

Chopped and Screwed: Mediating the Black Body

by Lauren M. Cramer

By performing well-known racial stereotypes, Consuela Boyer's *Blaque Woman* engages directly in the discourse surrounding black female representation in popular culture. It is explicit that *Blaque Woman* is a piece that is contending with issues of racial performativity; however, Boyer's specific approach to these issues gives us another layer to consider when determining the place of blackness in black performance—the voice. In Boyer's five-minute video, she dramatically changes her physical appearance, but her voice remains "screwed" (slowed down to the point of distortion) throughout the performances. These aggressive, sexual, and emotionally engaged performances would seem to provide an intimate space to engage with the black body. Instead, in Boyer's work, that intimacy is replaced with the awareness that a whole black body is not available for our viewing/listening pleasure. As a result, what appears to be a perfect recreation of black visual culture's most familiar images challenges the entire repertoire.

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In *Blaque Woman*, Boyer carefully reconstructs her own image, changing her appearance and mannerisms to ask, "what does it mean to act black?" By extension, I think this piece also asks, "what does it mean to sound black?" Asking both questions forces us to arrive at a similar place—"I know it when I see it/hear it/smell it/taste it/etc." It seems the best way to understand "sounding black" is to think about the black voice as a



Anna-Renae Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

guarantor of the black body. It is present (I heard it!). This is clearest in the discourse of music appreciation when applied to African/African American music. In "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music," Susan McClary and Robert Walser explain the tendency to describe black music in bodily terms (i.e. the rhythm or accompanying dance).¹ Another way to understand the link between black sounds and black bodies is to consider how blackness, as an aesthetic configuration, needs to appear "correct" across the senses. This coherence is in danger if/when non-black bodies "sound black" or "look black" (and vice versa). In *Blaque Woman*, Boyer purposefully creates something that is all wrong—that voice should not come from *that* body.

Boyer's manipulation of her voice places her work within the lineage of what Alexander G. Weheliye calls "sonic Afro-modernity," the intersection of black popular music and sound technologies that theorizes about



Tiffany Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

materiality, ephemerality, and embodiment. Weheliye describes the black voice as always mediated.² As a result, we can discuss black sounds in the same ways we've learned to address the black body as an overdetermined image. Boyer's work counters attempts to make sense of her body. The result is a kind of aesthetic alienation that is consistent with hip-hop's similar use of "screwed" black voices. First, it is difficult to make sense of what Boyer is saying, so explicitly this image is resisting legibility. Second, Boyer's specific vocal manipulation borrows from a distinctly regional hip-hop style meant to distinguish and draw discreet boundaries around Southern rap production. Finally, *Blaque Woman* also displays a shift in the black popular culture values of a previous generation that would be wary of Boyer's humorous combination of sex, technology, and "bad" behavior.

Perhaps the most provocative way Boyer's screwed voice forces a

renegotiation with the black body is the way it challenges the link between the organic and inorganic. Blackness can feel available for fantasies of ownership or consumption precisely because of its firm connection to the physical body. That black body has been understood as primal, earthy, grounded, sensuous, and pre-modern. But the technological barrier in *Blaque Woman* complicates the representational reading that insists on making sense of the black body from the outside. *Blaque Woman* is about a performer animating her own body and making that labor explicit in both the sound manipulation, slow motion, and even her intricate costumes. The foregrounding of artifice, or each character in *Blaque Woman* as inorganic, opens a space to reconsider the way the black body is encountered. In fact, if she is "keeping it real," she is actually "keeping it (blackness) really fluid," as she blurs the lines between organic/inorganic, presence/absence, and surface/substance.

I know it when I see it/hear it/smell it/taste it/etc.

As opposed to completely removing her voice to emphasize the mediation of her body, Boyer's decision to screw her voice introduces the additional wrinkle of temporality. During *Blaque Woman*, viewers/listeners do not have a clear sense of the source of the voice, both literally (was it recorded at the time of her performance?) or temporally (when is this from?). There is a technological *too-much-ness* that allows Boyer's performance to exceed itself and the present moment (this is clearest when the sound of her clapping does not appropriately synch with the image of her hands clapping). *Blaque Woman* makes visible and audible, when blackness does not land squarely on the body. Instead, like the lazy sound of a screwed voice, it seems to slide right off. In Boyer's piece there is a sense that the voice is emanating from a past point and slowly reaching the present moment, at the same time the use of technology is decidedly futuristic. By shifting the question from "where is the black in black popular culture?" to "when is the black in black popular culture?" I

think *Blaque Woman* can initiate a conversation about the centrality of blackness in the development of technologies of representation and reproduction, and the way discourses of modernity failed to include the black experience.

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Blaque Woman is a piece of art that seems to clearly give the viewer what is desired—images of the black body behaving in perfectly clear, predictable ways. Yet, Boyer’s vocal performance not only makes the piece less legible, it makes visible and audible the process of abstracting blackness from the body. This abstraction, in turn, helps us understand the vitality of liquid blackness because of the way it relies on the kind of intimacy, locality, immediacy, and (dare I say it) authenticity that feels present in Boyer’s work.

¹Susan McClary and Robert Walser, “Theorizing the Body in African-American Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (1994): 75–84.

²Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2005).