

# Introduction: Feel Me

**I**n the delirium of a felt life is the made thing and making a thing worth feeling for. I lose myself in the frenzied rapture called life, can attest to having felt, and in that heightened state of life—create. The evidence of creation means that I came out on the other side of rapture, and yet I am still in it. We now (me, you, reader, viewer, listener) are still in it, even as I may have moved on to the next thing. If I know anything, I know how to bend time this way—the pen, the flickering cursor, the soft flesh in the throat and its sound, the pastel's residue on my oily fingertips—my small bit of power the universe has given.

Living with arduous time—global pandemics, war, genocide, extinctions, and destruction of habitable lands and clean water—one could ask if artistic creation matters at all. If creative practice is frivolous, ornamental, or in poor taste in respect to our current conditions? To a question like this, I offer the poet's response in Ntozake Shange's *The Lizard Series*:

that's why poetry is enuf/ eisa/ it brings us to our knees  
& when we look up from puddles of sweat/  
the world's still right there & the children still have bruises  
tiny white satin caskets & their mothers' weep like mary  
shlda  
there is nothing more sacred than a glimpse of power of the  
universe  
it brought james brown to his knees lil anthony too/ even  
jackie Wilson/ arrogant pretty muthafuckah he was/  
dropped/ no knee pads in the face  
of the might we have to contend with/ & sometimes yng blk  
boys bleed to death face down on asphalt cuz fallin' to our  
knees is a public admission to a great big ol' scarlet letter that  
we cain't/ don't wanna escape any feelin'/ any sensation of  
being' alive can come right down on us/ & yes  
my tears & sweat may decorate the ground like a veve in  
Haiti or a sand drawing in Melbourne/ but in the swooning/  
in the delirium/ of a felt lif  
lies a poem to be proud of/ does it matter?

Can ya stand up 'chile?!

Well, how does it feel to live amid global disaster? What do you know of it? Disaster is here, has been here, will be here, even as we are torn up along with it. To run from feelin is to attempt to run from disaster itself—and exactly where are you going anyway? As the late Nina Simone said in a moment of grief for the very recent loss of Dr. Martin Luther King, “Folks, you better stop and think and feel again.”<sup>2</sup> For it is not the feeling that is frivolous—but the avoidance of that feeling that orders destruction, makes it unremarkable, ordinary. And truly, even if you don’t feel—feeling is likely to catch up to you, “no knee pads in the face.”

This book is interested in how Black women artists take up our glimpse of power of the universe—how creativity makes its way through feeling and what we can know with the work left behind. It is interested for the same reason some of the artists’ words and work direct us toward the creative process as one of self-revelation, exploration, and need. Toni Morrison has described her own impulse toward writing in terms of a need—a longing to read something not yet written: “Writing to me is an advanced and slow form of reading. If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”<sup>3</sup> Renée Stout describes her creative *process* as the very purpose of her art as well:

While I can make a piece and think it’s nice, I want to be on to the next piece, because I get everything from the process. The piece that I create is sort of the evidence of the process, but is also for the viewer to enjoy whatever it is that I was doing in my studio. But I want to be on to the actual act of creating the work.<sup>4</sup>

The work—that which is left behind—is evidence that something has happened here. We may enjoy the evidence of that experience in status—the gallery, the recording. And if we are lucky we might peek in to catch a glimpse of the universe’s power in motion:

In the photograph, Edna Smith Edet’s eyes are closed and her mouth is relaxed. If there is any expression here, it is inward.<sup>5</sup> She is in the moment of making music happen. We can tell by the blurred movement of her ring finger as she plays the upright bass. The scene is dark, but there is a hint of artificial light emanating from a square box above and to the left of Smith’s head. Save for the shine from a metallic watch on her wrist, the glimmer of the tuning keys on the bass, and a soft light bouncing off her forehead, nose, and hand, the rest is darkness. We might see the silhouette of something in the background, but the light of the image is Smith herself in a moment of creative expression that we cannot touch or hear save for this remnant, for this evidence, a photo offering the only proof of this moment having taken place at all. Roy DeCarava is known for these kinds of intimate portraits, but I’d never seen one quite like this—a Black woman artist deeply in an internal space of creativity. What might strike the viewer is that it is hard to situate this photograph in time. Even the shadow of Smith Edet’s clothes could be mistaken for a more recent era than 1955, when it was taken. There is nothing she is doing, no way that she is staged, no visual cue that says that she is in any other time but now.

Edna Smith Edet was a lifelong musician and music educator. In addition to playing with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, an all-female jazz big band especially popular during World War II, she also led her own jazz trio, traveled to

Ghana and Nigeria to learn and teach Black diasporic music, and returned to New York to continue teaching music anthropology with an expertise in diasporic children's songs at Medgar Evers and Queens Colleges.<sup>6</sup> Her studies and recordings of Black children's songs and games are still available to us. Knowing all of that does not mean that I can glean what chord she was striking, how it felt to her, and how it felt to be in this moment of making. But I do have this photo.

And . . .

The sculpture was just an idea—a sketch of a monument that would never be cast or put on display. But for Meta Veaux Warrick Fuller it was worth keeping close in the small quarters of her attic studio. She would render more well known works from this same room where *In Memory of Mary Turner as a Silent Protest against Mob Violence* would sit—only a foot tall, unimposing in size but heavy in content—as a memorial for Mary Turner, who was brutally lynched by a mob in Valdosta, Georgia, in 1918. I wonder about this insistence on proximity. Necessary because the size of Fuller's studio was very small, but also necessary as a personal talisman—a remembrance of the stakes of living as a Black woman in America.



**Figure 1.** Photograph of Meta Warrick Fuller in her attic studio, 1919. Harmon Foundation Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of John L. Fuller.

Here, Fuller is in her studio working at this sculpture (figure 1). She is in a smock, her hair only slightly disheveled. It is a drastically different photograph from the one of her in her parlor wearing the fashions of a middle-class woman in the early twentieth century. Again, though aware of the camera, and perhaps because of her smock and disheveled hair, she, like Edna Smith Edet,

appears to be suspended in time—at work, without the trappings of the era, in an ever-present state.<sup>7</sup> The photograph is high-grain because of the technical limitations of low light photography at the time. It has not the artistic mood of the DeCarava photograph, but it appears as timeless nonetheless. The same sun emanating through two small windows, the clay forming underneath Fuller's hands—the clutter of her attic studio appearing as homely as anyone's attic.

If we are lucky, a photograph may be left behind. But what we usually have (also if we are lucky) is the art itself—the evidence of having been in the studio, the rehearsal hall, the desk. It is a gift if what we call *the work* is documented, published, recorded, or performed for an audience's pleasure. And it is work, isn't it? To develop a craft, hone it, master it, or deliberately choose not to master—to reach for something other than the craft itself. To collaborate, choose the precise color, brushstroke, lighting, chord, the most exacting word that would communicate the very thing, yes perhaps said before, but newly felt. “For there are no new ideas,” as one poet said, “there are only new ways of making them felt.”<sup>8</sup> This project is interested in that effort—in Black feminist thought made possible through art, what I call *feelin* or the affective sedulity of Black women's creative process that takes place in the studio where the work of art making, tinkering, experimenting, emoting, and sensing happens and may manifest in photographic series, collections of poetry, songs, albums, or not available to an audience at all. I am interested in the impulse to create because it was a book the writer needed to read, an image that brought the painter sinister joy to stroke through, or a note the vocalist needed to reach. This project is interested in the motivations, the will, and compulsion to make art through the weight of needing to feel, the *affective sedulity* that compels the artist to create—and most importantly, the knowledge produced in the “delirium of a felt life.”

Those of us in the fields of critical theory, cultural studies, and feminist studies might have turned twice around in the so-called affective turn: the first into the complexities of emotion and emotion's relationship to knowledge and power, and the next, away from the bodies that inhabit, experience, and produce those feelings as knowledge. Patricia Ticineto Clough describes the affective turn as a transdisciplinary development that occurred “at a time when critical theory is facing the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism.”<sup>9</sup> This list of terrible things to happen in the face of critical theory considered to be a developing moment specifically made legible through the works of European philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guatarri, Baruch Spinoza, and Henri Bergson is curious to me. Had not critical theory emerged in exactly these times of trauma, torture, massacre, and all of the other terrible endings of worlds? Had terrible things not preceded it? And if so, what of this gesture of a *turn* toward affect? Who does it serve now? This effort to cite a moment in which affect is an appropriate object to examine seems doubly curious to me as Clough further describes the affective turn as “[throwing] thought back to the disavowals constitutive of Western industrial capitalist societies, bringing forth ghosted bodies and the traumatized remains of erased histories.”<sup>10</sup> Clough describes a warranted reckoning, no doubt, but I am left to wonder *who* has woken up to these atrocities and what synapses have worked to shutter or open their eyes? Had not thought long been “thrown back” to Western thought itself even as the accumulations of destruction and greed mounted for half a millennia? What forms of thought, what

bodies are enabled to make such a reckoning within the discourse of this new affective turn? *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought* turns toward the body, indeed in the flesh of Black women by engaging discourses of emotion and affect as they already exist in lexicons of Black cultural production and Black women artists specifically. *Feelin* argues that Black women artists approach and produce knowledge as internal and complex sensation entangled with pleasure, pain, anger, and joy to name a few emotions, making artistic production itself the meaning of the work. *Feelin* intervenes in discourses in critical theory built on logics that would make terrible things a happenstance rather than endemic to the very circulations of discourse in which theory traffics. Discourses that would disembodied feeling as knowledge only to put it back together pallid and disjointed. It expands notions of Black women's pleasure politics in Black feminist studies that are inclusive of the erotic, of grief and pain, of joy and shame, and the sensations and emotions that yet have no name.

## Feelin as Sacred Knowledge

*Feelin* is interested in how Black women artists create knowledge in the studio by engaging emotion and sensation. It is curious about how Black women artists engage how racism, (hetero)sexism, and classism are felt and how those felt experiences are connected to Black feminist thought. It asks how Black women's art and artistic production negotiates, shares and acknowledges emotion as a form of knowing that, in Audre Lorde's terms, galvanizes radical thought into "more tangible action."<sup>11</sup> As Angela Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge."<sup>12</sup> *Feelin* is a thing that I trace here through close, empathetic readings with the works of Black women artists who practice the visual, the literary, and the audible. By looking at Black women's art we are also looking at processes through which Black feminist thought engages mind, body, and spirit as knowledge or as Dian Million notes of Indigenous women scholars who "feel our histories as well as think them."<sup>13</sup> Here, Black women's creative production (as opposed to the products themselves) is Black feminist theorizing.

Audre Lorde greatly influences my understanding of *feelin*. I understand Lorde's essays "Uses of the Erotic," "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," and "Uses of Anger" to be Black feminist engagements with what is now being discussed as affect theory. Writing in 1984, Lorde cites the erotic as a source of knowledge of systemic forces, as well as knowledge of the power within us. She states: "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives."<sup>14</sup> This book demonstrates that Black women artists willfully explore interiority.

Black feminist criticism serves as an interpretive lens, an invitation to creative thought and practice that allows me to wade through material that shares themes, motifs, and language that these artists have used in their creative meaning-making processes. I read Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory" as a direct critique for pronouncements of theoretical turns as they plainly center the work of theorizing *as the production of critical thought*. There she states:

I have become convinced that there has been a takeover in the literary world by Western philosophers from the old literary elite, the neutral humanists. Philosophers have been able to effect such a takeover because so much of the literature of the West has become pallid, laden with despair, self-indulgent, and disconnected. The New Philosophers, eager to understand a world that is today fast escaping their political control, have redefined literature so that the distinctions implied by that term, that is, the distinctions between everything written and those things written to evoke feeling as well as to express thought, have been blurred.<sup>15</sup>

Christian makes the case for situating this particular "race for theory" as an intentional effort to reassert Western abstract logic as the reliable, publishable, and thus valuable form of meaning making—an effort which becomes increasingly palpable as Black women literary writers emerge on the very same scene. "For people of color have always theorized," she says, "but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking."<sup>16</sup> This project takes Christian's assertion quite seriously, and offers that Black women's creative production outside of literary prose, which has long been a focus of Black literary criticism, is a valuable site of theorizing—to once again bring attention to the verb. However, this project does reach toward new ways of thinking, new frameworks for looking at and feeling Black women's creative production. As bell hooks has interjected, "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing toward this end."<sup>17</sup> She describes theory's capacities for liberation as visceral, felt change that is integral for social change. In my efforts here to name the ways that racism and sexism are felt, and thus creative responses to those experiences must also be felt, I point this project in the direction of a "feminist theory, a feminist practice, a revolutionary feminist movement that can speak directly to the pain that is within folks, and offer them healing words, healing strategies, healing theory."<sup>18</sup> Black feminist theoretical texts serve as a companion here to the theoretical substance already endemic to Black women's art. Together with creative production, Black feminist criticism in the form of expository propositional prose assists in creating a foundation for talking about how Black women reveal the workings of our inner lives and make meaning of it in the world.

## On the Holiness of Black Language

Regards to Ralph Ellison

In high school there was a white girl who stopped me in the middle of a sentence because she claimed that it was against her religion for me to say "I Am." While the Hebrew translation of אהיה אשר אהיה reads into the future "I shall be, as I shall be," perhaps it is fitting that I could say, "I Be" and not offend her by speaking myself into past, present, and future existence.

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\*Often translated as "I Am that I Am," the answer God gave to Moses at the burning bush when he asked for God's name in Exodus 3:14.

Black English is useful here as a way of speaking and knowing that asserts, as the above poem does, one's history and self-knowledge. You will find that I use the standard term *feeling* here to describe sensations as they are widely understood, but *feelin* is a term I use to describe holistic sensory experiences as knowledge. *Feelin* is a term rooted in diasporic Black speech. As a verb, *feelin* encompasses cognitive understanding as well as affective, bodily response to an object. It is different from "understanding" an object, in that *feelin* brings the subject into active, identity-shaping response but more aligned with the concept of overstanding, or "profound knowledge and insight, over and beyond that of mere 'understanding.'"<sup>19</sup> Linguistic scholar Geneva Smitherman discusses the importance of style and shifted meaning across time and its meanings for the Language across time and identity in her book *Talkin and Testifyin*. The verb "to be," for example, marks habitual or continuing conditions when the word "be" is stressed. However, the word is omitted when such conditions are not recurring.<sup>20</sup> In order to denote the stylistic and phonetic uses of the term, I've dropped the "g" in "feeling" to say and mean *feelin*. *Feelin* sounds this way in the mouth, and dropping the g in what would be a gerund fixes the term in the present progressive. *Feelin* is most always used after the verb "to be," and most often after the implied or present phrase, "I am." In the present progressive, *feelin* marks self-hood and time.

*Feelin* is the experience of knowing tinkered with in the process of creation. In the process of creation, one can explore the possibilities of being that are to one's own pleasures and needs. I am proposing that creative knowledge production is so self-centered, a kind of self-centeredness that is transcendent—beyond oneself—which would allow for the creation to exist outside of the studio and have others feel it too. Kevin Quashie offers an approach to the concept of Black female subjectivity through a one-ness that is self-centered. This oneness is not individualism, but relationality, in which being is constantly unfurling, in a state of self-creation and definition. "Oneness," Quashie observes, "is a relation, a habitat that facilitates one's being to all that is around, beyond, within it—a capacious and transcendent inhabiting."<sup>21</sup> Not to be confused with two-ness, seeing oneself through the position of another, nor individualism, oneness makes possible ways of being that are both connected to a collective and audaciously self-centered.

*Feelin* denotes a moment of self-knowing and experience. In an instant, they who experience *feelin* acknowledge sensations in the body. Something touches them in a core of knowing and identity in time. The word *feelin* signifies something deeper than its corollary term, "feeling," which is defined in verb form as

the ability to “have a sensation, impression, perception, or emotion”; in noun form as, “senses relating to sensation or touch”; and as an adjective, “capable of sensory perception” and “conscious, sentient.”<sup>22</sup> *Feelin* appropriates and elevates “feeling” through emphasis and context.<sup>23</sup> *Feelin* incorporates this “standard English” definition while giving particular emphasis to the experience as one that happens in a place beyond tactile sensation, emotion, or thought. To be *feelin* something is to touch, experience, be impressed upon, and sense something in all matters of being: physical, intellectual, and spiritual.

*Feelin* is what Claude Brown would call “soul language.”<sup>24</sup> Its meaning is inferred in the way that it is pronounced, and that pronunciation signifies its connection to spirit and soul. The sound of *feelin* has its own pitch and cadence, which it is important to approximate in my written rendering. *Feelin* is pronounced FEEL-uhn rather than FEEL-een. This particular *utterance* of “feeling” to produce *feelin* enhances the music of the term and points to the signification of its multilayered meanings. According to Brown, “it can be asserted that spoken soul is more of a sound than a language. It generally possesses a pronounced lyrical quality, which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaseless and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives.”<sup>25</sup> This is why it is important in my use of it here, that I do not place the apostrophe as often used to communicate a kind of broken English. An apostrophe would mark an incompleteness in relation to the word “feeling.” *Feelin* is related to that word but is a concept on its own, complete in its use here. *Feelin* is a reality, a deep-down-in-your-bones way of knowing that, like haunting, is not “cold knowledge” but “transformative recognition.”<sup>26</sup> *To be feelin* as verb is to experience, to be open to experience, and to identify, be identified by stimuli. It is a way of being called, chosen into recognition and overstanding.

There is also the use of *feelin* in the form of a noun that signals moving inward to sort through thoughts, emotions, and feelings as in the phrase, “I got in my feelins.” This means that one has taken something personally. To get in one’s feelins is to make the decision to reflect, to acknowledge that emotions are giving one information, and to listen closely to that information. It acknowledges the interconnected aspect of knowing and sensation as it happens in the body. The body may experience lethargy, hunger, loss of appetite, bloat, sudden bursts of energy, all of which signal emotions packed with information. To get in one’s feelins demands cognitive pause and reflection.

To speak of *feelin* is to deal with states of being across mind, body, and spirit. *Feelin* implicates all three at once. As a bodily way of knowing, it reverberates in the spirit and the mind. In order to navigate through *feelin*, I engage aspects of experience that cross these boundaries. It is at the site of creative production that the artists I discuss here articulate these reverberations. Therefore, in order to engage with their work, I have to engage with what M. Jacqui Alexander calls sacred subjectivity—a particular way of knowing that allows for subjugated knowledges to emerge.<sup>27</sup> The use of the terms *soul* and *spirit* here signify on experiences that can be described as existential—identity as it exists outside of the realm of the mind. These terms are not intended to bind the subjects in a particular understanding of religious experience or even a particular mode of understanding one’s identity. Instead, they are deployed to give room to the many ways in which the artists’ works explored here articulate consciousness and experience differently. Born from a language in which “I am” is articulated



as “I be,” the power of feelin marks time in the present while also implicating the past and the future. Alexander describes spiritual time and space in this way:

Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called a now. Time becomes a moment, an instant, experienced in the now, but also a space crammed with moments of wisdom about an event or series of events already having inhabited different moments, or with the intention of inhabiting them, while all occurring simultaneously in this instant, in this space, as well as in other instants and spaces of which we are not immediately aware.<sup>28</sup>

To be feelin—is to recognize currents of knowledge already running through an individual. However, the acknowledgement of getting in one’s feelins, or feelin something marks time. One is feelin in the moment, getting in one’s feelins for a moment, but even that time is not linear. The moment at which one is feelin something is also the ringing of the familiar (as in memory and the past), the experience of the present, and what may be perceived to know habitually and into the future.

As an experience through which body, mind, and spirit inform at once, feelin makes self-knowledge. One, “is” or “be” through feelin because it occurs at the core of one’s self. The moment one acknowledges feelin, it is a signal to move inward—continuing a process of knowing. Something already within an individual has been struck or awakened into speaking. Alexander speaks of a similar experience through diasporic iterations of African diasporic spiritual systems like Voudon and Lucumi. To know oneself in these spiritual systems is to know the currents, Orisha, and spirits already running through the nexus of mind, body, and spirit. To know these spirits is important business for practitioners because without knowing, Alexander states, “we could indeed not address subjectivity of any kind.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore to “know who follows you” is to truly know the self. This process of knowing is tenuous: “Knowing who walks with you and maintaining that company on the long journey is a dance of balance in which the fine lines between and among will and surrender; self-effacement and humility; doing and being; and listlessness and waiting for the Divine are being constantly drawn.”<sup>30</sup> To know who follows you mandates what she calls “traveling to the interior,” and surrendering oneself to spirit.

Spiritual self-knowledge and the processes toward introspection guide the efforts of what I call affective sedulity—the impulse, desire, and rigorous relationship toward felt knowledge. Feelin is the shorthand for affective sedulity in verb, noun, and adjective form—it is a cultural formation of the aesthetic value of felt knowledge as both common practice and particular experience. This particular focus on felt knowledge resituates the very concept of knowledge and thus its transmissions, transmutations, and forms of habit. For what would the concept of the rational human be useful, if sedulous engagement of *felt* knowledge is valued as knowledge?

As Nina Simone demanded of her audience in her performance of “Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)” at the 1968 Westbury Music Festival days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, “You better stop and think and feel again.” This book shares her sentiments. Another way to state this is that this book is feelin Simone on this one. Simone’s demand for thinking and feeling emerges from her mourning and rage and is also an invitation to experience the assassination of

King through rage and mourning. Her urgency is felt through her musical styling; her vocal timbre; how she edges out the lyrics by tightening the vocal chords and giving us the impression of limited breath; the improvisational function of the ad-lib as she changes the lyrics and takes us out of the expected meter and rhyme of the song; and the arresting nature of the bridge and coda where improvisation takes over and the instrumentals seem to slow and build. Her demand for the audience to think and feel undercuts the consistently methodical, restrained, and logical tactics of civil rights activism and co-signs Black folk's right to rage and mourning at the profound loss of the icon and leader. Those tactics which were efforts to humanize Black folks through respectability and peace for Simone were not effective because this country would, without remorse, react violently to even the most civil and appeasing (what would be called "logical") actions of Black folks.

I'm feelin Simone on this because it seems as though—for me, over here in this work at the nexus of Black and gender studies, efforts to be included into the order of knowledge have been unsuccessful thus far. I'm feelin Simone on this one even if I am not imbibing or even understanding her precise emotions—I can recognize the value of those emotions, their direction, and more importantly, can think and feel with her. This project, with Simone, asks that we think and feel again, not toward a mythical past of better relationships to knowledge, but again in the sense of repetition, ritual to remind ourselves that we always do feel, and thus, thinking could never be done without feelin it. And what could we learn anew if we were to recognize and honor that knowledge?

Affective sedulity invites us to dig deeper into registers of knowledge through feeling. This project takes up Black women's creative production, the work engaged in the studio, and highlights singular affective registers and engages those registers through the art itself and the conditions under which the art was made. Because creative process itself is multifaceted, this project takes up a limited number of affective registers as diving boards for deeper study: joy (and thus mourning), shame (and thus pride), Black grief, sacred sexual ecstasy, and anger. The decision to take up these particular affective registers emerged from direct engagement with the art as well as the prominence of the feeling in Black feminist study engaged with the topics and engaged by the artist whose work and creative practice is discussed here.

For example, Black grief is encountered here as a lens through which to read both Black studies and my own very personal grief while penning this book. I pause here in order to do the work of grief and ask that you feel me, mourn with me for a moment as I reflect on personal and collective loss through a catalog of Black grief. Joy emerges in Lucille Clifton's poetry because of her own insistence on joy in her life and work—yet what also emerges in sedulous study of her poetry is the complexity of joy and its relationship to mourning and sadness. Feelin her atheology of joy necessitates a depthful discussion of religious and secular humanism. Ecstasy is explored through the timbral and stylistic vocal practices of Black women singers. Ecstasy here is read through the lyrical content and stylistic quality of R&B singer and choir director Avery\*Sunshine and other Black women singers who perform and experience ecstasy through vocal practice. Feelin Black women's vocality invites listeners to succumb to sacred sexual ecstasy. Shame also emerges in this book as an affective register by which images of the Black maternal figure have circulated. The specter of racial shame and images of demeaned Black motherhood coalesce at mythical images of Black

maternal figures such as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and so on. Black women artists have engaged the visual field of Black motherhood, and my reading of the photographs and multimedia sculptures of Renee Cox, Betye Saar, and Deana Lawson will explore how twentieth- and twenty-first century formations of Black maternal imagery have informed this visual field. I discuss anger, because—well—how could I not discuss Black feminist thought and emotional registers without engaging the trope of the angry Black woman or the Black feminist mandate to embrace anger as righteous fuel? These points of entry—grief, joy, ecstasy, shame, and anger invite us all to feel these artists' work and Black feminist interventions on Western humanism and its Cartesian obsessions.

## Pleasure and the Black Feminist Oceanographic: Genres of Knowledge Production

Nikky Finney writes of the clitoris:

New studies show  
The shy curl  
To be longer  
Than the penis,  
But like Africa,  
The continent,  
It is never drawn  
To size.<sup>31</sup>

The cartographer or the poet? One who has already mapped the effable terrains of desire, circumscribed the possibilities of fungibility, and graphed relevance by size. The cartographer is by vocation, topical. She takes up the human concerns of trafficking feet, the efficacy of building edifices, and access to much needed oxygen. But Nikky Finney, the Black and lesbian poet, directs us to the depths of pleasure by water, where “desire can rise,” “refuses retreat.” While there are indeed many cartographies of desire, and the fields of Black and gender studies have drawn our attention to the geographies of terror and belonging that shape Black lives, here I follow a path of desire with the poet/oceanographer who begins with the knowability of pleasure “9cm deep / in the pelvis.” Likening this subjugated physiognomy to less than understood geography, Finney draws lines of epistemological grounding between that which can be understood, should be understood, and is likely to be intentionally misunderstood. What science names the female, the female pelvis, and its possibilities for climax and pleasure; what is known as the continent of Africa and its size both geographically and historically are all named and known on mis-mapped, and mis-named grounds. The poet points toward the watery otherwise knowing, to the negative space of the continents—the oceans—that in their depths provide location of the largest clitoris known to humans.

To succumb to desire, to ask these questions, is to risk drowning, but perhaps Black studies of the Atlantic have taught us that we have already drowned, that we are in the wake of that drowning. That is, as many Black theorists have taught

us, Black subjectivity in the Americas is forever connected to/shaped by/in processes of becoming through what was lost through racial injury—made metaphor by the Atlantic Ocean's abyss. What do we make of ourselves in this abyss? What are our possibilities of becoming, of self-determination, as chaos in the flesh, as dwellers of no-land? It is no surprise then, that Black feminist thinkers have long been questioning and reaching for answers for the possibilities of joy, of pleasure in such conditions.

Let us consider our metaphors: Black female sexuality has been described as "black (w)holes," left unspoken of by the "culture of dissemblance," "awaiting their verb" and otherwise resistant to limited paradigms that cannot attest to the particular, queer, expansive possibilities of Black sexuality and gender.<sup>32</sup> All of these assertions seem to be dire descriptions of what can never be known but what they actually attest to is that what may be called Black female sexuality (even this moniker of "Black female" has critical meaning) cannot be named through the language and terms by which we understand sexuality or gender—and thus I'd argue, what we understand as pleasure.<sup>33</sup> Finney invites us into the waters, invites us into new and expansive ways of knowing that do not limit our bodies to land, using a Black queer lexicon of desire, by centering mammalian clitoral pleasure that exceeds the human penis in size. What now to the sexologist, the psychoanalyst is the penis in relation to the clitoris? How do logics of gender and sex upend with this knowledge? In the poet's ocean, the logics of gender and sex are exposed for what L. H. Stallings would call the "biopolitics or necropolitics of asexual cultures."<sup>34</sup> Finney opts for the "unknowable and immeasurable." She points toward the possibilities of knowing that are otherwise wrongly mapped. These are ways of knowing that Black queer poetry makes possible. Ways of knowing that I navigate here in attempting to analyze not just the work of Black women artists but the workings, the feelings, of our inner lives as knowledge production.

What I want to say is that Black clitoral pleasure and its position as subjugated physiognomy (even if by metaphor) has its own means of charting its own "discursive terrains."<sup>35</sup> These means are produced in the creative field where Black women, nonbinary, trans, and queer folks are able to use many tongues that witness to the manifold ways that Black bodies have been subject to injury, abjection, and yet, also, pleasure.

It might be of some importance to those of us dedicated to language to be precise in the uses of terms here. Pleasure is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: "The condition or sensation induced by the experience or anticipation of what is felt to be good or desirable; a feeling of happy satisfaction or enjoyment; delight, gratification. *Opposed to pain.*"<sup>36</sup> One might immediately see why pleasure is such a fraught concept in Black feminist thought. It is in the Atlantic that Black bodies became what Hortense Spillers calls "flesh" characterized by the suffering of human bondage, bodies without the perception of sensation and simultaneously an open wound. Black flesh is ungendered and as such, it has been of particular difficulty to talk about Black sensation without also, and quite immediately, talking about the system that would deny Black people—and in particular Black women—the utterance of sensation. That utterance, according to some, has been mired by a culture of pain that, if taken into a hedonist understanding of the concepts of pleasure and pain, is antithetical to possibilities for speaking of pleasure and pain at once.

Of course, sexual practices which center pain would be otherwise proof of the fallacy of this dichotomy, and as such, the axes of power and play in matters of

who can experience or inflict pain float to the surface of this messy discourse of pleasure and its multiple moving parts. But according to Amber Musser, Black women have been relegated to the underside of "the discussions of masochism."<sup>37</sup> Either as subjects who are the embodiment of pain, or inured to pain. Black women, in effect, are illustrative flesh upon which others' desires are projected—even the desire for pleasurable pain.

Deborah Walker King's concept of *blackpain* describes the Black body as the image of suffering in the United States. When pain on Black bodies is read, it is often devoid of the Black skin which suffers it. King states, "Blackpain has a metonymic function as a sign of social, economic, and cultural woundedness that can be co-opted by anyone suffering in a manner associated historically with black people."<sup>38</sup> King continues by noting the way in which white first wave feminists deployed Black pain as a mode of "reading" their own struggle for visibility. In this example, the suffrage movement in the United States activated by invoking blackpain in chattel slavery as unjust insofar as suffering is imagined to be incurred by white women who do not have the right to vote.<sup>39</sup>

Rebecca Wanzo's study of Black women's suffering in the media highlights Black women's particular lack of access to sentimental narrative in which our pain would be perceivable.<sup>40</sup> This disembodied understanding of pain in which pain and suffering exist in the social (even as currency) implicates pain's symbolic attachment to the flesh of black women. Symbolic attachment does not include the material of those bodies in pain, but further obscures the internal experiences of Black women. Black women's pain can never be *read* on the bodies of Black women because Black women are symbolically and perpetually bodies of pain.

I have previously written about the medicalization of Black bodies which differentiated medical subject from white master, and freak-show Americana from American.<sup>41</sup> Flesh is medicalized where the body is human, and as such, the fleshed body is without its I. It is subject to, not subject. It looks like pain but feels no pain. It pleasures but does not feel pleasure. Pleasure is a sensation equally difficult to trace and troubled for Black feminist scholars who would also give utterance to Black women's pain otherwise unsentimentalized as such. The legacy of the Atlantic, the specter of interracial rape that permeates race relations in the United States further problematizes the possibility to utter pleasure in the din of pain. There is within Black feminist thought a ritual of speaking about pleasure *in spite of* or in efforts to *break silence*, to challenge what Darlene Clark Hine calls "the culture of dissemblance," intended to protect middle-class Black women from a particular kind of pornotroping—hypersexualization in favor of a more challenging, often difficult conversation about Black women's sexuality and, within it, the possibilities of pleasure.<sup>42</sup> In my reading of the texts above, neither pleasure nor pain are given concepts as they relate to discourses about Black female experience.

Pleasure in its dichotomous rendering mobilizes pleasure as absence of pain save for the curious concept of sadomasochism in which pain *is* pleasure. Pleasure without pain is not possible for Black women, particularly in the visual world, and yet to describe the broad stroke of Black women's lot in pleasure seems to continually orient Black women's pleasure toward structures bent on Black women's annihilation. Jennifer Nash differentiates pleasure from ecstasy in her study of racialized pornography in order to make clear the aspects of sexual enjoyment that may not be "pleasing," but indeed center representations of Black female

pleasure.<sup>43</sup> By reading racialized pornographic texts for signs of possibilities of pleasurable enjoyment within the racial script, Nash reveals how Black women's pleasure is possible within the pornotroping white gaze. Not in spite of it, but with the grain of it. This is one kind of charting—to describe ecstasy is to note an *otherwise* form of pleasure that belies or rather, deeply reveals, one's politics. Not in spite of racial subjugation, but deeply embedded within racial subjugation because we are raced subjects, living and learning in a racist world. I agree with Amber Musser that masochism is an important analytic with which to think about Black women's pleasure.<sup>44</sup> I do take it up here as masochism and sado-masochism emerge as important lenses through which to analyze the interstices of power and pleasure, particularly in chapter 4, where I discuss the image of shame and Black motherhood. However, in order to make room for otherwise possibilities of articulating sensation, I do not couch all pleasurable sensation within this framework. To do so, in my mind, would be to start at a location other than the creative moment in which pleasure is created and ever unfolding. As I said, I am interested in the creative *process* as knowledge producing, and the affective experience within creative production holds within it registers of pleasure complex and otherwise.

Diving deeper, L. H. Stallings proposes the concept of *funky erotixxx* for discussing Black female pleasure that exceeds Western patriarchy and its medicalization of Black flesh. She defines funky erotixxx as “unknowable and immeasurable, with transgenerational, affective, and psychic modalities that problematize the erotic and what it means to be human,” that “can be made legible in sexual cultures rather than the biopolitics or necropolitics of asexual cultures.”<sup>45</sup> *Funky erotixxx* demonstrates a uniquely Black transatlantic understanding of sexual pleasure that exceeds the limited boundaries of the Enlightenment's human subject by which Black folks have been defined in opposition.<sup>46</sup>

I am influenced here by L. H. Stallings's reframing of the meaning of sex work as inherently sacred and necessary to survive in the new world.<sup>47</sup> Creative production, or art *work* here presumes “art as experience.” Stallings's intervention on the idea of work is key to this study in that it tags M. Jacqui Alexander's push toward a transdisciplinary approach to spirit work that centers Black women's self-knowledge through spiritual knowledge, acknowledges the erotic compulsion to engage such work with the sacred, and situates this particular way of knowing as a practice for survival. Stallings identifies the libidinal current of life in the New World mandated by logics of capitalism and post-Enlightenment thought by centering the Black aesthetic practice of funk and its sacred profane. She states, “Sacredly profane sexuality ritualizes and makes sacred what is libidinous and blasphemous in Western humanism so as to unseat and criticize the inherent imperialistic aims within its social mores and sexual morality.”<sup>48</sup> *Funky erotixxx* thus challenges the bifurcation of the sexual and the sacred, exposing how Western humanism's hypocritical profiteering from social mores and sexual morality through libidinal economies is inherent to its imperialist project. Funk as an aesthetic practice that does a lot of work in all aspects of Black life runs counter and *irregardless* of hegemonic logics and “reminds us that there are aesthetics, or rather trans aesthetics, of sexuality that can aid in the creation of neoteric modes of being human.”<sup>49</sup> As this project is invested in the erotic functions of creative practice, I understand its making, and the processes of making of the artists engaged here as erotic, err, sex work.

I am also drawn to Stallings's discussion of work and the erotic for a key point about the structure of what we call pleasure, particularly in Black feminist discourse. Western humanism's formulation of sexuality, sex, the erotic, and thus pleasure is so dependent on concepts of sexual morality and social mores that define respectability, and particularly genres of the human. It is Western humanism's formulation of sex, what Stallings calls "asexual cultures," that value pleasure along axes of morality and its relationship to suffering. These logics also value the nature of work itself. To take up sacred sexual work is to make a series of deliberate choices to be and feel in the world and approach existence itself through a different set of evaluative processes or aesthetics that make sacred and sexual work—the erotic—important and resistant to the social mores and moral structures of dominant logic. The impulse, deliberate choice, and rituals of engaging funk are what I call affective sedulity. These are the rigorous practices that value messy feelings that make way for different modes of being. What these scholars attest to is that the means of charting Black pleasure are complex and cannot begin or end with notions of sensation that are couched in the same frameworks of difference/sameness, flesh/body, human/nonhuman in humanist study. Pleasure is both individuated and relational, embodied and spiritual.

It is quite compulsory for this project to engage in a discussion of studies of affect with the guiding hand of Black feminist thought as Black feminist thought has always asked that we reorient ourselves to suppressed forms of knowledge. Patricia Hill Collins's foundational intervention on Black feminist thought describes Black feminist thought through the lens of the "social construction of knowledge." Through a feminist standpoint, feminist scholars are able to negotiate power relations in the production of knowledge and privilege the knowledge held by those who are disempowered.<sup>50</sup> Standpoint theory, specifically, was formulated in opposition to positivist forms of knowledge production set forth through Enlightenment-era notions of truth and rational thought.<sup>51</sup> Collins expands the notion of knowledge production by citing the ways in which Black women's actions and everyday experiences are instances of Black feminist knowledge production.<sup>52</sup> Under Collins's decree, not only are prototypical figures such as Sojourner Truth progenitors of Black feminist thought, but women otherwise unnamed in history—domestic workers, mothers, my grandmother—are producers of a particularly Black feminist way of knowing.

Black feminist thought is found in the places wherein Black women have most been able to create. According to Collins:

An historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression. Not only does the form assumed by this thought diverge from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like—but the purpose of Black women's collective thought is distinctly different.<sup>53</sup>

The purpose of Black feminist thought extends beyond feminist actions for social or civic equality but even more deeply to affirm Black women's experiences. Black women's creative and life-affirming work also taps into the workings of our inner lives. According to Collins, "U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality."<sup>54</sup> In her influential

call for a Black feminist criticism, Barbara Smith notes that the deep desires and lived experiences of Black women, otherwise rendered invisible in the real world, are legible in Black women's writing.<sup>55</sup> These interconnections indicate that feminist action and feminist thought are interwoven with "the state of Black women's literature" and that a Black feminist movement would "open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women's lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art."<sup>56</sup> Therefore, in developing a robust body of scholarship that centers the lives of Black women and their feminist work, Black feminist thinkers have had to develop a distinctive Black feminist criticism.

When I say Black feminist thought and note its relationship to Black women's creative production I am not ascribing a particular virtue of Black feminist thinking or allegiance and identity to individual artists. Instead, I am writing in the tradition of Black feminist thinkers who draw on the everyday knowledge of Black women as distinguishing features of Black feminist thought. That is, the particular knowledge that Black women and nonbinary people hold that unfolds from the conditions of our lives to reveal a map toward otherwise possibility is feminist thought. As Daphne Brooks notes of Black women musicians on this matter,

Black women's musical practices are, in short, revolutionary because they are inextricably linked to the matter of Black life. Their strategies of performance perpetually and inventively philosophize the prodigiousness of its scope. But also—and quite crucially—Black women's musical practices are revolutionary because of the ways in which said practices both forecast and execute the viability and potentiality of Black life.<sup>57</sup>

The contours of the gender and race politics of individual Black women artists may make or unmake the revolutionary potential of the work, and here is the crucial commentary for thinking with Black women artists. As Black feminist scholars may disagree deeply, as scholars in the field of Black studies might have full-on arguments with each other, the quality of creation that makes way for Black life is at the core of why we gather here. I am interested in how Black feminist thought can come to contradictory problems and tarry with them. That is, to engage in forms of curiosity, ways of thinking *with* that revel in possibilities unforecasted and constantly emerging. Black feminist thought as improvisational and sedulous—cunning and inventive.

*Black women have long possessed 'magical'  
powers and told their daughters stories.*

—MARJORIE PRYSE<sup>58</sup>

The rich legacy of Black women intellectuals engaging with the literary work of Black women writers in a way that is both scholarly and familiar informs the mode of this project. By approaching Black women's art in the genres of literature, photography, and music this project engages with the concept of Black women's literary traditions while also attempting to expand the analysis through creative production and across critical disciplines.



Developing a critical lens and a familiar sensitivity is perhaps responsible for the ways in which Black feminist intellectual work has engaged familiar language otherwise taboo in academic parlance: the incorporation of pronouns such as *we* and *our*, the use of familial naming in reflections on the meaning of Black feminist writing as Farah Jasmine Griffin and Alice Walker offer, the insistence on the use of Black language in engagements with such knowledge production are but a few examples.<sup>59</sup> The familial relationships imagined by these scholars who are moved to read Black women's writing echo the very substance of Black feminist life-affirming work. Black feminist scholars are called to Black women's writing as Black women are called to write—affirming each other in the process. Mary Helen Washington describes this circle of affirmation in terms of a distinctly Black women's literary tradition. In *Invented Lives* she states: "Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well being."<sup>60</sup> This "talking to each other" occurs in the circle of Black women readers, scholars, and writers, and within the literary work of Black women as well. As Washington observes in the work of Black women writers collected in her edited volume *Invented Lives*, "A common scene recurring in at least five of the eight fiction writers in this collection is one in which women (usually two) gather together in a small room to share intimacies that can be trusted only to a kindred female spirit. That intimacy is a tool, allowing women writers to represent women more fully."<sup>61</sup> This circle repeats, unbroken, within the pages of the work of Black women writers, their own lives, and the interconnected bond in which Black feminist scholars read their work.

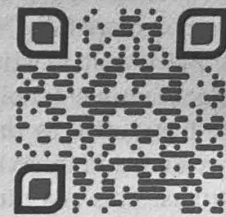
Instructive to this project is Deborah McDowell's deployment of archival research and interviews that consider the context and the lives of Black women artists. This is a direct rejection of the behest of literary analysis (via Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among others) that critics set aside the author's experience as instructive to reading their work. McDowell takes up the contestation that Black women's lives are intricately interwoven in our art, and places it directly within academic discourse. According to McDowell, "Despite the power and appeal of Foucault . . . it is not yet time to toll the death knell for the 'author' or for 'literary tradition,' although we must proceed with more complicated definitions of 'tradition' and how it functions."<sup>62</sup> Not only is it imperative that Black women writers' lives be considered parallel to their work, but the tradition in which Black women writers write must also be reconsidered as Black cultures operate nonlinearly.

Hortense Spillers offers a mode of reading Black women writers that observes a tradition in which Black women engage literary work in a nonlinear relationship to time.<sup>63</sup> It is a circular tradition in which Black women writers are most freely able to engage in discourse. Any other understanding of their discourse would be simplistic. She states, "It is exactly the right not to accede to the simplifications and mystifications of a strictly historiographical timeline that now promises the greatest freedom of discourse to black people, to black women, as critics, teachers, writers, and thinkers."<sup>64</sup> The metaphoric circularity of discourse proposed by Spillers occurs again in Bernice Johnson Reagon's account of the spiritual song tradition carried on by Black women in which spiritual songs and freedom songs speak across and to each other.<sup>65</sup> This kind of circularity highlights how Black women artists, across genre, speak to each other across time and space.

Black women's speaking with each other necessitates these kinds of border crossings between the public and private, the personal and the political, the creative and the scholarly. Black women speak with each other in discourse and this book project through modes of call-and-response that affirm, disagree with, and elaborate on each other's work. In her study on Black women's caring and accountability, Marsha Houston notes that Black women's communication with each other across generations and within communities operates on a level with which truth can be found in many voices and held all at once.<sup>66</sup> To speak in a circle across time and space is an apt metaphor that includes the concept of non-linear literary traditions, and for the purposes of this study, the time relative to knowledge production itself and the evidence thereof.

Regarding ellipses: Entering into *Tongues* is like entering into something already begun. No so much as getting into a car and starting the engine, but having left a car running and returning to it for warmth. It was already there, motor humming, pistons firing. It is as if you were already speaking, and realized it. (Has that ever happened to you? You suddenly become aware of your own speaking?) Its like that. In that sense, there is no observable beginning and you begin to doubt if there is an end.

In the humanities we call this Discourse.



**Figure 2.** Still detail of "S.i.T.Experiment" by Bettina Judd, 2011. Hover your mobile device over the QR code to navigate to <http://dr.bettinajudd.com/sit-experiment>.

It is in honor of this circular tradition that I put Black women artists in conversation with each other in this project. Throughout, I pull quotes—snatches of knowing—that speak back to and in chorus with other Black women writers, scholars, and artists. These thinkers speak to each other, talk to and about each other, and signify on each other's thoughts. In a circle, everyone's face is forward and the voices and expressions of those in the circle converge at the center. It is in that center that the diverse, complicated, and sometimes contradictory shared experiences and knowledge held by Black women converge.

This project imagines a circle of knowledge. As artist-researcher (and daughter) who has been called to this project, I speak with these women through the familiar, conversing in the languages germane to our conversation. I am aware that in my speaking this conversation began even before this project started. The unbroken circle of Black feminist discourse necessitates that this project practices what it preaches—that is that I speak in the familiar and engage in our shared modes of knowledge production. Black feminist knowledge production, we know, must necessarily exist outside of academia and thus what I call the compulsory language

regime of expository propositional prose. That is, the common parlance of theoretical discourse by which knowledge production is recognized in the academy: the monograph, expository language, propositional structure, and prose itself. While I must traffic in it here as one professionalized in the institution and in need of the rewards of such labor in which the corporate structure of academia mandates forms of knowledge production—the processes of review, tenure, and promotion; while I might even find pleasure in reading and engaging the expository propositional prose of my colleagues and elders, this book intends to push the boundaries of the form of discourse just a little bit by incorporating creative works as they are engaged here in the project as evidence of knowledge production, and as language that explores other evidences of knowledge production. Here poetry, narrative, image, video, and sound crop up in the text not as illustrations of a concept, but as a continuation of the discourse set forth in expository propositional prose. That is, engagement with artistic production here—my own and others’—is as integral to the prose more often given credence as rational and therefore communicable thought. More than understand, I want you to feel me.

The conditions by which artworks are produced very much function in the way that we will need to think about pleasure. Art *work* is also produced in the same world in which oppression and hierarchies of difference are produced—that is art *work* is dependent on labor and the structures by which capital, labor, and consumption depend. The value of art and its work is also valued by the same regimes of knowledge that organize genres of the human and thus the work itself is in conversation with the effects of those forces. As *work*, art practice labors under the same forms of duress and coercion that any other work is produced. (As I stated above, so too, does this particular work that you are reading.) This means that art *work* is subject to and responsive to a market—its negotiations with knowledge are also within the parameters of that market and the market’s logic. Nowhere else is this more evident than in the necessary and rich genre of the artist statement by which art may be translated and therefore valued by logics of scarcity and novelty value inherent to capitalist art markets.

## The Artist Statement—Methodologies and Methods

I research my mother’s anger. What I really do is try to be a good daughter. While I do not purport to think exactly as all of them do, I do wish to attempt to “complete [her and their] thoughts.”<sup>67</sup> My interest is in understanding who they are and the subtle tether between us that connects experience, knowledge, survival strategies, and strategies for thriving.

I could tell many stories about many mothers, first with my family and spreading outward to all of the Black women who have in some way nurtured me. I wish to make it clear that I do not wish to limit who these women are to the role of nurturers of anyone or anything but their own lives. For even as my own mother has in many ways nurtured me as a mother, what I have found most valuable and what I explore in my work are the ways in which she has nurtured her own life in art.

The first instrument that my mother gave me was my voice. It was an instrument that could not be taken from me unless I no longer used or cared for it (something that she warns me about even now). She demonstrated its purpose and power by using her own voice daily and for all occasions. When she was full of sorrow, worry, joy, or elation, she sang. She would put on a record or play her black standing piano and sing. She would sing in the car, me tightly buckled in next to her. Her rich, classically trained soprano would hit a note cleanly with no vibrato, yet something within me would shake. I would join her on such a note and something deeper within me would move. This sound and feeling would shift the air, alter the space; heavy feelings would lift, and there would be joy. She would perform and something would move within others—she shifted the energy of others, all while changing within herself. She thought of her voice as something that is to be used in service to the divine and others, yet the grace of it allowed for it to most dynamically change her life. She learned the power of creativity as something deeply personal and imperative for “feeling good” by example. When I was ten years old and showing interest in poetry, my mother set an unpublished manuscript of poetry written by her mother on the little white desk in my bedroom. These tools helped me to figure out my place in the world, and at the very least express my frustrations with it. It helped me to think about the sexism and violence in our home, it helped me to respond to the violence that was outside of our Los Angeles doors in the high tensions of the early '90s. That early desire for depth and understanding led me to poets, musicians, artists whose expressions touched on all of this—whom I could feel.

By focusing on the homegrown artistic practices through which Black feminist thought is created, I hope that my work highlights not only the contributions of Black women artists to feminist thought, but also the feminist practices within African American culture that place Black women squarely within a politic that is concerned with the status of women broadly and Black women specifically. Examining knowledge production beyond the academy or the gallery is important to a more holistic understanding of Black feminist thought. My research compels me to look at aspects of knowledge production that are so often avoided in the academy. Such knowledge production practices include spirituality, politics of emotion, and memory.

This kind of work requires me to work on levels of academic production that are both traditional and creative. This project oscillates between academic prose, creative writing, and other media in order to demonstrate the overarching artistic and scholarly approach I have to knowledge and creative production. As such, you may find that I refer to this book as a project—as it is imagined beyond its binding. I will primarily focus on expository propositional prose while incorporating as much as possible my own creative work that is set out to explore this topic.

In the process of writing this book, competing modes of meaning-making crowd my efforts. The research project, within the parameters of academia, requires a statement of project, a research question, clear and definitive declarations of meaning making. Scholars reveal not only our methods of research practice but also the methodology that informs those methods. We review and unpack theories upon which the basis of our inquiry is defined. Everything is seemingly revealed by this structure through expository propositional prose.

I am also impelled by practices, methods, and methodologies of art practice.

These practices have their own sets of methods and methodologies to consider because of the market in which they are produced. The rise of the importance of the artist statement in the art world, liner notes, prefaces, forewords, epigraphs by the poet, and astute interviews and lectures by all of the above, gives voice to artists who, otherwise, have said all that needs to be said in their work.<sup>68</sup> The artist statement and project description are outlines of the methods, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks of the creative trajectory of an artist's work—even over large swaths of time. What makes it compelling as a document is that it is intended to be both autobiographical and technical while also communicating some reason for the creative product's journey into being.

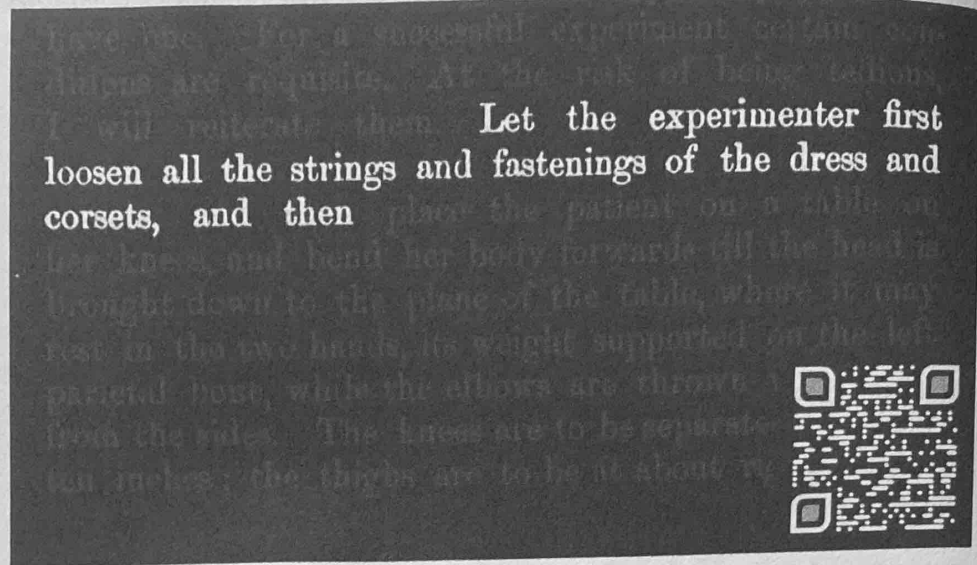
The artist statement is a document for which the primary use in the art world is business-related. Artists train to craft precise statements for grant opportunities, residencies, and gallery spots. The statement is as imperative to an artist's marketing as the art itself. The artist statement is also an artist's whisper into the ear of their audience. Its informal uses of personal pronouns and sometimes erudite use of academic language performs the artist as both deeply introspective and well read. From it, we expect to learn not only about the art but about the artist's intentions. By foregrounding the market based uses of the artist statement I do not mean to imply that artist statements are disingenuous. What I mean to point out is that these documents represent knowledge in markets similar to the academic market of project statements and proposals. That is—we are all compelled to produce knowledge in expository form, for exposition is the privileged language of positivist discourse wherein process, logic, and reason are seemingly simplified, universally shared, and thus consumed. In short, exposition makes the opacity of creative thought legible to the rational market of consumer-based capitalism and expository propositional prose is the mandate to be legible to the regime.

But we do what we must, right?

To describe my methods is to contribute to a circle of knowledge in which creative processes are as informative to truth and experience as the art that is produced. The creative practices of Black women artists *are* also their lived experiences, and as such, are included in my analyses of their work. *Feelin's* central argument is founded on the idea that art is experience. That is, that Black women's creative process is also experience. Informed by Black feminist critical theories in the fields of literature, I include and highlight Black women's lived experiences in the context of discussing their work. As such, archival research, interviews, and reviews of interviews conducted by myself and other scholars and journalists inform the framings of discussing these artists' work. Also, cued by Black feminist criticism, I deploy close readings of these women's poetry, photography, and music, which enhance and drive the modes of discourse and knowledge production I observe.

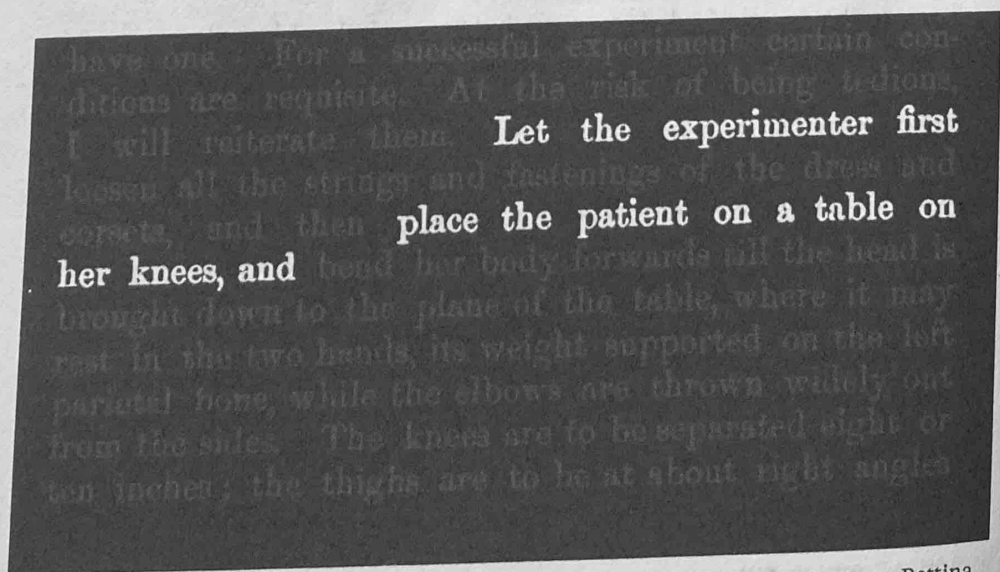
*Feelin's* objective to take seriously how oppression is felt and thus how resistance is felt necessarily finds use in Amber Musser's "empathetic reading practice," which "illuminates how subjectivity and power act in concert with embodied experience" and functions as a "critical hermeneutic and methodology in that it highlights how we can discern the structure of sensation in various texts/performances and it works to give those sensations meaning, which in turn allows us to read difference in a sensational mode."<sup>69</sup> This kind of reading practice facilitates a sensitivity to tone and style in the artworks, which keys us in to the particular affective registers explored here.

## ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH



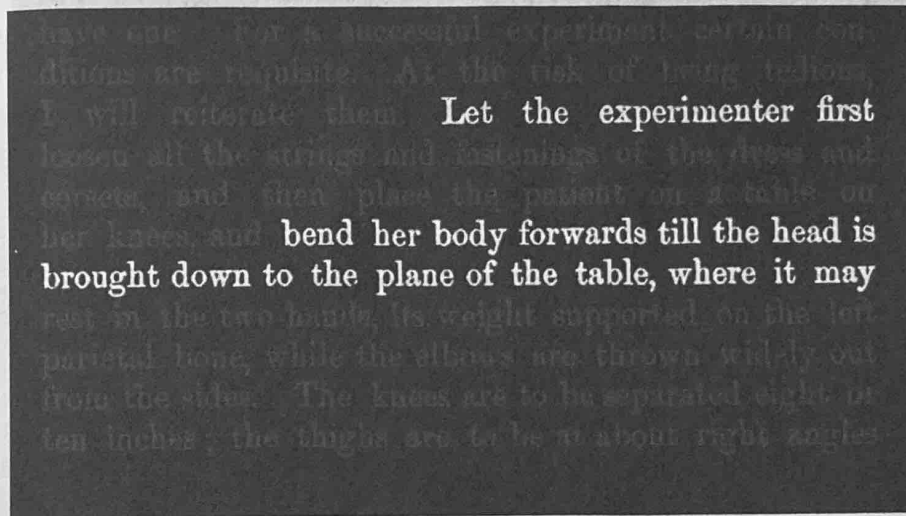
**Figure 3.** "Let the experimenter first loosen all the strings and fastenings of the dress and corsets, and then." Still detail of *Run on Sentence*. Bettina Judd, 2011, digital image. Hover your mobile device over this QR code to navigate to the full video at <http://dr.bettinajudd.com/run-on-sentence>.

My methods of art practice as research are informed by autobiographical experiences of knowing through creative production, affirmed by theories by women of color, as well as burgeoning scholarship that explores the inherent connections between ways of knowing and creative production.



**Figure 4.** "place the patient on a table on her knees, and." Still detail of *Run on Sentence*. Bettina Judd, 2011, digital image.

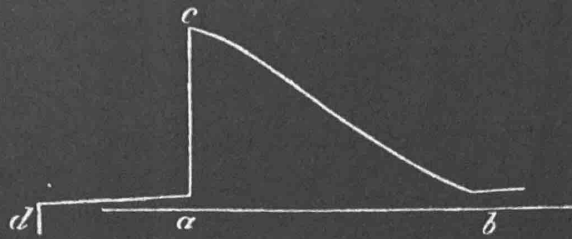
These processes are representative in the series of images that recur in my project *Run on Sentence* in which I black out and highlight various passages from J. Marion Sims's book on uterine surgery. By highlighting parts of his text, I draw attention to the sexual, racial, and class tensions that are prominent in his work. These tensions are perceivable in this work through tone, space, and punctuation in his writing—particularly the frantic experience of reading this run on sentence in which Sims attempts to explain how to observe the female pelvis. His instructions read like a Harlequin novel while remaining cold and calculated. Eventually, Sims reduces the female body to a right triangle in order to sterilize the sexual anxieties barely hidden in the text.



**Figure 5.** “bend her body forwards till the head is brought down to the plane of the table, where it may.” Still detail of *Run on Sentence*. Bettina Judd, 2011, digital image.

This connection between the inner life and artistic production challenges notions of knowledge as exclusively located in empiricism. In order to postulate that art practice itself can be research, artist-researchers must also consider feelin and the inner life as valuable information. It is for this reason that artistic practice, the processes through which artists engage the inner life and create, is both method and data. This kind of information is unfixed, its contours developed by experience and context. In his essay, “On the Difference between Artistic Research and Artist Practice,” composer Germán Toro-Pérez states that, “We can describe art experience as sensuous experience, and the result of artistic activity as form perceivable by the senses if we understand form not as solid shape, but as the possibility of relationship.”<sup>70</sup> When we are considering the internal world of the senses to be valuable information, art practice is the research method.

parietal bone, while the elbows are thrown widely out from the sides. The knees are to be separated eight or ten inches; the thighs are to be at about right angles



with the table; thus the plane of the table ( $ab$ ), the axis of the thighs ( $ac$ ), and that of the body ( $cb$ ), would

**Figure 6.** “diagram of the subject.” Still detail of *Run on Sentence*. Bettina Judd, 2011, digital image.

Just as in scientific research, artistic research practices involve trial and error and ethics of rigor. Art practitioners are always experimenting with new materials, new concepts, and techniques as a part of the art practice in order to come to an end result. Rigor in the arts is tangled in opening up new opportunities for experiences of art.

*There are no new thoughts, only new ways of making them felt.*

—AUDRE LORDE<sup>71</sup>

Just like other inquiries in the humanities, art practice is grounded in the understanding of knowledge as relational. As artist-researcher and Black woman in the academy, I am prone to code switching, speaking in my multiple tongues, multiple modes of discourse. As I write in the mode of academic prose, I am also thinking in the poetic and attempting to fully capture the visual information that informs this project. This code switching is not only in language, but also in discipline, making this a necessarily interdisciplinary project. This project attempts to make connections between art practice and Black feminist knowledge production, newly felt. As Graeme Sullivan states, “The aim of research in the visual arts, as in other similar forms of exploratory inquiry, is to provoke, challenge and illuminate rather than confirm and consolidate.”<sup>72</sup> Visual art practice is a form of knowledge production where transformation rather than fixed knowledge is the goal.

The art practice that takes place in this book is executed and represented in relation to archival research, theory, close readings of artists’ work, and interviews. I include visual art and poetry that I executed before I began *Feelin*, and published or created while *Feelin* was still in progress. Including this work demonstrates the circular and ongoing nature of knowledge production and situates the project itself in the realm of experience. It reveals how my processes of developing questions explored here were seeded in creative practice. The artwork is in conversation with the Black feminist critical framework that operates throughout this project. It is also in conversation with the themes and concepts discussed in each chapter, including joy, the mystical, ecstasy, motherhood,



and sexuality. Further, the art and poetry in this project converse with bodies of knowledge that exist outside of this book; as such that work has a secondary life. This fact highlights the scope and immense possibilities for what art practice as research is capable of accomplishing, and also reveals the relevance of the premise behind *Feelin* to further research/art projects. The goal is to make room for new thought—to be able bend toward new ways of thinking. As Anzaldúa states:

Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use relationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by a movement away from set patterns and goals toward a more whole perspective.<sup>73</sup>

I would like to, for a moment, say a word about the structure of the texts and images in this project. As I stated above, this project deploys modes of code switching and cross-conversation in which image, academic prose, poetry, and lyric by me and other women artists are represented as “speaking to each other.” I am influenced by the hybrid writing style of women of color cross-genre writers Gloria Anzaldúa and D. Soyini Madison in which border crossings occur at the site of language, critique, and poetry. I am also influenced by the performance writing mode deployed by playwright and director Sharon Bridgeforth, who, in an attempt to visually represent the improvisational jazz aesthetic that shapes the performance of her plays in her scripts, uses varied placement and font styles to represent different (and same) voices.<sup>74</sup> As I stated above, the creative work in text here is not intended to be illustrative nor addendum, but is the next sentence, the next paragraph, the next thought in what has been offered in expository propositional prose. Sometimes the forms of knowledge production live beyond the page as video or sound, and I hope that readers experience the next line of the book by using the QR code with your mobile device, or by navigating to the link to which the code directs. I invite readers to engage in this hybrid way of sharing knowledge as I, too, communicate through this broken tongue. I say it again: more than anything, I want you to *feel me*.

We begin this foray into feeling with a Black study of grief. This first chapter takes up my personal grief, yes, and places the experience of personal loss on the altar of Black studies, which—I argue—has been a study of Black grief. Influenced greatly by the interventions on the field of Black studies by Toni Morrison, Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman, this chapter reflects on how it feels to be left behind. As a means of refusing the expository which would, in my view, gloss over the intimacy and immediacy of feeling grief, the bulk of this chapter is a series of fourteen lined poems that find interspecies community with the grieving mother orca, Tahlequah, who in the summer of 2018, carried her dead baby calf through the Salish Sea for seventeen days. In writing these poems, I was able to access my own grief from having lost, not only my father that same summer, but at least thirteen other loved ones since my move to Coast Salish lands in 2016. The poems are a practice in affective sedulity, where I feel and think through the meaning of mourning through text. I acknowledge the presumed opacity of this

form of writing and feeling in the series' introduction where expository propositional prose is relegated to footnote and video is offered as meditative guide to the text. By challenging form endemic to the book format requisite here, this chapter reveals the affective modalities of the expository, the poetic, and the visual in addressing grief.

Continuous with this exploration of grief as Black study, the second chapter, "Lucille Clifton's Atheology of *Joy!*," explores Clifton's poetic midrash on the Garden of Eden story as an intervention on discourses on the human in theological and humanist discourse. In a 2000 interview with Michael Glaser, Clifton frames joy as ethical and theological imperative made possible by acknowledging suffering.<sup>75</sup> This particular kind of affective sedulity—to deeply touch and acknowledge suffering—makes room for the possibility to experience the complexity of life. I use the term *atheology* after Ashon Crawley in order to mark the ambivalent relationship to any one religion or philosophy, especially western philosophies that would never acknowledge Clifton as a human subject. Beginning with one of her most famously known and deeply felt poems, "won't you celebrate with me," the chapter proposes that the central figure, one who is "born both non-white and woman," exists on a bridge between earthly flesh matter and Lucifer, the divine outcast, in order to make of herself something altogether new. The chapter then traces this atheology of joy through close readings of Clifton's poetry and creative process evidenced in her archive through reams of automatic writing and transcripts of conversations with the dead. I place Clifton's atheology of *joy!* in conversation with Womanist theologians and Black liberation theologies, as well as Black humanist theories, and find her in conversation with all of these approaches to the theodical question: Why do bad things happen? For Clifton, *joy!* explains how acknowledgment of the difficult, as well as pleasure, makes up a complex life.

Continuous on matters of the sacred and the sacral, chapter 3 goes on to unpack the ecstasy in the vocal work of Aretha Franklin and Avery\*Sunshine's vocal performance. In order to listen to Sunshine and really hear her, really *feel* what she has to say, the chapter first expositis the aesthetic grounds by which Sunshine's craft might already be understood in the music of Aretha Franklin. There, we might observe the genre-crossing transaesthetics of the sacred sexual. Through such close readings, feelin is explored through the ecstatic sensation of singing, or as Bernice Johnson Reagon names, "running sound through the body."<sup>76</sup> Singing in both sacred and secular contexts emerges as a ritual that involves intense pleasures: the sensations of ecstasy—simultaneously one with carnal flesh and the divine on sacral and sacred planes that reveal the erotic's use in sacred sexuality. The chapter takes up L. H. Stallings's formation of funky erotixxx and sacred sex to argue that the craft of singing itself, the vocal tricks, the blues scale and harmonies are modes of practicing sacred and sexual ecstasy in the body. Where musicologists and those in cultural studies remark on the stylistic similarities of gospel and the blues, this chapter examines closely what makes those stylistic choices—growls, squalls, and layered harmonies—sacra-sexual.

Chapter 4, "Shame and the Visual Field of Black Motherhood," takes up the visual image of Black motherhood and its association with racial shame by analyzing the visual art of Renee Cox, Betye Saar, and Deana Lawson as visual practices of negotiating with the image of racial shame via the Black maternal figure. I analyze these images through the lens of Black feminist thought's critiques of the

family and the myth of Black matriarchy propagated by the infamous Moynihan Report—including the critiques of Hortense Spillers, Angela Davis, and Tiffany King. I argue that *feelin* motherhood involves navigating these troubled and over-determining images of Black mothers—a navigation that is not necessarily blissfully joyous, but troubled with shame against the bodies, sexualities, and life choices of Black women.

Chapter 5, “Toward a Methodology of Anger,” encounters *feelin* through method. It takes up the trope of the angry black woman as a signpost of subjugated knowledge and offers anger as a methodology to practice affective sedulity in scholarship and life—that is to follow where Black women’s anger and the threat or accusation of Black women’s anger leads. Urged by the foregrounding scholarship on Black women’s anger and the insurgent image of Black womanhood by Audre Lorde and Hortense Spillers, I identify three texts of rage demonstrating how reading tone and homing in on the narrative and language of Black women accused of and experiencing anger produces otherwise subverted forms of knowledge. The first text is Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam,” which serves as a document of Simone’s rage at the murders of Medgar Evers in Mississippi and of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair in Alabama and her own trajectory as an artist that was very much shaped by racism and segregation. I also take up the process of writing my first collection of poems, *patient.*, mining for the experience of anger that lay beneath the creative process, and finally, I revisit the transcript of the arrest of Sandra Bland, which led to her untimely and suspicious death, using Sharpe’s method of redaction and annotation to focus on Bland’s language, tone, and thus unwavering insight on the dangerous encounter with the officer which ultimately led to her death.

The book closes with considerations of the apocalypse. How might thinking through the pleasure-producing creative process inform the way we might thrive after yet another world-ending event? What does *feelin* matter when we are faced with the inevitable collapse of all that we know? Denise da Silva’s Black feminist poethics anticipates the event and the import of Black feminist visionary creativity.<sup>77</sup> June Jordan spoke of always expecting the end of this world.<sup>78</sup> At this end of this book we return to the Black queer poethics that center Black women’s pleasure as a locus of knowledge production—of interacting with the world. Taking Finney’s metaphoric cue discussed earlier, Black feminist oceanographics urge for new and more depthful means of charting Black women’s desires, where, like the ocean, there are unknowns, and largely our imaginations shape what we feel we know of its depths. This chapter takes up the work of Jacqueline Jones Lamon, Aracelis Girmay, Dionne Brand, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Tourmaline, and Adjua Gargi Nzinga Greaves, all of whom, I propose, engage in this Black feminist oceanographic work. It is in the oceanic where *Feelin* sets out a claim for those of us interested in Black women’s pleasure, interior lives, and Black feminist epistemologies: Black women’s creative production demonstrates how Black women artists have their own means of charting pleasure, interior lives, and even our methods of knowledge production that are holistically grounded in mind, body, and spirit.

To return to the poem above by Nikky Finney, I ask, what are the things that we know that we know about the ocean?

This is the thing about engaging Black feminist thinking concerned with pleasure: we are a part of this world that has developed our imaginations and the limits of our imagination. We take part in those limitations and occasionally are titillated by them, and we may wholly be invested in our pleasures toward them. The complexities of our lives find us squarely in spaces where how we have been read is what we have been reading. Which is to say that the language and ideology that we have to describe our lives snaps us right into a one-dimensional place. It's hard to see ourselves in this kind of maze. As Angela Davis notes, "What we often assume belongs most intimately to ourselves and to our emotional life has often been produced elsewhere and has been recruited to do the work of racism and repression."<sup>79</sup> What pleases us just might (and often does) please our oppressors. What do we do with that? Whatever it is that we must do, this book argues that we do it not by disregarding the internal life, but by engaging it in order to root out the structures by which we find our internal lives shaped.

There is already a legacy of Black lesbian poetry that has told us about this. Here, Nikky Finney gives us language for desire while critiquing Western modes of knowledge that would find clitoral pleasure small if insignificant. She challenges cartography and also biology through the lens of pleasure. For what is the scale by which we measure the organ of pleasure for mammals? Which is another way to ask: Where does pleasure begin? End? This is what Black lesbian poetics has done, and a Black feminist pleasure poetics can do. Finney previously set forth another theory of Black queer women's pleasure in "The Making of Paper" while paying homage to her mentor Toni Cade Bambara. In the moment of situating herself within a tradition of Black feminist writing and declaring her dedication and love for Bambara, Finney recounts Toni Cade's final request of her: "some paper and what about one of those fat juicy pens?"<sup>80</sup> Bambara's sensuous description of a pen marks the function of pleasure between the two women through the written word and the act of creating those words. It foregrounds the full-bodied response Finney writes. Finney's exuberant response to being the one to offer Toni Cade Bambara her last ream of paper and pen is that her pro-tree politics would not stop her from, in fact, chopping down the biggest tree and making the paper for Bambara herself and take deep hyperbolic pleasure in "slash[ing] its lovely body / into one million thin black cotton rag sheets."<sup>81</sup> Finney is offering here Black feminist theories of feeling that layer the daily possibilities of pleasure with erotic pleasures. The creative process that is writing, the pleasure of being tasked by your mentor to assist in that pleasure and doing that work, the damage in doing that work, the intimacies that occur between two Black women in intergenerational creative practice takes up Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," which proclaims the possibilities of pleasure in collective work and creative production among women and through the erotic. Lorde states, "That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling."<sup>82</sup> It is the capacity for feeling that makes pleasure a possibility and rhetorical focus. The capacity for feeling at all, pleasure and pain, must also be addressed. The complexities of their coexistence and perhaps interdependence is the deep diving work that must be done as messy, slippery, wet though it might be.

It is at feelin where I would like to begin. A concept that not only encompasses pleasure, but centers it in a wide capacity of experience that would otherwise be denied to Black women. I want to talk about feelin the way that my people talk about feeling. The ways of knowing in a complex world that make up who we

are. Ways that are not simple, or neat, but quite messy and irresponsible. Feelin that is nasty in every Black sense of the word nasty: sexual, raunchy, rude, messy, unfavorable, and on. Feelin as sensation, and possibility that is practiced through creative practice. It is both heady and theoretically complex, and yet, every day regular-degular. Here, I will talk about our way of knowing: my mama, my cousins, the way alla-us know that we know that we know.