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Do You Want to be Tender?

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Do You Want to be Tender?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Henderson State University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art, 2016

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

In this thesis you will find a body of writings and artworks that reflect Leah Grant's art practice and research. Throughout the paper you will see Leah alternate back and forth between her artwork and writings. Leah Grant addresses her personal experience as a Black woman and what it means to explore vulnerability through understanding how the relationships around her affect the relationship she has with herself. Leah has created a collection of poems, prints, and video and audio collages that assist her with revealing and concealing.

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Epigraph

Conversation with K.Foote

Vulnerability is complex because you have different components of yourself you haven't discovered yet.

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Premise

My research focuses on addressing the discomfort that comes from accessing vulnerable components of my experiences being a Black woman. I use self-reflection to explore the relationships I have with others to better understand the relationship I have with myself. I am conceptually connecting these different components to a web structure. I use lace as symbolism for my web and as a connector to the many experiences I have and components that make up my identity. I find myself being denied components of my identity. I often feel that some people sift through my appearances, mannerisms, and characteristics as if they have the right to curate my identity. Why do traditional societal norms get to choose what is acceptable or what is not acceptable? I will also be connecting these questions to my experiences in the home. I grew up in an environment where it was taboo to desire or to be anything outside of what was laid out for me. Whether that came from peers, family, or religious beliefs. Constructing the person, I wanted to become was not acceptable if it conflicted with any of these groups. To counter this constant limbo, I am exercising my right to speak up and state how I see myself despite what others have projected on to me. In my work, I am speaking up on the things I use to be reluctant about and, in some cases, still am.

The work I create provides a platform to unlearn and relearn characteristics that make up who I was, who I am, and who I am trying to become. I am not able to erase pain, but I move through it. I am always in a state of becoming and I have a hunger to explore and to accept these various states no matter where I am in the process. My studio practice has taken many forms since starting this program. Recent installation work has allowed me to process different versions of myself by recomposing something new with every composition. This process is how

I work in the print studio, dark room, and experimental media labs. Having the ability to make a new arrangement reflects how fluid I can be by making new meanings, forms, and by collaging directly on the wall.

Writing allows another access point for me to share things I am not able to do through the images I create. I would mostly focus on formal qualities in the beginning of my process because it is difficult to share personal information about myself in public spaces, especially since I was taught to do the opposite growing up. In my art practice, I pair phrases or poems with my personal archive of photos and occasionally appropriated materials to create new collaged pieces. I am weaving writings, poems, and artwork together to represent the structure of my lace web that is constructed around my identity. Language has allowed me to explore more in my work to deal with depression, anxiety, and displacement. I use abstraction to deal with the discomfort of the emotions I am experience and to leave space for myself and the viewer. My thesis work will consist of broadsides, screenprints, written and recorded poetry accompanied with video collage. I link contrasting elements such as weight in form, color palettes, fabrics such as lace, and natural textures to assist with abstraction and duality through the multiple mediums such as printmaking, alternative photo processes, and laser engraving and cutting.

Reveal and Conceal pt.1

I have had some experiences growing up that made it hard to fully be myself. Sometimes situations would look like me disagreeing with a family tradition or expectation. I realized that sometimes a dark cloud would be casted over my brain and eggshells layered under my feet. I had depression and anxiety, there was no room to bring up mental health issues at home. I started to do my own work toward healing and realizing these issues were hereditary. I did not have opportunities to talk about it with family members because everyone acted as if everything were okay all the time and would blame the person before them for family troubles. My sister, school, work, and friends were how I coped with the dysfunctional environment at home.

I connect with the writings from *All About Love* by Bell Hooks. She mentions love from all angles such as family, romantic, and platonic. She talks about how most people can mistake love and care for being the same thing. In the quote below, Hooks talks about how care can exist in the home but also be absent of love.

“I am grateful to have been raised in a family that was caring, and strongly believe that had my parents been loved well by their parents they would have given that love to their children. They gave what they had been given care. Remember, care is a dimension of love, but simply giving care does not mean we are loving. Like many adults who were verbally and/or physically abused as children, I spent a lot of my life trying to deny the bad things that had happened, trying to cling only to the memory of good and delicious moments in which I had known care.” Bell Hooks (2000) (p.8)



Figure 1: *Maya Angelou on the Noble Story of Black Womanhood.*

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/c4MucoOQz0c?feature=oembed>

The above image is Maya Angelou in an interview with Bill Moyer. She is describing how she would teach her daughter to move through life despite the difficulties she will face.

Reveal and Conceal pt.2

As a Black woman I do not feel seen or respected by most Black men. Some men contribute to problematic systems that were built to control women. I am constantly aware of being in “Limbo” because of the lack of support women receive. Not being seen by men throughout everyday life is hard but not being supported by men in your own community is harder. Women have been taught to carry the burdens of man, but who carries our burdens? Why are we expected to support men and help them heal with nothing in return? Women are groomed to deal with abuse because of gender roles and historical traditions. If a woman wants to change her behavior and character, she is still responsible for her previous actions. When men decide to change, they are admired for becoming a better man and his old form is forgotten like he had a clean slate from the beginning.

The quotes below reflect how the conversation on race gets prioritized over sexism within Black communities. I have also had conversations in class that are a perfect fit for these examples below. When the protests arose because of the police brutality in summer 2020, I was taking a class on intersectionality. The first week of class we were focusing on how lynching affects Black people specially on how modern-day lynching’s still exist currently. Sad part of that discussion was how Black women were not a part of the presentation. Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and the many other Black women affected by police brutality were not mentioned once. I had to speak up about this oversight after a disagreement I had with a peer of mine from my group, who is a Black man highlighting that I was “just picking a fight” because historically Black men have larger numbers in lynching’s.

Jamilah Lemieux highlighted in the forward of *Black Macho and The Myth of The Superwoman* a quote from *The Black Scholar*, written by Robert Staples who wrote against Michele Wallace's work.

"Though we have become more sophisticated and pointed in our language around our issues with Black men, the attempts at silencing us have remained sadly consistent with the scathing, violent attempts made by writers like Robert Staples (The Black Scholar) against Wallace. Addressing sexism in anti-racist movements is divisive! To suggest that Black women face oppression at the hands of Black men distracts us from our true enemies: Racism! White supremacy! Isn't it fair to reason that Black women are somehow complicit in the plot to keep the Black man down, considering that Black girls allegedly fare better in classrooms and Black women outpace Black men in the workplace?" Jamilah Lemieux (2015) (p. x).

"Wallace publicly walked the walk many Black feminist women do when the weight of recognizing Black patriarchy crashes squarely on our shoulders. She spoke pointedly of what scribe and scholar Moya Bailey has since labeled 'misogynoir'--- sexism towards Black women; anti-Blackness that can come even from those who are Black, who were raised by Black women and profess to value Black people. Jamilah Lemieux (2015) (p. ix)

BLACK

***WHY CAN'T
WOMEN
BE ANGRY?***

Figure 2. *Why Can't?* series.



Figure 3. *What Can't?* series.

I Have Not Victimized Myself

Sharing what I have dealt with does not make me a victim.

I am here to show the uncomfortable, exposing sides when I see fit to.

Sharing my truth does not mean I am ungrateful, or I am complaining.

It is not my goal to only highlight the result when sharing my truth.

Virgin Pornstar

Being a Black woman and wanting to unpack and talk about my own sexuality is difficult because I always get questions to how this relates to my blackness. “How does blackness relate to sexuality?” The concept that women have a sexuality is foreign (yet alone Black women). I always must provide transitions when wanting to address another part of my identity to the public. Sometimes an indicator or signal is nice and helps the viewer better understand but most of the time people ask for one because they do not see how it relates to my work.

Sexuality is not separate from women’s identities even if we have not had sex yet. Sexuality is more than the physical, it influences a lot of visual culture in multiple ways. My experience being a “virgin” has been not inclusive when mentioning sexual liberation. I am either shamed for not having sex yet or fetishized and placed on a pedestal for the “purity” I have attained so far and get encouraged to keep going. I get talked down to as if I am not knowledgeable about sex. My value may increase to some men because I have not been “hoeing” around. They see my sexuality as a target as something for them to claim. On the flip side of situations, I encounter men who glorify their sexual desires so much that they believe that any woman who is a virgin will automatically become sprung as soon as the tip goes in. I do not identify with the label virgin because of the historical contexts that come with it. I am simply a person who has not had sex yet and who is NOT waiting for marriage or religious purposes. I value respectful and safe interactions with men more than the historical contexts of purity and the notion that time will run out if I do not hurry up and experience sex in the context of toxic masculinity.

I want sex please

I want sex, but I want it with a man who is aware of my mind and my body.

I want sex, but I want the partner I choose to be at ease with my timing and deliverance of how to enter and exit.

I want to be present enough to unclench and let my muscles exist in a relaxed state.

I want sex to be present in our separate and combined explorations.

I want to be desired and to desire.



VIRGIN PUSSY NOT FOR SALE!

Virgin Wanted

Need experience to have sex?

Requirements:

- must be flexible**
- must be freaky**
- must be thick with a flat stomach**
- must not get attached**

VIRGIN PUSSY NOT FOR SALE!

Figure 4. *I Control The Gaze.*

They will try to tell you to cover up your scars, but we know better because we've been enchanted way too long that hiding them isn't an option anymore. They secretly wish to explore us. They want our knowledge of self. We know our form cascades out of galaxies consuming all the masses.



Figure 5. *Unable.*

I was thinking about having sex with a close friend a few years ago because I thought it was a safe space to do that. I thought the friendship was strong and open enough not to regret anything later, but I was wrong. What I essentially thought was a good idea turned into a bad one. I did not end up having sex with this person, but I did experience things that changed me in a way that made me lose touch in who I thought I was and who I thought he was.

What Happened to The Gang?

In my first year as a graduate student, I formed the question “What Happened to The Gang?”. This question was fresh in my mind because of the transitions I was experiencing before and during graduate school. I began to process old friendships and experiences while being in a new environment and becoming a new person with new experiences. Processing this question through screenprints and other mediums allowed me to understand the importance of building a web based on my experiences.

I learned new approaches for my practice through the teachings of Dr. Alphonso W. Grant. He guided many students using Graeme Sullivan’s book called *“Art Practice as Research”*. This book helped me reframe what could be considered as an art practice. This approach gave me the frameworks to build and discover my own creating process. It allowed me to use what came natural for me instead of using information that did not enhance my interests. Building a web through the collage process allowed me to dissect and zoom into who I am and reevaluate by using influences in my surroundings. I use references from films, music, writings, and books. I look to mental wellness instructors such as Alex Elle for tools to use in my writings and to aid my healing process.



Figure 6. *Unfavorable Conditions*

You are not dumb for appreciating the good in people. It is not weak to love those who have hurt you. Keep winning and sharing your light.



Figure 7. *Bygone*.

Let Go

I know that feeling and connection you had at the time was great and made you feel important but when it is time to move on please do.

Moving on

It is not your job to wait on someone to love you the way you need to be loved. They must catch up on their own. Just remember it is okay if they miss the opportunity.

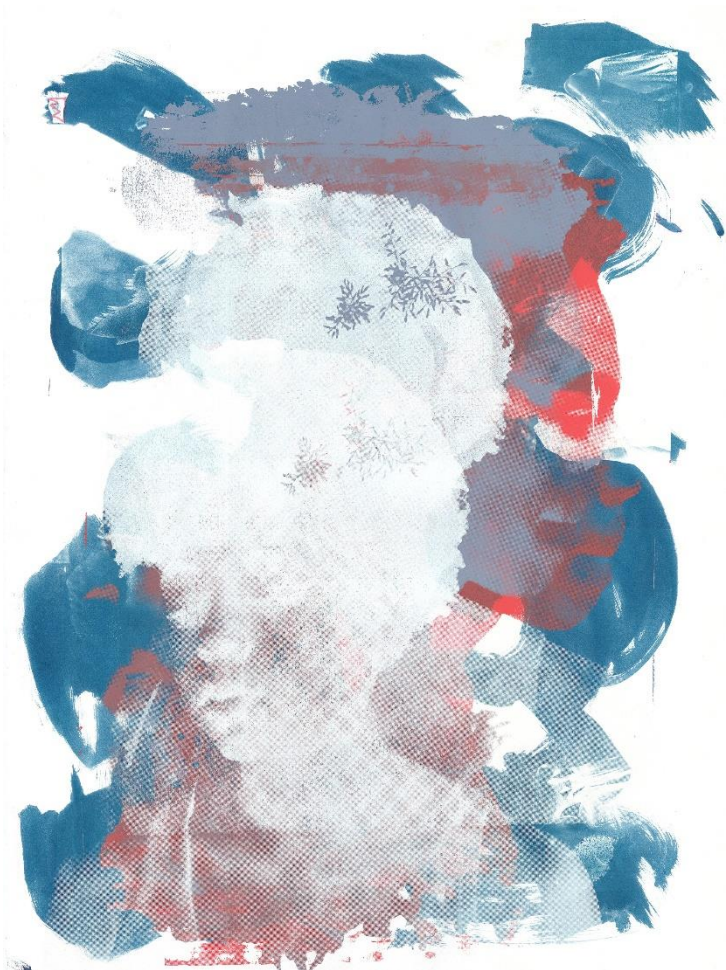


Figure 8. *Nebulous.*



Figure 9. *Making friends is hard.*

Where are you going?

It is okay to love people even though they are not coming with you. Sometimes our purpose will put us in different directions.

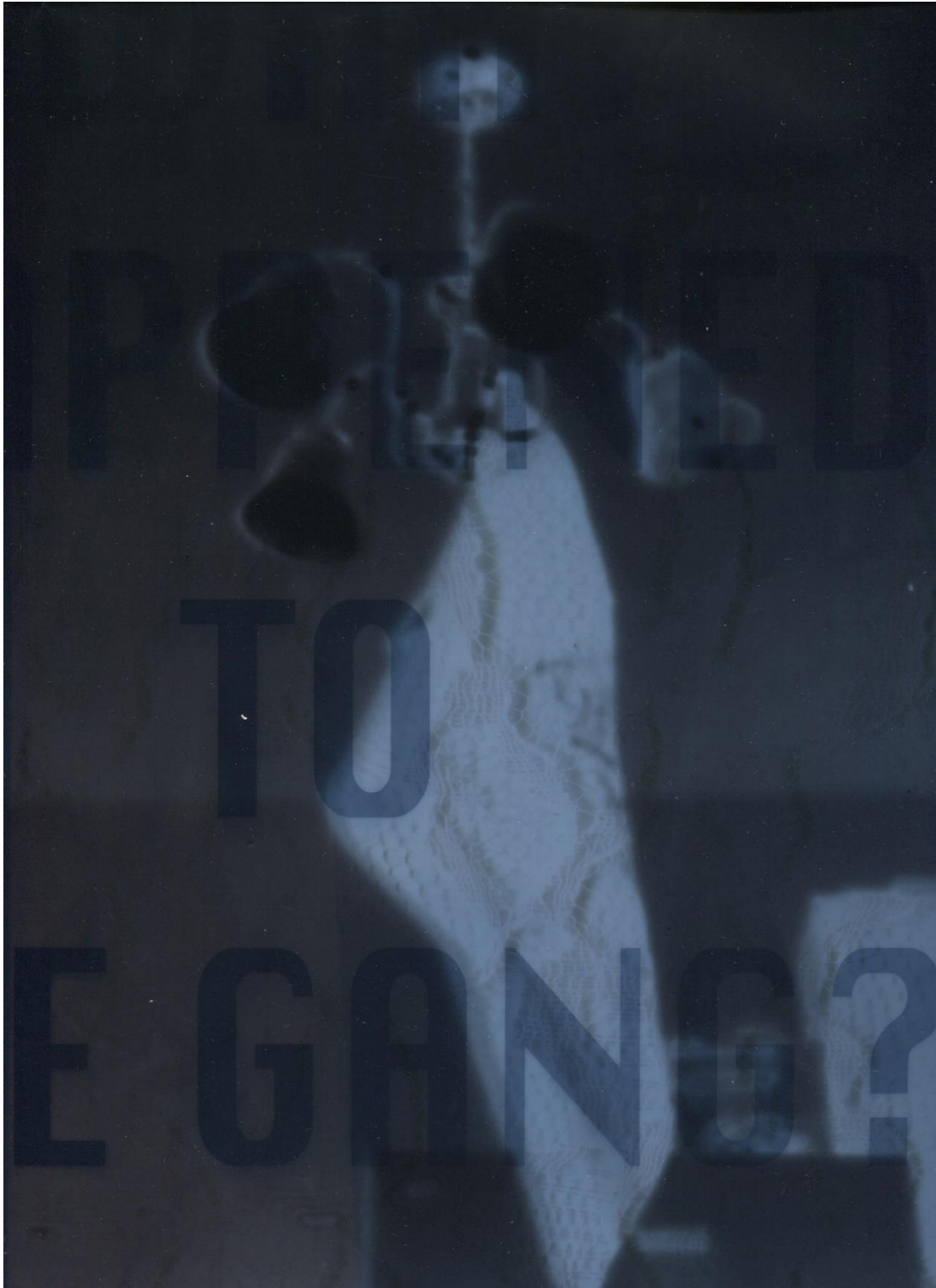


Figure 10. *Gang?*



Figure 11. *Now I have to start over.*

Do you want to be tender?



Figure 12. POP-up Exhibition

[Poetry publication and online exhibition]

Website: www.doyouwanttobetender.art



Dear Friend,

I am finding myself to be strong and weak at the same time. It gets harder to take care of myself when so much is expected of me. While everyone is consumed with their own lives and responsibilities, it is hard for me to ask for support.

I am aware of others needs but I fear no one is aware of mine. I find that there is no room to not be okay. I am hesitant to say I need an extra lift. A back to rest on. A shoulder to lay my head. I help others relieve stress but there is no one to help carry the weight that burdens me.

Figure 14. *Dear Friend #1.*



Figure 15. Video still from *We Cannot Waste*.

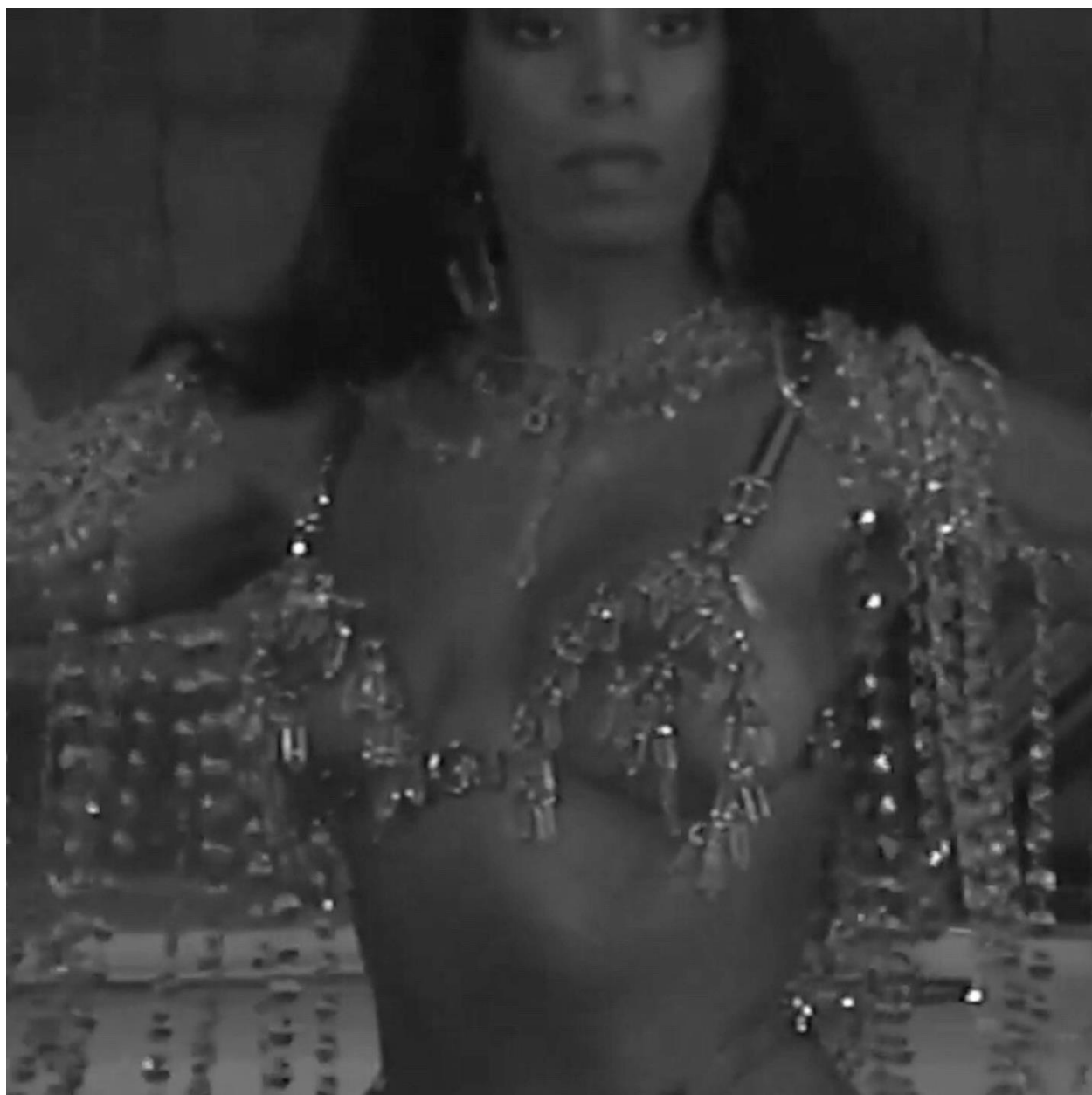


Figure 16. Video still from *Black Woman*.

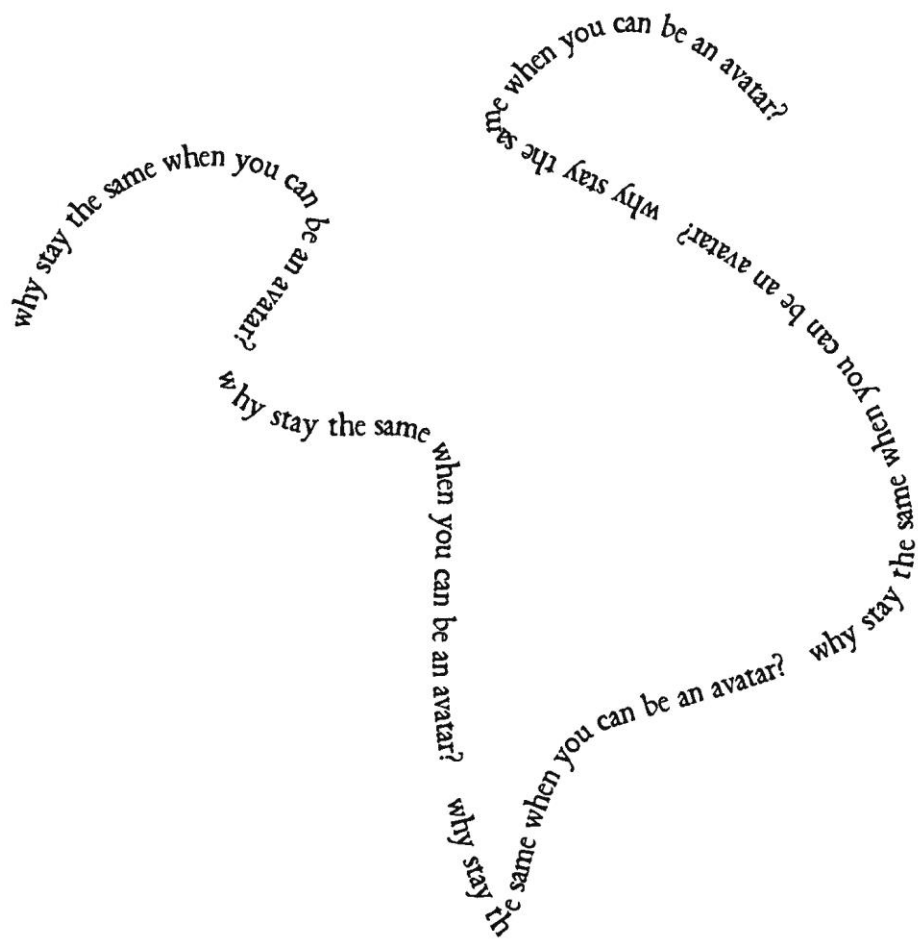


Figure 17. Avatar.

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