rap music video genre. In *A Taste for Brown Sugar*, Mireille Miller-Young, one of the leading scholars of video vixen culture, traces a historical genealogy of the rap music video vixen beginning in the 1990s at the convergence of hip hop and pornography (Miller-Young 346). She offers a succinct definition of the vixen that ties together this convergence. She writes:

Like the porn star, the vixen is the eye candy that, with every wiggle of her body, sway of her hips, and glisten of her skin sells the rapper, the products of his supposed lifestyle, and finally, the song. She is crucial to the economy of profit and pleasure in hip hop, and her seductive, erotic performance infuses hip hop videos with a palatable sexual energy and sense of erotic fantasy (Miller-Young 348).

Miller Young's definition captures the popular perception of the vixen that weaves together the archetype's contentious discourse expressed in Balaji's essay. And while I acknowledge and accept Miller-Young's definition of the video vixen, for the purpose of this chapter I intend to extend this definition to be more accommodating to Charli's and Meagan's respective music video performances.

In my consideration of Charli and Meagan in the discourse of the video vixen, I consider them to be different iterations of the video vixen. As GerShun Avilez notes in his consideration of the capaciousness of the vixen archetype, their music video performances capaciously rub against the figure of the video vixen and at times, overlap with the video vixen archetype.⁹⁴ Like the video vixen, they both complement the video's narrative plot to help advance the consumption of the music video. Also like the video vixen, they are simultaneously the center of

⁹⁴ A conversation on April 10, 2024.

the video (Meagan) and a co-star of the video (Charli). Charli and Meagan depart from the video vixen because neither of them embodies the hypersexualized⁹⁵ typical considerations of the video vixen. Meagan, however, does weaponize her sexuality in “21 Questions” as I later explain and still, her representation of sexuality remains a departure from the typical hyper-sexualization of the video vixen. The video vixen as I understand “her” for this chapter is both a supporting act and a main act that uses her Black feminist transformative power to disrupt carceral systems.

Starting in the 1980’s with the popularization of music videos, directors began to increase representations of (Black) women in rap music videos. However, an increase in representation did not necessarily mean an increase in self-identity making practices for the vixens. In “The Evolution of Hip-Hop’s Video Vixen” journalist Brooklyn White discusses this phenomenon. White notes that the vixens that appeared in many 1980s music videos were paraded as accessories. White writes, “vixens of the ‘80s and, even in the early ‘90s... were essentially nameless and seen as embellishments. Being known was reserved for their white counterparts who appeared in pop and rock videos.”⁹⁶ Some examples of 1980s vixens as nameless accessories can be seen in Tone Loc’s “Wild Thing” (1988), Biz Markie’s “Just A Friend” (1989), and Heavy D & The Boyz’s “Somebody for Me” (1989) music videos. In “Wild Thing” Tone Loc raps, “Workin’ all week, 9 to 5 for my money/ so when the weekend comes, I go get live with the honey”. In this intro verse, he introduces a nameless woman and the accompanying vixens in the black and white video all blend into one another, making them indiscernible from his band mates and the leading ladies. While this aesthetic choice of the music video may just be

⁹⁵ See Luke’s “I Wanna Rock (Doo Doo Brown)” (1992), Jay-Z’s “Big Pimpin’” (2000), and “Nelly’s “Tip Drill” (2003) as a few examples.

⁹⁶ White, Brooklyn. “The Evolution of Hip-Hop’s Video Vixen.” *Okayplayer*, 11 Aug. 2023, www.okayplayer.com/originals/history-of-hip-hop-video-vixens.html.

a playful setup to accompany Tone Loc's narrative song about hooking up with "the honey," it also represents the "nameless embellishments" theme of the 1980s video vixen. Similarly in Biz Markie's "Just A Friend," he introduces the leading lady that he pursues in the video as a nameless woman. He raps, "I asked her her name she said blah blah blah, she had 9/10 pants and a very big bra". Again, we see the nameless video vixen introduced in the lyrics and in the actual video, the vixen's role is merely a supportive one for Biz Markie's lyric story. Finally in Heavy D & The Boyz's "Somebody for Me" music video, they introduce the vixen in the same way. Aesthetically, the vixens are demarcated by a three horizontal lines on the screen, creating the effect of three screens in one (1:40). Each of the three screens show a different body part from a different vixen at a time, thereby creating visual "nameless" women who refuse identification via these fleeting camera shots. Taken together, these three seminal video/artists of the decade represent the way the video vixens of the 1980s were typically included as accessories in videos.

During the 1990s, vixens continued to be casted as accessories but this time they were also more centered in the videos. Returning to White's essay on the evolution of video vixens, she discusses the changes to the way video vixens were portrayed in 1990s music videos. She writes:

Soon enough, video girls were everywhere, even in videos for artists outside of the flashy scene, like Q-Tip. It was reflective of the larger, "ghetto fabulous" era that Hip-Hop was experiencing, and the emphasis on the Black American Dream. Wealth, access and excess, inspired by Blaxploitation films, where central points of this dream and music videos were created to showcase this illusion. Being surrounded by beautiful women was equated with having arrived, and everyone wanted to look the part (White, "The Evolution of Hip-Hop's Video Vixen").

Here, there is a visual transformation of the vixen from a "muted" or nameless performer during the 1980s to an excessive performer during the 1990s. The excessiveness⁹⁷ of the 90s video

⁹⁷ Fleetwood, Nicole R. *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

vixens were not only represented by sartorial performances, aesthetics, and sexuality, they were also represented by the increase in number of women in videos. Take for example, Tupac Shakur's "I Get Around" (1993), Raekwon's "Ice Cream" (1995), LL Cool J's "Doin It" (1995), and 112's "Anywhere"⁹⁸ (1998). Though the video vixens were supporting actresses for the rappers, they also received more camera focus and attention. Additionally, video vixens became hypervisible during the 90s because of the convergence between the lead artist and the supporting actress. This is most represented by rappers Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina.⁹⁹ These iconic female rappers capaciously moved within and between roles¹⁰⁰ as artists, video vixens, and video models. Thus, they blurred the lines between these roles, widening the possibility of the video vixen in popular culture. It is this site of possibility where I draw from to consider the transformative work of Charli Baltimore and Meagan Good as iterations of the video vixen in the early 2000s.

The early 2000s continued to represent the excessiveness of the video vixen. As Brooklyn White summarizes, "These women, who were once getting a piece of the shine, were now the center of it" (White, "The Evolution of Hip-Hop's Video Vixen"). Videos that encapsulate the centering of the vixen include Mystikal's "Shake It Fast" (2000), "DMX's What They Really Want" (2000), Ja Rule's "Between Me And You" (2000), and 50 Cent's "Candy Shop" (2005) to name a few. In addition to being centered in the video, several of the vixens became famous enough to appear in multiple videos, thereby subverting the "nameless" vixen phenomenon of

⁹⁸ Though 112 is not a rap group but an R&B group, this music video represents the excessive performances of the vixens during the 90s. Moreover, this video is tied to 90s rap music videos since the song contains a feature by rapper Lil Zane.

⁹⁹ For more on the convergence of female rappers and video vixens, see Hobson, Janell, and R. Dianne Bartlow. "Introduction: Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music." *Meridians*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–14. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338908>

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with Dr. GerShun Avilez on February 7, 2024.

the 80s. Some of these women include Melyssa Ford, Karrine Steffans, Karen Denise Aubert (also known as K.D. Aubert), and Buffie Carruth (known as Buffie The Body). Notably, Melyssa Ford helped to transform the relationship between the vixen and the music industry by changing “the standards when it came to getting paid properly for work” (White, “The Evolution of Hip-Hop's Video Vixen”). Moreover, with the release of *King Magazine* in 2002, many of the vixens landed cover shoots thus widening their visibility in the hip hop industry. In many ways this visual medium—the magazine cover photo—transformed their power within the industry and carved a niche for them to exist in a space that was violent and domineering (a misogynistic male-dominated industry).

I situate Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002) and Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003) within this genealogy of the video vixen departing from the early 2000s. Like the vixens of the early 2000s who also landed *King Magazine* cover shoots, Charli and Megan exist within the photographic medium in their respective music videos. And, like the transformative power of the *King Magazine* photos, their identificatory photos in the music videos also possess the power to carve a niche for existing in a violent and domineering space—that of the U.S. carceral system. The next sections of this chapter analyze the way Charli and Meagan uses their transformative practices of refusal, legible within and informed by their introductory photos, to buttress shields of protection against the U.S. State for Ja Rule and 50 Cent, respectively. And while their roles within the videos are supporting acts, like the vixen, I maintain that their transformative power is worth centering in my analysis.

Charli Baltimore in “Down Ass Chick” (2002)

I begin my discussion of Charli with a return to her “Wanted” photograph in the beginning of the video (0:22). Arguably, her identificatory photograph pinned to the detective’s

board represents her imposition in the carceral State. She alongside Ja Rule are wanted for their criminal activity as expressed in Roberts' and Williams' discursive labeling, "The new Bonnie and Clyde,"¹⁰¹ and their exclamation, "let's go get them" (0:19). Additionally, her "Wanted" photo appears in several copies across two adjacent boards. On the first board, Charli's photos appear alongside Ja Rule and other wanted criminals. The identificatory photos are connected by thread, thumb tacks, info cards, and several identificatory notes that read "FELONS," "KINGPIN," and "THE DON". Though the second board is blurred, Charli's photos are enlarged and most apparent amongst photos of additional "wanted" people. Like the first board, the second board also connects the "wanted" fugitives with devices like info cards, maps, and string. Moreover, Charli's photographic appearance on both boards connects the boards to one another though they are separated by the perimeters of their frames. Taken together, this visual arrangement introduces Charli (and Ja Rule) in a carceral circuit. In "Carceral Circuitry: New Directions in Carceral Geography" Nick Gill et al. argue that "prisons and other carceral spaces...are traversed by various circulations that reach within and beyond their boundaries," a process they refer to as carceral circuitry (Gill et al. 1). They borrow from actor network theory to trace an ontology of carceral circuitry that "conceive of the carceral landscape as 'fibrous, thread-like, wiry, [and] ropy'" (Latour, 1997: 3). In this landscape, circuitry names the routes, courses and pathways that constitute liminal carceral spaces, thereby addressing them in their own right rather than as interstices" (Gill et al. 6). Furthermore, they discern three central circuits: circuits of people, circuits of objects, and circuit of practices (Gill et al. 5-8). Drawing

¹⁰¹ "Bonnie and Clyde." *FBI*, FBI, 18 May 2016, www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/bonnie-and-clyde.

from Gill's et al. theory of carceral circuitry, I read Charli's photographic placements as an aesthetic marking of her imposition within a liminal carceral space—detective investigative boards. As such, the placement of her photographs on the detective boards come to represent carceral circuitry via objects (“wanted” photographs of criminals) and this is reified by the “fibrous, thread-like, wiry [and] ropy” (Gill et al. 6) thread that connects several of the photographs on the detective boards. Ultimately, the “circuits” across the boards link Charli to criminality.

Her link to criminality is further drawn by her and Ja Rule's preparation for their diamond heist (0:30- 0:40). The scene in the detective's office fades out and cuts to the following scene where Ja Rule and Charli review their gadgets over a neatly drawn map that directs their ensuing diamond heist. Ja Rule leads this review as Charli looks onward, following his direction with yes nods, softly grasping his shoulder as he explains the plan. They are in a windowless room lit only by a top light, and the camera's focus on limited space within this room suggests that the room is very small. As Ja Rule and Charli review their heist map, Ja Rule's non-diegetic lyrics “every thug needs a lady, and every thug needs a down ass chick” underscore this part of the scene (0:39). After they review their plan, the scene cuts to several focused shots on their extra gadgets in a closet and offers closeup jumpcuts of their all black and leather clothing as they prepare to drive to their targeted location. Taken together, this scene manifests an example of carceral geography that further links Charli (and Ja Rule) to criminology and implicates her in the carceral system. In “Carceral Geography and the Spatialization of Carceral Studies” Dominique Moran explains the field of carceral geography and its relation to varied perceptions of carceral spaces. Moran writes,

In the study of distribution of carceral spaces, rather than seeing, for example, prisons as spatially fixed and bounded containers for people and imprisonment practices, rolled out

across Cartesian space and straightforwardly mappable in scale and distance, carceral geography has tended towards an interpretation of prisons as fluid, geographically anchored sites of connections and relations, seeing them as connected to each other and articulated with wider social processes through mobile, visual, haptic, and embodied practices (Moran 90).

I draw from Moran's description of carceral space to articulate my understanding of this scene as another liminal space that further implicates Charli in the carceral system before she is formally imprisoned. If we are to understand carceral spaces as "fluid [spaces]...with wider social processes through mobile, visual, haptic, and embodied practices" as Moran contends, then it becomes possible to read Charli's and Ja Rule's planning in this "underground" space as an embodied social process (planning a heist, reviewing gadgets, sartorial performances) that precedes her actual imprisonment and extends the carceral space beyond the detective's office. In this way, the space of the diamond heist planning becomes yet another liminal carceral space.

These liminal spaces eventually lend way to Charli's actual imprisonment when police capture her at the end of their diamond heist (2:19). Following their diamond heist briefing, Charli and Ja Rule exit the back of the unmarked building to enter their vehicle (0:48). Once they arrive at the targeted estate, Ja Rule asks, "You ready?" to which Charli nods her head and replies "yes" (1:00). During this exchange, the non-diegetic song lyrics (rapped by Ja Rule) exclaims, "Baby say yeah, if you'd die for me like you cry for me" (1:00). The accompanying lyrics and their exchange invoke the legacy of Bonnie Parker and solidifies Charli's persona as a "down ass chick". This exchange also foreshadows her ensuing imprisonment. After Charli professes her loyalty to Ja Rule they begin their heist with the successful break and enter into the house (1:15). Their identical clothing and face masks make them indiscernible from each other as they choreographically ascend opposite staircases in the large foyer to the room that holds the diamonds. They remove the censored Scarface painting hiding the diamonds before breaking into

the safe (1:33). After they retrieve the bowl of diamonds from the safe, the alarm is triggered, and the homeowner awakens to see them stealing his jewels on camera (1:55). He hits a red button and the police are dispatched to the house as Charli and Ja Rule make a dramatic exit from the premises. Fortunately for Ja Rule, he escapes. Charli, however, is captured by police and unmasked on the premises (2:18). Her unmasking reveals a similar facial refusal that accompanies the refusal in her “Wanted” photo at the beginning of the video.

Charli’s practice of refusal reifies at the convergence of the heist scene and the subsequent interrogation scene. Her unmasking reveals a distorted facial expression and her bright red hair—a performative and aesthetic nod to her earlier “wanted” photos on the detective boards. Charli’s capture scene fades into the interrogation scene which takes place in a jail cell (2:20). Together, her performative costume and the fade technique intimately connects the heist preparation scene, the actual heist scene, and the capture scene. Though the convergence of these three scenes implicates Charli in the carceral system, I maintain that she paradoxically refuses the State’s power even while in custody. FBI detectives Roberts and Williams lead Charli’s interrogation. This interrogation takes place in a dark jail cell that is dimly lit by a top light positioned above Charli—another aesthetic nod and connection to the heist preparation scene. Detective Williams is the most aggressive in their attempt to force Charli to disclose Ja Rule’s location:

Williams: “Where is he? Where is he! Where is Ja?”

Roberts: So Charli, we know you didn’t pull this crime by yourself, and we know who you pulled it with. Where is Ja?

Williams: Where is Ja? We gotta know! We want him! We want the diamonds! Where is Ja? We want him, where is he?

Charli: I don’t know what y’all talking about.

Roberts: Charli, Charli, Charli... (2:22 -3:00)

Charli's refusal becomes most apparent in this exchange. She denies knowing the whereabouts of Ja Rule and she also denies any criminal activity. I label her silence (denial) as a manifestation of her initial aesthetic practice of refusal. Noticeably, Charli wears the same clothing during her interrogation scene as she does in her "wanted" photos: an all-black leather attire, bright red hair pulled back in a low bun, while making facial expressions of refusal. I posit that this mirroring aesthetic during her interrogation scene carries with it the same refusal of the sovereign gaze and power, to quote Campt, as the refusal in her wanted photos at the beginning of the video. In refusing to "snitch" on Ja Rule, Charli temporarily disrupts the State's power as she incapacitates the detectives in capturing Ja Rule.

Additionally, Charli declares a discursive refusal that parallels a legacy of Black feminist performances of silence. Detectives Williams and Roberts continue to interrogate her after her initial refusal to speak on Ja Rule's whereabouts (2:58). However, this time Charli speaks to them and confirms that she will not turn in her partner. She raps:

Now I'mma show you blood or love
There's no belly you bounce from
Blow selling, dough amounts to no tellin'
There'll be no tellin'
Snitches get it back
Those gats to your backs for my boy...

In this beginning of her verse, Charli confirms "there'll be no tellin'" and even goes as far as to threaten to shoot any snitches in the name of protecting Ja Rule. While her profession to silence is most apparently an allegiance and act of loyalty to her partner, Ja Rule, I maintain that she draws from and continues a legacy of Black feminist performances of silence. I turn to Darlene Clark Hine's "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West" to help me think through the larger implications of Charli's refusal to snitch. In her article, Hine discusses the

impact and threat of rape on Black women. In response to this torturous reality and threat, Black women developed what Hine calls a “culture of dissemblance”. She writes:

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. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma (Hine 915).

While I am not implying that Charli is threatened by rape in this interrogation scene, I do think this Black feminist performance of secrecy, or silence, is important to consider in tandem with Charli.

When she raps during this scene, she verbally addresses Ja Rule though she aims her words and accompanying physical gestures at the detectives. A series of panning camera cuts capture her delivery of this verse and shows Detective Williams impatiently tapping on the table, revealing his continued frustration with her silence. Detective Roberts maintains the same physical stance he had prior to the delivery of her verse. Taken together, the camera technique and the detectives’ performances suggest that Charli has broken the fourth wall to speak *to* Ja Rule who is absent from the space of the jail cell and conversely, the detectives are momentarily suspended in a time frame that precedes her verse. In the latter part of her verse, she raps:

Niggas in their feelings
Cause I handle your dealings,
Keep your name intact,
My fame’s intact
So cops won’t know what it’s hittin for...
Cause I’m your bitch,
The Bonnie to your Clyde, it’s mental
Mash your enemies, we out in the rental
I’m your bitch
Niggas run up on ya?
Shift ya lungs, who’s your organ donor?

Her verse reveals that she is speaking *to* an absent Ja Rule and not to the detectives. Moreover, her verse not only serves as a literal break in her silence, she also hints that her and Ja Rule are criminals: she keeps his name intact (via a refusal to snitch) so cops are not aware of their dealings, she declares that she is his Bonnie, and she asserts that she would kill his enemies if needed. However, none of these confessions, I argue, are legible to the detectives. As such, Charli performs a Black feminist culture of dissemblance—she protects the sanctity of their intimate lives (though she discloses this to the video witness) while appearing to be open about her “lack” of knowledge regarding Ja Rule’s whereabouts.

Ultimately, this secrecy does not protect Charli as she subsequently serves time in prison for her practice of refusal (3:25- 4:54). However, she continues to refuse the power of the State while she is incarcerated. The interrogation scene where she delivers her verse fades into the following scene where she is escorted into prison (3:25). Viewers do not see the end of the interrogation scene because this fade transition occurs while she delivers her verse. Noticeably, the transport scene begins when she says the “Bonnie to your Clyde” part of her verse, further implicating her in the carceral system. Moreover, her movement into a literal prison reifies her positioning in the carceral circuitry. I return to Nick Gill’s et al. “Carceral Circuitry: New Directions in Carceral Geography” to further uncover Charli’s transformative power in prison. Her escort into prison is best represented by the “circuits of people” part of the carceral circuitry ontology. Gill et al. describe this function of this circuit:

The movement of people is a striking characteristic of carceral space. Carceral geographers have recognised the enrollment of mobility in order to punish through the use of transfers between carceral establishments in both immigration detention and prison (Gill, 2009; Moran et al., 2012; Heimstra, 2013). Moving inmates can sever them from communities of support, discipline them, problematise their access to healthcare (Stoller, 2003) and threaten them with further relocations. Inmate transportation can also act as the initiation into a disorientating and subjectifying system (Feldman 1991; Svensson and Svensson 2006; Moran et al., 2012).

Such ‘inmate shuffle’ is deleterious in terms of both mental health (MacKain and Messer, 2004: 87) and physical well-being (Gill, 2016) and represents an expedient, unregulated way in which states and private security companies stamp authority over vulnerable populations (Svensson and Svensson, 2006) (Gill et al. 6).

The video initially shows the effects of the inmate shuffle on Charli. As prison guards escort Charli to her cell, another female inmate who is coded as masculine (and accompanied by a femme inmate), intentionally blows smoke into Charli’s face as she raps the lyrics “niggas run up on ya? Shift ya lungs, who’s your organ donor?”. While Charli discursively proclaims to assault enemies who try to “run up on” Ja Rule, she lacks this self-defense in the moment as she fearfully moves backward in response to this inmate’s offense (3:33). Shortly after, the guards deliver her to her cell where she displays for the first time a look of defeat on her face as she completes her verse. In the following shot, the camera pans left to display all the female inmates in her cell row yelling angry profanities at her (3:46). Other representations of compromised physical well-being include a short scene where two women are fighting in the cell and the masculine-coded inmate mashes Charli’s head while she’s receiving a call from Ja Rule. In the middle of these scenes, Charli extends a rectangular hand-held mirror from her cell that partially reveals her face to the viewers (3:55). I read this as a semiotic device that reminds the viewer of her imbued transformative power. The convergence of the scenes (prisoners yelling profanities, the fight, and the mash) occur over the course of a few seconds. Charli’s mirror scene, however, happens over the course of four seconds (3:53- 3:57). This focus on her mirrored reflection is a kind of pause within the music video, and this pause coupled with the shape of the mirror simultaneously represents what Tina Campt might call a convict photo.¹⁰² Invoking an image of

¹⁰² In discussing convict photos, Campt explains, “The shift from the studio to the site of incarceration produced a parallel transformation in the images themselves. No longer posed with props or backdrops, subjects were shot standing or seated in front of the austere facades of brick or mortar prison walls. Techniques such as placing a

Charli in the middle of this chaotic scene transports her practice of refusal from her “Wanted” photo at the beginning of the video into the current prison scene.

Following the interjection of her mirror image, Charli begins to rearrange the social geography of the prison space, thus confirming her transformative power. After the inmate mashes her head while she speaks on the phone with Ja Rule, Charli leaves the phone booth with a new attitude (4:30). This hardcore facial expression is another semiotic gesture that partially marks her new character transformation and her ensuing disruption of the effects of the carceral circuitry. As Charli leaves the phone booth, Ja Rule raps:

Got me a down ass chick with red hair,
that don't care
blazed by the shots and flares
Girl, come on follow me, bust back at police, conceal ya heat (4:30- 4:40)

His lyrics and her semiotic mirror shot narrates her character transformation and the way she temporarily rearranges the social structure of the prison space. Charlie emerges from her prison cell wearing an orange jumpsuit and sporting cornrows braided straight back (4:33). This clothing change simultaneously represents her new masculinized prison aesthetic and a disruptive sartorial performance. The aforementioned accompanying femme inmate stops by Charli's cell (4:35). Charli aggressively puts one arm around her neck and whispers a direct order in her ear while pointing a finger in her face. She then pushes the inmate away as she turns in the opposite direction revealing another hardcore facial expression (4:40). Here, Charli usurps the power that this inmate previously had over her during the transport scene as she was

mirror in the frame of the photo...” (Campt 79) also contributed to the making of a convict photos. As such, this mirror-image of Charli interjected in the space of the prison cell creates a convict photo that contains the transformation of the convict image. In this case, I argue that the transformation occurs within Charli as evidenced by her new ability to usurp power within the prison space.

partnered with the masculine presenting inmate who blew smoke in her face. This reversal in the power dynamic, coupled with Charli's new aesthetic changes, reify her transformative power in the carceral space.

In the following scene, the masculine-presenting inmate who mashed Charli's head also succumbs to her transformative power. Charli sits alone at a lunch table while a prison guard stands directly behind her, observing all the inmates during their lunch hour (4:46). Surprisingly, this inmate slowly approaches Charli's table with a smile, carrying boxes of Marlboro cigarettes to her. As she nears the table, Charli gestures for her to come closer. The inmate, now standing above Charli and still smiling, bows down to hand over the goods (4:50). The performative gesture of bowing or lowering herself to meet Charli at eye level comes to represent a change in their power dynamic. Not only does she take orders from Charli, presumably passed on from the other inmate whom Charli whispered to earlier, but she also repositions herself to a stance that suggests surrender and respect. I maintain that this rearranged social geography of the prison space is catalyzed by Charli's imbued and recurring practice of refusal that is initially legible in her "Wanted" photo at the beginning of the video. Her imbued transformative power takes several forms—the photographic, the discursive (via her and Ja Rule's raps), the aesthetic (hair and clothing changes)—that result in tangible changes to her relationship to the carceral system and within the carceral circuitry.

Her disruption of the carceral circuit actualizes in her release from prison and reconnection with Ja Rule (4:55). After the inmate presents the goods to Charli, the scene fades to the outside of the Los Angeles County Jail (4:53). The camera moves from the top of the building to the front entrance. Charli walks through the doors to depart in the chauffeured limousine waiting for her outside. She mean-mugs one of the officers standing at the entrance—

another semiotic gesture of refusal—before she enters the limousine. For the first time in the video, she wears her hair down, unbound by a bun or braids and this aesthetic choice comes to represent a kind of freedom. I posit her exit from the county jail is her reversal of the carceral circuit of people. She is not transported into prison, or transferred to another carceral facility, instead her chauffer transports her to a private jet where she meets Ja Rule (5:04). They arrive at a beach to enjoy the luxury of freedom, champagne, and their diamonds. Surprisingly, the camera cuts to Detectives Williams and Roberts watching them through binoculars, pre-celebrating their takedown (5:36). Though this surveillance confirms that Charli lives in the wake¹⁰³ following her incarceration, I maintain that her transformative practice of refusal is effective in momentarily disrupting the State.

Meagan Good in “21 Questions” (2003)

In my consideration of Meagan Good, I begin my analysis with a return to her freeze-frame image in “21 Questions” (2003). Like Charli’s “Wanted” photo on the detective board, Meagan’s image functions as a semiotic practice of refusal that imbues her with the transformative power to circumvent the power of the State. Though she uses this power to act on behalf of her partner, 50 Cent, I maintain that like Charli, her performance is important and worth centering in an analysis of the music video. I attend to this transformative power imbued in her image via listening to images, as Tina Campt guides us to do. My haptic connection to both the mousepad of my MacBook and the interface of my iPhone is the modality for which it becomes possible to listen to her image (specifically via pausing the video).

In this introductory scene, Meagan stares anxiously to the left of the photographic freeze-frame at the officers she believes are breaking into her and 50 Cent’s home (0:31). The frame

¹⁰³ Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

captures her bangs in motion, swayed to the right side of her face, seemingly attempting to comfort her paranoid stare. Meagan's face is paused in front view while the light from the right side of the frame reveals most of her face. Though her full face is captured in front view, her right-looking side eyes sort of refuse photographic capture, much like Charli's smirk in her "Wanted" photo. I read the performative gesture of looking away from the camera as what Campf calls the "paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce" (Campf 5). Arguably, this freeze-frame image is created by the sovereign regime of the U.S. police State as Meagan physically and visually responds to the threat of police breaking into their home in this shot. In this way, the ATP officers orchestrate her positioning and photographic subjection in this frame, and paradoxically, she refuses this subjection. It is in the side eye gesture that I situate Meagan's performative practice of refusal that imbues her with the transformative power disrupt the State.

In reversal of the narrative script in "Down Ass Chick," 50 Cent is the one transported into the carceral circuit following the intervention of police, while Meagan maintains her freedom (0:36). Meagan's freeze-frame image is followed by a second freeze-frame image that captures both her and 50 Cent's anxiety at the sound of what they believe are police breaking into their home (0:32). After this second image, the instrumental for the song plays as the scene transitions to a low camera angle showing the prison bus that transports 50 Cent and other inmates to prison (0:33). The camera then cuts to the scene unfolding inside of the bus. Another inmate, played by Tyson Beckford, sits behind 50 Cent and punches the back of his chair while making threatening remarks to him. This scene represents what Gill et al. dubs the "inmate

shuffle”. Here, we see the immediacy of the “initiation into a disorienting and subjectifying system” for 50 Cent (Gill et al. 6). After Beckford threatens him, 50 Cent raps

I just wanna chill and twist the lye
Catch stunts in my 745
You drive me crazy, shorty I
Need to see you and feel you next to me... (0:43- 0:52)

These opening lyrics are important because they represent 50 Cent’s attempted psychological escape from the in-motion carceral circuit (“I just wanna chill and twist the lye”) and his lyrics also represent his attempt to attend to the image-frequency of Meagan’s transformative power for his freedom. At cursory glance, 50 Cent merely longs for Meagan to be in his presence as he is shuffled into a literal carceral space. However, I return to my consideration of Meagan’s introductory photo to excavate a deeper meaning of 50 Cent’s desire for her presence during this transportation scene.

In his call, “need to see you and feel you next to me,” I posit that 50 Cent nods toward her image-frequency that possesses the ability to “rupture the sovereign gaze” and thus possesses the power to repel the grasp of the carceral State. Leading his call with the sensorial need to “see” Meagan followed by the need to “feel” her calls to mind Camp’s theory that images register as sound that can be felt (Camp 6). This is useful in my analysis of this scene because as I maintain throughout this chapter, Meagan is introduced in the carceral narrative of the video via a freeze-frame image, and as such, her image emits the power to repel the carceral State. 50 Cent’s need to see her, I argue, is not merely a need to see her present on the prison bus with him, but it is also a need to see and feel (to listen for) her carceral repelling power that is inscribed in and transmitted from her introductory image.

Meagan continues to transmit her disruptive powers into the prison space after 50 Cent is formally incarcerated. 50 Cent calls Meagan on the phone after he is officially booked into the prison (1:24- 1:33). During this phone call, he raps a series of questions to her:

If I fell off tomorrow would you still love me?
If I didn't smell so good would you still hug me?
If I got locked up and sentenced to a quarter century,
could I count on you to be there to support me mentally?

These questions makeup the introduction of 50 Cent's first verse on the song. His questions do not merely test Meagan's loyalty, they represent a discursive refusal of incarceration.

Technically during this scene, 50 Cent has "fallen off" and has been "locked up and sentenced," yet he asks these question as if he were not already imprisoned. This scene is intersected by camera cuts showing the rest of 50 Cent's G-Unit crew, Lloyd Banks and Young Buck, as his co-inmates—another reminder of the rap group's literal and intimate ties to the carceral State.¹⁰⁴

Here, I turn to the visual component of the scene to argue that Meagan orchestrates 50 Cent's refusal via her own disruptive powers. The scene is captured in a split screen: on the left side of the mise-en-scene, 50 Cent leans on the prison pay phone while he asks Meagan these questions. On the right side of the mise-en-scene, Meagan sits at home answering his questions with "yes" head nods and "yes" replies that are muted by 50 Cent's rapping and the instrumental. This split screen technique creates the effect of two images speaking to one another and Meagan's subtle head nods and her literal silence during this scene further alludes to her image appeal.

Noticeably, the camera captures Meagan in a left profile view. The right side of her face is mostly hidden during the entire phone call scene. This profile view, I argue, is another iteration

¹⁰⁴ On December 31, 2002, 50 Cent and rap group member Tony Yayo were arrested for weapons-possession charges. During the filming of this scene in 2003, Tony Yayo was still imprisoned for bail jumping. See documentary *G-Unit: Bullets Can't Touch Us* (dir. Mark D. Ware, 2008) in the MIRS division of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

of her original side-eye refusal in her introductory freeze-frame. As such, this scene is a semiotic mark for her refusal of the photographic/carceral gaze and the connection between the two photos transmits this power of refusal to 50 Cent. Moreover, 50 Cent's digitally haptic connection with Meagan (represented by the split screen positioned side-by-side) is also an encounter with "quiet" since she is muted during this scene. As Campt reminds us, quiet is the modality for which we can listen to the disruptive frequencies of images. Since Meagan's image is imbued in this scene, 50 Cent then attends to the vibrations of her emitting power of refusal. In the end, his discursive refusal of incarceration is attributed to Meagan's practice of refusal.

Meagan's practice of refusal continues to create freedom for 50 Cent at the convergence of their visitation and conjugal sex scenes. Near the end of the phone call scene, Tyson Beckford approaches 50 Cent and maliciously presses the phone's hook switch causing an abrupt end to their call (2:05). While Tyson approaches, 50 Cent asks Meagan sexually suggestive questions:

In the bed, if I use my tongue would you like that?
If I wrote you a love letter, would you right back?
Now we could have a lil drink, you know a nightcap
And we can go do what you like, I know you like that

Tyson hangs up the phone right after this verse, disconnecting 50 Cent from Meagan while preventing a sexual connection between the two. However, 50 Cent physically reconnects with Meagan when she visits him in prison (2:27). This reconnection scene is enmeshed with their conjugal sex scene and subverts Tyson's efforts to keep them separated. The camera cuts between their meeting within the prison space and their sex scene in a van parked outside of the prison. During these interwoven scenes, 50 Cent continues to deliver a verse of questions to Meagan. They sit on opposite sides of a table holding hands in the visitation space of the prison. This haptic connection between the two represents 50 Cent's physical connection to Meagan's disruptive frequencies. Moreover, her aesthetic refusal lingers in the camera technique that

captures this visit. The camera does a 360 rotation that is interjected by counterclockwise rotations and close-ups of their faces. During these camera rotations, the right side of Meagan's face remains hidden by her bangs (like in her original freeze-frame photo), a shadow, and interjected camera cuts to their sex scene. I read these camera techniques as a continuing formulation of her aesthetic practice of refusal that is initially legible in her introductory image. As such, their haptic connection via their conjoined hands represents 50 Cent's access to her disruptive frequency/vibration while he is simultaneously imbued with her refusal.

Additionally, their interjected conjugal visit sex scene instrumentalizes Meagan's sexuality as an addendum to her disruptive powers. Outside of the prison, 50 Cent hands the guard an item, presumably hush money, before entering a white van (2:30). Inside of the van awaits Megan. They hug and embrace right before the camera cuts back to their visitation scene. This camera technique enmeshes the two scenes together and prolongs their haptic connection. As I've stated earlier in the chapter, the carceral State appropriates haptic connections as weapons of power. This also includes inmates' regulated/limited touch with visitors or the complete forbiddance of touch or having visitors at all.¹⁰⁵ Recognizing this emphasizes the radical importance of the conjugal scene, especially since there are no sartorial props in the video (marriage rings) to signal they are actually married. Meagan continues to avoid photographic capture during the sex scene, emphasized by her lack of eye contact with the camera (this juxtaposes 50 Cent who looks directly into the camera while he undresses at the 2:41 mark). Again, this refusal transports and imbues this scene with her disruptive powers. However, it is

¹⁰⁵ Hagan, Molly. *Controversy and Conjugal Visits - JSTOR Daily*, 2 Feb. 2023, daily.jstor.org/controversy-and-conjugal-visits/.

not merely *this* practice of refusal that emerges in the scene, her sexuality becomes a practice of refusal as well.

In *The History of Sexuality (volume 1)* Michel Foucault writes, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies” (Foucault 103). Drawing from Foucault, I read Meagan’s sexuality during this scene as an instrument of disruption that allows 50 Cent an additional freedom (sex) during incarceration. Her sexuality—represented by her sexy walk toward him, her change in clothing, and the actual sex—serves as a traversal linchpin that reconnects 50 Cent with his freedom even within a carceral space. Additionally, as GerShun Avilez notes in *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, “The transformative power attributed to sex derives from its ability to reorient Black embodiment and subjectivity” (Avilez 135). In effect, the sexual encounter between Meagan and 50 Cent complicates his subjectivity as a prisoner. Since limited/forbidden touch is a manifestation of State power, Meagan’s sexuality then becomes the counter-haptic weapon that rebuffs this carceral power and reorients the meaning of 50 Cent’s incarcerated body within the architectural confines of the prison.

Meagan’s power of refusal reifies by the end of the video when the plot returns to the starting locus. At the end of the visitation scene, 50 Cent leans in to kiss her on the lips (3:12). At once, the prison guards approach their table to violently grab him away from Meagan and transport him to solitary confinement, presumably for overstepping the boundaries of allowable touch (3:15). Again, the domineering haptic power of the State is weaponized against 50 Cent. Equally important to note is Meagan’s full face during the kiss and after he is dragged away from her are fully visible to the camera view for the first time in the video (following her freeze-frame

image). Ostensibly, her power of refusal is paused, allowing for the guards to wield haptic power over 50 Cent—a kind of prison guard assault that takes place for the first time in the video. 50 Cent’s departure following her full face reveal paradoxically confirms Meagan’s power of refusal.

Moreover, this confirmation solidifies after the guards transport 50 Cent to solitary confinement. They recklessly throw him on the mattress that is placed in the corner of the cell (3:33). The smallness of the cell is emphasized by the darkness surrounding 50 Cent. The only visible light in the space comes from a top light placed above the mattress. 50 Cent grabs his head in agony after they violently drop him onto the mattress, face first (3:41). He rocks back and forth and the camera partially captures the defeated look on his face, briefly highlighted by the top light (3:44). In the following shot, the camera pauses on 50 Cent’s face now entirely covered by the darkness of the light’s shadow, only his nose is visible (3:48). Here reemerges 50 Cent’s own practice of refusing the photographic subjection of the State and I argue this is attributed to his haptic encounter with Meagan during the former visitation scene. After this photographic pause, the camera view blurs as 50 Cent bows his head, seemingly succumbing to his new confinement (3:49). However, the camera then cuts back to the beginning of the video—the second freeze-frame image containing 50 Cent’s and Meagan’s startled look at what they believe to be the sound of police breaking into their home (0:32 and 3:50).

When the frame unfreezes, Meagan’s introductory image reappears—her right-looking side-eye partially covered by her bang—and this indicates that her practice of refusal is still working (3:53). After successfully flushing the illegal substance and hiding the illegal money, Meagan and 50 Cent approach their window and peek outside at the police from behind the curtain (4:04). The scene cuts to show the arresting officers escort their neighbor, Tyson

Beckford, into their vehicle for his transportation into the carceral circuit (4:05). The scene cuts back to 50 Cent and Meagan inside their home witnessing Tyson's arrest from their window (4:12). They smile at each other and breathe a sigh of relief at knowing they are not the targets of arrest. Though a cursory reading of this ending suggests that the events that have unfolded over the course of the video were 50 Cent's anxious thoughts suspended in a state of panic, I however, read against this interpretation. I posit that this ending scene reifies Meagan's transformative power of refusal. Her aesthetic practice of refusal appears throughout the video, working to create pockets of freedom for 50 Cent until he eventually adopts this aesthetic practice in solitary confinement. After this adoption, 50 Cent is transported back to the beginning of the video where he and Meagan learn they are not the targets of arrest. I read this as a backward traversal through time and space—Meagan's power of refusal disrupts temporality and transports them back to the freeze-frame moments. Conversely, the carceral events that have unfolded were real, not imagined, and this actualizes Megan's "paradoxical capacity of [her] identity photo to rupture the sovereign gaze [and power...] by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection [it was] engineered to produce" (Campt 5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Charli Baltimore and Meagan Good possess the ability to disrupt the power of the carceral State. Their practices of refusal, made evident only through a method of haptic listening, exist within a structure drawn by the State at the beginning of the videos—wanted photos and a freeze-frame image. As such, Charli and Meagan hold the paradoxical capacity to not only rupture the sovereign gaze, but to rupture the sovereignty of the State by the end of the music videos. Charli's restructuring of the prison space allows her to walk free by the end of video and reconnect with her partner Ja Rule. This restructuring is informed by the

continuous insertion of her aesthetic practice of refusal that ultimately transforms herself and results in her freedom. Meagan's practice of refusal imbues her with the power to emotionally support 50 Cent during his incarceration, weaponize her sexuality against the surveillance of the prison system, imbue 50 Cent with his own power of refusal while incarcerated, and she traverses through time and space to literally undo his movement through the carceral circuit. In the end, haptic listening is the method that that brings to life their radical transformative power.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The 90s through early 2000s was an era marked by vociferous noises. This noise included the Black popular cultural expansion in TV shows, film, literature, music, and their complementary music videos. Cultural producers offered us varied representations of Blackness that both continued the popular cultural interventions of the 70s (namely in film) and simultaneously added fresh new perspectives while contributing new cultural norms. In addition to the pop cultural noise, this era introduced new sonic waves of resistance via protests against police brutality, the crackling of arson fire expressing the Black community's rage in response to anti-Blackness during 1992, and calls for reproductive justice for poor Black women among other sounds. While this era maintained the loudness of both prosperity and protest, it also hid the quiet resistance against the U.S. carceral State. Specifically, Black women's and girls' vociferous and less discernible practices of refusal situated within film, literature, and music videos also propelled narrative resistance against the atmospheric violence of the State.

And what were those quiet and less discernible ways that Black women and girls challenged the U.S. carceral State during this era? Where were the spaces, even within the cultural texts, in which this lesser discernible resistance existed? What are the lenses or methodologies that makes this resistance legible?

To answer these questions I proposed a method of haptic listening. Drawing from the convergence of Hartman and Campt, I defined haptic listening as a methodology for discerning Black women's and girls' quiet practices of refusing the U.S. carceral State in visual and literary culture from the 1990s and early 2000s. This methodology consists of a four-step process: (1) situating myself within a literal quiet space to feel the intensity of the quietness that surrounded my text-to-image pictures, drawing my attention to the frequencies or indiscernible stories of

resistance written within the texts. (2) Haptic listening required picturing the Black women's and girl's refusal narratives via the creation of text-to-image pictures. I transformed and "pictured" their narratives via drawing maps, symbols, and hieroglyphics (markings only discernible to me) on sticky notes to recreate my understanding of the text. I reworked and redrew the pictures with every re-reading and re-watching of the texts to create a more discernible image for the characters' refusal practices. (3) Using haptic listening, I physically encountered these text-to-image pictures to read and look for the "radical interpretive possibilities" (Camp 5) of these newly created images. In other words, I listened to the images via my haptic encounter with these narratives. By touching the newly created images, I listened for and interpreted the sounds, silences, refusals, surrenders, connections, modes of survival, hauntings, traversals through time and space, performances, haptic connections within the texts, portals, transmutations of lives, etc that I saw, heard, and *felt* only after physically connecting with my text-to-images. (4) Since I worked with visual texts that exist within the digital medium (films and music videos on streaming services), this methodology also intersects with haptic media studies as I intimately engage media devices to listen for images. The use of media devices in this way allowed me to listen to the images of scenes before transferring the scenes to the text-to-image picture for further analysis. This step was primarily used for my analyses of *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.* and *Set It Off* in chapter two, and "Down Ass Chick" and "21 Questions" in chapter four. In this way, Black women's and girls' practices of refusal in the digital medium is first made legible through haptic encounters with media devices.

In chapter two I gathered a cartography of witnessing from my text-to-image pictures. Black women's and girl's multisensory witnessing accounts were the catalysts for their resistance against the U.S. carceral State. Through a practice of haptic listening, I realized that

three of the four protagonists in *Set It Off* continued to live a transmutational life after they were shot and separated from their unalived physical bodies. In chapter three I learned via haptic listening that Winter's fugitive journey began and ended with her own vociferous haptic encounters, first to her mother's gunshot wound and then with the tracing of her own laceration by the end of the novel. As a result, I traced a fugitive journey that began and end at the same locus, only made legible through a practice of haptic listening. And finally in chapter four I argue that Charli Baltimore's and Meagan Good's transformative practices of refusal are legible within and imbued by their identificatory photographs in "Down Ass Chick" (2002) and "21 Questions," (2003) respectively. These aesthetic practices of refusal, made obvious through haptic listening, appear throughout the music videos signaling the movement toward freedom. I maintain these aesthetic practices of refusal are the reason for Charli's release from prison, and Meagan's ability to traverse time and space to free her partner, 50 Cent, from prison. In the end, my project honors the less discernible narrative practices of resistance by Black women and girls during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Coda

And still, I am left with several considerations about the usefulness of haptic encounters¹⁰⁶ (a form of haptic listening via skin-to-skin contact) that make legible Black women's practices of resistance. I turn my attention to the surviving mothers and sisters of Black women who had their lives stolen by the haptic terror of the U.S. carceral State. Specifically, I think about Valerie

¹⁰⁶ In *Listening to Images*, Tina Campt defines haptics as "the multiple forms of contact and touch that characterize any encounter with a photo album, commence the moment we feel their weight, open their pages, or inhale the musty smell of worn, aged, or deteriorating paper, plastic, or hide" (Campt 71). I expand my definition of haptics and haptic encounters to include human-to-human contact.

Carey, Gina Best, and Rhanda Dormeus. Valerie Carey is the surviving sister of Miriam Carey, a Black woman gunned down by plain clothes Secret Service workers in Washington D.C. after driving through an unobvious police checkpoint with her one-year-old daughter in the car.¹⁰⁷

Gina Best is the surviving mother of India Kager, a Black woman murdered by the Virginia Beach SWAT team in the parking lot of a 7-11 with her four-month old child in the car.¹⁰⁸ And

Rhanda Dormeus is the surviving mother of Korryn Gaines, a Black woman shot and killed in her home in the presence of her children, one of which was shot too, by Baltimore County SWAT police after a standoff where she refused to surrender herself or her children to their custody following a long battle with local police that resulted in the loss of her unborn twins.¹⁰⁹

I had the privilege to meet each of these women, briefly, in 2023 at Kimberle Crenshaw's #SAYHERNAME Presentation and book signing event at the 14th street *Busboys and Poets* in Washington D.C. My sister, Doreen, invited me to attend the event with her, knowing my passion for the stories of Black women who challenge and/or survive the carceral state and its manifestations (like our mother, Betty, our baby sister Denise, and we have survived it so far). We sat in the audience of the *BusBoys and Poets*' reading room for about two hours as we listened to these surviving mothers and sisters retell the stories of the day they found out their loved one was murdered and how it affected their lives since then. Afterwards, we had the opportunity to shake their hands and receive their signatures on our purchased copies of Kimberle Crenshaw's and the African American Policy Forum's book 2023 #SAYHERNAME:

¹⁰⁷ Crenshaw, Kimberle, and African American Policy Forum. #SAYHERNAME: *Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence*. Haymarket Books, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Crenshaw, Kimberle, and African American Policy Forum. #SAYHERNAME: *Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence*. Haymarket Books, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Crenshaw, Kimberle, and African American Policy Forum. #SAYHERNAME: *Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence*. Haymarket Books, 2023.

Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence. In shaking their hands, I formed a haptic connection with these surviving mothers and sisters who intimately knew the haptic terror of the U.S. carceral State.

Specifically, I heard and saw the story about Korryn Gaines prior to this event while living in New York City. I encountered Korryn through a series of online news clips, social media postings about her murder, and screenshots of “the Facebook video”—introductory photographs that showcased her literal capacity to challenge the sovereign gaze and power of the State. And while I am careful not to reduce Korryn’s life to photographs (I understand she was a woman who lived a life apart from her encounters with police), I am merely stating that *my* introduction to her story occurred via a series of images. As I’ve explored in this project, haptic listening to images makes legible Black women’s and girl’s practices of refusal within photos. But what does haptic listening via haptic connection to the surviving mothers of Black women who challenged the State offer? I spoke briefly with Rhanda Dormeus before shaking her hand. For me, this handshake reified the legacy of Korryn Gaines’ story. It affirms an aliveness that challenges the stories told about her death. It confirms for me that a connection to a Black maternal touch can prolong the life and legacy of Black women who challenged the State in defense of themselves. And it can extend the voice of Korryn Gaines who declared “I’m never going to stop talking until they silence me.”¹¹⁰

Haptic listening is a methodology that makes legible the indiscernible practices of refusal enacted by Black women and girls. It is a method that can be a “reclamation that signals their

¹¹⁰ See page 124 in Crenshaw, Kimberle, and African American Policy Forum. *#SAYHERNAME: Black Women's Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence*. Haymarket Books, 2023.

[and our] refusal to allow police violence against Black women to be illegible.”¹¹¹ It is a method that connects us more intimately with the stories of Black women and girls who challenge(d) the State. It is a means to prolonging the lives of Black women who have been literally and figuratively killed by the carceral nation. And it is a method for excavating these narratives hidden in plain sight between the pages, the camera cuts, and within the backgrounds of the mise-en-scene. This project is dedicated to Black women and girls everywhere who have not survived, who continue to survive, and those who have survived the U.S. carceral State.

¹¹¹ See page x in Crenshaw, Kimberle, and African American Policy Forum. *#SAYHERNAME: Black Women’s Stories of Police Violence and Public Silence*. Haymarket Books, 2023.

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