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Queer Theology
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Final Project Reflection

P.S. I Loved You Once, I Still Do: A Performance Installation

I. Procession

A Woman descends from a whirlwind, lands onto the earth from a past, present now. Laden in a purple, babydoll dress that allows her breasts to roam free, a large translucent hat with an even larger lavender bow, she walks briskly through doors, upstairs and toward her garden, her h(e)aven while a long, gold cloth—that names her sisters, now ancestors—trails behind her. Etta James wails a tune that has all too long been the cry of Black womxn since 1619. “Why don’t you trust in me when things go wrong? Cling to my daddy, and I’ll be strong. We can get along, we can get along, if only you trust in me” (James). Her rhythm and blues notes mix with the wind slipping through the trees, as the Woman’s feet shuffle underneath her. She stomps and rocks against the pavement as Etta’s voice fades into another woman’s breath. She says “When I think about being...womanhood in this moment, when I think about pleasure, democracy, and love, I think that those words have to be verbs...” (Monroe). The Woman continues to dip her body in and out of rhythms, using her feet to shift her weight, and deciding how much she will give in to gravity. “They can’t be static. They have to be dynamic. It has to...you have to think about these things as action. Like, love has to be a verb. It has to be something that we’re...doing redoing and remaking and rethinking and...” (Monroe). In between dips the Woman pours water onto the pavement. Water is a sign of life. It is the portal through which life is incubated; the main ingredient in rituals where we are called into being. It is the portal through which her

ancestors escaped this life to meet God. Where they made a decision that it was better to love us from the Otherside.

She said “When we come from that place of love, and then when we think about what brings us joy...and keeping our eyes toward Joy, and moving in ways that bring joy, then we enact pleasure. And then from that place I think about creating democracy knowing that democracy is always in negotiation and it’s always in flux” (Monroe).

II. Pleasure

I’m not going to lie to you. I’m tired. It’s been a year. On those days where I was gripping my heart and holding my breath, fearing more news of another sister’s death, the love of my Sisters held me up. We gave each other space to cry, got our asses in the streets, organized how we were going to “keep our feet on these white folks’ necks” a saying expressing our intended political, social, and communal strategies to make sure not another one of us would die by the hands of white supremacy, patriarchy, misogynoir, or capitalism. Our conversations about the 2020 elections, mixed with our plans to purchase dildos, and our exchanging photos of folx we deemed fine and sexy. We laughed and cried and cussed while we laughed and cried. We talked about orgasms and our favorite books and the deafening silence of our homes during quarantine. We longed to hold the ones we loved, to lovingly whisper sweet secrets in their ears. We desired sex and Spirit and community and love. She said, “The question that I have for God, for the world, for myself is...where can I find love, where can I look for love? I think it is the joy, the pleasure that sustains us. To me those are super elements. Like...we need them, like...we can’t survive without them. It’s like water. That’s what love is to me” (Blade).

III. Democracy

“Nobody, and I literally mean, nobody loves Black women except for Black women.” This is what a friend of mine said to me during a recent phone conversation. The statement pierced my heart when news report after news report carried with it the death of Black women and femmes by the hands of those who thought it easier to kill us than to love us. Yet, in the wake of horror and injustice, Black womxn continue to create space for ourselves to experience joy and pleasure, enacting a “politics of articulation” to borrow from Evelyn Hammonds where we show up for one another to heal by retelling our stories for the our sakes, for the love of us. The Woman finishes pouring the last drop of water from the vase. She sits in a chair that’s sunk deep into the soil, as she drapes her long gold quilt over her lap. R&B sensation, Brandy Norwood’s song “I Wanna Be Down” blasts in the background. Her laughs-turned-cries-turned-laughs mix into Brandy’s proposition elucidating a tune similar to Etta’s: “I would like to get to know if I could be/ the kind of girl you could be down for / ‘Cause when I look at you I feel something / tell me/ That you’re the kind of guy I could make / a move onnnnn” (Norwood). She rocks her shoulders as she weaves her quilt, stretching her long arms up above her head and back down to the earth. She takes the long needle and inscribes “trust Black womxn” in the air. “What would it take for the world, for America to trust us/me?” she says with her laugh. How much grief must I endure before you see me? Don’t you know that in the freedom of my hips, and the surrender of my closed eyes and tossed hair lies your sacred democracy?

IV. Orneriness

The Woman labors in the soil to prepare for ritual, draping the tree and bushes in flowers, hanging photos of Black, cis, queer and trans women and girls from glitter-gold ribbons, lighting candles, and spraying perfume into the air. She claims space for Black feminine energy and

memory in the middle of campus between the lecture hall and the chapel, between the academy and the church, between two institutions that have often been silent, complicit in the death of her sisters. She randomly catches a glimpse of the cross, carved into the towering piece of stone above her head. The sun shines gloriously, and the tree gently sway as if to approve her work. She smiles as other Black womxn students pass the site, gasp and say, “Is this your work? It’s so beautiful! Tell me more!” Their approval means the world to her. She labors for them. She carries this in her heart as people begin gather at the beginning of the procession. She motions them to come closer, to commune with her in the garden, to witness up close. She turns up Etta’s voice as it reverberates off the buildings, and even marks a path of water hoping they would be curious enough to step in. Yet, they remain at a safe distance, arms crossed, lips pressed, eyes squinted. As she pours the last drop of water from the vase, the Woman chooses to retreat back into her h(e)aven, sits in her rickety chair, and begins to knit.

In her 2016 lecture, “Colored Orneriness: A Concerto in Four Movements,” Dr. Emilie Townes theorizes the power of radical love for one’s community and nation in what she terms “colored orneriness.” By invoking one’s embodied lived experience of faith and “doing one’s first works over,” we can live up to what it means to be responsible to our communities, to learn the very meaning of democracy and enact it. “Colored orneriness” is an attitude, a swag, a womanist methodology filled with possibilities, a divine calling to answer God’s “what if’s?” A call to “not perform a heteronormative drag show and resist [labor] that does not resemble reflection or faithfulness” (Townes). The Woman enacts “colored orneriness” as she walks through campus, pours water, knits in ecstasy, and laughs-cries as a ritual to reclaim the land back for its rightful owners, for those whose blood was spilled in its construction. She builds a site of Black feminine energy in memory of Black queer and trans womxn as an ornery labor of

love, an act of resistance buffered by the sweet, soundtrack of classic, Black R&B love songs. She asks, “What does it mean for Black womxn to have marched to the polls this election cycle and cast their ballot for a country that has never loved them back? What does it mean to enact radical love for oneself, one’s nation as an act of political resistance?”

V. God

Another woman’s voice emerges from the speaker. She says,

“I feel like people use God to minimize or contain Black womxn’s experience. If you think about church politics, in my opinion, it’s used to control how people exist. I feel like, for Black women, when it comes to God, I feel like they get don’t get the credit they deserve for the work they have done, or they get dismissed from the conversation. But, God for me is also outside of the church, more so than inside the church. Like...when I protest, I feel like that is my ministry, involving myself in the work of my people. I feel like that is where God exists. God exists in the actual work, and that is where love exists as well. ‘Cause if you truly love people, you will do what you can to support them by whatever means necessary. And, if you love God, and you say that God exists within you, you don’t put limitations on who you show that love to, by deciding who deserves love and who doesn’t” (Collins).

The Woman restfully sits and knits under the safety of the tree’s shade, under the shadow of God’s creation while rocking to the sounds of Aretha Franklin’s “Day Dreaming.” She enacts a theology of pleasure by embodying the truth that God is indeed grieved by the death of Black womxn, that God is indeed a god of Justice, that rest and pleasure is indeed God-ordained.

VI. Recessional

The Woman stands up from her chair and drapes the gold cloth around the tree. She adjusts her hat, leaving her leaning chair and frazzled yarn and needle behind. She finally peeks from beneath her hat and mask labeled “ICON” to see the people gathered around the tree.

Unbeknownst to them, she smiles and begins to feel the rhythms of Brandy, Etta, and Aretha enter once again into her hips and spine. Her work is finished; she grabs her shoes and speaker, and pimp-walks away, down the stairs, disappearing into the courtyard before her spirit is whisked away.

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