

MISOGYNOIR
IMAGES THAT
RESTRAIN & CONTROL

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With this installation, I want to demonstrate how there is no singular black woman experience, but rather a multiplicity of them. My accompanying paper, *Misogynoir: Images that Restrain and Control*, explores specific encounters that have shaped the way I view myself and offers me the opportunity to share my understanding of it to the audience. This installation relies on the audiovisual experience of the spoken word, and the viewer's gaze at my body.

Throughout my life, I have struggled with the question of who I am, in part due to controlling images established during Slavery that have skewed the idea of my body and femininity in the eyes of others. The goal of being in charge of my own image is what drove me to showcase myself and my thoughts in such a vulnerable form. "Misogynoir," a portmanteau coined by queer Black scholar Moya Bailey, describes the very specific convergence of anti-Blackness and misogyny that thrives on stereotypes and images used to oppress black women via their sexuality and femininity. Through vast research into stereotypes that plague the Black female experience, Black feminist thought, and the various ways in which Misogynoir presents itself, my final project has come into fruition.

From Birthgiver (Alien Emoji, Green Heart Emoji) on April 28, 2016 is a photo transfer etching of a text from my mother in response to an experience of being dubbed the "Black Bitch" by my peer group. The second in the series, *And Then There Were None*, plays off of the rhyme "Ten Little Niggers" by Frank Green; it is a self-portrait of me wearing a pickaninny mask to comment on feelings of a premature loss of childhood innocence in part due to adultification that I am subject to and my hypersexualized body. The pickaninny caricature dehumanized black children and depicted them as mischievous and unneeding of affection, resulting in them being defined as non-children. They were also commonly shown nude or nearly nude, normalizing the sexual objectification of black children. The last print, *Rekia, Michelle, Renisha...*, refers to the continued erasure (in this case, the underreported deaths) of black women in movements and, specifically, the Black Lives Matter movement. It also speaks to my own fear that if something happens to me, I may also be forgotten and ignored.

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In 10th grade, pictures from a group chat were posted on Instagram in which I was the topic of conversation. Messages such as, “Bitch break razors when she shaving,” and, “Bitch keep her phone, bed bugs, and breakfast in her hair.” These messages served to remind me of my place as lesser than and to deny me my femininity. I felt less than human. I remember wanting to throw up. Sure I was still me, but I was the ugliest version of myself. I was hairy, dirty, hard to look at, man-like, filthy, and more. I considered omitting these quotes, and there were a lot more, but in order to control my own image it is necessary that I tell you what was said. I have to tell you about how I spent that night crying in bed. How at first I didn’t tell my parents because I didn’t want them to also be disgusted by me. And it angers me to this day that others can have so much power over the way I view myself.

“Misogynoir,” a *portmanteau* coined by queer Black scholar Moya Bailey, is used to describe the very specific convergence of anti-Blackness and misogyny that thrives on stereotypes and images used to oppress black women via their sexuality and femininity. The word misogyny comes from the Greek *misos-* meaning “hatred” and *gunē* meaning “woman.” And noir is the French word for black.

When people become comfortable with ideas that are repeated over an extended period of time (such as the stereotypes of the Jezebel and Angry Black Woman), it doesn’t matter if what’s being communicated is fact-based or propaganda; these images have lasting effects on how society treats people regardless of position or power. Despite their own oppression, black men preserve misogynoir against black women through misogyny and internalized racism that associates blackness with inferiority. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde remarks, “if Black males choose to assume that privilege for whatever reason – raping, brutalizing, and killing Black women – then ignoring these acts of Black male oppression within our communities can only serve our destroyers. One oppression does not justify another.” The racialized sexism that Black men are able to participate in has only served to hurt the black community in their strives for freedom as the black experience cannot be equated with the experiences of only black men.

However, misogynoir is not just an intra-racial issue, it is also an interracial one perpetuated by white men, white women, non-black people of color, and black women themselves (respectability politics). White men created the images & myths that continue to characterize black women which white women benefit from. Black women have also continually been excluded and erased from movements by both black men and white women respectively (The Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, Women’s suffrage, Feminism). Misogynoir is also perpetuated by other POC because in a society built on discrimination and racism, a hierarchy is inevitable and no group wants to be one the bottom which means stepping on the toes of others. The argument is often made that being Women of Color, black women are further dividing themselves with the use of the term misogynoir. Feminista Jones asserts, “If people want to dismiss it as jargon, it’s because they don’t want to be part of the conversation. [The term] is for everybody. We [black women] can talk until we are blue in the face but if nobody else is listening and nobody else is willing to work to make change, it really

doesn't do much for us." Misogynoir and its emotional, physical, mental, and social fall out, has been around for centuries, there just never was a word for it before.

Throughout our lives, black women have been conditioned to expect violence. Our bodies are hypersexualized from a young age to justify whatever harm may come to us, but, at the same time, we are repeatedly told we are undesirable and unworthy of affection. We are hypervisible but at the same time erased from movements; the experience of white American women is often made synonymous with the experience of *all* American women. In Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the character Nanny remarks that, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," and as far as I can see, she isn't wrong. Black women are denied the same quality of life as white women and simply put, this needs to change.

The cult of domesticity otherwise known as the cult of true womanhood was a prevailing value system among the upper and middle classes during the nineteenth century in the United States and Great Britain. "True women" were supposed to possess four virtues: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. The cult of domesticity revolved around the women being the center of the family. Although all women were supposed to emulate this ideal of femininity, black women were excluded on account of all the controlling images placed upon them and were instead forced into perceived roles with those values skewed against them. In her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins writes, "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression." The most popular of these stereotypes would have to be the aforementioned Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire.

Jezebel

The depiction of black women deemed *the Jezebel* portrays them as sexually promiscuous seductresses desperate for the attention of white men. In biblical history, Jezebel was the wife of Ahab and Queen of Israel. The story of Naboth is one of the better known stories of Jezebel's life. Naboth, a landowner who lived close to the King's residence, was asked to give his land to King Ahab in exchange for compensation. Because of Jewish law, Naboth refused to give up his family's ancestral land. Inflamed by Naboth's refusal, Jezebel falsely charged him with treason and blaspheming God and the king, and had him condemned to death by stoning. Jezebel's name has been used for thousands of years to describe cunning, merciless and reprehensible women. Some believe she exemplifies evil and her name has also become synonymous with idolaters, prostitutes and sorcerers. The Jezebel stereotype was deliberately constructed to excuse the rampant sexual exploitation & sexual assault of enslaved black women. If you were constantly looking for sex, you thus could not be a victim of rape. The persistence of this belief made black women more vulnerable to sexual assault but less likely to be believed when they reported it. The Jezebel stereotype is victim-blaming at its core. It also served another

function in that the result of this assumed excessive sexual appetite should provide an increase in children being born, allowing plantations to bring in more profit.

Sara Baartman, otherwise known as the Hottentot Venus, was a Khoisan woman from South Africa whose body was commodified and objectified as part of London's Piccadilly Circus because of her "abnormal" sexual organs specifically, her large buttocks and big breasts. In 1810, Sara allegedly "signed" a contract with an English ship surgeon named William Dunlop. Apparently, the terms of her "contract" were that she would travel with Hendrik Cezar, brother of slave trader Pieter Willem Cezar, and Dunlop to England and Ireland to work as a domestic servant, and be exhibited for entertainment purposes. She was to receive a 'portion of earnings' from her exhibitions and be allowed to return to South Africa after five years. However, this was not a valid contract as she was illiterate and came from a cultural tradition that did not write or keep records. Sara Baartman was seen through an oppressive, heavily pornographic lens with her physique and its value being reduced to nothing other than her sexual anatomy. Audiences paid to watch and touch her body. During her show she was locked in a cage and clothed in tight-fitting garments. Baartman had no independent agency over her body but was the subject of an aggressive form of voyeurism. In 1815, Sara was studied by French anatomists, zoologists and physiologists who used her to conclude a link between animals and humans through scientific racism (Qureshi 241-242). Thus, she was used to help emphasize the stereotype that Black women were sexually deviant and that Africans in general were a lesser race. After her death in 1816 at the age of 26, her remains were dissected, a plaster cast of her body was made, and her brain and genitals were pickled and placed into jars so that they could be put on display. She was butchered like an *animal*. What's even worse is that her remains weren't returned to South Africa until 2002. The enforcement of the Jezebel role made it impossible for Black women to ascribe to the cult of true womanhood as she rejected purity and her aggressive sexual nature masculinized her in that she desired sex just as a man does. Although, of course, it was a desire to be *used* for sex and the erasure of her agency that drove the entire image.

This stereotype has lived on to the modern day, with one example being the Daniel Holtzclaw case from 2015. Holtzclaw, an Oklahoma City police officer, was accused of committing sex crimes against 13 different women, all of them black, in which he gave them an ultimatum: to have sex with him or face arrest. His alleged victims range in age from 34 to 58; and at least one of them is a grandmother. On December 10, 2015, an all-white jury convicted him on 18 of 36 charges including forcible oral sodomy and four separate counts of rape in the first degree and he was sentenced to 263 years in prison. During closing arguments, prosecutor Lori McConnell said Holtzclaw targeted drug addicts and other women with felony records, "He didn't choose CEOs or soccer moms; he chose women he could count on not telling what he was doing." Holtzclaw, "counted on the fact no one would believe them and no one would care." The attorney of an alleged victim, one of the two who reported her assault to police, said that her client was "afraid that no one was going to believe her because she's African-American." Holtzclaw understood the systemic devaluation of black woman and he used it in his favor. He relied on the Jezebel stereotype that branded black women as dishonest. I remember seeing the

video of him being charged, in which he is crying uncontrollably while rocking back and forth. And you know what, it felt good to watch his life fall apart after he ruined the life of so many women.

Mammy

During slavery, the mammy caricature was maintained as proof that black women were content and happy in their roles as slaves to refute arguments made by abolitionists. Yet with slavery's demise, the Mammy image remained a key figure because a seductress such as the Jezebel would threaten white families. Mammy was portrayed as an obese, coarse, maternal figure often smiling and laughing as evidence of the supposed "humanity" of the institution of slavery. The mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness in order to justify rape of black women. Mammy was dark-skinned in a society that regarded black skin as ugly and dirty, obese, and old or middle-aged. It was implied that no white man would choose a fat, elderly black woman instead of the idealized white woman. Mammy also implied that black women were only fit to be domestic workers which became a justification for economic discrimination. In 2016, The National Women's Law Center compiled a fact sheet which states that African American women who work full time, year round are paid only 60 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men. This amounts to a loss of \$21,937 a year, meaning that African American women would have to work nearly 20 months to make as much as white, non-Hispanic men did in the previous year. Growing up I was always told that I'd have to work twice as hard to get half as far and it is clear to me now that this is the result of systemic economic racism in addition to other forces and stereotypes at play.

Sapphire

The Sapphire, otherwise known by its more modern manifestation, the Angry Black Woman (ABW), portrays black women as rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing. While the Sapphire is just one name for the myth it is suggested that the angry black woman has many depictions like the matriarch and the "black bitch." Unlike the Jezebel and Mammy, the Sapphire/ABW has not been studied as much as it is accepted as fact by many. There is a lack of research on this stereotype as anger is seen as essential aspect of black femininity (Harris-Perry 88-89). It is generally accepted that this image of black women was enlarged by white Southerners to clearly show the contrast between the "uncivilized" loud blacks, and respectable, well-behaved white women.

This myth was employed to punish black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, obsequious, and unseen. Society's acceptance of this myth has rendered black women silent and mute for fear that what they will not be taken seriously as being perceived as angry will distract from any argument being made.

Misogynoir is a societal issue affecting all aspects of the lives of Black women whether they are cis, trans, gender-fluid, straight, gay, or asexual and in helping you understand, I think it is necessary that I share my own personal experiences. Keep in mind, these are the experiences

of someone who stands in a privileged position in that I am middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied, and have access to numerous education opportunities such as Oxbow and the private school I attend in Park Slope, Brooklyn. There is no escaping misogynoir, even with all of these things working in my favor, and it is important to understand that those who are not experiencing these privileges experience this combination of anti-blackness and misogyny in vastly different ways. There is no singular Black woman experience, however there are shared moments that have fostered a fluid unity.

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I have felt unsafe in my own body for years knowing that even my age wasn't a deterrent for sexual advances from men. In a report titled *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, researchers found that Adults think that black girls are less innocent, less in need of protection and nurturing, and seem older than white girls of the same age. American adults also think black girls know more about adult topics and about sex than white girls of the same age. And these perceptions are greater when it comes to younger black girls ages 5-9 and 10-14. This is of course the result of the persistence of the Jezebel archetype in popular culture and media.

In my own personal experience I began getting cat-called and harassed on the street as young as 12 years old, and the fact that I experienced precocious puberty didn't help. I have memories of being whistled at while I walked with my mother by men old enough to be my father. Feelings of embarrassment would always engulf me. No one wants their body to be commented on and definitely not while with their mom. At such a young age these experiences shaped how I viewed my own body as a sexual object.

I remember the first time I was dress-coded in middle school because I was wearing leggings. That day after getting home I cried and not a quick cry with a couple of tears but one of those cries so intense that it leaves you with a headache. I was angry and ashamed at my body for being different from other girls, angry at it for getting me in trouble. But the fact of the matter is, my body wasn't the problem but rather how it was viewed as vehemently sexual by those whose job was to nurture me. Going to a primarily white institution during a period so influential as middle school I already knew I was different and this experience didn't do anything to help.

When I was a freshman in high school I had to go to school one day for a yearbook meeting during Parent Teacher Conferences. It was the middle of the day. I had reached Vanderbilt Avenue when a man struck up conversation with me. From the way he communicated I could tell that he had some form of a developmental disorder. At one point he asked if he could have a hug and I obliged but what I didn't expect was for him to start humping his body against mine. Shaken by his actions I sought refuge in a deli hoping that he would be gone by the time I came out. This was not the case as I realized he was at the top of the block and around the corner waiting for me. I ended up walking in some roundabout way so that he wouldn't see me and eventually arrived at my school. And I didn't tell anyone. I didn't tell my parents and I never told my friends until this year. I didn't want anyone to know. Because in

that moment I had felt so powerless, I didn't push him off or scream or ask anyone for help. I continued on with my day because that was all I thought I could do. I didn't want to be seen as weak.

Even this year, when making my way home one day, a man started a conversation with me in which upon learning my age he remarked that knowing I was 16 made him feel bad about what he was thinking about me. Obviously he was referring to thinking about me in a sexual way. He then proceeded to start following me home. Not knowing what to do I started freaking out and called a friend who advised me to call my parents who came to pick me up from the McDonald's on Vanderbilt and Atlantic where I went to lose him.

In his song "Fresh Out / My Struggle" Kodak Black raps, "Ay, where them yellow bones? I don't want no black bitch I'm already black, I don't need no black bitch." Being simultaneously hypersexualized and told you're undesirable makes for a confusing time in terms of self-esteem. Men on the street will allude to wanting to lick you in certain places while other people will tell you you're ugly.

Many are familiar with The Doll Test done by psychologists Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie K. Phipps Clark in the 1930s and 1940s. Black children across America consistently, though not all, identified Black dolls as ugly, while describing white ones as "pretty," "clean," and "nice." Race isn't the only determining factor in terms of beauty but also the Eurocentric features that are associated with white women.

In 2015, the hashtag "#whitegirlsdoitbetter" began trending on Twitter. Active since as early as 2013 and initially associated with porn sites, the hashtag resurged with provocative or posed selfies of young white women. Essentially the goal was to highlight the physical attributes and thus overall superiority of white women to women of color, particularly black women as our value is most often associated with our assets. Not only is this problematic in that "it" is referring to black women's breasts and butts which we are often reduced to & ridiculed for, but this hashtag is more proof of white women's role in upholding racial hierarchies.

Serena Williams is the best tennis player and arguably the best athlete in the world. From the age of seven 'til nine I took tennis lessons at the Prospect Park Tennis Center because I wanted to be just like her. In addition to my short-lived tennis career, Serena and I also have in common the misogynoir we have both faced however what she experiences is on another level of vileness. Sexists and racists emboldened by the mouthpiece and anonymity of platforms like Twitter and Instagram misgender her, calling her a man and deriding the strength of her body. I see similarities between the two of us in that my shoulders are broad, my wide nose, my big thighs, our similar skin tone, and we are very close in height. It is almost impossible to not internalize messages being said to someone who you see yourself in. In the words of Brittney Cooper, "There is nothing wrong with gender-nonconforming, female-bodied people embracing masculinity," but femininity being viewed as singularly exclusive to white womanhood is a big problem.



doesntmattersmd legs got more muscles than mine.

33m 31 likes Reply



— View replies (16)



now.this She almost looks full woman here! I like it

33m 9 likes Reply



javonsayles22 Daddy duties 🤔

31m 1 like Reply



Screenshots of comments underneath a reposted photo on Instagram of Serena and her daughter, Alexis Olympia.

Black womanhood is routinely and systematically devalued and dismissed in ways that white womanhood isn't. The conversation has barely started surrounding the fact that existing as both black and woman means exposure to multiple forms of oppression. To be able to continue resisting and defying the roles forced upon us just goes to show the resilience that black women embody. I refuse to bottle up my emotions for everyone else's comfort and convenience. As a society we need to acknowledge and address instead of ignoring and silencing those who are victims. As Crystal Valentine and Aaliyah Jihad declared, as a black woman, "My very existence is defiance."

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