

# being-in-blackfeminineflesh

## Towards an Embodied Veneration of BeTTy BuTT's Inexhaustible Pleasures

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On 23 November 2012, BeTTy BuTT, a founding member of The Official Twerk Team, published a video on her solo YouTube channel performing to the song “Fuck You All the Time” by Jeremih featuring a chorus sung by Black female vocalist Natasha Mosley. Performing in front of and on top of a white leather couch, BeTTy wore leopard-print leggings, a black tank top, and an intentionally exposed red bra with lace details. The heavily edited video, directed by @KANGTATUM,<sup>1</sup> paired with the song’s deliberately sexy and haunting chorus echoes, chops, and screws a call to consider questions around the presumed and performed inexhaustibility of Black women’s sexual, reproductive, and erotic labor. BeTTy BuTT’s willful inhabitation of the explicit (I can fuck you all the time) and the primitive (while wearing leopard print) calls me in. In response, I position myself and my own bodily comprehension to offer a reading from my vantage point as a Black femme from the Dirty South—a cultural nexus that connects the southeastern United States to the Gulf South—witnessing the erotic move through a familiar body. I am reaching for a way of seeing that can do right by the destructive and irresistible qualities of Black femininity, which I rhetorically recast as the condition of being-in-blackfeminineflesh.

BeTTy BuTT’s performance offers what Hortense Spillers describes as a “first-order naming,” a naming in which “words seem to come off the human tongue and need not be referred back to

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1. At the time of writing, @KANGTATUM’s Youtube channel no longer exists and there is no corresponding social media presence.

a dictionary in order to be understood,” whereas everything that follows my rendering of BuTT’s performance is a second-order symbolic response meant to contextualize the digital medium of the so-called twerk video and allow us to follow BeTTy BuTT into an arena of methodological play (Spillers 2003:168–69). I turn to Spillers’s methodological configuration of first-order naming to suggest that tending to “the hieroglyphics of the flesh” lining the surface of Black feminine erotic performance might require a mode of bearing witness to *a truer word* that is not preoccupied with unveiling interiority and upends the notion that “Black womanhood” ought to be made available to a universalized public optic. Within the space of dirty possibility opened up by the radical and raunchy plays in objecthood showcased and popularized in twerk videos like BeTTy BuTT’s “Fuck You All the Time,” Black feminine figures intentionally abandon the grounds of moral authority that might substantiate a claim to know or perform “Black womanhood.”<sup>2</sup> To refuse knowability and refuse a moral investment in public notions of womanhood in a performance of such hyperbolic and erotically insatiable femininity is a queer act (Musser 2018:5). In the place of a proper territorializing sighting of “Black womanhood” these performances offer a sensuous engagement with being-in-blackfeminineflesh.<sup>3</sup> This term is a heuristic meant to signal that I am more invested in the ways beings variously marked by Black femininity negotiate their own relationships to their bodies and the histories those bodies carry than I am invested in how those negotiations are perceived by spectators.

How do we know being-in-blackfeminineflesh when we see it? Southern vernacular movement aesthetics of “p-popping,” “shake dancing,” and “twerk” as they have coalesced in the medium of the twerk video offer insight on the impact that working-class Southern Black femininities have on global understandings and practices of Black performance. In these social choreographies and samples of social media content, spirited performances of Black femininity knead into traumas of ecological dispossession, sexual vulnerability, and patriarchal violence. “Revered and reviled,” these performances elicit a method of reading that is sensitive to the broad range of sensations they stir in the bodies of viewers and performers (Hartman 2016:171).

*Figure 1. (previous page) Still image from the twerk video performance “BeTTy BuTT | Fuck You All The Time.” Uploaded by BeTTy BuTT on 23 November 2012. The image shows BeTTy’s dancing image double-exposed through editing that articulates a corporeal glitching or haunting. (Screengrab by Ra Malika Imhotep)*

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2. “Black feminine figures” is the most honest and accurate description of the bodies and bodies of work at the center of my inquiries. I have sifted through a number of different ways of naming my interlocutors: “urban Afro-Femme,” “Black femmes,” “Black women + femmes.” After a number of reckonings, personal and political, I acknowledge my inability to impose coherence on the radically transgressive group of Black beings I want my work to be in conversation with and accountable to. I regard “The Black Woman” as a concept that warrants destabilization. This is grounded in the ways artists and intellectuals marked Black and female throughout the 20th century reckoned with the tensions between the Women’s Liberation and Black Liberation movements in the late 1960s, throughout the 1970s, and into the 1980s (see Spillers 1985; Combahee River Collective [1977] 1986; Morrison 1971; Lindsey [1970] 2005; Bambara [1970] 2005).
  3. In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick defines this “territorialization” of the body in terms that are generative for my analysis of contemporary Black laborers working through the convergence of blackness, femininity, and the erotic, positing that, “once the racial-sexual body is territorialized it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, [and] proactive” (2006:45).

My relationship to the medium of the twerk video as a Black femme who came of age in Atlanta, Georgia, in the early 2000s is intimate, challenging, joyous, erotically charged, and foundational to my sense of self. The Official Twerk Team, a performance troupe at the center of the media phenomenon, was from the Eastside of Atlanta, and as a high school student my viewings of their videos were complemented by the opportunity to see them perform live at Golden Glide skating rink. I can still recall the thrill and terror my best friend and I felt when we saw that a photo taken that night of me supportively holding my friend's arms as they bent over to offer up their own twerk had been uploaded to Facebook by the event promoters. I *knew* the twerk video as a site of Black folks' expressive theorizing at a haptic level before I met the language of Black performance theory (see Stallings 2015).

The questions that drive my intellectual and affective compulsions to study twerk videos lie in what is opened up or pressed upon by the unmarked performances they elicit. As a party to the collective feeling evoked by the sight of Black feminine figures' erotic performances, I have desperately wanted to believe that "sexuality is a site of memory, as opposed to a history of violence and terror" (Stallings 2015:199). The multimedia texts I turn to (and replay) here surface and shake the resonant material and ideological wounds of Black women's embattled sexuality, heteropatriarchal violence, and the contortions of form necessary to sustain feeling through over-written traumas, particularly for those of us from the Dirty South.

Much more than a subculture of hip hop, the Dirty South is at once both a specific (albeit contested) geography and a network of sound and movement cultures cultivated in the 1990s landscapes of the US South. The sound and movement cultures of the Dirty South converge and diverge on multiple levels. While the distinct sonic materials reverberating from below the Mason-Dixon Line are sometimes problematically conflated with one another, the regional kinship indexed by the term "Dirty South" points towards a shared sense of relation and otherness shaped by the region's foundational proximity to US chattel slavery. The Dirty South is a product of those left behind after both waves of the Great Migration. This is cogently articulated by curator Valerie Cassel Oliver in the essay "What You Know about the Dirty South?" that accompanied the 2021 exhibition *The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse* (2021). As Oliver explains, the dirt of the Dirty South indexes the physicality of place, the labored relationship to the earth, and the unkempt intimacies that cultivated these sonic and material cultures (2021; see also Stallings 2019).

I know the Dirty South most intimately through Georgia red clay and the swampy waters of New Orleans. In 2005 I witnessed the changes in the social and cultural geographies of Atlanta in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. At least 100,000 people evacuated to Atlanta in the days before and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August 2005 (Appleseed Foundation 2006). The vast majority of these evacuees remain in the Atlanta area today. While this is a statistically smaller number than those who stayed in other parts of Louisiana or evacuated to Texas, the influx of evacuees to Georgia was rapid and mainly concentrated in the relatively small metro-Atlanta area, causing a 1.8% increase in Atlanta's population in roughly a week's time (Appleseed Foundation 2006). Atlanta's foundational stank—described by Kiese Laymon as "root and residue of Black Southern poverty, and devalued Black Southern labor"—encountered the culturally fecund murkiness of the post-Katrina exodus, giving material levity to the imagined Black space of the Dirty South (Laymon 2020). And what's more, it changed the way we danced.

### Witnessing BeTTy BuTT as She "Fuck[s] You All the Time"

*Her legs, in leopard-print leggings, enter the left of the frame distorted and are met by their double from the right. The two merge in front of a cream-colored couch. A single red pillow at the center of the couch creates a diamond between her thighs. She shifts her weight, then dips into each hip. Another distorted set of her own legs enters from the left before she is brought into full focus.*

*On top of the beat she kneels on the couch, her hands behind her on the arm of the couch, one hand extends to embrace the other. She throws her ass in a circle. She's on the floor; one leg extended towards the ceiling. She is bent over the couch, makin' it vibrate. She sits on the couch, legs spread, facing the camera. Her right arm holds up a wild mass of her own black hair; a bounty somewhere between curls and loose naps. She grinds forward while looking into the camera lens. She is bent over again, still vibrating. She lays down on the couch. The red pillow is between her legs, she raises her knees and folds her arms into her chest. Her legs slide up and down to straighten, one at a time, as if she were a restless lover. She turns her head and says something indiscernible to the camera. (It's interesting that with all this editing they would leave that part in.)*

*When we see her face it is deliberately provocative and comfortably set. She is barefoot. She is brown against the cream of the couch. She is lit from behind. Her nails are painted the same red of the pillow, which is the same red as her intentionally exposed lace bra. Her shadow dances too, arms raised above her head.*

*She kneels on the floor, back facing the camera, knees spread. Her lower back undulates, as her hands move from over her head. Fade to black. She is standing with her back to the camera. Legs spread further than hip-width apart. She isolates and loosens her thighs. Everything that is supposed to shake, shakes. She leans over to the left and places her hands on the couch. She is sitting on the couch legs spread. She folds over herself. She leans over the couch and tosses her hips from left to right. She stands, back facing the camera, and shakes her ass while her hands hold up her hair. She bends her knees and sends her pelvic bone back towards the camera. She is laying on the couch looking back. She extends her left leg. She is crawling on the floor. Looking into the camera. Pussy poppin'. Tossing her hair. She slides to her knees. She tosses her hair. She is laying on the couch looking at the camera and circling her hips. (see BeTTy BuTT 2012)*

This video, like the rest of BeTTy BuTT's self-authored performance works, are uploaded to her solo YouTube channel and circulated as twerk videos. They are *her* records of *her* body, choreographed and shaped by *her* intent. In them I see an argument for rethinking the performative labors of contemporary Black feminine figures, how our bodyminds witness them, and how we write about them.

Through the technological incorporation of special effects designed to distort and render ethereal her moving image, BeTTy BuTT aesthetically evades easy knowability (see McKittrick 2006).<sup>4</sup> This disruption of the presumed recognition and solidity of the "Black female body" works through the erotic to play with and subvert the overdetermined relationship between Black feminine flesh and sexual labor. While BeTTy BuTT overtly presents her erotic prowess in ways that could be interpreted as conforming to a stereotypical view of Black women as insatiably sexual, she does so in a solo performance of autosexuality: "an expression of a free sexuality which has no object but itself, and most especially it is a sexuality not dependent upon men" (Miller 1991:333).<sup>5</sup> Which is to say that in the moment of performance the self is the primary object of an erotic fulfillment that exists outside the limits of the stereotype, and as we read and engage with the performance other layers of symbolic play come into relief.

BeTTy BuTT's autosexual gestures "signify" on the tropes of Black female sexuality that precede her. Henry Louis Gates describes the Black vernacular play of "signifyin'" in terms that speak directly to BeTTy BuTT's digital performance aesthetic:

[It is] a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself,

4. McKittrick develops "knowability" as an analytic that takes seriously the ways the discursive and physical violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade constructed Black women's bodies as "sights" of profitability controlled by outsiders. This profitability was indexed by the appearance of a body that was "healthy, working, licentious, [and] reproductive" (2006:45).

5. Citing the broader context of gender relations in Trinidad's 1988 carnival, Daniel Miller argues that autosexual displays of women wining effectively have no external sexual object, but objectify freedom in ways that subvert nationalist projects of heteropatriarchal sociality (1991). The performances of wining themselves have no direct relationship to heteropatriarchal scripts of erotic performance in which a Black feminine figure's movements are presumed to cater to masculinist desires, but within the broader political and spectral economy the performances enfold practices of corporeal freedom that trouble the nation-state.



Figure 2. Still image from the twerk video performance “BeTTy BuTT | Fuck You All The Time.” Uploaded by BeTTy BuTT on 23 November 2012. BeTTy, in animal print leggings, crawls on all fours away from the camera, casting her eyes back towards the viewer—her explicit play in tropes of a primitive eroticism. (Screengrab by Ra Malika Imhotep)

however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled. (1989:44)

In the “Fuck You All the Time” video, BeTTy BuTT effectively brings the viewer into a digitized hall of mirrors as she doubles and re-doubles her flesh through a series of repetitive gestures and frames of her movement edited to be transparently doubled over others. Gleaning from Amber Musser’s reading of Foucault’s “technology of self,” BeTTy’s performance and its editing “by [her] own means or with the help of others” displays a series of alterations meant to transform the dancing body into a sight of self-pleasure (2018:63). This movement appears in a cyborgian call-and-response dialogue with Natasha Mosley’s *chopped* background vocals.<sup>6</sup> In this dance, both BeTTy and Mosley become complex configurations of Black femininity whose technologically mediated performances explicitly (re)state an inexhaustible capacity to perform erotic labor that is principally for the self and then extends its autoerotic function into an experience for the other/viewer/listener. The coupling of their distorted visual and aural performances is an aesthetic glitch or distortion that reveals literal technologies that enable the performance of the erotic Black feminine “self.”

### ***Pop That Thang!!!***

#### ***Static and Dynamic Sightings of being-in-blackfeminineflesh***

*popping is an art, and like art, it isn’t for everybody*

—Mia X in Polo Silk’s Pop That Thang!!! (2017)

The idea that contemporary Black women and femme performers are “captive” to the social and political imperatives of the plantation is a reductive reading of the condition of being-in-blackfeminineflesh. This reading shows up in Black studies as the legacy of sexual woundedness that generations of social reformers, Black and white alike, have worked to overcome (Hine 1989; Higginbotham 1994; Hartman 2019). Presenting, and later profiting from, the body’s performance of sexuality is a

6. Natasha Mosley’s vocal performance could be understood in the way that Katherine McKittrick and Alexander Weheliye read singer Brandy’s hook on “Can You Hear Me Now?” Like Brandy, Mosley’s voice is “fundamental to how the song works, how it achieves its effects in the flesh” (2017:27).

variant of erotic labor or sex work.<sup>7</sup> This outright performative enjoyment of and investment in the carnal has been and remains a contested topic within the long tradition of Black feminist inquiry. But recasting the work of being-in-blackfeminineflesh as erotically rooted autosexual play that may or may not be invested in profit allows for a more nuanced appraisal of the ways contemporary Black women and femme performers make use of their erotic materiality.

In “The Uses of the Erotic” Audre Lorde argues that the erotic is a bridge between the spiritual and the political (Lorde 1978). With BeTTy BuTT in mind I wonder how displays of erotic embodiment might further bridge this ideological and practical gap between political utility and spiritual resonance while simultaneously bearing witness to the ways the Black feminized body remains publicly freighted with the historical wounds of race, class, and gender? This question is rehearsed in Jasmine Johnson’s assertion that “flesh dance”—the movements and gestures associated with Southern hip hop culture—is overdetermined by male authority:

Flesh dance positions women as the property of men; yet this fact does not foreclose the possibility that these public and popular performances of femininity, authored by misogyny, could also be a source of subversive power. (2020:14)

But what if instead of hearing it as an imposed command “authored by misogyny,” we engage the scene or sound of recorded and mediated instruction as an interruption, or differently, an invocation of the subversive power and corporeal pleasures being enacted as Black women and gender-nonconforming (GNC) femmes choreograph their own command of their marked bodies through a series of sexually charged gestures and performance practices?

The twerk video is a Black performance phenomenon that emerged alongside the launch of YouTube in April of 2005. This technological turn towards amateur content-sharing occurred during the same space-time as the forced migrations of poor and working-class Black folks and their cultural products in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in August of that same year. Often featuring Black women and/or GNC Black femme performers, appearing solo and as performance troupes, the twerk video is a self- or collectively authored performance work that rehearses and mobilizes the practices of being-in-blackfeminineflesh. Here I extend Ntozake Shange’s poetic declaration, “I usedta live in the world,” into dialogue with Spillers’ exhumation of “unprotected [Black] female flesh” (1987:68). The turn of phrase “being-in-blackfeminineflesh” exalts explorations and contentious performances of sexuality and interiority that are markedly Black, markedly feminine, and sexually and socially nonnormative.

i usedta live in the world  
really *be in the world*  
free & sweet talkin  
good mornin & thank-you & nice day  
uh huh  
i cant now  
i cant be nice to nobody  
nice is such a rip-off  
regular beauty & a smile in the street  
is just a set-up. (Shange [1975] 1989; emphasis added)

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7. My use of the term “sex work” here speaks to Afro-diasporic understandings and practices of transactional sex and sexuality activities, which are related to but distinct from the discourse of sex work as coined by US-based sex worker activist Carol Leigh in 1978. Leigh’s definition of sex work emerged in the specific political economy of late 1970s labor movements and the women’s liberation movement. It was intended to be a term that would unify workers in the sexual economy alongside a US-centered labor movement. Sex work in the Afro-diasporic context draws from longer histories of transactional sex and sexual activities that are often connected to but not limited by colonial power relations (Leigh 1997; see Kempadoo 2004).

Here Shange signals that the practice of being-in-blackfeminineflesh is shaped by a will to evade ever-present threats of patriarchal violence. These threats seize the physical spaces of “the world” and “the street” and subsequently alter the modes in which Black femininity is allowed to perform itself. This is the intersection of racialized gender that Black feminist thought and practice emerge from. It renders the Black feminine figure as an embodied counter-epistemology, “a text for living and dying and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations” that cannot depend on the sanctity of a stable, protected body (Spillers 1987:68). Spillers’s understanding of “flesh” has become a central preoccupation of contemporary Black feminist inquiry. Spillerian flesh is at once a “primary narrative” of brutal abjection *and* an opening towards a state of being that elicits no ethical or moral regard from the dominate regimes of thought and power. From this space of disregard, enacting “fungible flesh as a mode for fugitive action,” the practices of being-in-blackfeminineflesh offer a repertoire of subversive possibilities, as C. Riley Snorton has written (2017:12).

The “blackfeminine” in being-in-blackfeminineflesh is a refusal of biocentric, transexclusionary, and nonimaginative notions of “Black womanhood” and “Black femininity.” I use “blackfeminine” as opposed to “black fem(me)” to intentionally step outside of lesbian aesthetic discourse, but the two terms are connected at the root. Both express that which exceeds the confines of normative (i.e., White Supremacist Heteropatriarchal) femininities.<sup>8</sup> Attuned to the ways the internalized and externalized violence of slavery and carcerality continually endured by Black people have leveled the ontological distinctions between “male” and “female” labor and brutality, an ungendered other-than might be able to hold the relational plays of gender dissent and deviance that mark Black social life, sexual cultures, and sexual economies (Haley 2013; Davis 2019).

Rather than impose Spillers’s ungendering formation on the lived subjectivities of Black folks as a limit or condemnation, I want to (gleefully) embrace it as a severance from the strictures of gender binarism (as predicated on the knowability of “the body”). This is a move toward what Alex Weheliye has termed “living in the flesh”—“an alternative instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man [or Woman]” (2014:43). This is a move towards the “s/he” and “man/woman” appellations Spillers uses to describe the condition of Blackness as forged through the femininized/feminizing experience of captivity. If Spillers is correct in asserting that the “touch of the mother” is the most indelible mark on modern Blackness, then it becomes imperative that we pursue and claim the “insurgent ground” of unruly Black femininities divested from “the ranks of gendered femaleness” (Spillers 1987:80). Here, we must follow those who are actively trans-gendering Black feminism towards a queer appreciation of “Mais Viva!” or fugitive aliveness (Santana 2019; Snorton 2017).<sup>9</sup> As articulated by Treva Ellison, Black femme praxis is “a lived politics of double-crossing, or making queer use of racialized and gendered labor constructs” (2019:14). Thus, the kindred theorization I offer with being-in-blackfeminineflesh only arrives at the erotic play and vernacular expressions centered *through* material experiences of criminalization, labor, precarity, grief, death, and survival.

In line with L.H. Stallings’s assertion that public Black sexual leisure cultures (like Atlanta’s *Freaknik*) and Black dance in strip clubs (like New Orleans’ *Club Spades*) are articulations of neutral sexuality—that is, sexuality divorced from reproduction—and occasions for androgynous performances that pleurably fail at being respectable expressions of Black civic morality, I have argued

8. Fem/femme (along with the masculine signifier “butch”) is a social, aesthetic, and sexual identifier popularized in lesbian subculture that has long been contested. In her biomythography, Audre Lorde describes being a Black lesbian in the 1950s who did not fit into the heteroaspirant roleplay of “butch” and “femme” identity (1982). Further, in the 21st century as nonbinary gender identities have come into popular discourse “femme” and “transfemme” stand on their own as articulations of gender identities that reappropriate femininity from its traditional associations with heterosexual and heteroaspirant modes of gender performance (see Nestle 1992; Munt and Smyth 1998).

9. Theorized across the lived experiences of Black Brazilian travesti activist Selen Ravache and the work of Brazilian Black feminist theorist Beatriz Nascimento, Santana’s understanding of “Mais Viva!” is the sense of critical awareness and radical embodied knowledge that makes Black and trans resistance possible in the contexts of erasure and precarity.

elsewhere that being-in-blackfeminineflesh is a queer condition that destabilizes “projections made about what gender signifies and can be made to signify by the performative processes of Black bodies” (2015:181; 2019:40). There are deeply political stakes to this queering of black gender performance. Building on Cathy Cohen’s 1997 provocation to consider the ways “primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom have existed their entire lives outside the white middle-class sexual norm [...] fit into society’s categories of marginal, deviant, and *queer*,” we can see that the indulgent displays of blackness and femininity in twerk videos (and other pieces of public/social media circulated by Black women and GNC femmes) are culturally, politically, and economically deviant (Cohen 1997:458).

In *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild presents the Africanist aesthetic as one that places value on the “democratic autonomy of body-parts,” where bodies are presented as multidimensional, evidenced by s- or z-curve body profiles with “ribs and belly forward, buttocks back, and knees bent in postures that suggest motion and kinetic energy” (2003:147–48). This s- or z-curve described by Gottschild is easily recognizable in the shaking postures of Black dancers from Josephine Baker’s 1927 *Banana Dance* to the twerk stance displayed in the stage performances of contemporary artists like Sukihana and Megan Thee Stallion.

Having been colloquially referred to as “booty shakin’” and “p(ussy)-poppin’” in Atlanta and New Orleans respectively throughout the 1990s and syncretically hailed as “twerking” throughout the region from around 2005 onward, the contested pleasure vehicle of flesh dance was awkwardly pulled into mainstream consciousness as twerking in 2013 by an unfortunate, nationally televised reference at the MTV Video Music Awards.<sup>10</sup>

Outside of or underneath mainstream consciousness, twerk moved throughout the Dirty South as part of a long tradition of ass-centric vernacular social dance. While polyrhythmic back, thigh, and hip isolations have long been associated with dance traditions throughout the African diaspora,<sup>11</sup> “twerking,” by name, emerged as the dance counterpart to Southern rap in 1993 when New Orleans bounce music artist DJ Jubilee called audience members to “shake it like a dog” and “twerk” as part of his instructional dance song “Do the Jubilee All.” Jubilee is credited as the first to say “twerk” *on vinyl*, but it was female bounce music artist Cheeky Blakk, proclaimed the “Mother of Twerk,” who furthered the cultural institutionalization of twerk by putting it in the title of her 1995 “Twerk Something” (Graham 2013). In “Do the Jubilee All” twerk functions as a euphemism for the more direct instruction to “shake something baby” that Jubilee, a male music artist, issues to his audience. A closer look at the grainy YouTube rip of the original music video for “Do the Jubilee All” troubles the assumption of a female audience with scenes that show DJ Jubilee himself and other anonymous male figures following the dance calls that move them into positions recognizable as twerking. Further, the instrumental element colloquially referred to as the “Cheeky Blakk claps” first heard in “Lemme Get That Outcha” (1995) drew percussive attention to the back-body, invoking rhythmic “ass-clapping” that literally reshaped vernacular dance in late-20th-century New Orleans (Jones 2017; Blay 2019).

New Orleans bounce music and culture function as a venue of active collaboration between presumed cis-Black women, Black gay or queer men, gender-nonconforming Black femmes, and Black trans women. being-in-blackfeminineflesh is visually signaled by an array of markers that chew up and gloss over the heteropatriarchal scripts of “proper” or “true” womanhood.<sup>12</sup> New Orleanian

10. “Twerking” was the top Google search of 2013, clearly pointing to the moment it was awkwardly pulled out of the Black counter-public by a bleach-blond Bantu knot–swinging Miley Cyrus at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. A look at the Google trend infographic for “twerking” shows a minor uptick in 2009 that I read as global Black counter-public activity with the emergence of The Official Twerk Team followed by a major uptick in August 2013.

11. Mapouka in Côte d’Ivoire, leumbeul in Senegal, chakacha in Kenya, bubbling in Jamaica, perreo in the Dominican Republic, wining in Trinidad and Tobago.

12. For more insight on New Orleans’ “Sissy Bounce” and its connection to localized Black queer survivals see the work of Alix Chapman (2013).



bounce music pioneers Big Freedia, Sissy Nobby, and Katey Red, who openly bend and transform Black gender, utilize the same gestures, movements, and aesthetic accoutrements (hair styles, wigs, lashes, rhinestones, acrylic nails, clothing) as Black women rappers and shakers/twerkers whose gender performance is in supposed alignment with the gender they were assigned at birth.

In collaborations between Katey Red and the late Magnolia Shorty, Sissy Nobby and his ensemble of shakers, Big Freedia and Tarriona “Tank” Ball, HaSizzle and Anjelika “Jelly” Joseph, among others, the choreographic imperatives of flesh dance can be heard as “calls” rather than “commands.” Black dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains “calling” as an element of social dance in the US South originated by enslaved “dance and music specialists” in which dance steps and gestures are rhythmically announced by musicians (2011:206). In US American social dance’s contemporary study and practice, calling is most associated with North American square dance. However, as explicated by Hazzard-Donald, the European social dance traditions from which the American square dances evolved were customarily “memorized under the instruction of a dancing master” (2011:207). The enslaved fiddler conscripted to the labor of entertaining white folks “would have inserted the African tradition of ‘calling’ danced in an environment where few dancers knew the changes in the dance steps” (207). Within the Southern Black social world, the calling tradition became integrated with the vocal song and instrumentation of the ring shout, where lyrical phrases “instructed participants on the ritual pantomime” of the occasion (207). In this context, HaSizzle’s improvised scat “Get-Get, Getcha Sum!” is not at all a misogynist demand for Black feminine movement; it is more akin to a supportive invocation of a particular kind of embodied knowledge (HaSizzle the Voice 2021).

The cover of New Orleans-based Street photographer Polo Silk’s 2017 monograph *Pop That Thang!!!* prominently features an image of Magnolia Shorty in full hood-femme regalia, clear plastic cup of drank in her left hand while her right hand holds the head of a wireless microphone up to her mouth. She is bent towards the camera in an active posture, seemingly rapping straight to the ass of the speculatively feminine thighs and torso of a figure in front of her whose head, hands, and feet catch the wall or floor outside of the frame. The monograph is representative of Polo Silk’s 35mm, Polaroid, and digital archive. The central figure of this collection of images is being-in-blackfeminineflesh. Its pages are full of scenes of hyperbolic displays of working-class Southern Black femininity and eroticism. The most prominent pose, assumed by Black feminine figures of all shapes, shades, gender-designations, and ages, is that “well-planned ‘booty-tooted out’ pose” (Polo Silk 2017). This static comportment indexes a twerk-stance and other Black diasporic significations of ass-centric visual culture. The monograph’s title, *Pop That Thang!!!* (and the 2017 gallery exhibition it accompanied), is itself a call/exclamation/instruction that emphasizes (with three exclamation points) the centrality of Black feminine flesh to New Orleans bounce culture and New Orleans culture at-large in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Brief introductory blurbs by the artists Charlie Vaughn/Uptownz Illest and rapper Mia X contextualize the “sexual freedom, BODY, SPIRIT, and SOUL of underground New Orleans” held in these images, as part of a diasporic circuit of transcendent Black feminine performance (Polo Silk 2017).<sup>13</sup>

For the Black feminine figures in *Pop That Thang!!!*, these performances of “being seen” entail a valorization of the whole body, with an emphasis on the most sensational flesh: ass, hips, thighs, and sometimes breast and pussy-prints (Thompson 2015:69). These willfully eroticized performances of Black femininity, captured by or staged for Polo Silk’s camera, reference and archive the sexual cultures and aesthetic priorities of the Dirty South in the late 1990s to early 2000s.

While Black women and GNC femmes in New Orleans were transmogrifying p-popping into twerk, Black women and femmes (many from NOLA) traveled in droves to Atlanta for the Spring

13. Vaughn writes: “This seductive borderline dirty dance has connections to hole-in-the-wall blues clubs, dancehall reggae, Latino, and, of course, African movements” (in Polo Silk 2017:9). And a page later, Mia X recounts: “It’s almost tribal to watch girls mimic moves done in African and Jamaica” (10).

Break festival known as Freaknik.<sup>14</sup> As described by Krista Thompson, throughout the festivities they would routinely flash their flesh, embodying the sexual carnivalesque as demonstrated by the women in *Pop That Thang!!!*, to signal the start of impromptu public performances attracting largely male audiences who would record, photograph, or otherwise insert themselves into the act. Thompson contextualizes these performances within the erotic mythology of the Dirty South *and* the contested politics of “law and order” in the New South. This, too, is a diasporic movement pattern. Similar to the crisis of containment that followed what Daniel Miller refers to as “the wining Carnival” in Trinidad in 1988, the “lewd” performances of public Black feminine sexuality at Freaknik in 1994 troubled the middle-class morality of local governance (Miller 1991:325; Thompson 2007:34). Like the working-class “bacchanal women” who challenged conventions of cross-gender sociality as they “jump’d up” with “systematic gyrations of the hips” until they reached a point of rapture at the 1988 Carnival, public performances of Black feminine sexuality at Freaknik in the mid-1990s expressed fantasies of nonproductive sexual fulfillment that threatened the heterosexist logics of propriety espoused by Atlanta’s post-Civil Rights governance (Miller 1991:333; Thompson 2007:35).

The City of Atlanta’s efforts to control Freaknik in 1995 correlate with an increase in the social surveillance of the Black feminine body at the event in years following. “After 1995,” Thompson writes, “as the culture of videotaping *within* Freaknik became an intrinsic part of the event, violence was increasingly meted on female performers by other Freaknik attendees” (38). The instances of rape and sexual assault that plagued Freaknik throughout the late ’90s functioned as extensions of the disciplining apparatus of the post-Civil Rights state. In this case study, the agential Black feminine figure, asserting her sexuality on the streets of Atlanta, is seized not only by law and public discourse, but by her male peer who is empowered (or emboldened) by the state and armed with technology to put her back in her place, as it were, through surveillance and sexual assault. The footage of Freaknik captured by male attendees was a kind of “alternative cinema” enabled by the democratization of camera technology. In this practice of street recording, male Freaknik attendees weaponized their gaze against the bodies of the Black feminine figures they beheld.<sup>15</sup> This real-world dynamic enacts Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the sadist pleasures of male voyeurism ([1975] 1989:64). This interplay between the Black feminine figure’s performance of command of her own body through publicly staged erotic performances and the interruptions of this performance—by physical violence, sexual violence, and the violence of being recorded without consent—is the context through which being-in-blackfeminineflesh adapts towards new mediums of articulation.

## The Twerk Video as Medium

One colloquial understanding of the etymology of “twerk” is that the word is a vernacular contraction of “to work” (as in “to work that ass”). From this understanding we might begin to comprehend the ways the twerk video speaks to a larger conceptualization of labor as it relates to being-in-blackfeminineflesh. The popularity of “twerk” in language and practice thus implies that on the backs of Black women (trans and cis) and GNC Black femmes there is important cultural

14. Freaknik began in 1983 as a picnic organized by students in the Atlanta University Center (Morris Brown College, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University). The first Freaknik was put together by the DC Metro Club, a collective of AUC students who were originally from the DC, Maryland, Virginia (DMV) area. This history shows that Freaknik was always a convening of cultures across the Dirty South (Haines Whack and Burns 2015).

15. In the article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” originally published in 1975, Laura Mulvey briefly describes “the alternative cinema” as the opening up of opportunities for cinematic production from the strictly capitalist to the artisanal. While Mulvey indexes alternative cinema as a potentially radical space where patriarchal narrative conventions can be challenged, I am thinking about a variant of alternative cinema that perverts the male gaze through its crass and hyperbolic voyeurism. Which, in Mulvey’s terms, is “fixated on sexually consuming a controlled other” (1989:59).

work being performed across various spatial boundaries and moralistic binaries. Twerk videos, like BeTTy BuTT's "Fuck You All the Time," can be understood as a gendered and embodied medium through which Black feminine figures choreograph social and erotic economies. Centering corporeal self-knowledge of the Black feminine form, the twerk video and its circulation occasion sensuous methods of witnessing and analysis attuned to the ways bodies move, are moved, and have been moved by broader structural systems of demand and domination.

In "YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus," Kyra D. Gaunt offers a discussion of the appropriation of twerking by white female celebrities as a result of context collapse enabled by YouTube and the impact this may have had on the Black adolescent twerkers at the center of her online survey. For Gaunt, context collapse is meant to signify:

1) the virtual co-presence of two invisible audiences—culturally Black and hegemonically non-Black who bring different histories and orientations to twerking and 2) a "connection without restraint" to other YouTubers anywhere, anytime [...] that allows users to do and say things face-to-face communications might limit or temper especially concerning racialization, sexuality [...]. (2015:246)

This context collapse creates a deep and loose connection between content producers and their anonymous audiences. Gaunt's research on Black girlhood in the digital needfully problematizes the ways this "connection without restraint" leaves Black girls vulnerable to the offline violences of their adultification in the eyes of the public. While young Black girls are major participants in online twerk culture, I acknowledge that my claims about the queer erotics of being-in-blackfeminineflesh are most readily mapped onto the performance practices of consenting adults. Gaunt turns to "body-work or batty-werk" as the alternative facework that young Black girls perform through amateur twerk videos that may render them as "everybody's visual ho" to viewers whose own histories and biases "deny the agency of erotic pleasure in musical play" (262). I assert that adult Black feminine figures producing and appearing in YouTube content don't twerk because they, as Gaunt suggests, have internalized the notion that "Black girl's [...] bodies speak more powerfully than their voices" (252), but rather their displays of excess flesh are invested in a staunchly different cultural capital than that of the universalized YouTube vloggers discussed at length by new media scholar Michael Wesch (2014).

A highly "spreadable" response to the calls of Dirty South MCs, the twerk video is staged and published in way that compels audiences to share it via various social media platforms. These performances circulate by way of a process Jenkins, Ford, and Green have termed "spread." Spread as opposed to virality ("going viral") affords digital consumers an active role in the dissemination of media. Concerning the phenomena of the twerk video, spread becomes indicative of the ways video content-sharing platforms like YouTube allow audiences to observe the dancing Black feminine figure remotely across an array of digital and IRL locales (Jenkins et al. 2013). This experience of reception mediated by the internet is distinct from that of the stickiness and funk of the live site of the dynamic Black feminine figure. While dancers in Southern clubs and digital twerkers like BeTTy BuTT enact similar modes of performance, the Southern strip club is analogous to a server hosting different self-interested "sites" all programmed and performing for immediate capital gain. Whereas for performers and performances who circulate within the digital realm, revenue increases based on the number of views a video accumulates and views are increased by the number of times a video is shared or visited via different social platforms (i.e., Twitter, Instagram, Facebook). Reception is not specifically tied to the liveness of the performance. This shifts the relationship between the laboring body and audience.

In the vernacular cinema of the twerk video, what Spillers describes as the "irresistible and destructive sensuality" of the pornotrope is mobilized by a global cohort of Black women and GNC Black femmes connected by a thread of Black popular culture highly influenced by Black sexual cultures and economies of the US South (1987:67). Echoing Amber Musser's discussion of inhabiting

the pornotrope, “pornotroping” might also be an act performed by the Black feminine subject aware of the sexual surplus that is her flesh. In its depictions of a “fleshy mixture of self-production, insatiability, joy and pain,” Polo Silk’s *Pop That Thang!!!* carries the erotic charge of Black social life in the late ’90s and early 2000s (Musser 2018:5). This collection of still images and its social resonance offer queer evidence of the impolite pleasures experienced in the bodies of Black folks and their value to our understandings of contemporary Southern Black sexual economies.<sup>16</sup>

Twerk videos like BeTTy BuTT’s “Fuck You All the Time” performance are distinct from what Johnson terms “flesh dance music videos” (2020:14). Johnson’s examples are the industry-funded music videos of Black male rappers and rap groups that enlist Black women performers as narrative elements and accents that flesh out the social world of each scene. By contrast, in both its amateur and more professional iterations, the twerk video gives the main stage to Black women and GNC femme performers as its defining and central spectacular elements. While there are examples when these forms are collapsed into one another, the distinction is important because the self-authored performance work of the twerk video occasions interpretive possibilities that are less crowded with the optics of popular misogyny than the videos of Black male rappers.

To return to Spillers, as a medium in which Black feminine figures “strip down layers of attenuated meaning” for the sake of erotic consumption, the twerk video offers “a truer word” that is impolite. The form forces viewers to consider that “the marvels of [a black feminine figure’s] own inventiveness” might be explicit, “dirty,” and willfully objectified (1987:65). As a dirty and vernacular form of cinema, highly sexualized in popular culture and broadly circulated, the twerk video is an ideal text in which to read the condition of being-in-blackfeminineflesh. In this instance, the performer inhabits the pornotrope as a means to a different end. The twerk video captures play between two Spillerian configurations, that of “the captive body reduced to a thing, a *being for the captor*” (1987:67) and that of the Black female performer as “being-for-self” (2003:165).

### Coda: This Woman Is a Ghost

BeTTy BuTT’s solo YouTube channel was launched in May of 2012 and as of March 2023 has 15,500 subscribers and a total of 770,950 views. There are only four videos uploaded to BeTTy BuTT’s solo account. Three of them uploaded in 2012 and one uploaded in 2013. Unlike the early videos from The Official Twerk Team, BeTTy BuTT stages her solo performances mostly in public spaces. In the first video “BeTTy BuTT ‘Pop That’ Twerking in Atlanta,” BeTTy dances in matching color-trimmed black sports bra and shorts with black rain boots in the middle of a baseball field. The second video is footage from what appears to be a club performance. When she does return to interior domestic spaces, they are either hyperstylized as in the video “BeTTy BuTT ‘Fuck You All The Time’” or staged as a direct reference to earlier Twerk Team videos.<sup>17</sup>

Not much has been said publicly about her departure from The Official Twerk Team in late 2010, but after filing through photos tagged “#bettybutt” on Instagram, I discovered that BeTTy BuTT, née Jamie Moore, underwent chemotherapy that year, losing her hair and no longer performing publicly until her solo YouTube channel launched in July of 2012. Once in remission, Moore began to garner her old fan base, reviving her stage name BeTTy BuTT through a personal Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube channel. My survey of the tag “#bettybutt” on Instagram

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16. José Esteban Muñoz defines queer evidence as “an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof” (2009:65). It is a means of refuting expectations for hard material causality and instead savoring the hint or trace of memory and affect.

17. For example, in the page’s final upload “Betty Butt,” posted in February 2013, BeTTy performs in the corner of a stairwell wearing a white shirt, pink shorts, and yellow thigh-high socks. In this final video, BeTTy’s costume is a direct reference to those worn by The Official Twerk Team between 2009 and 2010. Between the costuming and the enclosed domestic staging, this performance could be read as a deliberate attempt to return to the aesthetics that launched her career.

and Twitter revealed that in 2013 she launched a clothing line called “lov3heart”—a friend’s promotional post announced “she can make dresses bathing suit stripper outfits and much more that fits you.”

On 12 November 2014, Jamie Moore was shot and killed inside her Atlanta apartment. As reported by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, her murder was the result of a botched robbery targeting her boyfriend (Foreman 2016). While conducting research for this article, digging through the digital archive of yet another dead Black woman in the age of #SayHerName pulled me into a state of mourning. I was confronted by the lifelessness of a body I had spent hours engaging as a site of resistance. Further, all the desire and libidinal excitement motivating my writing was suddenly interrupted by grief.

On 5 November 2014, just a week before her death, Moore posted a photoset onto her Twitter and Tumblr pages of herself dressed in a turquoise mesh bodysuit, bedazzled eye makeup, iridescent fish-scale body art, and color-coordinated yarn-locs. The photos are captioned “Betty Butt/Ameti/Yemaya” (bettybutt-blog-blog 2014). Moore’s explicit embodiment of the orisha Yemeya illustrates a deep level of diasporic self-knowledge. At the time I discovered this photo I had already begun thinking about the metaphysical resonance between Black female secular performers and African cosmology systems like Ifá, the Yoruba religion from which the image of Yemeya/Yemoja—orisha of the sea—emerges. But even this turn towards Afro-diasporic cosmology is an attempt to reckon with a sense of grief, a yearning (perhaps also felt by Jamie Moore) to place being-in-blackfemineflesh within a tradition in which death is not an absolute ending.

I was introduced to the concept of “dead reckoning” during a talk given by Dr. Tonia Sutherland at the 2018 African American History conference on culture and digital humanities at the University of Maryland, College Park. Gleaned from *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, “dead reckoning,” a term of seafaring origins, has been rearticulated to hold the feeling of

[finding] yourself bothered by someone’s death more than you would have expected, as if you assumed they would always be part of the landscape, like a lighthouse you could pass by for years until the night it suddenly goes dark, leaving you with one less landmark to navigate by—still able to find your bearings, but feeling all that much more adrift. (Koenig 2021:105)

My reencounter with the news of BeTTy BuTT’s tragic death was the sudden loss of a lighthouse. I had spent hours digging through the online archive of Atlanta’s Official Twerk Team, remembering their role in my adolescent formations of dance, joy, and desirability along the way. And then I remembered her death. I must have heard about it when it happened. I want to believe I mourned her then, as I do now. But the reality is that the news passed quickly and faded from my memory.

The violence that claimed the life of Jamie Moore is a manifestation of a global state of violence routinely perpetrated against and between gendered, poor, racialized, and otherwise vulnerable populations in its efforts to protect the interest of racial capitalism and the white, able bodies it values (see Vergès 2022). Her life was claimed as collateral in an attempt at petty theft. As such, the circumstances of her death echo the inescapable “scene[s] of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” throughout the history of US chattel slavery that mark our contemporary understandings of gender, class, and sexuality (Spillers 1987:67).

Jamie Moore’s tragic end and my jarring encounter with the fact of it speaks to what interdisciplinary artist Lorraine O’Grady describes as “the body that has been raped, maimed, murdered” at the end of our every path toward the reclamation of Black feminine subjectivity (1992:4). I’m struck by the way BeTTy BuTT, the digital performance persona or avatar, performs an erotic immortality that survives the matrix of past and present death that seizes Jamie Moore.<sup>18</sup> O’Grady charges

18. With my use of the term “avatar” I am thinking with Lisa Nakamura’s analysis of message board avatars as representative of minoritized “taste cultures” that allow women to “graphically embody themselves [...] thus publicizing bodies and lives previously unrepresented” (2007:120) alongside McMillan’s rendering of avatar production in Black feminist performance art (2015). These two contextualizations of online avatars speak to BeTTy BuTT’s sensuous image as a transhistorical Black performance methodology, a spiritual incarnation, and a self-aware virtual proxy.



*Figure 3. Still image from “Endurance challenge compilation video.” Uploaded by YouTube user “BETTY BUTT FAN FOREVER” on 19 Dec 2014. The image—an expression of mourning’s transmutation into monstrous intimacy—is positioned as a mandatory “break” between twerk videos that have been compiled into a masturbatory contest for a presumed male viewer. (Screengrab by Ra Malika Imhotep)*

that, in order to be self-determining creators of their own reflections, Black women artists “must give a healthy present” to the Black feminine subjectivities obscured by the persistence of racialized gender violence. That is the work of being-in-blackfeminineflesh as witnessed in the permutations of BeTTy BuTT’s inexhaustible eros that found and aroused inquiry in me years after Jamie Moore left behind her physical form.

Throughout this article I have worked to advance a method of Black feminist performance writing that is intimately related to the autoerotic labor of the twerk video. This is a method that embraces the body I write from—the body of a Black feminine figure who learned to see herself and how to be seen from BeTTy BuTT and a pantheon of Black women and GNC femmes working as entertainers, educators, organizers, and sex workers throughout the Dirty South. What you see as sexy or deviant in BeTTy BuTT is indistinguishable from what I see as sexy or deviant in me. In the performance that anchors this essay, BeTTy BuTT leans over the couch to free up her ass in the same manner as I have trained myself in front of many mirrors, DJs, audiences, friends, and lovers alike. This woman is a ghost whose fugitive aliveness I conjure with every breath. Every dance. Every fuck. Every pursuit of feeling close to freedom.

I, Ra Malika Imhotep, PhD, Black feminist scholar, performance artist, and survivor think about how those around me will respond to the news of my death more often than I’d like to admit. While I am normally preoccupied with how they will mourn and what they will say, there is also the question of what my memory will do for them. What work my name and my image will perform in my absence. I end this essay with a consideration I wish I didn’t have to make concerning the posthumous compilation of one particular tribute video published the month after Jamie Moore was murdered that demonstrates the extremes to which being-in-blackfeminineflesh can be conscripted despite its will.

The YouTube account Betty Butt Fan Forever turned mourning into monstrous intimacy with the publication of an “endurance challenge” that haunts my attempts to see Jamie Moore in her entirety. It is a “simple contest” that utilizes an array of videos originally posted by BeTTy BuTT and/or The Official Twerk Team as pornographic stimulus for an ejaculatory competition between presumed male viewers (Betty Butt Fan Forever 2014).

Mission “Not Cum”/Impossible/Your Mission is to Survive... 4 rounds constant masturbation/to Betty Butt/15 second breaks/to recover between rounds/good luck/[...]HANDS off YOUR COCK

What kind of fandom is this? Tonia Sutherland’s work on digital afterlives and the distinction between memorialization and commodification asks the question: What does it mean to be Black and dead in digital culture? From lynching photographs circulated as postcards to the Tupac hologram performing at Coachella in 2012—Sutherland’s work shows the ways digital records of Black people’s bodies have functioned as “carceral artifacts” engaging their subjects in “compulsory post-mortem enslavement” (Sutherland 2018). In death, Black folks’ bodies are digitally imprisoned by the demands of entertainment. The demand to be entertained is a desire for stimulation. The endurance challenge is but one crude example of the ways Black folks’ bodies are conscripted to labor after their deaths. In the space of the digital, Jamie Moore’s laboring body, intentionally offered as a commodity she named BeTTy BuTT, intentionally Black, intentionally sexual, intentionally performing, can always be put to use.

But maybe, I wonder out loud, we who are marked by her, we who re-member her with every breath, with every dance, with every pursuit of feeling, might soften the dirt for her to rest, even if only in our minds. Might free up some space for her to survive, even if only in our own bodies.

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