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## Beyond the Line: Bessie Harvey's Visual Commentary on the Persistence of the Black Maternity Crisis in the United States

Frederica Simmons

*Please note that images in this article may be disturbing to readers.*

In the wake of the US Supreme Court's recent decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, I leaned deeply into the support of community to process the traumatic news: women who have walked the path before me, who have held me up and wiped away my tears with one hand while they showed me how to push forward with the other; my mother, my sisters, my friends. Some have children who have long since grown, others have daughters just recently born, and many more now face a future where they are no longer confident that they will have autonomy over their bodies, the right to choose maternity for themselves or not. While the decision was met with outrage from many, I quickly realized that not everyone felt the same sense of shock. The Black women in my life continued to reiterate the same resounding consensus—they were not moved by the newly sharpened outcry from white women, since the abuse of Black maternal rights at the hands of white men, literal and figurative, has been constructed and maintained by a culture of hegemonic *misogynoir* for centuries.<sup>1</sup> While we welcome the incoming camaraderie with open arms, this fight is not new or unfamiliar to us.

The sculptor Bessie Harvey (1929–1994) was an artist all too familiar with this abuse of Black maternity, both within her daily lived experience as well as within the context of the oral traditions of her surrounding community. Divorced and a single mother at the age of thirty-nine, Harvey described herself during her early years of motherhood as "little better than an animal trying to scrape together food and shelter" for her eleven children. She felt as if she "didn't really become truly human until [her] youngest was half-grown," at which time she found self-avowal and redemption within her evolving creative practice.<sup>2</sup>

With her mixed-media assemblage *A Thin Line or the Hanging Tree* (1984), a scene divided into two, Harvey presents the viewer with a continuum of space in which spectacles of brutality against Black maternal rights are glaring (fig. 1). The central knot that divides the scene "has four eyes, and the eyes [are] the eyes of God," picturing the divine authority that places judgment over the narrative depicted.<sup>3</sup> On the left, a single tree stands; from one of the branches, a Black corpse hangs from a string noose. Three figures bear witness to the hanging tree: a woman and two children. One of the artist's daughters, Faye Harvey Dean, provided clarity on the narrative of the work during a conversation I

had with her in January 2022. She explained that in the assemblage, the enslaved woman "was watching her son get hanged by her master for recklessly looking at his daughter."<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 1: Bessie Harvey, *A Thin Line or The Hanging Tree*, 1984. Mixed-media assemblage. Courtesy of the artist's estate

On the right of the central knot of divine witness, there is a second scene: the same enslaved woman, as indicated by her matching garment, serves as the personification of the racist white archetype of the Black mammy as she nurses a white baby wrapped in a pink knit blanket. Her eyes, bulging in the scene where she supports white life within the same landscape where she witnesses Black death, further establish the figure to be one and the same in both realms. The mammy figure, however, has enlarged, painted red lips that echo visual cues derived from the blackface of minstrel shows, further identifying the figure to be in line with the imagined white impression of Black identity. In regard to this artwork, Harvey recalls the tales of oral traditions across generations:

I heard the older people talk about in the slave times, see. . . . I wasn't there then, but I heard them talk about how that the white woman's milk wasn't strong and sometime the babies died. . . . The nanny, she had babies so often her milk never dried up, she always had milk, so she nursed the white baby to health.<sup>5</sup>

Scholar Celeste-Marie Bernier theorizes that, in the process of representing the traumas of ritualized killings of martyred Black people alongside the "misuse of woman," Harvey reveals the manner in which lynchings and racist archetypes alike contribute to the deliberate white supremacist systems of dehumanization and terror that have historically subjugated Black America.<sup>6</sup> Among these "misuses" are the despoliation of Black maternal bodies, for Black women were raped as breeding stock for white plantation owners to increase their wealth, denied the autonomy to care for their own biological children, and forced to dedicate their breast milk to fortify the health of white children.<sup>7</sup> In *A Thin Line or the Hanging Tree*, Harvey depicts through both symbolism and literalism her revelation that such atrocities divided Black and white communities by only "a thin line," where "a Black woman creates life while a white man commits death."<sup>8</sup> We continue to see this thin line crossed centuries later, and it is this same thin line that we must confront today in the wake of *Dobbs v. Jackson*.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "misogynoir" is defined as ingrained prejudice directed toward Black women; see Moya Bailey and Trudy, "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395>; and Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Bessie Harvey quoted in Leslie King-Hammond, ed., *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts, 1995), 93.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen C. Wicks, "Revelations in Wood: The Art of Bessie Harvey," in *Awakening the Spirits: Art by Bessie Harvey*, ed. Steven C. Wicks (Knoxville, TN: Knoxville Museum, of Art, 1997), 24–25.

<sup>4</sup> Faye Harvey Dean, telephone interview with the author, January 20, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Wicks, "Revelations in Wood," 24–25.

<sup>6</sup> Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Stick to the Skin: African American and Black British Art, 1965–2015* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 254. Bernier's reference to the "misuse of woman" is reflective of the term as regarded by artist, educator, and musician Lonnie Holley (b. 1950). For Holley, this "misuse" of Black women takes the form of sexual abuse, rape, and other variations of the same sadism enacted by white men on Black female bodies over the duration of centuries.

<sup>7</sup> Bernier, *Stick to the Skin*, 250.

<sup>8</sup> Bernier, *Stick to the Skin*, 254.