

ABSTRACT

They Lie On Me: Black Resistance in Media

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Despite its myriad formations in actuality, Black life is often represented within mainstream media in a dangerously distorted fashion, frequently relegating Blackness to the position of symbolic annihilation. Within this constructed reality, controlling images exploit and warp the idea of Black people, especially Black women, and naturalize the actual violence done to them. In such a media environment, the celebration of Blackness can rhetorically function as a disruption. Following Hortense Spillers, perhaps we should allow Blackness to “claim [its] monstrosity,” and rewrite what Blackness can become. As such, this prospectus outlines a thesis that investigates how Black queer narratives can create new identities that subvert the idea of what Blackness can be and do. Revisiting the Black oral tradition, and more specifically, what poet Kevin Young calls the storying ability of art, this proposed thesis considers those notions of Blackness which were never meant to survive. Focusing on music, film, and novels, this thesis would investigate Black created popular art to consider its possibility for stuttering the smooth flow of the hegemonic racial order.

They Lie On Me: Black Resistance in Media

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER TWO	24
Who’s Gonna Love Me For Me?	24
<i>OCTAVIA</i>	28
<i>EARTHA</i>	35
<i>BASQUIAT</i>	42
CHAPTER THREE	49
Queer Fabulation: Who Has the Authority to Tell Our Stories	49
<i>Authority Over Storytelling</i>	55
<i>Black Trans Storytelling</i>	57
CHAPTER FOUR.....	70
Iterative Black Storytelling’s Transformative Nature.....	70
<i>Presence and Absence</i>	71
<i>River Solomon’s The Deep</i>	77
<i>Retelling and Rememory</i>	81
<i>Trauma and Disability</i>	89
CHAPTER FIVE	95
Conclusion	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	102

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

During the summer of 2020, thousands were attending Black Lives Matter protests in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning. While there was plenty of shouting, marching, and sitting-in, there was also singing, dancing, and performing, which was facilitated by the organizers who brought portable speakers and microphones. At one protest I attended, an organizer took the microphone and explained that not only were we protesting the death and pain caused to so many Black people, but we were also gathered together during an incredibly difficult moment that brought out our largest vulnerabilities. Valuing this togetherness was and still is important to the way we connect with our communities, communities that are not just hinged upon pain being inflicted. Chate Joseph describes a similar moment at Parliament square in London as, “taking a moment of joy to bask in the beauty of what it means to be Black” (2020). They explain the historical import of joy as an act of resistance that “rings true today” and follows a legacy that was established since slavery and colonialism began (Joseph 2020). As a student studying tactics of modern communication and the ways Blackness is represented and contained, moments of resistance that align themselves with a philosophy of Black optimism are especially important today, as much of mainstream portrayals of Blackness continue their longstanding demonization of Black people.

Much research has demonstrated the news media’s inaccurate and harmful portrayals of Black families (Dixon, 2018), Black women (Gammage, 2015), Black men

(Staples, 2021), and Blackness more generally (Gammage, 2015). There is a long history of silence surrounding Black and queer people that has led to their invisibility in terms of representation (Jordan, 2018). Popular media is not much better as the multiplicity of Blackness becomes contained and smothered through portrayals of Black experiences as limited to criminality or suffering and death (Lu & Steele, 2019). Black criminality is so engrained within our lives that they permeate into the online texts we consume and become embedded within the features (Manzini et al. 2019). Music, film, and the novels often center narratives in which Blackness is seen as a problem in need of a solution. As popular media helps transform how we understand the world (Cheers, 2017; Lu & Steele, 2019), harmful portrayals of Blackness contribute to pernicious perceptions of Black people by audiences. The repeated consumption of Black pain, which finds no remission, can penetrate the subconscious, and create a psychic attachment to Black pain. That psychic or affective attachment is partially demonstrated through the concept of controlling images.

Controlling images of Black women as, “stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas,” is what Patricia Hill Collins argues helps naturalize Black women’s oppression (Collins, 1990). Controlling images don’t simply signify a difference between Black women and the rest of the world, but instead tincture collective understandings of them as inferior and therefore deserving of their mistreatment (Tuttle, 2012). As Tuttle explains Hill Collins’ conception, she notes “controlling images were created to provide ideological justification for the economic and sexual abuse of black women through systems of oppression, such as slavery and Jim Crow laws” (6). While we may believe that these institutions have been officially abolished, controlling images

continue to create ideological support for the idea that Black women are “less than,” and thus deserving of the violence inflicted upon them. As these ideological supports are rhetorically justified, Black women are figured not only as deserving this pain but also capable of withstanding it (Stanton et al. 2017). As Stuart Hall describes it, this system of representation renders raced, classed, gendered oppression a fact of life within society (2003). Collectively, these controlling images rationalize the violence Black women face for their refusal to meet society’s “proper expectations.”

The point, of course, is that there is nothing wrong with Blackness. Black artists have long sung the praises of Blackness. A well-known example is the Black is Beautiful art movement of the 1960s, which aimed to dispel the belief that Blackness was dirty, ugly, or undesirable (V. R. 2018). It may appear that over the last sixty years, representations of blackness could be broader, but often backlash to broadening representations occurs. For instance, Beyoncé’s song “Brown Skinned Girl” has a central message of young, dark-skinned Black girls embracing their natural skin and hair texture. But what does it mean that even now little Black girls must be taught by their elders that they are beautiful because the rest of the world has such a deep ingrained hatred for them? Continuing these projects remains essential because while the progress is slow, the progress is steady. Black people do not give up on promoting and embracing Blackness because there is something special and powerful in loving one’s own culture. Treva Lindsey makes it a point to say that it is not that no one cares about Black women because it erases all of the Black women, girls and femmes who are committed to the work of loving Black women (Lindsey, 2020).

This thesis will examine different representational practices that have used different creative outlets to spread messages embracing Blackness. The project is driven by the following research questions: “how might we best articulate anti-Blackness, and more importantly find moments of resistance within and/or against it;” “Is an embrace of monstrosity a productive response to the subjection Black women face through the portrayal of controlling images;” and “what modes of performance constitute joy as resistance?” It is not enough to combat the idea of Blackness as suffering, death, and pain with joy and happiness because that is not all there is. Blackness should be allowed to flourish in all of its complexity with a full range of emotions, experiences, and that which goes beyond this world. Through an investigation of several different types of media, I argue that exploring Blackness through not just a positive or negative lens, but instead through an infinite framework, opens up possibilities of what Blackness can be. More specifically, and as part of this infinite framework, I explore what embracing monstrosity and nothingness looks like for Black people and why we should not turn away from it.

In what follows, I offer my own brief understanding of the way Blackness and the resistance to anti-Blackness can look. I first detail relevant literature to notions of representation and Black women, then, I offer a consideration of some literature at the intersection of Blackness and monstrosity. I then discuss communication and rhetorical approaches to resistance by reviewing literature on Black joy. While it may seem atypical to divide the prospectus in this way, the nature of my argument—how we portray Black women, how we understand Blackness, as well as various modes to resist anti-Blackness—are all mutually connected. Finally, I outline my three content chapters.

Representation and Black Women

In this section, I detail some important insights about representation, controlling images, and how taking seriously modern representational tactics at play might function as a mode of resistance. The texts selected for this thesis were created by Black Trans women, or nonbinary writers. Here, I draw attention to the work of so-called marginalized peoples in opening up schemes of representation. The tactics used in these texts are not simply negative or positive portrayals, but open up the possibilities of representation writ large, by embracing an infinite framework informed by pushing back on controlling images through the work of monstrosity.

Hortense Spillers and Collins both explain that controlling images are used against Black women to subordinate them as well as to, “mask social relations that affected all women” (Collins, 1990). Spillers specifically talks about how Black women are confined to the stereotypes created about them, without any other knowledge of what Black women can be. They must move through the world by reinterpreting Venus, or the Mammy, or the Jezebel because the signification of the Black woman has been so strongly tied with these ideas (Spillers, 1987). By repurposing the master’s tools to break free of what he had deemed the only possible way of living, Spillers gives Black women agency over their own identities as well (Spillers, 1987). In an interview revisiting “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers said, “the history of black people was something you could use as a note of inspiration, but it was never anything that had anything to do with you,” which I think shows the way that Black people are reduced to an idea or a consumable product that others can look towards in order to know what to aspire not to be. She goes on to explain that she wanted to, “generate a discourse, or a vocabulary that

would not just make it desirable but would necessitate that black women be in the conversation” (Spillers, H., et al. 2007).

Through generating that discourse, she was able to create a vocabulary to speak of Black women’s sexuality in a way that was something other than traumatizing. Opening up these new avenues for exploring what Black women, and even queer people—who she says were very interested in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”—is a way to conceptualize the world not only by considering the history of slavery but also by working with the conceptions that exist today; it is another way of working with and against the archive (Spillers, H., Hartman, S., Griffin, F. J., Eversley, S., & Morgan, J. L. 2007). The work of Black women in working with and against this archive is meaningful because it foregrounds Black identities that are oftentimes lost in history.

It is almost banal to (correctly) observe today that the labor of Black women usually goes unseen and uncredited. Hartman says in “The Belly of the World” that Black women are the ultimate caregivers, having to put themselves in grave danger with no expectation of reward or reciprocation (Hartman, 2016). It is a care that, “has been produced through violent structures of slavery,” and yet is freely given and at the center of Black making (Hartman, 2016). Alice Walker explains in “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden” that Black mothers, grandmother, and great grandmothers were never given the tools and opportunities to explore all of their possibilities. Their spirituality and creative energy were channeled into the limited options they were given. Walker suggests that we should be looking back to our mother’s garden in order to find our own because Black mothers were able to create and sustain a whole world (Walker, 2000).

Taking the work of Black feminism seriously is good and necessary because it means Black women are being taken care of, and by extension so is everyone else. The devaluation of Black women's work shields society from acknowledging that this is not the way life has to be. Fugitive planning, a term used by Fred Moten to describe working with and against normative proscriptions, becomes a means by which Black people are able to create alternative strategies that center community and make communal living possible (even absent governmental or policy backing). Fugitive planning requires imagination that can see beyond the shackles of this world or can at least formulate the question of "what if we did not?" What if we did not do the work of appeasing the white imagination? What if we did not devalue women's work? What if we did not work? Moten's conceptualization of fugitive planning also contributes to these ideas of turning away from the work that is expected and instead going back to where the work is still Black and alive in the Undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013). He says that the door must remain open, even in the face of destruction, to allow any fugitive the comfort of a place to stay. While planning and acting on the run is a terrifying prospect, when thinking about the ways that the world is structured, Harney and Moten maintain that such agility opens up new horizons (Harney & Moten, 2013).

Taking seriously the work of Black creators centers the way such work combats not just controlling images, but the infinite portrayals of possibility. Christina Sharpe's concept of wake work is central here because as she describes the exploration of Black expression, Sharpe is also depicting, "aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity" (Sharpe, pp. 14, 2016). Catherine Knight Steele's book *Digital*

Black Feminism extends this interpretation by exploring how Black women, , the creators of so much essential technology, have been and through their creativity and ingenuity were able to grow the possibilities of what Black people are capable of doing.

Technological and social changes are so influential to our own lives and concentrating on Black creators' ability to relate with one another is a worthwhile cause. In this thesis I want to extend the works of other Black feminists through an investigation of different mediums and their impact on our culture. . Black feminism has existed outside of the academy since its conceptualization and does not need the academy to justify its existence (Steele, 2021). Instead, I think that this analysis is important because Black feminists do exist within the academy and showcasing the seriousness that it takes to do that criticism greatly influences our ability to circulate and change representational practices. Part of the the infinite framework needed includes an understanding of monstrosity and its relationship to the construction of Black identity.

Monstrosity

Monstrosity is a key component of representational practices as it relates to Blackness. Monstrosity is often at the core of depictions of Blackness as criminal, or as suffering. Here, I am inspired by Christina Sharpe's methodological investigation into Blackness and monstrosity to better apprehend how popular aesthetic performances can joyfully construct Blackness. Investigating the intersection of subjectivity, the gaze, and representation, Sharpe (2010) charts the invention, recreation, and circulation of the Black subject from the Middle Passage to the present. Sharpe, following the intellectual tradition of Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), places the texts she examines "in

conversation with each other to clarify the use of [B]lackness over time, as well as the connections between representations and performances of [B]lackness” (4). Sharpe’s purpose is less to catalogue the obviously monstrous, but more to investigate the “everyday mundane horrors that aren’t acknowledged to be horrors” (3). For Sharpe then, monstrous intimacies—those usually sexualized and racialized relationships constituting modern subjectivity—include “a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous” (3).

Black people have long been portrayed as monstrous and it has led to societal repercussions that both villainize and sanctify them, without ever allowing them to just be. In embracing monstrosity, Blackness is able to reject the presumptions and demands of humanity and civil society as a whole and construct new understandings of how life could be organized. . It is not so much to say that Black people are monsters, but to say that if they were, what would be the problem with that? My project calls back to the idea that Fred Moten (2013) establishes, which is that there was never anything wrong with Blackness. We should not be trying to fix it. The first step in that is to allow Blackness to be anything and everything. And the next step would be to allow Blackness to be nothing and revel in that nothingness. Currently, and maybe always, Blackness is thought of as having no life. Calvin Warren (2018) explains that “Black Lives Matter,” forces us to contend with the question of what a Black life would look like in an antiblack world. There is no coherence between Blackness and life so therefore Blackness must be signified as nothing, that which exists outside, that which is monstrous.

Art can help us break free from fixed positions, or controlling images, through the embodiment of the nonhuman as monstrous. Jan-Therese Mendes points to two Black Canadian artists whose figures “invest in their own extraterrestriality or monstrosity,” and finds interest in the fact that these subjects do not seek recognition into a liberal human citizenry (Mendes, 2021). Both the Afro-Astronauts in Camille Turner’s *The Final Frontier* and Riya Jama’s digital collage depicting Black Muslim women as monsters, cyborgs, and aliens that Mendes explores seem to both describe a “strange excess,” an excess with which Black people are intimately familiar (Mendes, 2021). Instead of saying that these artistic representations are inherently monstrous, Mendes explains that the art being examined is refusing to relinquish Blackness in spite of the social costs. This is important to my understanding of Blackness because these representations of Blackness which become stranger and outside of mainstream frames of understanding, open up the infinite possibilities of being and of representation (Mendes, 2021).

One of the best examples of monstrosity being repurposed is within “Monster” by Kanye West and featuring Bon Iver, Rick Ross, Jay Z, and Nicki Minaj. The music video was banned from MTV for being incredibly disturbing—its monstrosity was seen as too much. Joseph Winters examines how the monster is reimagined within hip-hop and reggae’s lyrics, sound, and visuals through music videos (Winters, 2017). Nicki Minaj’s verse is especially compelling to this analysis because it provides an analysis of the intersection between Blackness and womanhood. Nicki has several alter egos and, in this song, she plays Roman Zalanski in opposition to Barbie to contrast between these different personalities she could embody. Winters makes it a point to note that the monster, “can open us up to the monstrosities and contradictions that mark our

interactions with the world” (Winters, 2017). Nicki herself saw this as her breakout role and noted that she felt she could be true to herself while performing this song. She mentions in the song that her critics often say that she is “fake” and not a true rapper but throws it back in their faces by saying that she does not care because she is still successful and making money. What’s interesting to me is that even though she is playing a monster among other personas in the song she still felt like she was free to be herself within the song which could mean that the figure of the monster allows for an unshackling from society’s standards.

Black women, particularly those who are trans and queer, having agency over the narratives that are being forwarded about them is still an important factor when discussing these different kinds of representations. What is so powerful about the monster being used by Black people is not just the act of moving outside of humanity’s framework, but that it was their choice to place themselves within the monstrous. These representations will affect how the rest of society views people. While there have been some Black artists and writers who have received backlash from their own community for their representation of Black people, such as Zora Neale Hurston or Jean-Michel Basquiat, I think that there is a level of intention that must be regarded when examining these works. Moya Bailey discusses the way marginalized groups creating media by and for themselves holds the potential to be a liberatory act because of its ability to, “engender different outcomes for marginalized groups, and the processes by which they are created build networks” (Bailey, 2016). Works such *Freeing Ourselves: A Guide to Health*, a zine created by The Brown Bois Project to advocate for healthier and safer outcomes regarding their own bodies, is an important example because it chooses to

decenter what would be considered “healthy” or “normal” by a cis white society and instead looks at what marginalized bodies could and do look like (Bailey, 2016).

In short, these scholars point to monstrosity as another way of thinking about the infinite possibilities in representing blackness, and in pushing back against controlling images. I will employ these concepts to better explain both the relationship between Blackness and monstrosity. Monstrous representation is one tactic for such resistance, another approach—one which I will connect with monstrosity in later chapters—is in the concept of Black joy.

Black Joy

From social media, to popular press, to academic inquiry, Black joy has been considered a strong tonic to the disease of anti-Blackness. The study of Black joy has been used as a challenging lens to the onslaught of imagery circulated of Black people dying. Chantae Joseph’s popular Vogue essay explains that in the face of being told that we are “too loud” and “too different,” the act of experiencing unbridled joy is a form rebellion. For Joseph, joy as rebellion can be traced through the history of enslavement, but the study of Black joy from a scholarly perspective is certainly not without precedent (Joseph et al., 2020). Investigating social media practices across multiple platforms, Catherine Knight Steele and Jessica Lu describe how the hashtag #CarefreeBlackKid became a way for Black Vine users to share Black children being free of the pain that the world has so regularly pushed on them (Lu & Steele, 2019). Many videos and images of police brutality have been circulated online with different justifications attached to them. Some suggest white people must be confronted with the violence that Black people face;

some circulate it as part of the 24-hour news cycle; and most gruesomely, some spread the videos around because of outright racism and a perverse pleasure in witnessing Black pain of life (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Lu & Steele, 2019). In their own words, “The joyful posts shared via these hashtags celebrate Black life in ways that challenge mainstream media’s attempts to fix Black people and Black life into a position of death and despair” (Lu & Steele, 2019).

All of these, speak to a kind of Black joy that is more complex than what has been presented through media portrayals. Finding freedom outside the frame of controlling images, requires work that might not always feel beautiful or happy, but it does create a significant shift in fostering different types of joy in Black communities. A recent example is Graciela Mochkofsky’s article, “How Does New York City’s Latinx Community See Itself?” in which she highlights the Netflix show “Siempre Bruja” (Mochkofsky, 2021). As she explains, the show was marketed as telling the story of a “strong Black woman with magical powers,” but what it ends up centering is the romance of an enslaved woman and the master’s son (Mochkofsky, 2021). She transports herself to 2019 where she learns that Black people are free but decides to return to her century to be with her captor. Both the show and the book it is based on are written and led by a team of non-Black producers, who purport to know what Black people want to see as on screen while still playing into their own fantasies of white enjoyment. Mochkofsky does not stop there, but instead explains that the show inspired Djali Brown-Cepeda, a Black Dominican woman, to seek out her own Black Latinidad representation by starting an Instagram account, called Nuevayorkinos, that would allow “La gente of New York City,” to tell their own stories (Mochkofsky, 2021). Brown-Cepeda’s tactics on Instagram

demonstrate that “even hardship is part of a joyful narrative” (Mochkofsky, 2021). This is not to romanticize the struggles of Black and people of color, but instead to say that representative tactics shape how joy is understood. Controlling images may limit what modes of Black joy are valued, but joy is broader in scope than its current theorization and popular understandings.

This thesis will broaden the scope of literature on Black joy to incorporate those aspects of joy that emphasize whether being human is desirable, and what possibilities lie outside of humanity. Here, Black joy is coupled with monstrosity to open up the infinite portrayals of Blackness. Lu and Steele’s study of Black joy “assert Black people as fully human,” through the full range of emotions that they are capable of experiencing (Lu & Steele, 2019). In this way, adding monstrosity to the study of Black joy is not an abdication, but rather an embrace of the possibilities of being within Blackness. In this manner, scholars can move past the validation of Black people as part of humanity, by incorporating the work of Afrofuturists and the appeal of living outside of the category of Man, beyond simple distinctions between “Man” and monster (Weheliye, 2014). More interesting for me, is to think of the various representational tactics that carve out space outside of that white humanity, while simultaneously widening the categorizations assigned to Blackness, and to Black joy.

Part of that broadening emphasizes the potential representations of Black life to be considered through mysticism. Seeking a Blackness unencumbered by the afropessimist conception of nonbeing, Fred Moten offers a Blackness without ontology. Calvin Warren re-theorizes this exchange through what he calls Black mysticism. Instead of following Moten in only thinking of Blackness without ontology, Warren broadens the

tactic. Warren sees Black mysticism as attempting to abandon ontology altogether and discusses the idea of a “blackness that precedes anti-blackness” (Warren, 2017). I think the mystic aspect of Blackness, as Warren and Moten would discuss it, is its ability to stay on the horizon and evade capture. Warren concludes by explaining that the impossibility of escape from ontology enlivens Moten’s text, and in the same way I think that this impossibility enlivens all Black joy because in our constant pursuit we are able to find more creative and imaginative ways to resist capture.

Black mysticism and Black joy together demonstrate that media can be involved in opening up the infinite possibilities of representation. This thesis studies three mediated texts that broaden those possibilities by meditating on Black joy through the possibilities entailed in monstrosity. That is, Blackness without ontology is not predicated on joy as something only experienced as pleasure. Black joy is mediated through the monstrous, it is made anew, re-presented, and moved in these locales. That undertaking is predicated on the annihilation and recomposition of ontology entailed in representing Blackness in its infinite possibilities.

Another way that we can understand Blackness through infinite possibility is Sylvia Wynter’s interruption of Man by, “dwelling in the monstrosity of the flesh,” and, “disfigure[ing] the centrality of Man as the sign for the human” (Weheliye, 2014). Wynter’s point is to emphasize the monstrous as the constitutional opposite for the human, and moving betwixt and between those dialectics expands the way Blackness is figured through controlling images. Alexander Weheliye uses Sylvia Wynter’s frame of *habeus viscus* to both warn against juridical humanity and to “emancipate the true potentiality that rests in those subjects” (Weheliye, 2014). I think that where Warren

would disagree is in the idea that we should stake claim in subjecthood to begin with, because the very act of being is hinged upon anti-Blackness. Through this study, I “dwell in the monstrosity of the flesh” by considering how being is represented in three popular media texts. More specifically, I interrogate the tactics used within these texts to explore Blackness as something outside of Man, to analyze what possibilities each of these texts open up and what is foreclosed.

There is no perfect way to understand Blackness and that is not what I am trying to create or discover here. What should be taken away from this thesis is that Blackness is complicated and entangled with the world in both sacred and profane ways. The complexities that lie between them are obscured by controlling images. Indeed, controlling narratives of criminality or other ways of articulating antiBlackness are often made into spectacularized violence, in which Blackness is only seen in relationship to such violence. Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* analyzes the quotidian or “gentler forms” of violence that slaves were subjected to and “illuminated the terror of the mundane” (Hartman, 2010). *Scenes of Subjection* offers insight into the enjoyment that whites devised from Black suffering and the anxieties that were present when Black people began to fight for their inclusion into social and political life (Hartman, 2010). Hartman argues that for those who enslaved people, there was also an obsession with “black enjoyment” that was forced upon Black people in an almost benevolent fashion, but which was still an exercise of power, so that slaves both resented and were forced to take the opportunity to enjoy themselves anyways (Hartman, 2010). These forced choices illuminate the way that the media we consume also creates a forced choice of what we are able to enjoy, and for whom that enjoyment is devised.

Yet, tactics to resist such forced binaries remain. Hartman suggests that historical retelling, critical fabulation, is one such act, especially for those who have been lost to history in “Venus in Two Acts” (Hartman, 2008). Through the practice of critical fabulation Hartman reconstructs the lives of two Black girls who were murdered on a slave ship, even though there are only scraps of archival evidence to suggest who they were or could have been (Hartman, 2008). That tactic is not without consequences. Hartman presses this point, noting that she must deal with the question of whether or not speaking these stories into existence is another instantiation of violence through the archive. Or, if the story is a form of redress in its attempt to tell their impossible stories. What critical fabulation allows is the possibility to imagine “what cannot be verified” through a narrative of what could or might have been (Hartman, 2008).

Critical fabulation is a tactic, a way to invent the infinite possibilities of Blackness, whilst understanding the author’s, or in this case, the critic’s, role in the retelling.. “If this story of Venus has any value at all it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to her,” writes Hartman (Hartman, 2008). The key to this critical fabulation is not to be as impartial as possible, but instead to understand that our own experiences will always paint what those subjects become within the archive (Hartman, 2008). Similarly, when we begin to tell stories of elsewhere or distant futures or what could be, we cannot distance ourselves from the world that we know. Instead, we must try to move through the knowledge we have already acquired. When Blackness is designed as otherwise, it is still within the confines of what we can understand and what we have seen as possibility.

At first glance, it may seem as though the discussion of Blackness as existing elsewhere does not meld well with the idea of Black joy. But at root, both rest on representative tactics that attempt to push back at controlling images. These tactics, from “our mother’s gardens,” contest the notion that simple affirmation opens up representational practices (e.g., that simply having more and different types of representations will help), while also offering a vision of being elsewhere that broadens how Blackness can be, what joys can be felt and by whom. In other words, while Black joy at first looks like an effort to affirm oneself and one’s community within an almost neoliberal enterprise, Black joy can be much more than simple understandings of pleasure or happiness. Black joy may also function as an acknowledgement that civil society has failed to provide for the humanity of Black people, so they have to do invent the possibilities of joy themselves. Through various representational tactics—allusion, monstrosity, critical fabulation, and storying—the three texts under study challenge controlling images, but may also participate in such stereotypical representations. In the last section, I detail the three content chapters that I believe will substantiate my investigation into Blackness as I consider cinema, Afrofuturist literature, and song.

Preview of Chapters

In my first content chapter, I discuss the representational tactics at play in Jamila Woods’ music. I will analyze three of her songs and their lyrics and composition, focusing most closely on Woods’ use of allusion. She is a singer/songwriter in the R&B, Hip Hop, and neo-soul genre of music and uses allusions to childhood nursery rhymes, great Black women in history, and her own personal history as a queer Black woman

from Chicago in order to express her love for Blackness as well as criticizing hegemonic white standards that exist. “Hip Hop was and still is a way to construct knowledge and find a way to release and come to terms with anger, frustration, hate, social revolutionary worldviews, the questioning of authority, and rebellion,” writes Monica Miller et al. in order to explain the history and significance that Hip Hop still has on the world (Miller, Hodge, Coleman, Jeffrey; and Chaney 2014). Hip hop is not alone in this capacity.

Jasmine Hines reflects on Nina Simone and Janelle Monae’s ability to advocate for Black feminism through their musicality (Hines, 2020). She emphasizes that she chose these two artists from different generations who were both very outspoken and popular in their mainstream success (Hines, 2020). I wish to highlight Jamila Woods’ work for similar reasons; Woods’ work drawing upon many Black activists who she found inspiring and alluding to the work they do being one way to connect the past, present, and future. Hines explains that the work that Simone and Monae do through their social commentary could give more tools and insight to educators who wish to motivate Black girls within music programs (Hines, 2020). I think that with this study I wish to highlight not only the ways that Woods’ work could be used within a musical education setting but the outreach that it is able to obtain through her lyrics and the ability to seek out those references individually through platforms like Genius and other interviews.

In my second content chapter, I analyze the short film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* as a piece of media that is engaged in critical fabulation. The film stories the Stonewall riots from the perspective of a Black trans woman. This chapter discusses the tactics in the film that story history in inventive ways, interrogating how critical fabulation and queer iconicity can affect the way we view history, as well as a consideration to the way

we choose to go about that criticism in context to Black trans people's work. Stephen Prince explains that the unique aspect of film is that it has a different relationship to the signifier-signified relationship, which can be modified with iconicity or semiotic coding that audiences would be able to recognize or interpret through visual meaning and communication (Prince, 1993). *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* takes iconic film and reference photographs of Marsha P. Johnson that many in the queer community would recognize and then plays upon those images in order to fill in the gaps of what would be missing in our historical imagination.

Shifting our perspective on history through fabulated narrative can both benefit Black trans and queer people by providing an agency over a lost history that could give insight into what the world could have been like or what changes could happen now. At the same time, without remedying the iconic status of the Stonewall riots, to paint a fuller picture of what was and could have been, this film is working against the archive without engaging with it first. The ways Black trans women relate to their history and art is complicated because so much of it is lost or was never written about in the first place. Black trans women are often punished more harshly in comparison to others' explorations of identity. Critical fabulation is not without considerable risk, even as an artistic endeavor. Kevin Young's concept of storying is important to the analysis of this film because Blackness cannot be considered purely through authenticity, in the same way that civil society is so invested with the Truth (Young, 2012). Playing with the truth in order to survive and to create Black people's own truth is essential to creating life outside the boundaries. Critical fabulation is significant in that in many cases the historical and scientific "facts" of reality are used to further subjugate (Young, 2012). In

this way Tourmaline, the director of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, is able to both play with the facts of reality and insert her own lived experience onto the screen. The tactics of the film paint a fuller picture of what Black trans life is or could mean, without necessarily getting every single historical detail correct.

In my third content chapter, I analyze Rivers Solomon's novel *The Deep* as an Afrofuturistic novel that attempts to create worlds within our world. This world-making, I argue, could challenge our conceptions of both what it means to be Black and create community. Similar to Hines, I chose Solomon because they are a contemporary writer who is influenced heavily by authors like Octavia Butler, a founder of Black sci-fi. Both authors are playing with these "altered bodies-hybrid multi-species" characters, as Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating describe Butler's creation in an interview (Mehaffy & Keating, 2001). Not only is Butler designing these otherworldly creatures, but she is also creating for them a kind of sexuality or sexiness that many times are denied to Black people. Octavia Butler describes the way that one of her characters seemed to lose a perceived sexiness that she had envisioned for him once she tried to create a body for him, that the sexiness came from his lack of bodiliness (Mehaffy & Keating, 2001).

The exploration of Black queer and feminine sexuality's ability to exist through "agentive and embodied subjects" is important because it has a "capacity for chaos and disorder," as Tiffany King discusses in her dissertation "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes" (King, 2013). When we're discussing Black sexuality, it can be difficult to parse through questions of agency in relation to anti-Blackness, but the ability to, "live outside of settler colonialism and slavery's property-

making mandate,” is well explored within the narratives of Butler and Solomon (King, 2013). One review of *The Deep* maintains that their use of mer-beings whose gender and sexuality exploration are, “appropriate given their blend of humans and fish, land and sea, their setting a perfect place to explore gender and sexual flexibility in an Afro-futurist frame” (Nies, 2021). The premise of the book is based on clipping.’s song “The Deep,” which is an homage to Drexciya’s mythical universe. The world Solomon creates is one where the pregnant women who were kidnapped onto slave ships and thrown overboard adapted to the ocean and became mer-people that must pass along the memory of where their ancestors come from. This tactic of world-making and storying is useful in considering how to open up Black joy beyond simplistic understandings, where pain, desire, memory, and community all become elements of inventing the experiences of Black joy.

My concluding chapter will briefly summarize the previous chapters and explain how a simultaneous investigation of these works of art help us better apprehend Blackness and representations of Blackness. There, I argue that all three of these media are able to bring forth new understandings of how, where, and why Blackness can escape capture or controlling images and instead exist on its own as something new and out there. Taking seriously the work of Black feminists and queer authors is imperative to the work that is being done in communication studies. If it is not taken seriously and deeply though then we are leaving out core conversations that would offer valuable insight into the way that we should be approaching our study and knowledge production.

CHAPTER TWO

Who's Gonna Love Me For Me?

Hip-hop was once thought of as a passing fad but has since proven its endurance and iconicity within our current society (Kennedy, 2017). It has been almost five decades since hip-hop first hit the music scene and the popularity of these genres is still going strong. According to Billboard since 2017 R&B and hip-hop dominate the charts and have come to define contemporary popular music (Billboard Staff, 2021). Hip-hop has even transcended the “music genre” classification and become better understood as a full movement through which people find community and are able to speak their truth (Flores, 2012).

The truths expressed in this artistic community are frequently counterhegemonic in orientation and offer opportunities to image a better world. Tricia Rose describes rap music's use of language and music as a means to, “mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion,” and continues on by explaining that it is not only a cultural form that is pleasurable but also one where, “oppositional transcripts, or the ‘unofficial truths’ are developed” (Rose, 1994, p. 99). Rose uses James C. Scott's concept of a hidden transcript to describe rap music's ability to critique dominant structures and, “create alternative codes that invert stigmas” (Scott, 1990, p. xiii). Scott argues that hidden transcripts may be expressed openly, but in a “disguised manner” such as with, “rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theater of the powerless,” which can then be used to obtain a better understanding of subordinate groups' fugitive planning

(Scott, 1990, p. xiii). Unfortunately, and as with much of Black artistry, these gifts are often appropriated by larger cultures.

The appropriation of Black music displays both the theft of Black culture but also the resilience of the Black community in its ability to allow culture to flourish despite pushback. Perry A. Hall explores the appropriation of Black music and how the absorption of “Black culture does not lead to comparable embrace of Black culture at the human level” (Hall et al., 1997, p. 32). Hall centers jazz as an example of the cooptation of Black music leading to a dilution of culture and loss of connection to Blackness. Hall explains that as jazz was being appropriated by white icons, Black bands turned inwards and were eventually revitalized by all-Black audiences. Black music, Hall explains, continuously finds innovative ways to represent Black communality, even when dominant cultures try to capture its beauty (1997). In this way, the cultural theft of Black music is reminiscent of Bitzer’s conception of constraint in the notion of the rhetorical situation (1997). While some understand constraint merely as the contouring of the limits of a rhetorical response, constraint also creates innovation, by calling for intentional counterreactions to constraint (Palczewski, et. al., 2016).

The appropriation of Black music and culture continuously demonstrates the attraction that non-Black audiences have to Black culture, while continuing to reject Black people. Greg Tate’s 2003 collection of essays, *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture*, is titled as such owing to his mother’s observation of the phenomenon of white cultural theft of Black culture within a framework that remained openly hostile to Black people. As Tate explains that it is not just the irony of white America’s appropriation but also, “the way They have always tried

to erase the Black presence from whatever Black thing They took a shine to: jazz, blues, rock and roll, doo-wop, swingdancing, cornrowing, antidisimination politics (sic), attacking Dead Men, you name it” (Tate, 2003, pp. 3). As both Hall and Tate observe, the appropriation of Black culture is not a way to celebrate and build upon connections with Black folks, but instead a way to dilute and integrate the most palatable parts for white enjoyment.

While Tate rightly opens with an homage to the influence of his mother, Black women’s labor is frequently devalued. Catherine Knight Steele points to the cooption of Black women’s labor and the watering down of their ideas by using the example of the phrase listen to Black women as a way to reduce Black women’s radical work to “hashtagable lines” (Steele, 2021, p. 3). This reduction of radical work flattens the wide experiences that Black women bring to the table. Steele places herself within the same Black feminist tradition as Brittney C. Cooper by explicitly choosing to take Black women’s work seriously. More explicitly, Steele explains the importance placed on the need to, “acknowledge, appreciate, struggle with, disagree with, sit with and question” (Cooper 2017, as cited in Steele, 2021). Cooper describes this kind of embodied discourse as a form of textual activism through which Black women demand their inclusion. Given the long-standing exclusion of most Black women from larger public conversations, Cooper explains this embodied discourse as Black women inserting themselves into the texts they write, which is how we are able to open up a space to reflect on how best to find liberation (Cooper, 2017). A central aspect of this thesis emphasizes the importance of this political move to the way Black women and Black queers choose to advocate for themselves and find community within each other. This dual advocacy

and community combination is especially vital as it may be the only way we will be able to survive.

This thesis is at least partially motivated by the questions Treva Lindsey provocatively asks when she ponders, “why are Black women so often relegated to the margins” (Lindsey, 2020)? The inexplicability of anti-Black violence and exclusion are part and parcel of white supremacy’s continued persistence. Even with more Americans becoming supposedly open to racial integration and immigration, white supremacy still manages to create new tactics which are able to push its agenda into mainstream dialogue. As Frank B. Wilderson explains, the Black exists within a “paradigm of gratuitous violence” which has no reason or remission. Within this culture of violence, however, remains the need to maintain-even in the face of unyielding oppression. As Lindsey reminds us, “When someone says no one cares about Black women and girls, I tend to reply, ‘we all we got’” (Lindsey, 2020). As such, for many Black women, girls, and femmes’ survival, the work of other Black women, girls and femmes is all we got.

The affirmation of Black social life is the centerpiece of this thesis given its importance as a mode of resistance. Resistance against oppression need not always look like armed conflict, or the passage of political rights, but can also be found in through a process of life-making. As Amanda Brown explains, that process can occur through the revisioning of existence and living (Brown, 2021). Brown defines life-making as, “Black social life that occurs in the (under)Commons, where living is an act of refusal to white supremacist patriarchy, where Black queer/trans folks find joy, and where their various identifications are not limited to or determined by normative configurations of binary gender” (Brown, 2021, p. 6). In the remainder of this chapter, I trace how the music of

Jamila Woods’ draws upon a tradition of Black women freedom fighters. In so doing, I attempt to examine, better apprehend, and explain how this enunciation of Black affirmation can function resistantly.

Jamila Woods is a singer, songwriter, and poet from Chicago whose work is centered around Black feminism and affirmation of the self. While her work has been much discussed for its reference to “Blackgirlmagic,” this chapter considers her second album (Jordan-Zachary and Harris, 2019). As I explain, her music’s usage of embodied discourse affords the opportunity to write and perform her experiences in a fashion that appears to both inspire and be inspired by Black people. Jamila Woods also uses her abilities as an advocate in her community by teaching students about poetry as the Associate Artistic Director of Young Chicago Authors (Wallace, 2019).

LEGACY! LEGACY! is Woods’ second studio album and she describes it as a meditation on 12 different Black artists, their understanding of the world, and how that shapes her own reality. Below I will be analyzing three songs off the album in order to discuss the different strategies that Jamila Woods undertakes when she calls forth the names of the Black artists that inspired her.

OCTAVIA

Octavia Butler

“OCTAVIA” is the eleventh track within Woods’ album, but I start my analysis by discussing the woman who inspired the song owing to the song’s central concern of an embodied discourse both in form and content. This song is about the language that Black people were able to steal and repurpose in order to create their own narratives. Jamila

Woods explains in an interview about the album that she was “fascinated by how they taught themselves how to write and read” (Anderson, 2019). Woods later traced that fascination across a cultural and historical inquiry before land on Octavia Butler, a prolific Black science-fiction author whose influence spans far beyond the sci-fi genre by reconfiguring what themes and ideas novels explored (Anderson, 2019).

Octavia Butler’s influence has shaped not only numerous cultural genres, but remains hugely influential in the study and progression of the science fiction genre. Butler referred to herself as a writer, not simply a science fiction writer, because she wanted to escape the assumptions people had about science fiction as a genre, namely that it was not literature, immature, and simplistic in nature (Fast Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction, 2018). Having said that, her impact is most apparent in that genre, as evidenced by large number of authors who cite her as an inspiration, but also the depth of guidance her work afforded so many (Temple, 2019). Woods’ influence ultimately transformed the genre through the inclusion of identities and the destabilization of those very conceptions through her creations.

Butler also said that she does not aim to desensitize her audience but instead writes her characters, who are often Black women, to believe they have no limitations (Fast Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction, 2018). Instead of exploring strange and odd creations that many popular science fiction authors write about, she utilized the power of this genre in order to intimately investigate the lives of her Black characters. During a science fiction panel, Butler asked the other panelists why there are no Black characters within the books they write, and one author responded, “that blacks were not needed because aliens were present” (James, 2015). While this may seem like an

outdated logic, the usage of aliens within science fiction works as black-coded characters is still a common occurrence in media today. Adilifu Nama discusses how black-coded aliens, such as Jar Jar Binks within the Star Wars prequel trilogy, are used to perpetuate a white supremacist ideology in worlds that are supposed to be understood as post-racial (Nama, 2008).

All of this to say that Octavia Butler had uniquely changed the sci-fi scene and was challenging dominant ideology through her storytelling practices. Butler does not choose to shy away from race, gender, or disability by creating utopian or dystopian societies that are void of these identity categories, but instead chooses to challenge them headfirst in order to create a rich other world. She challenged our idea of Truth and how it was deployed by dominant structures by using the endless possibilities that were afforded within the genre. With the context of Butler's work and mission within her own writing, we can discuss how "OCTAVIA" by Jamila Woods builds upon and transforms some of Butler's ideas and writing.

Woods' "OCTAVIA"

Within this section I will be talking about Jamila Woods' interpretation of Octavia Butler's words and the context through which she weaves this narrative. Woods' approach to each of her songs does not just lift ideas from the icons that she is inspired by but instead holds a conversation with them. Within "OCTAVIA" important themes include passing on the torch of knowledge production from one generation to the next and an appreciation for the work that was done by those who came before us. I will argue that this demonstrates a form of hapticality as Moten defines it, a way to feel through

others which has no imitation. The care that is felt between Black people, especially Black queer people, is demonstrated through a serious look at the feminist texts that are able to survive and or be revitalized.

Jamila Woods starts off “OCTAVIA” with the line “Don’t ever let a textbook scare you/ You the missing piece, OG technology, they stole you,” and this is already a direct reference to Octavia Butler’s attempt to disrupt history and science (Woods, 2019, track 11). Butler stated she wanted to work against social Darwinism and the idea that, “they must be poor because of their genes,” and one way she manages to challenge these ideas is by creating characters who are intimately aware of and want to obtain knowledge about their bodies while still understanding that the lived reality of their situation will determine their place in society (Mehaffy & Keating, 2001, pp. 57). This comes back to her idea of creating characters that believe they have no limitations. A good example of this would be Lauren Olamina, the main character in Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower*, because she is a Black disabled woman whose disability affects the narrative considerably in ways that are not commonly explored within ablenormative stories. Therí A. Pickens criticizes scholars who ignore Lauren’s syndrome by dismissing it as a delusion that she has created, but within the plot itself we realize that Lauren’s grappling with whether or not her disability is a delusion is important to the danger she must face. Pickens concludes similarly to Lauren that even if her syndrome is a delusion or all in her head it, “does not mean it is not real, or really affecting the action of the novel” (Pickens, 2015, pp. 75). Woods is drawing from an idea that the history and science that is written about Black women’s health and bodies is not the ‘truth’ but is instead a powerful tool that will be used and abused by dominant groups as a justification for staying in power.

Catherine Knight Steele also discusses Black women’s relationship to technology within Digital Black Feminism and agrees with Woods and says, “Black women were core users and creators of technology during the antebellum period in the U.S. but remain mostly absent in the written record. The master narrative does not grant space to Black women’s words or document Black women’s creativity” (Steele, 2022, pp. 24). In “OCTAVIA”, Jamila Woods is acknowledging the fact that historically, Black women’s labor has been undervalued or stolen. However, at the same time, she affirms Black women’s place within the world. By describing Black women as the missing piece, I think that Woods is affirming their place in revolutionary thinking. The next lines that follow, “Don’t ever let ‘em knock the way you talk/The language you evolve your natural genius,” could be interpreted as a celebration of AAVE and Black women’s ingenuity as it exists outside of the normative understanding of knowledge production. Steele cites Patricia Hill Collins’ approach to Black women’s oppression by centering the idea of, “reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks by examining the work of Black women who are not considered intellectuals” (Collins, 2009, as cited in Steele, 2021, pp. 55).

Moving into the chorus provides an example of how Woods both in content and form is able to discuss this framework of reinterpretation and repurposing of text.

*I'm the truth, I am a fact
They lie on me, I have to laugh
I write it down, it happens next
So be it, see to it
(Their science is a-lyin' on me and you
That don't make it true)(Woods, 2019, track 11)*

In asserting herself as the truth or a fact I think that Jamila Woods is writing herself into existence. Even though she acknowledges that history ‘lies,’ or erases, Black women she can laugh because in creating this music she creates herself an undeniable truth. The last line of the chorus reasserts the idea that Octavia Butler demonstrated in pointing out that science as a tool used by white supremacy does not create a solidified truth. It is both reinterpreting Butler and referencing Butler’s ability to predict our future given that she made the news when many realized that Parable of the Talents predicted Donald Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan (Caldwell, 2016). Woods is also including the Black listener within this line by saying that their science is lying on “me and you,” which creates a communal feeling that the rest of the album embodies. This means that not only can Jamila Woods or Octavia Butler write Blackness into being, but the Black audience has this power as well. In obtaining this power, Black audiences are able to create their own interpretation of survival by living through these works.

Alexis Gumbs discusses the importance of Black feminist texts and says, “We were never meant to survive. Memory is the last(ing) danger. And when these dangerous words survive, they survive in writing” (Gumbs, 2010, pp. 18). She is writing about Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alexis DeVeaux and Barbara Smith and their ability as Black lesbian and bisexual feminists to create a poetic intervention that could ‘break a space’ which could provide a counter-narrative to what it means to survive. Jamila Woods is similarly doing the work of writing to survive but she is lending her words in order to allow other Black women to survive as well.

Woods acknowledges that writing was a dangerous practice that slaves learned by risking their lives, knowing that if they were caught it could mean death. “It used to be

the worst crime to write a line,” is the beginning of the second verse which goes on to express gratitude for the inheritance of Black writing (Woods, 2019, track 11). She references the Montgomery bus boycotts and marches of the civil rights movement as torches that were passed on. Meanwhile, “We are a precious creation, our lack has no imitation” is the last line of this verse and it wraps up an idea that underlies the entire song which is that there is something about Blackness, about being Black together, that cannot be stolen (Woods, 2019, track 11). Even when history writes Blackness out, even when they lie on us, there are still people who are doing the work and cultivating a place, “where the revolution is still black, still strong” (Moten & Harney, 2013, pp. 26). Specifically, she is referencing a Black feminist tradition by mentioning, “a seat on a bus,” which is a callback to her first single “Blk Girl Soldier” which mentions Rosa Parks as one of the freedom fighters who ‘taught us how to fight’. These last lines reference a quality of Blackness that is incomparable to anything else, something that is almost frightening in its inability to be captured. Looking back on a history of revolution that can only be passed on but could never be replicated by others, I think that Woods streamlines an emotion to her Black audience which is able to express the connection and bond that is forged through this history.

The lessons that Woods is referencing are not just typical protest strategies like shouting, marching, and sitting-in, but also writing, singing, and performing. Even when they ‘try to mimic our greatness’ there is something about Blackness that is precious. This expression of care for Blackness that Jamila demonstrates in her music is demonstrative of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe as hapitcality. When we think of the connections that are being made through texts to try and unite Black people

together there is a frightening amount of emotion bounding us together because, again, we were never meant to survive. Blackness has no imitation and therefore no possibility for capture and because hapitcality, the feeling of the undercommons, is a love for and as the shipped we are able to create these breaks wherein Blackness is celebrated as a coming together.

“EARTHA”

Within this section I will be describing Woods’ analysis of Black interpersonal relationships as described in the song “EARTHA”. Within the song she regularly references interviews that Eartha Kitt was part of but also branches off to question her own relationship with Kitt’s motto of not compromising herself for anyone. This song is able to examine how Black people can affirm themselves through self-love but also set boundaries on who has access to their person. I think this is important because while we may be preaching self-love it may be difficult to navigate how you might begin to center yourself.

“EARTHA” is the sixth track off LEGACY! LEGACY and Jamila Woods said that when she was writing this song, she saw Eartha Kitt as her guardian angel who could advise her about love and relationships (Anderson, 2019). This song is inspired largely by a clip from the interview in All By Myself: The Eartha Kitt Story where an interviewer is repeatedly asking Eartha Kitt whether she would be willing to compromise in a relationship with a man to which Kitt laughs in his face (1982).

To Woods, both the idea of a relationship, whether romantic or not, needing to be earned and having an uncompromising attitude would change the way you move through life.

Jamila Woods said in the process for writing this song she really enjoyed the hypnotic quality of the drums because she was able to “talk [her] shit and not give any fucks about what anyone thinks,” which was a similar feeling she noticed in the way Eartha Kitt speaks (VICE News, 2019). This ability to center oneself in their relationship to the world is the overarching theme to this song, even though it does have references to a romantic relationship, I think that its ability to be interpreted as an uncompromising approach to the world is what gives it so much power.

Eartha

Eartha Kitt was an actress, singer, dancer, and activist who is seen as both a Black and queer icon. Her career flourished as she took on roles on Broadway, recorded well known classic songs, and played Catwoman in the third season of Batman (1966 Batman Pages). When describing her career there is always an interlude where one has to describe “The White House Incident” because it had such a lasting and powerful impact on her career in the United States. Eartha Kitt was presented in the press as a disruptive figure when she attended a “Women Doer’s Luncheon” that was being hosted by Lady Byrd Johnson. Kitt brought attention to the fact that this luncheon was not focused on the issue at hand which was Juvenile Delinquency in the Streets of America and she brought attention to what she had heard from boys and men about their reluctance and disinterest to fight in the Vietnam War. Her remarks were centered around the fact that children

were not just rebelling to rebel, and that sending children to war is what directly was causing them to turn to drugs. Press coverage of the event focused on Kitt making Lady Byrd Johnson cry, a direct manipulation of the event because Johnson wrote in her diary, “I did not have tears in my eyes as another paper said” (unladylike, 2021). The story was manipulated over and over to paint Eartha Kitt as an aggressive, angry Black woman who spoke out of turn, even though she raised her hand and was given turn to speak. In an interview reflecting on the event Eartha Kitt explained that she did not realize her blacklisting in America had begun until she was contacted by The New York Times and told that the CIA had a dossier on her which depicted her as a nymphomaniac and a bitch. In that same interview she says, “What has that got to do with the CIA if I was?” which was such a perfect response because she did not confirm or deny her sexuality but instead rejected the very idea that her sex life needed to be under investigation (Eartha Kitt: The White House Incident, 2014).

Woods’ Eartha

This assertion of agency that she was unyielding in is the kind of energy that Jamila Woods is tapping into within the song “EARTHA”. Woods said that repetition was very important in this song because it mirrors the way that an unhealthy relationship can become repetitive in that you find yourself having the same conversations (VICE News, 2019). Eartha Kitt deals with this frequently, wherein she is asked repeatedly by interviewers the same question because she does not provide the comfortable response that she was hoping for, but she stands her ground anyway. Tiffany King describes this agency as a reconceptualization of the erotic as defined by Audre Lorde. In having a

simultaneous vision by being able to see both the violence and agency afforded she argues that Black women would not be destroyed (King, 2010). Lorde describes the erotic as, “the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feeling,” and in delving into the self and these strong feelings of uncompromising I think that Jamila and Eartha are able to speak their truth into existence” (Lorde, 1978, pp. 88). Similar to King’s work as a storyteller in reconceptualizing and remembering the work Black women embraced and were never recognized for, Jamila’s storytelling is both a recounting and writing of the present that inscribes history with Black women’s love and respect for themselves. “I used to be afraid of myself” is the beginning line of this song and expresses a kind of vulnerability that is hard to admit and describe (Woods, 2019, track 6). Black women and queers are often told that they are ‘too much’ or ‘too loud’ so when Jamila Woods begins “EARTHA” by describing having to hide her smile or teeth away when she laughs, they are describing a history of silencing that is understood by the Black community. The imposition of respectability onto Black people is used to create submissive subjects with the promise of upward mobility and social inclusion without any of the payoff. To be too loud, too black, too big, too much is an insult used against Black women and even if she were to make herself small her very existence is already breaking the rule because we were never meant to survive.

Reconceptualizing what survival means is a necessary step in allowing Black women, Black queers, Black trans women, Black people, people, etc. to find alternative forms of being. Survival should not just be the act of staying alive or staying afloat but an enduring ability to be free (Gumbs, 2010). When Woods asks, “Will you root for me or will you leave?” she is asking whether the listener will feel with her and will celebrate

with her. This question is not asking for recognition or approval but is instead a way for Woods to find those that she wants to be with in community because she asserts, she's "too grown for your plot."

*I don't wanna compromise
Can we make it through the night?
I'm trying to see eye to eye
But you look right over me
Your words stuck on repeat
And I'm tired of you* (Woods, 2019, track 6)

"EARTHA"'s chorus begins with the idea of wanting to be uncompromising and asking the listener if they are willing to abide by the boundaries set. While Woods is willing to compromise given that she says, "I'm trying to see eye to eye," she realizes that she is met with indifference and resistance repeatedly. Black women are constantly trying to meet their oppressors where they are at and are constantly denied. The exhaustion felt over generations of being told that you are handling your oppression wrong, that your oppression is your fault, and being met with the same tired phrases is the sentiment being captured within the chorus. The resentment or, "sentiments of anger, revenge, and rage," that is felt due to anti-Blackness is worsened by a cruel optimism that believes there is relief in political hope (Warren, 2015). In the case of "EARTHA", the hope that the dominant group will suddenly listen and realize the weight of Black women's suffering just causes Black women more pain and Jamila Woods acknowledges this by explaining that she is tired.

Akwugo Emejulo (2020) acknowledges this exhaustion as well when she writes:

To claim exhaustion is to hail the equally exhausted and build solidarity.
Declaring exhaustion requires no explanation, and no justification of
distinctiveness. If this is required, that signals the misunderstanding of what is at

stake and what women of colour's interests and desires are. Exhaustion operates quite literally as a structure of feeling of mutual recognition. (1)

Woods is able to not only describe her own exhaustion but to express it in solidarity with all other Black women who have a similar experience. It is a strange banality to listen over and over again to rehearsed lines from those who refuse to understand the arguments that you have explained the world over. Resentment is fueled by the constant demand of Black people to reexplain their trauma in order to receive some kind of retribution (Warren, 2015). The cruel optimism that is derived from the belief that the next time these grievances are aired out they will be dealt with accordingly. This has never been the case. This cycle is emulated in the repetition of the phrase, "How many times do I sit and listen to you? / I don't know why I keep sittin', listenin' to you" while the backing vocals say, "I don't know why I let you do the things I put up with/ Can't tell you how many times I wish this wasn't it," become almost inaudible (Woods, 2019, track 6). The way these two lines are layered over each other mimics an external and internal monologue where a Black woman's explanation for her frustration is barely heard.

Woods' frustration over not being heard follows into the second verse. She explains that she has heard all of the arguments that the person she is arguing with is bringing up, and not only that but their ability to learn from these situations is all thanks to Jamila's labor and love. This is a pressing topic that has been brought up more frequently as Black resistance movements were being covered on the news. Black people are frequently called upon to educate non-Black people about their oppression. Laura Adom wrote an article titled, "Dear White Parents, My Black Son and Husband Need You Right Now," where she writes, "We're exhausted by often being the only Black

person in many of the rooms we walk into and having to speak for all Black people” (Adom, 2020). She notes that she was flooded with messages from white people who were touched by her article and wanted answers to questions about how they can be better allies or what other resources she recommends. Adom goes on to explain that it is not Black people’s responsibility to educate non-Black people on how to undo their own racism, especially when many Black people are trying to heal from the pain it causes to begin and there are already so many resources readily available.

Woods is not only speaking on the subject of having to educate someone but taking out the time and energy to continue to re-educate someone because she has to explain herself again. She laments that she could be using that time to take care of herself by running a mile or twisting her ends but instead she has to replay the conversation for herself because she feels gaslit in this situation. Even though she expresses doubt she finishes the verse with the line, “But I said what I said,” which indicates an air of finality in her stance. Similarly, Eartha Kitt is asked repeatedly, in different ways, whether she would compromise in a relationship with a man and she repeatedly, in different ways, answers with a resolute no.

I have pointed to the ways that repetition gets used within the song to demonstrate the tireless questioning that Black people must face, but the outro’s use of repetition is different in that Woods changes the tone to something vulnerable and soft to ask the question, “Who gonna share my love for me with me?” This is in response to Eartha Kitt saying, “I fall in love with myself, and I want someone to share it with me. I want someone to share me with me.” cite please This sentiment and feeling are the same sentiment that was described in “OCTAVIA” because it is also a form of hapitcality, “a

feel for feeling others feeling you” (Moten & Harney, 2013). Woods’ repurposing of repetition is a similar reconceptualization of the way we choose to approach love and our relationships with others and the ability to be uncompromising in this approach is what allows for a space or break to take place for Black women.

“BASQUIAT”

The last song that I will be reviewing in this chapter is “BASQUIAT” in which I will be examining how Jamila Woods explores emotions of anger and resentment. I not only wanted to speak on the joy that comes with self-love but the need for a full spectrum of emotions when thinking about Blackness and its complexity. Flattening the experiences of Black people in order to have a more comfortable view of them is not the end goal of this project. I will be reflecting on the ways that society paints Black rage with a one-size-fits-all brush and also building on how this impacts Black people’s expressions of anger or pain.

“BASQUIAT” is inspired by the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and features Saba, a Black rapper also from Chicago. Basquiat’s work provided social commentary on both his own experiences with colonialism and anti-Blackness. In an interview, he explained how art neglects many people and specifically stated that “black people are never portrayed realistically in... not even portrayed in modern art enough” (Interview between Jean-Michel Basquiat, Geoff Dunlop & Sandy Nairne, 2018). For Basquiat, his work was then centered on the creation of a more realistic depiction of Black people, or at the very least that he could depict his experiences as a Black person realistically. With this understanding in mind, I turn to Woods’ homage to Basquiat.

Jamila Woods recalls a different section of this same interview where Basquiat is asked if there is any anger in him and what makes him angry. He pauses for a long period of time, seemingly trying to recall an answer, and settles on the answer, “I don’t remember.” Jamila Woods took from this response that the interviewer was trying to gain access to an interior and vulnerable part of Basquiat that he was not willing to grant access to or that there was so much to be angry about that it would not be possible to make a list. Woods relates to this moment because she is regularly faced with people saying, “Oh, you’re so nice, you’re so quiet, you’re so shy,” which feels like they are complimenting her on her ability to not be angry (Anderson, 2019).

I think this is an important song to discuss within a conversation about joy because while I have argued that Black people are depicted as suffering, in pain, and deal with stereotypes like the Angry Black Woman, there is still so much anger and bitterness which is justified and expressed within hip-hop and Black art. J. Kameron Carter recalls Fred Moten’s words: “Our music hurts so much that we have to celebrate... That we have to celebrate is what hurts so much. Exhaustive celebration in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is” (Moten, 2017, as cited in Carter, 2019). It is not so much that joy is the counterstrategy to these depictions but that the deployment of images where Black people are carefree and happy stands in stark distinction to mainstream narratives of suffering. That being said, Black interiority is more complex than this binary of joy and anger and Jamila Woods and Saba are able to explore how Basquiat was met with racism that expected his anger and led to his work and words being misunderstood.

Jamila Woods begins the song by discussing how “they” want to see her angry, with the “they” being applied to be white people or civil society. She takes on both her own experiences as well as Basquiat’s when she sings, “I’m reclusive, I sleuthed it/ I already know what you’re thinkin’ ‘bout me,” because Basquiat has stated in interviews that he wishes to remain more reclusive both so that people focus on his art and so that people do not misinterpret him (The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2018; Woods, 2019, track 9). Interviewers have asked him if the figures in his painting look intentionally angry and the answer Basquiat provided was, “I’m not out to frighten people.” Woods also acknowledges that she knows what others think about her because the way that Blackness is constructed ratchets it down to a monolith. It also demonstrates the ways that oppressed groups are able to analyze and understand the way that dominant structures and groups conceive of them as a whole in a way that the oppressor does not have to.

This flattening of Black experience is one of the many things to be mad about when thinking of the plethora of ways that anti-Blackness manifests itself. It seeps into every aspect of society because it is the groundwork by which humans actualize themselves. When Jamila Woods is asked, “Are you mad?” and “What make you mad?” she responds that yes, she is mad, but she doesn’t know why. This is similar to Basquiat’s response, but in Saba’s verse he is also asked if he is mad, and his response is “yes I’m mad/ Yes, I’m Black, no I don’t elaborate/ I said all that I had to say,” and this response to the question becomes an interrogation of what the state of Blackness must look like (Woods, 2019, track 9).

J. Kameron Carter describes how Blackness is able to open up other worlds by creating alternate versions of the sacred (Carter, 2019). I think that this explication of Blackness is necessary to studying these complex Black emotions because in thinking of Blackness as sacred excess, as Carter describes it, we can understand it as accursed (Carter, 2019). Carter deems this powerful force monstrous and suggests that with it comes the possibility of other worlds, or the sacred otherwise. When we think of Black malpractice we should think of a reshuffling, disorientation, or deviation from the norm in a way that allows for Black social life.

Each of the three songs explored within this chapter is remediating a current problem that Black people face by offering a solution that comes from within Blackness. Within “OCTAVIA” a central issue is the way that history erases Black people from the record as well as the use of science as a tool of white supremacy. Within “EARTHA” is the issue of Black women’s labor being stolen, and the exhaustion faced by the constant erasing of Black issues is addressed. Similarly, within “BASQUIAT”, the issues being analyzed are being overdetermined as angry and being forced to speak on your experience whilst knowing that those words will be taken in bad faith and misrepresentative. “OCTAVIA” also speaks on Black women being able to speak their truth, “EARTHA” discusses building community and solidarity in defiance to exhaustion, but “BASQUIAT” seems to marinate in an anger that is intimate and impenetrable.

While discussing Basquiat’s resistance from being mistranslated and misunderstood it advocates for a Black interiority that is summarized in the line, “My smile is not employed/You can’t police my joy, no,” within the chorus. The joy that Jamila Woods and Basquiat are safeguarding from white people that are asking for a

performance is denied through an act of refusal. Kevin Everod Quashie discusses a theory of Black quiet that can be understood as the underside to signifyin' because while signifyin' is seen as a counterpublics of resistance which offers a way to express self-empowerment (Quashie, 2009). Quashie argues that Black culture is represented with an aesthetic of resistance because of the historical significance that the public expression of speaking back against oppressors has offered. He believes that a concept of Black interiority is important because it supports other representations of Blackness which can be messy and offer a *greater human texture* through which to find resistance (Quashie, 2009). Similarly, I argue that joy is not the only mode of resistance to counter the mainstream idea of Blackness' suffering because of the capacity for Blackness to be complicated and unknowable. Quashie states that he does not want to dismiss the importance of resistance, but that resistance alone cannot encapsulate Blackness and Black culture. "BASQUIAT" is a great example of this because it does not answer all of the questions it poses and instead expresses raw emotions that are too complicated to fully explain.

Saba asks "Why you entitled? Why are you pryin'?" in context to white people asking about both his anger and his joy which means that's it is not just joy that needs to be safeguarded from white civil society, but all Black emotion (Woods, 2019, track 9). Basquiat has stated that he does not like discussing art at all or himself because he wishes to separate himself from his art and allow the viewer to take from it what they will which is an interesting frame to consider when listening to this song. While Basquiat wishes to represent the Black as the main character within his paintings, he does not wish to elaborate on the painting itself and this could be because he wants to allow for greater

context to take over his paintings in a similar way that the paintings which is inspired him did. Basquiat took inspiration from all parts of life and repurposed themes and motifs which were normally only found within white paintings in order to expand his expression and by retooling these ideas he could find new ways to speak his truth. At the same time, he knew that the way him and his art were depicted was already overdetermined because he was considered a “graffiti artist” even later in his career even though his peers, such as Keith Haring, had shed that label.

This is demonstrated within the line, “That’s not how I meant it, but that’s how they write it,” within Saba’s verse and is intensified by the line, “If they gon’ misquote me, what’s the point in talkin’?” (Woods, 2019, track 9). I think this raises an interesting conversation between “OCTAVIA” and “BASQUIAT” because “OCTAVIA” is about the struggle that Black people went through in order to gain the ability to read and write as well as the power that comes from speaking truth into existence, whereas “BASQUIAT” is speaking to a larger issue of being trapped within a world where the only two options are speaking and staying quiet, and each option is met with pathologization.

This idea is also expressed within Audre Lorde’s *A Litany for Survival* with the lines “when we speak we are afraid/our words will not be heard/nor welcomed/but when we are silent/we are still afraid” (Lorde, 1997). I think that the difference between what “BASQUIAT” describes, and this poem is that Basquiat’s refusal to speak is not a silencing by others but a choice to stay quiet. Jamila Woods ends this song with a repeating outro with lines such as, “The pressure rising, rising/ Some days I’m almost carefree/ Some days I wish I could be,” which I think demonstrates the complicated

nature of Blackness' being. Being carefree is not an easy task but it is an expression of freedom that becomes complicated in the face of anti-Blackness. Black rapturous joy can be singed with sadness and still reach a kind of ecstasy that is fueled by or inspired by the suffering that cuts through it. Black malpractice would require us to balance our choices so that the expression of Blackness can both turn itself outward as an act of resistance or turn inwards to an interiority that is safe and healing.

Conclusion

Jamila Woods is able to use counterstrategies that complicate the mainstream understanding of what Blackness can look like. By referencing different Black artists, she is able to continue a tradition of Black thought through her music. Highlighting the ways that Black women and queers are able to take on different approaches is important project that emphasizes the power to reshuffle our preconceived notions of what the world can look like. Through evoking artists like Octavia Butler, Eartha Kitt, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jamila is draws on the power offered by these previous models. In this way, Jamila's work not only draws upon the previous experiences of artists and intellectuals, but also recontextualizes them into the contemporary moment by adding her own voice to the conversation. In this way, she both honors a rhetorical tradition, but adds to it.

CHAPTER THREE

Queer Fabulation: Who Has the Authority to Tell Our Stories?

“The life expectancy of trans women of color is 35 years old,” is an often-cited statistic that was proven false only a couple of years ago, but its mass circulation continues both in the press and in online discussions of trans women’s safety within society (Herzog, 2019). While the statistic may not be an accurate reflection of the violence done onto trans women of color it does speak to the lived reality of these women and the vulnerability they must experience at the hands of cisgender violence. Speaking out against this violence is an essential aspect of calling attention to the alarming deaths and abuse trans women face but the well-intentioned use of the quote by both trans and cis advocates removes any hope for the possibility that young trans people will be able to live long, fulfilling lives.

The interior lives of trans women are often fetishized and demonized within popular media in order to naturalize the violence that they face continuously. The cycle perfects and repeats itself through the hyper visualization of trans experiences on the screen. In the documentary *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* trans actors lament and discuss the fixation that so many portrayals create around the process of transitioning, especially when pertaining to the fetishization of genitalia. The violent responses that cis people, especially cis men, have towards trans women is usually focused on a narrative of rage in which a cis person discovers that the genitalia of their sexual partner are not that which they expected. This paper seeks to interrogate the ability for Black trans women to

create and even fabricate their own narratives of history in order to challenge the controlling images that the media puts forth. These portrayals have real consequences for trans women that have even been written away in our legal system. For example, the trans panic defense, a legal strategy that claims the assailant of a trans person is acting out of self-defense or an impassioned rage after discovering their gender identity is an example of the ways in which transantagonism is excused by the legal system and does not afford the same protections to trans people (The National LGBT Bar Association, 2021). Trans women can be fired or denied a job, denied housing, and can be openly attacked without any repercussions to their assailants because of their status as an otherized and perverse member of society (Puar, 2015).

Despite the challenges created by civil society and our political system trans women have historically created organizations and engaged in mutual aid in an effort to take charge of their communities' safety. Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) was founded by Sylvia River and Marsha P. Johnson in 1970 and serves as an early example of care work led by trans women of color in an effort to protect trans and queer youth who were houseless or engaging in sex work and needed lodging or a place to recharge (NSWP 2017). Marsha P. Johnson was well known during the 1970s and 80s because she was said to be a very welcoming and warm presence in New York City where she would perform with a drag performance troupe. Marsha would go on to model for Andy Warhol as well become an activist for ACT UP, a political organization laboring to put an end to the AIDS pandemic (LLP, 2019). Marsha is undeniably a key figure during this time period and has gone down in history as a beloved ancestor to all black and brown trans people who value the work she did.

Marsha is often best associated in queer history with the first night of the Stonewall riots. The Stonewall riots began at the end of the 1960s during which many queer people began confronting and fighting back against the many police raids that were commonly occurring in gay bars throughout the United States (Tran, 2018). On June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn and many of those being arrested chose to fight back and overwhelm police by slashing police car tires or overturning these cars altogether, throwing bricks that were found nearby, and later setting fire to garbage and using it as ammunition to launch. Many consider this the key turning point in the collectivization of queer people in order to launch the gay liberation movement. Marsha P. Johnson, in many retellings of this story, is the heroine who threw the first brick which instigated the riots, kickstarting the movement into hyper-drive. While there is no denying that Marsha is a tangible force within her community, neither her nor Sylvia were at the riots when they first broke out according to both Marsha's recounting and several witnesses. In many interviews she even states that she showed up when the riots were already in full swing and went to find Sylvia outside on a bench (Tran, 2018).

These changes in history that are outlined and used as signifiers to larger political issues also shift our perception of the world around us. Black trans sex workers are often left out of queer history, and especially the AIDS epidemic, even though they were impacted most harshly by the combined vilification of mainstream society and being cast out of their own community. Creating hyperbolic or fabricated narratives about our history is not new and many times is a placeholder to reference larger institutional issues and exploring when and how we decide to deploy them can lend greater understanding to those communities.

Tourmaline is the director of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), a short film which places Marsha P. Johnson at the center of the Stonewall riots on her birthday. Tourmaline is a Black trans activist, filmmaker, and writer, who focuses on storytelling that depicts trans people who may be lost to history (Tourmaline, 2018). Tourmaline has expressed a sense of connection, qualification, or entitlement to the footage of Marsha P. Johnson and other trans women that are filmed because they are her ancestors, and they directly impacted her ability to live the life she has now. In telling their stories through the informed lived experience she has she is able to rearticulate what trans womanhood looks like and can be.

The film stars Mya Taylor as Marsha P. Johnson and begins with archival footage and sound of Marsha that overlays Mya Taylor's entrance as Marsha P. Johnson. Marsha is heard saying, "And then they start calling me Marsha. And I liked it so much! I said that's who I'm gonna be, I'm gonna be Marsha!" while Mya Taylor as Marsha imagines herself on stage about to perform. Trans people have long criticized films that make trans characters' only goal in life to transition and pass because of its hyper focus on only that aspect of trans lives, as if we don't have lives outside of surgery, bigotry, and long silences in front of a mirror. In this scene we see both the want to become Marsha as well as her ambition to be a performer as well, a large part of Marsha's life was centered in the art scene as an Andy Warhol model as well as her participation in Hot Peaches, a drag troupe (LLP, 2019).

Our next scene with Marsha is her creating handmade cards and handing them out to friends as invitations for her birthday party. These scenes are enjoyable because they convey the friendships that Marsha had, as well as the popularity she enjoyed in New

York City. One of her friends calls her the Queen of Christopher Street after offering her a bouquet of flower, signaling the nickname Marsha was given because of her presence as, “an unmistakable Greenwich Village fixture.” (Jacobs 2019) I also think it is important to show that trans women did have support systems that they were actively creating, even in the 1960s. While queer history is often thought of as magically starting the night of the Stonewall riots, this assumption ignores the long history of queer resistance that came before it (Chauncey 1994).

The main antagonist of the movie is a cop that is being paid off by the Stonewall Inn to avoid police raids. This police officer seems to have a particular fixation on Marsha and attacks her unprovoked on her walk home from handing out invitations. While there have been criticisms of the spectacularized violence that dominates so much of Black and trans narratives being told, this is not necessarily a moment of exploitative violence being eschewed for the sake of watching a trans woman beaten. While we do see Marsha struggle against the police officer the scene is very short, and we do not see the cop engage in the worst of that violence. Instead, Marsha is seen in her bathtub with many scrapes across her body. The scene does not engage in the kind of spectacularized violence that is so prevalent but does establish that trans women are being targeted regularly by police officers without reason. What immediately follows is Marsha preparing for her birthday party by frosting her cake and setting up the table. In between this scene we cut back to archival footage of Marsha speaking to Andy Warhol, who is behind the camera. Marsha is explaining how she never feels she knows what she should be doing, and Andy tells her that she seems like the most put together person he has ever seen. It ends with Marsha exclaiming, “It’s expected!” to him. This broadcasts the

message: trans women are expected to be perfectly put together even when facing an extremely difficult and violent life. This first half of the film is interesting and shows important aspects of who Marsha is as well as the realities of living as a trans woman both in 1960 and even the struggles of today.

The second half of the film begins with no one showing up to Marsha's party, not even her best friend Sylvia Rivera. Marsha calls Sylvia who seemingly did not show up to her party because she forgot, as did all of Marsha's other friends. Because this is such a short film every scene must convey something important about the film itself, and this almost contradicts the idea that Marsha has a support system who loves her and stands by her side. No one showing up to Marsha's birthday seems to be the narrative device used to place her at the Stonewall Inn, which is really a shame because exploring Marsha as the life of the party, as she claims herself, was leading into an interesting character study that could have been explored because everyone who Marsha invited to the party ends up joining her at the bar anyways.

A beautiful dream sequence begins where a more glamorous version of Marsha is presented with a longer wig, a red dress, and an intricate headpiece. She performs a poem about how she does not wish to be a saint and instead wishes to continue to fight back and stay awake. Everyone cheers for her after and we cut to archival footage of Marsha proclaiming that she, "got lost in the music at Stonewall!" The sequence shows Marsha's ability to draw in a crowd and gorgeously perform but is then cut short by the police officer switching off the music in the bar and bringing us back to reality. The movie ends when Marsha throws a drink in the cop's face and pushes him down. A line of text appears reading, "Marsha played a central role instigating the 1969 anti-policing riots at

the Stonewall Inn, a watershed event for the gay liberation movement,” as archival footage of protests begins to flood the screen.

Authority Over Storytelling

Marsha P. Johnson lived to the age of 46 until she was found floating in the Hudson River. Police initially were very quick to deem her death a suicide which caused many of Johnson’s friends and those connected to her to protest that the police were not doing their jobs properly since there was enough evidence to suggest that she might have been attacked. In 2002, her death was reclassified from a suicide to “undetermined,” but in more recent years Mariah Lopez and Victoria Cruz have been able to get the case reopened for investigation as well as gain access to unreleased documents for the case (France, 2017). Victoria Cruz’s journey for finding justice for Marsha P. Johnson is the subject of the documentary *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017) directed by David France (France, 2017).

Both *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* and *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* deal with different aspects of Marsha P Johnson’s life, and each try to memorialize her in different ways. Shortly after *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* was released, Tourmaline accused David France of stealing her labor in order to make a film that she claims he should not have been creating in the first place. She detailed all of the issues that she had with France over Instagram, Twitter, and then later wrote a piece for *Teen Vogue* in order to get into the specific details of her accusations (Tourmaline, 2017).

When these accusations arose in 2017, many queer spaces that were signed to distribute and stream the film pulled out and chose to stand in solidarity with Tourmaline

instead because the queer community felt that David France, a cis white man, was guilty of stealing labor from Black trans women, but even more so that he had weaponized his privilege in order to create his film (Ennis, 2018). In 2021, the Wikipedia for David France's film states that, "Subsequent investigations by *Jezebel* and *The Advocate* found no evidence in support of the allegation," but this is a gross misrepresentation of what each of these articles' conclusions came to be. While each article provides evidence to each side's credit, they also engage in a conversation of who should be telling these stories (Ennis 2018, Juzzwiak, 2017). The lack of culpability from David France raises the question of what the appropriate response is to holding people accountable for their actions.

This brings up an interesting discussion that should be read alongside the analysis of the two films. While *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* has been criticized for being ahistorical in what ways does it engage with a queer Black interpretation of history? Does history matter in these cases? These questions become important when we think about who is allowed to tell trans people's stories, or who is even capable of doing those stories justice. Lastly, what impacts does the documentary have on the legacy of Marsha P. Johnson, as well as the legacy of queer storytelling altogether? These criticisms have existed in queer circles for decades but questioning where and how queer storytelling show take place is an important aspect to the work of creating solidarity because it shows respect for the art as well as acknowledging that these stories have an impact on trans people's real lives.

Black Trans Storytelling

It is important to understand the theoretical frameworks that exist for Black people are much different from those that are engaged with in civil society due to us living in the wake of slavery. Slavery continues to affect the world as we know it and shapes our understandings of what Blackness and Black people can and should be. Saidiya Hartman speaks on the ways that slavery forces Black women to make choices that are otherwise unfathomable (Hartman, 2010). Providing a generous reading or interpretation of Black work is necessary for white audiences to break through the inherent biases that they face. I will be talking about Black led narratives as well as the paradox that accompanies Black authenticity in order to provide a framework for the analysis of Black art in this paper.

Black Led Narratives

Very few pieces of media are created by trans people and become mainstream enough that a large group of people outside of the queer community are consuming it. Cis storytellers create media that is palatable and marketable to a cis audience, which leads to the creation of media that depicts spectacularized violence and codification of transness as mentally unstable, violent, and deceptive. This is why *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* is such an important film in terms of both the way it was conceptualized as well as its execution. Not only has a Black trans woman been cast as the lead, a Black trans woman is also the director of the film, and the focus of the film is centered solely around Marsha's life and story. While there are aspects of the film that will be criticized within this paper, there should still be an acknowledgment and understanding that the production

of the film struggled specifically because trans Black women are denied so many resources whether it be because they are unable to gain financial aid both to survive and to have their projects funded as well as being antagonized at the drop of a pin.

David France's claim that he was personal friends with Marsha before her death and wanted to create a film about her and he alludes that he is the proper person to create this film in interviews (Ennis 2018, Juzzwiak, 2017). This is one of the key problems with white creators' understandings about the world; white creators assume that the only criteria necessary for a job to get done is whoever has the "best" skillset, without considering bodily experiences, identity, shared life, and the ways some narratives are culturally significant and must stay within its respective culture. While some claim that this is a form of identity politics, I think that the more important aspect to consider is that we cannot only rely on "objective qualifications" for those who wish to share their stories because it ignores a history of institutional denial as well as trivializing other forms of knowledge that can be drawn upon. France's film, sitting at a 96% on Rotten Tomatoes was placed alongside *Happy Birthday* and thought of as a more accurate portrayal of history without acknowledging that Tourmaline may have taken creative liberties in order to conjure the image of trans women she wished to present to the world.

A large reason that it is possible for France to leave this situation unscathed is because cis filmmakers and actors are cosigned easily and granted pass in a way that Black and trans individuals are not. This is exemplified by the fact that *The Death and Life* and *Happy Birthday*'s Wikipedia pages have been edited to allege that no substantial evidence was found against France as well as his film still receiving praised and being widely available on Netflix. If researchers were not to read the entirety of the *Jezebel* and

Advocate pieces, then they would not know about the nuance of the argument that Tourmaline is forwarding.

France claims that he stole nothing from Tourmaline and that the footage that he used within the film was available because he bought all the rights to use them from the original creators (Ennis 2018, Juzzwiak, 2017). This claim is argued in antagonism to Tourmaline, who is argued to be guilty of stealing. However, Tourmaline *did* steal footage that was then uploaded to Vimeo, “as a form of direct action against assimilation and historical erasure of trans life.” Tourmaline could not gain access to the kinds of footage that France was able to purchase the rights for in his film especially because he was able to gain widespread support that she could not have back in 2012 (Ennis 2018, Juzzwiak, 2017). Both the *Jezebel* and *Advocate* pieces seem to minimize this detail by claiming that France did nothing legally wrong, he was not *technically* stealing the labor of trans women. These arguments are examples of how white cis filmmakers are easily cosigned while Black trans women are positioned as unreasonable in their response to labor being stolen due to a lack of physical evidence. The ways Black people must navigate the world are fundamentally different to their non-Black counterparts and to evaluate this situation requires a shift in focus from hard Truth.

Black Authenticity and the Counterfeit

Kevin Young’s *The Grey Album* criticizes the focus on authenticity that many white voyeurs use because their attempt to determine the Truth of the history of Black experience ignores the ways that Black people have found escape through imagination (Young, 2012). He emphasizes that this imagination is material in that it derails the

oppression that Black people experience by granting access to lives that they otherwise could not have lived. An example that Young focuses on in is the way that Alice Walker lied about being Zora Neal Hurston's niece in order to find out where her unmarked grave would be. This is a great example of the way that Black people must lie in order to gain that which is lost due to slavery, but also exemplifies his concept of *troof* as well. The vernacular *troof* as Young describes it is a Black reality that differs from the framework of white-dominated history. Even "objectively scientific truth," has been used against Black people so to create a counterfeit reality is necessary for Blackness to flourish (Young, 2012).

A counterfeit storytelling, according to Young, argues back against white skeptics limiting Black authorship and also prioritizes the African American trickster as a protagonist worthy of study (Young, 2012). This is important to our analysis of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* because many have criticized its lack of historical basis without engaging in the actual storytelling involved within the film itself. I even fell prey to this because when first conceptualizing this paper I was much more focused on my qualms with the film's lack of authenticity and did not hold space for Black trans people to explore their interiority. My immediate want to criticize the film overshadowed the unique situation that the film finds itself in as one of the first well known pieces of Black trans film that focuses not only on Black trans women, but also on the quotidian life of Black trans women. While it is true that Black trans women have received more positive visibility through shows like *Pose*, there has still been criticism of the show's colorism and focus on pain narratives within the trans community (Anderson, 2019). Using Kevin

Young's ideas of the counterfeit and storying when analyzing *Happy Birthday* is essential to combatting the underlying biases that inform our understanding of transness.

Moreover, it is important to understand that even though we hold space for these forms of Black trans art and expression, they are not above criticism. Black art can most assuredly be criticized but must be situated within the historical context that it is made. It would be very easy for me to criticize *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* as a piece of art itself, but this would ignore the large amount of work behind the scenes that had to take place for the film to even come into being. An example of this is the way that Tourmaline has said publicly that she stole video of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera at the Christopher Street Liberation Day rally. Her reasoning for doing this was that she was engaging in, "a form of direct action against assimilation and historical erasure of trans life" (Ennis, 2018). Tourmaline uploaded the footage onto Vimeo which allowed a wide audience to gain access to the footage, especially allowing trans people to engage with an important piece of queer history that is otherwise unavailable to the larger public. Arguing that stealing is a universal wrong and she should not have taken those videos does nothing to address transgender people inability to access their ancestors' art and history. Lesbians Organized for Video Experience (LOVE) Collective had the video taken down for copyright infringement but, as Tourmaline has stated there is a difference between her "stealing back her own hirstory," and the act of stealing itself (Ennis, 2018). Kevin Young emphasizes that he is not interested in the outside approval that is necessary for Black people to create a life and is instead focusing on the ways that Black people had to, "reinvent themselves in order to reinvent our world" (Young, 2012).

Tourmaline feels entitled to these archives, *and rightfully so*, because these are her ancestors, and they directly impacted her ability to survive. “Stealing,” becomes an aspect of the counterfeit because it challenges the understanding of what authenticity looks like in society (Young, 2012). Kevin Young emphasizes that when he speaks on the counterfeit he does not mean lying for lying’s sake and is instead pointing out the ways that Black people are unable to access certain parts of life without embellishment. A more extreme example that has been controversial both interpersonally and publicly is Nellie McKay, a Black literature professor, not disclosing that she was actually 20 years older than everyone was led to believe and that the woman she claimed was her sister was in fact her daughter. Her need to lie was the direct result of the view society would have on a Black single mother and that opportunities she would lose, namely being able to attend a graduate program at Harvard (Young, 2012). Black people sometimes must follow conventional norms, especially gender roles, in order to be taken seriously because even slight deviations from white norms established can lead to harsh backlash that could cost them everything. Young emphasizes that he is not so much interested in the outside approval that is sometimes necessary for Black people to create a life and is instead focusing on the ways that Black people, in this case Black mothers, had to, “reinvent themselves in order to reinvent our world” (Young, 2012).

Critical Fabulation

One method in the reinvention of the world can be accessed through the use of *critical fabulation* which Saidiya Hartman coined in her essay, *Venus in Two Acts*. She discusses the issues she ran into when creating intricate lives and experiences for Black

slaves, especially Black women, whose only lasting impact in history might be a measly receipt from when they were bought or mentions of slaves in texts focusing on the inner lives of white people. Hartman defines critical fabulation as:

laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration (11).

The way we choose to engage history has changed and so our prioritization of certain historical events, records, and material has shifted in focus.

The interiority and everyday life of people has become incredibly important to both humanities and archival studies scholars in order to understand the values, practices, and lost stories of those whose history was not recognized as valuable (Hartman, 2018). Saidiya Hartman speaks on the ways that it is beneficial to create counter-narratives and find out the *what ifs* and *what could have beens* in particular to the lives of Black slaves, but she has also created these narratives for Black people who are living in the wake of slavery and have been lost in the archive because the only written acknowledgment of them is the police reports and write ups that the state made (Hartman, 2008). This shows that critical fabulation has a place in more recent histories as well and still has the potential to open us up to other forms of understanding history.

Happy Birthday, Marsha! explores what could have been or what we could imagine Marsha's life to be. The overlay of archival footage and sound over Mya Taylor's performance represents not only the potential for what Marsha's life could have been had she lived longer, but also the beautiful emotion Marsha is able to feel when she is able to perform. The film offers many instances of viewing its lead as an artist who has

big dreams that are obtainable. The archival footage of Marsha is not just a casual interview but illuminates that she was viewed as beautiful talented, and entertaining in her own lifetime. While we may see dream sequences of the glamorized life that Marsha wishes for, we are still grounded in a reality where Marsha is surrounded by a community that loves her. My argument is not that all critical fabulation must create an idealized history, but that it should move past Black life as doomed to suffering and death.

The violence spectacularized in shows like *Pose* feels gratuitous even amidst the joyful relationships the characters may have, whereas in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* the violence experienced is acknowledged through the depiction of Marsha tending to her wounded body in the solitude of her own apartment after she is attacked by a police officer. The importance difference being that the beating she receives is not shown on screen and what is emphasized instead is the process of healing she chooses to undertake herself. After taking a bath she prepares for her birthday party and is clearly excited at the prospect of celebrating amidst her friends because she takes the time to hand out invitations and bakes her own cake. These first scenes of the movie showcase a brilliant balance of what Black trans life might have been like in the 1970s as well as expressing the tender care that the director sews into her depiction of Marsha.

Much of the messaging in *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*'s is lost due to the final sequence of the film which reduces the wholistic depiction of Marsha's life, poetic performances, and joy to being the instigator of the Stonewall Riots. The problem I have with this is not that the film is inaccurate in its portrayal but that it turns Marsha into an icon whose contributions are reduced to a single hyper-visible event. The Stonewall Riot has become the marker of the gay liberation movement and overshadows the specific

position Martha inhabited as a black trans person and the nuanced events that occurred before and after the riot. The choice to turn Marsha into the woman who threw the first punch not only takes away credit from all those who came before and after Marsha but discounts the impactful work she did do in creating a community of care and resistance (Chauncey, 1994). The Stonewall Riots were not just a one-night event but an ongoing series of protests against policy brutality and raids which Marsha did actively participate in.

Queer scholars have long written about the dangers of queerness being co-opted and used to justify conservative and neoliberal stances as they become relevant and valuable as tools of subordination (Puar, 2007). Conversations of homonationalism are significant here in understanding the ways that the narrative usage of queerness gets deployed in order to hurt Black and brown populations in the name of justice and *more progressive* politics (Puar, 2007). The way that queer narratives, especially those of Black trans women, get deployed then is valuable to study in the context of critical fabulation because analyzing the tactics that we used to understand shared histories, especially the tactics that inner members use, can give insight into how counter-narratives may justify the oppression of others by moving closer to the master narrative.

Saidiya Hartman tackles these difficult choices within *Venus in Two Acts* and *Scenes of Subjection* while creating and stretching the possibilities of what the archive has to offer. In this essay we should make sure to understand the difference between the archive and physical archives. According to Michelle Caswell, “for humanities scholars, “the archive” denotes a hypothetical wonderland,” where historical events can become the backdrop for possibilities. On the other hand, for archival scholars there is an

importance place on the material collections and physical locations where they have been stored (Caswell, 2016). This is important to note because Caswell writes that there has been a lack of engagement from humanities scholars in understanding the practices of archival research. Scholars like Saidiya Hartman and poets who engage in persona poetry can be seen as bridges into both worlds because they engage in archival research which informs the art and work that they create.

Mammy Narrative and Overcoming

Rather than illustrate a heroic portrayal of an important fixture in the community, the film's portrayal veers toward mammy-fication of the titular figure. Representing Marsha as martyr plays into a Black mammy narrative rather than a radical tradition of Black mothering. Historically, Marsha not only wanted to protect herself but her fellow trans sex workers as well (Reign, 2018). The filmic portrayal, however, reduces the narrative into a singular police officer's vendetta against Marsha. In so doing, the collective organizing prevalent during this time is decentered, and Johnson becomes a motherlike saint for a movement. Examples of this can be discerned in the film's portrayal of Marsha and Sylvia's relationship within the movie. While friendships can obviously be complicated, and hardships inevitable, the portrayal of Rivera as forgetting Marsha's birthday—again, an ahistorically event—seems more than an odd choice within a short narrative that fails to resolve their relationship. At best, this represents a wasted opportunity and fails to portray a community of young queer people coming together to survive. Instead, Marsha becomes figured as a martyr within the movie as she is framed as the sole instigator of these events, as opposed to the actual work of solidarity by which

Stonewall occurred. Historically, Marsha frequently and explicitly credited collective labor where appropriate (Reign, 2018) where the portrayal created a fantasy that she alone started the riots. Not only is this historically inaccurate, but it embodies a politics opposed to the values she actually put forth in trying to create a queer radical tradition.

The second issue created through this martyrdom is the fantasy of an overcoming narrative. The climax of the film ends on Marsha pushing the police officer down following a film's worth of his antagonism toward her. The problem with this narrative is that it supports the neoliberal idea that in a post-feminist society, feminine subjects should overcome their internalized fragility in order to better perfect their subjecthood—no longer experiencing the damage they once had (James, 2013). The movie positions the physical push by Marsha as a catalyst to her own overcoming, in distinction to the filmic narrative of her earlier lack of resistance a weakness unable to be. The resilience performed here is an individual act of self-aggrandizement that leaves us as the audience satisfied that Marsha did fight back (James, 2013). While the poem she reads does allude to her untimely death, the film creates a narrative fulfilling the neoliberal fantasy of Marsha transformed into a strong-willed woman who could deal with all the world's attacks. The damaging effects of this idea are seen in how Black women are expected to resolve all the world's issues without complaint because they are always strong and resilient enough. Black women are then left to fend for themselves absent the collective assistance of solidarity owing to an internalized belief that Black women should always be available to become whatever we, especially a white "we," need them to be. This is a form of ontological plasticity that allows Black women's flesh be molded into whatever weapon society desires from them, with no concern for their wellbeing or positionality

(Jackson 2020). In such a way, the mothering trope reveals its racialized transformation into a belief of Black women's fungibility, especially for white audiences.

Conclusion

This film's use of critical fabulation as a way to create a fuller image of who Marsha P. Johnson was and could have been if she was able to persist and continue to perform is awesome. I mean awesome in two senses of the word because on the one hand Marsha's portrayal for the first half of the film brings so much joy and love into her life and knowing that trans women have the potential to lead beautiful lives filled with friendship and laughter is important. On the other hand, the portrayal is awesome in that it creates a fear of trans women having to face the world's horrors alone even when they are seemingly surrounded by a community that claims to care for them. Critical fabulation as a tool is terrifying because digging up lost histories and finding new ways to orient life is fascinating and able to open up new avenues that can exist outside of our western frame of thought but can also lead to taking subjects from the past and reanimating them for our own use (Hartman, 2007)

Authenticity is a slippery slope because while we might like to represent history accurately, accuracy can be interpreted in many different ways. Accuracy might mean that we captured a feeling or experience as opposed to retrieving every detail. In many cases the most grotesque parts of history are incredibly hard for us to imagine and can become more accessible through a fictionalized recounting that is more digestible. When dealing with real people's lives it is even harder to create these fictionalized accounts because to change their story could be to essentially change who they were. Saidiya

Hartman asks, “Why risk the contamination involved in restating the maledictions, obscenities, columns of losses and gains, and measures of value by which captive lives were inscribed and extinguished?” and it is a worthwhile question to think through this film (Hartman, 2008). Hartman suggests that there is beauty, love, and possibility that comes with reanimating these stories once again. That truth needs to not only uplift but also bring us closer to a kind of justice that is reflected not only through what we see but how we choose to use it. She also questions whether we are creating a home for ourselves or for them as well which implies that it may be a selfish act to try to rehash the stories of those forgotten instead of letting them rest (Hartman, 2008). The importance of allowing our stories to be told, retold, and refigured by those within the community is integral to allowing other futures, futures that we couldn’t have imagined otherwise.

Kevin Young suggests that creating these narratives, or *storying*, allows for, “a communal vision of individual achievement and collective standards of excellence. A vision based not on mere technical expertise, but feeling, purpose, presence.” (Young 2012) The collective way we choose consume and inhabit these stories is what allows for the conversations necessary in order to create art that brings us closer to some kind of truth. That truth needs to not only uplift but also bring us closer to a kind of justice that is reflected not only through what we see but how we choose to use it. The importance of allowing our stories to be told, retold, and refigured by those within the community is integral to allowing other futures, futures that we couldn’t have imagined otherwise.

CHAPTER FOUR

Iterative Black Storytelling's Transformative Nature

Christina Sharpe's *Wake Work* shapes the life of this paper through her understanding of the personal as an integral part of the wake. She explains that all Black people are in the wake, but also that our individual lives are also, "produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (Sharpe, 2016, pp. 8). Sharpe also wishes to include the personal for the same reason that Saidiya Hartman does, in order to use a story to counter abstraction's violence. When telling these stories of how the past engages with the future we are able to recover some of the emotional attachments we often lose. Reshaping history as we continue to learn and grow from it is integral because it allows us to restructure our understandings and orientations with a more intersectional approach. Nirmala Erevelles understands the tension between Blackness and disability within *Wake Work* and connects the personal story with which Sharpe begins her book. Erevelles describes *Wake Work* as gesturing towards the intersection between disability and Blackness and tries to foreground their connection within her own work. Crisscrossing these paths and many others is the aim of the analysis below.

There is a yearning for the lost memories of slavery which can never be recovered for those who most live in its wake. In the face of these lost stories, Black speculative fiction is a means by which to participate in the process of imagining new worlds for Black people while still honoring the violence of the past. In this chapter, I analyze River

Solomon's *The Deep* as an example of the kind of storytelling that Afrofuturism is able to produce as well as the iterative work that the Black literary tradition continues to develop. I argue that this novel is an important interruption in the white retelling of history, or the master narrative, particularly in the context of how Solomon's storytelling facilitates rememory in the wake of slavery. Additionally, I utilize *Beloved* by Toni Morrison to describe how Black storytelling is part of a larger history of literary fiction, Afrofuturism, and memory.

In order to make this argument, I first begin by discussing the memorializing – the presence or absence – of slavery, as articulated by Toni Morrison. Next, I review Patricia Hill Collins' participation in Black storytelling in addition to Hartman's analysis of its importance. Following this review, I move to describing how *The Deep* emerged as an iteration of storytelling about the pregnant enslaved people cast overboard during the Middle Passage, as well as the primary story Solomon tells us in their book. I explain how this story grapples with racial trauma, disability, and is in part a history of Black narratives that simultaneously imagines both the future and past of Black people. To conclude, I argue on behalf of the importance of this storytelling process as a way of creating alternative strategies of living as well as processing racial trauma in a way that facilitates community between writers and readers.

Presence and Absence

Toni Morrison is the kind of writer that makes me think “how did I never think of that before?” In so doing, this question seemingly changes everything, including my capacity to consider such notions, and urges me to reconsider how I even consider the

world. I know that I should give that kind of understanding to any writer, but there are very few authors who have changed my worldview like Toni Morrison has done and continues to do. The only other author that approaches this level of connection, or deep affectation, whose impact marks and changes my thinking in some way, is Rivers Solomon. If this seems confusing, that's quite alright, even though this isn't necessarily standard fair for a Master's thesis, as this chapter is about storytelling, story-ing, and reconsidering how we consider in the first place. So before I get to Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, I need you, the readers of this chapter, to understand how I got to where I am and why a chapter about *The Deep* needs a Toni Morrison introduction.

In 1988, upon the occasion of the opening of America's Black Holocaust Museum, Morrison was asked what the importance or need for a remembrance of the institution of slavery, as well as how we might understand and commemorate the lives of the actual people born into, kidnapped into, escaped from, or died within that peculiar institution of New World slavery. This was her response:

“There is no place,” I said, “where you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There is no three-hundred-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored with an initial that I can visit, or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi.” (Morrison, 2019, pp. 75)

My first thought was there has to be a memorial though, right? especially because she answered this question (as I write this) almost 35 years ago. If you were to look for a memorial, the first search results that appear for memorials that honor people who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage are those of Molinere Underwater Sculpture

Park in Grenada. The more I read though, the more I realized that every article described the monument of these children at the bottom of the ocean as being largely interpreted by locals as a memorial to the Middle Passage, though the sculptor himself, a white British artist, had no intentions of referencing the Middle Passage in his artwork at all (Carozza, 2014). The sculptor encouraged other interpretations of his work, but this was not a memorial that was intended for people to think of the presences or absences of slaves. Moreover, an even cursory review of the models the sculptor used for the installation, and the modern clothing worn by those models and depicted in the underwater garden make any understanding of this as a memorial to the Middle Passage a stretch, at best. What the (mis)understanding of the work shows, however, is how desperate people are to latch onto potential memorializations—even inventing them when they are not there. In this way, this knowledge also evidences the claim that the Middle Passage continues on as an essential part of our history and shapes our understanding of the world.

While there are memorials that have been erected to try and memorialize this “unspeakable moment of American history” what remains true is that there is nothing suitable in order to truly capture the great loss that was and is faced in the wake of slavery (Morrison, 2019, pp. 74). There are little to no personal testimonies that could provide us with the grand scope of understanding that we wish or could wish to access. Especially in the case of those enslaved thrown overboard due to pregnancy—deemed too much of a disruption on the slave—there is no personal testimony that we could draw upon to understand the feelings, state of mind, or even straightforward reality of their death. And yet, within *The Deep*, Rivers Solomon takes up the challenge of creating a world in which we try to situate ourselves within their reimagined interpretation of the

lives of those cast off. Before I read *The Deep* as an endeavor in the creation of a new world, I explain previous foundations of literary Black storytelling.

What Was, What Might Have Been

How do we write an impossible story? How can we narrate what we cannot even begin to know? Both Patricia Hill Collins and Saidiya Hartman undergo projects of reconstruction that try to locate Black women within the limited writing that exists in the archive. Patricia Hill Collins explains that she and her sister found the contract of sale for her great-great-grandmother as well as a county census where she is listed as a thirteen-year-old “slave, female” who had an eight-month infant (Collins, 1991, pp. 17). While Patricia Hill Collins was able to recount family legends about her great-great-grandmother, there existed no other account of how or when she died and what the rest of her life might have been like. Patricia Hill Collins’ great-great-grandmother was raped by a white slave master and had her children taken from her. Many of her choices were not her own, and because of that, her descendants have to “look for her shape and his hand” when they are tracing their own history (Collins, 1991, pp. 19). This phrase signifies that there is no way to recollect what her life might have been like from the historical record that survives because it is all influenced by “his hand” exerting its power over her. As an enslaver and rapist many white men had the kind of power that would affect his slaves’ lives in a way that makes it almost impossible for us to reconstruct their actions, feelings, and emotions without considering the fact that they are so heavily influenced by a totalizing power structure.

For Hartman, the enslaved subjected to such abuse are understood as the unremembered. Black women treated in this way become another one of the young black girls that Hartman describes as having the same fate because, “no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all” (Hartman, 2008, pp. 2). Saidiya Hartman explains that while she understands the impossibility of grasping the lives of those whose power is stripped from them (Foucault, 2003), she still wants to do and say more. She wants to write an impossible story by “listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives,” to redress that violence (Hartman, 2008, pp. 3). I understand these struggles and meditation on what stories should and can be told as an important one to consider because while each story may be incomplete, it still serves as a way to attend to not only those who we have been lost but also those who are left ‘in the wake’ (Sharpe, 2016).

Hartman discusses a struggle with storytelling and the thin line that (may or may not) exist between instantiating the same violence that these violated Black people are subjected to within the archive. She asks why we would look into the casket a final time only to risk a “second order of violence” (Hartman, 2008, pp. 5). Hartman describes her intention as trying to paint the fullest picture possible of their lives, the guiding practice of this writing called critical fabulation (Hartman, 2008). Critical fabulation allows artists the ability to form some sort of redress given that the silence and absence of slave’s narratives within the archive both destroys those lives as well as our capacity to connect with history. One of the most important aspects to this practice is the straining against the archive that is necessary to accomplish such an impossible task. Describing the “resistance of the object,” by “listening to the unsaid,” the master narrative is disrupted,

and the authoritative voice of history is challenged by imagining an unverifiable truth (Hartman, 2008, pp. 5 & 12). Storytelling thus becomes a direct challenge to our collective understandings of reality and the world as we have come to accept it. Storytelling is thus central to our memories, remembrance, and memorialization of this world.

In classical rhetoric, “*memoria*” is understood at least partially as “the thing remembered” (Rider, 2013, p.1), and was foundational to each aspect of early rhetorical theory. In fact, as Jurg Glauser explains, prior to a shift early in the modern period, when memory became distanced from rhetoric and was more associated with ethics and logic, *memoria* was both one of the five canons itself and central to each of the other four— invention, arrangement, style, and delivery (Glauser, 2018). Through a twisting series of changes over the years, memory went from central to rhetoric, to beyond the purview of rhetoric, back to central to rhetoric in a myriad of forms. Today, the things being remembered, the act of remembrance, collective memory (operationalized through memorials, novels, memoirs, historical fictions, archives and more) are not only understood as vital aspects of rhetorical inquiry, but establish the almost axiomatic understanding that memory—public, private, collective, or otherwise—is necessarily rhetorical (Vivian, 2018). Similarly, Morrison’s conception of rememory is not only intrinsically rhetorical, but a vital and important consideration for the study of rhetoric (Rios, 2016).

Michel de Certeau argues that we should be creating these narratives as a way of “attending to and recruiting the past for the sake of the living, establishing who we are in relation to who we have been” (Hartman, 2008, p. 12). Hartman locates an example of

this narrative within Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *Kindred* offers a realistic depiction of slavery while also showcasing how Dana, the main character, lives through memories of slavery while making connections to the way that the world has been directly impacted by its aftereffects. Butler says in an interview, "I think most people don't know or don't realize that at least 10 million blacks were killed just on the way to this country, just during the Middle Passage... they don't really want to hear it partly because it makes whites feel guilty" (Beal & Butler, 1986). Offering a version of this lost history is not only a way to quench a longing for a past we will never recover but is also the only reconciliation possible when there is so much history that is overwritten by the quantitative losses and violences that rub us raw. Our only access into the world is limited, and many times seen through the eyes of the white slavers that enacted that violence to begin with. Solomon's *The Deep* offers a version of history in which a new world can emerge from the lost story of those cast overboard during the Middle Passage.

River Solomon's The Deep

For those unfamiliar, *The Deep* is a 2019 novel by Rivers Solomon based on a 2017 Clipping's song by the same name. Winner of the 2021 Audie Award, and one of NPR's "Best Books of 2019," *The Deep* is an Afrofuturistic telling of a historian's struggle (Yetu) to retain knowledge of the traumatic past of a people who must reclaim their identity to ensure their future survival. While a number of aspects of the novel are noteworthy, and discussed extensively below, the society's heritage is particularly unique as it consists of "water-breathing descendants of African slave women tossed overboard" who have built their own underwater city (Simon & Shuster, 2021).

In the remainder of this chapter, I read Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* to make a few arguments. I first analyze how Afrofuturist stories evolve from one another, demonstrating how there is not just a narrative in the story itself, but a process through which it comes to be. Following this, I explain how Solomon interrupts white master narrative of history through a process of rememory—specifically considering the importance of this in the context of racial trauma. Finally, I untangle how this text also interrupts narratives of disability by establishing a protagonist with a messy relationship to their experience of the world. This discussion is important to intersectional approaches to Black disability studies.

Iterative Storytelling of the Drexciyans

The Deep's mythos did not first come into conception within the novella that Rivers Solomon created, but instead originates from a musical techno-electro duo that consisted of James Stinson and Gerald Donald named Drexciya. Both members of Drexciya are from Detroit, Michigan and they created a mythology that stemmed from the kidnapped and enslaved Africans who were cast overboard slave ships during the Middle Passage. They ask questions such as, "is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Are drexciyans water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed" (Solomon & Drexciya, 2019, pp. 158). This reframing of one of the many, many gruesome acts committed against slaves, according to Daveed Diggs, is able to, "reimagine an escape from murderous oppression" (Solomon & clippings., 2019, pp 158). This same theme and idea of escape is displayed in the premise of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which is

based off a newspaper clipping that Morrison saw about an enslaved mother who killed her baby when her captor tried to rekidnap her. Drexciya's music has very few lyrics and therefore requires listeners to create this world with them, starting a conversation that needs its audience's participation.

What follows after the creation of this world is what Daveed Diggs calls a game of 'artistic telephone.' Diggs is part of the experimental hip hop group clipping, which created both the single "The Deep" as well as an EP of the same name which explored the world Drexciya had already laid the groundwork for even further. Even still, they were sparing in detail in order to follow the tradition that Drexciya had of allowing its listeners to cocreate the world. In the afterword of *The Deep* clipping, offers more details into some of the ideas and concepts they included within their understanding of the world. One of the rules they created while writing these songs was to only use the pronoun, "y'all" in order to, "affirm collectivity over the individual" (Solomon & clippings., 2019, pp. 160). One of the refrains used in "The Deep" by clippings. is y'all remember which becomes an important theme and foundational idea in the novella which Solomon collaboratively created.

In this game of telephone, *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon is the third iteration of a world that was created at least 20 years before its publication. It explores the world of the wajinru, a deep ocean community created by the descendants of two-legs, or humans as we commonly understand ourselves, who were enslaved and thrown overboard from slave ships. The story follows Yetu, the historian of her people, and the deep pain and anguish she feels due to the task that she has been assigned. Next, I describe Yetu's story as told to us by Solomon.

Yetu's Story

As the historian, Yetu is required to hold all the memories of the wajinru in order for the rest of her society to live idyllic lives where they are not burdened by their history. She carries this pain alone most of the time, but about once a year a ceremony is held to share these memories with the rest of the wajinru in order to appease the innate curiosity and anxiety that they feel about their collective past. This ceremony is also a painful process for its recipients, but for a short period of time Yetu is freed from these memories. Within the novella, Yetu has been carrying these memories for many years now and is unable to separate herself from the memories of her ancestors. These memories are not just snapshots of others' lives but instead are experienced by Yetu as if they are her own memories as well. The reader understands that she is able to get lost within these memories for days or weeks at a time, losing the ability to care for her basic needs.

During the current year's remembering, Yetu decides that it would be too painful for her to have to take back the memories (as would be customary), and instead chooses to escape to the surface as an act of self-preservation. She is aware that this could cause massive turmoil to her people because they have not spent the years she has learning how to cope with the trauma of their history, but her body and mind are both so weak that her only choice is to escape. When she makes it to the surface, Yetu encounters a group of two-legs who she says vaguely look like her and also resemble the other humans she recalls her ancestors had previously encountered. They offer to help her by allowing her to stay in a pool of water that is closed off from the rest of the ocean in order to rest and recover. There she meets Oori, a human woman who is the last of her people but has very

little in terms of a history to grasp onto. The two strike up a friendship and romance that allows them to speak on their connected but unique pain. While Yetu found the history a burden, Oori would give anything to have even a small portion of the history of her own people. Through these conversations Yetu is able to understand that while she felt isolated and alone within her own community due to the trauma she had to face alone, she cannot fully understand herself without a past and community to make sense of the world. Meanwhile, the wajinru have become more and more agitated as they struggle with the weight of their history. Their collective suffering has generated a powerful energy that can stir the oceans and they plan to attack the world in retaliation for the cruel acts that led to their creation in the first place. Yetu finally decides she must return in order to reunite with and save her people after Oori sets sail to try and protect the burial ground that was her homeland from the oncoming storms. Yetu plans to take back the memories from the wajinru but her amaba, or mother, will not allow her to continue her suffering alone. Instead, Yetu guides the wajinru through these memories and they collectively learn to bear the weight of their history. Yetu later reunites with Oori and discovers that the last of Oori's homeland has been destroyed. Yetu offers her a new life that they can build together, and the ocean grants them a wish so that they can both live underwater together.

Retelling and Rememory

The Deep is such an important interjection into the retelling of history because there are no white eyes within this narrative. While readers apprehend symptoms of white supremacy within the story, these depictions are approached through the perspective of

Black people and their merfolk descendants. This is important because the conversations started within the Black community still need to grapple with how white supremacy has infiltrated ways of understanding being that may be naturalized into ways of thinking, and vice versa. Still, it is rare to see stories that solely focus on Black characters and even still authors of these stories are met with pushback from the publishing industry (de Leon, et. al., 2020).

The importance of the Deep's perspective is displayed in the difficulty even authors like Morrison have faced in suggesting centering Black stories is vital to her work. Toni Morrison was asked in many interviews whether she would write stories that did not center around race, or more plainly whether she would write about white people. Her response was that this was insulting! Obviously! The insinuation that it would be desirable for her to write about white people or non-Black people in order to prove that she was an adept writer is ridiculous. When Bill Moyers poses this question it demonstrates how the master narrative has naturalized itself and convinced society that the neutral or the valuable is white. When Charlie Rose asks Toni Morrison if she was reading too much into the situation it casts doubt on Morrison's very judgement and that of her audiences as to whether there was ever really a problem. As Morrison later explained, this line of thinking—the need for racial “neutrality” from an author of her stature—is just another way the white gaze maintains its power. By and forcing us to believe that Black life does not have meaning unto itself, without the flicker of the white gaze flickers upon it—ideologies supporting white supremacy are reinforced and naturalized. These master narratives then encourage us to ask ourselves what it even

means to refuse a story from the white gaze and begin to ask what stories we can tell outside of that frame of reference.

Contemporary Histories

Returning to Toni Morrison's mediation on why these histories need to be envisioned and retold in the contemporary age, we can think about how *Beloved* became part of our collective history within the literary canon. Morrison explained in an interview that it was difficult to write *Beloved* because she did not want to dredge up the past (insert cite). The question she was seemingly repeatedly asked in interviews was one she had posed to herself—"How could she write about slavery in a fashion simply from the outside?" As she eventually answered for herself—she couldn't and instead had struggle to somewhat place herself within those circumstances. To write about Margaret Garner, the woman whose reported actions *Beloved* is based on, would require Toni Morrison to place her own baby within her arms and imagine a world in which she would have to kill that child. This process of writing as struggle is reminiscent of Morrison's concept of rememory which is introduced within this novel as well. Rememory could be described as, "a remembrance transcending individual or time-segregated acts of remembrance," as per Viviane Saleh-Hanna's understanding of it within a black feminist hauntology (Saleh-Hanna, 2015). This non-linear approach to the past is exactly what Toni Morrison is alluding to when she says to her students, "it's not a black father, it's yours. You know the one you know? That one" (visionaryproject & Morrison, 2010). This feels similar to the approach *Kindred* displays taking in putting Dana into a situation

where she must accept how the past, present, and future are all inter-connected to create her identity and the world she lives in.

Similarly, within *The Deep*, the concept of rememory is conceptualized almost literally. Yetu's memories are not just her own, but the collectives,' and her experience of the memories are not that of an outsider's but from her own perspective. The pain and joy that her ancestors feel is one that she can channel intimately not just through the transmission of memories from one historian to another but through other merfolks' flesh, possessions—even through the vibrations that can cause oceanic turmoil. Toni Morrison said of her own writing that, “recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” (Morrison, 2021). Similarly, Gary K. Wolfe, in reviewing *The Deep*, said that there is no testimony of the people thrown off slave ships and only through imagination are we able memorialize them (Wolfe & Mond, 2020). Collectively, these understandings display well what each of the three different iterations of *The Deep*'s mythos were exploring and seeking out. Not only were they able to use their imagination to create this new world but through that exploration they were able to uncover truths and ideas about our own society that must be pressed.

The literal act of remembering is explored within *The Deep* to uncover different realities that the wake of slavery leaves behind. Yetu feels cursed to remember her past constantly without any volition of her own. This trauma of her loss of agency is so intertwined with her own personhood that she is unable to understand herself as separate or individual from it. When Yetu tries to share those experiences with her loved ones,

they are unable to sympathize with her as the grotesque horror she describes is too difficult or unbelievable to understand.

In a similar fashion, we find ourselves collectively forced to grapple with the truths of slavery, the insurmountable suffering accompanying it, and the incredible difficulty to remember. Wolfe explains that the horrors of the Middle Passage demand the imagination to even begin to approximate what that reality. Simultaneously, Wolfe cautions against such an approach as it may become more of a comforting myth instead. This is similar to the warning that Hartman expresses within “Venus in Two Acts.” At root, nostalgic remembrance is a real risk to acts of remembrance (Orr, 2017). However, both Wolfe and Hartman rightly see value in our reimagining of the Middle Passage as we have no other way to connect to this time period. We are able to recover or remediate some of this racial trauma through the radical act of storytelling. Moreover, as Morrison’s notion of rememory is correctly understood as an act of “rhetorical resistance” (Haratyan, 2013), this mode of storytelling can function to stutter the urge to forget. As the act of forgetting is central to the continuation of violent master narratives, puncturing that urge through Black storytelling helps combat white supremacy and affirm Black agency.

Black Storytelling

In understanding that Black people must find ways to articulate history and how it affects the current moment, we are able to better understand storytelling approaches that are deployed in genres like science fiction and Afrofuturism. The Deep articulates such a view by offering a model of storytelling “that gives new meaning to the idea of a living document; a telepathic tradition of history that points profoundly at the many ways

humanity records and fails to record, its own past” (Heller, 2019). Two distinct moments within the novella well represent this perspective. Firstly, Yetu and all other historians’ ability to collect memories is fascinating because they are able to pass on all the memories of another person who is dying into themselves and are able to keep that person’s essence alive by viewing the world through their eyes. The novella’s chapters alternate between Yetu’s point of view and a collective point of view that looks at the wajinru’s history. Similar to the interpretation articulated by clipping.’s sonically presented understanding of this world, Solomon incorporates a collective point of view suggesting all the wajinru are connected through their ancestors and the lives they share with each other. This is shown to be simultaneously beautiful and anguishing. On the one hand, the wajinru seem more connected within the chapters that use collective pronouns to discuss the memories all of them can experience. Obversely, the Solomon explains how Yetu becomes an outsider when she is the only one able to connect with her ancestors. The reader is able to understand how carrying such memories alone can be tiring and traumatizing. This message is reinforced as the story’s conclusion reminds us how when memories are still heavy with emotional weight, those remembrances can be more productively maintained through a coordinated effort by an entire community. In this way, those memories are both more easily processed and more readily kept alive within the existing community.

The Impossibility of Forgetting

While remembering may be painful, forgetting is not easy either. The wajinru for the most part live idyllically without the strain of having to keep their memories or feel

any of the intense emotions that the historian has access to, but they are also restless and crave those memories as well. Without the history Yetu describes herself as feeling empty in every direction and she struggles to piece together her own emotions and thoughts without the history because she lacks the context or ability to classify the world as she once did.

To contrast Yetu's vast knowledge of her people's history, the novella introduces Oori and as the last of the Oshuben. Oori says to Yetu, "I would take any amount of pain in the world if it meant I could know all the memories of the Oshuben. I barely know any stories from my parents' generation. I can't remember our language. How could you leave behind something like that? Doesn't it hurt not to know who you are?" (Solomon, 2019, pp. 94). As Alex Brown insightfully notes, the Black diaspora might relate much more closely to Oori than Yetu because her lost history reflects the disconnect from a homeland (Brown, 2019).

Oori's definition of a homeland is "a place that means something because of its history" (Solomon, 2019, pp. 122). She acknowledges that your homeland is just a place until you imbue it with meaning. While at the end of *The Deep* Oori is no closer to reconnecting with her lost homeland, the ocean grants her wish and render her able to breathe underwater. In this way, she is given both the chance to create and reform her identity. One way to understand this aspect of the ending is to meditate on the possibility that we may not be able find every piece of history, but we are able to change our understanding of the past to better reflect our present and future. Oori does not become one of the merfolk, but instead becomes something entirely new. This adjacent reimagining is significant for its Oori to maintain her own sense of self, her own history,

while still acquiring the capability to experience anew the power of a collective history. In so doing, she is able to reimagine and recreate, by investing in meaning through historical remembrance—a new homeland.

Remembering and forgetting are two very essential parts of Yetu's journey, but we can also see its importance reflected through the form by which they are explored in *The Deep*. The wajinru are most powerful when they are able to remember together and experience the memories of the ancestors collectively. As scholars of rhetoric will rightly understand, this view is in line with the awesome power held by the discursive construction of collective memory (Gronbeck, 1998, Platinga, 2021). As audiences are reading *The Deep*, they are not just reading a standalone novella but are holding a product of hard work that was co-created to become the brilliant work it is. If we fail to understand this collaborative construction, or miss the embodiment of its own allegorical homage to importance of community involvement in the construction of resistant stories, then we miss important aspects of this retelling.

Yetu's suffering is similar to that of the child scapegoat in Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." In Le Guin's famous speculative fiction short story, it is revealed that a utopic society exists at the expense of one child being tortured in the basement of an important government building. When they come of age, everyone in the town learns about the torture to this child, yet no one challenges these structures. Most residents of Omelas eventually give into the comfort and security afforded by the torture of the child, and simply chose to forget its existence. A small number of residents walk away, though the story does not say where they go. The story concludes by commenting on the small number that walk away, noting, "They leave Omelas, they walk

ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas” (Le Guin, 1975, p.283). In this instance, Yetu can be considered the child who is being tortured in order to allow for the rest of her society to flourish but she chooses to escape even if it comes at the detriment to her own people.

The Deep offers an alternate vision to Le Guin’s classic ending by suggesting why forgetting the past is not only detrimental but impossible. In Le Guin’s story, those that walk away from Omelas do little to actually help the tortured child. In the Deep, we see in Yetu an analog to the child tortured for the good of their society. But rather than be a passive subject, Yetu is injected with the agency to walk away herself, even if it comes at the expense of her own people. This complication of the tale of Omelas’s premise adds a new voice and understanding to what it would mean to walk away from Omelas and abandon your community, but also offers promise of resistance Le Guin’s parable does not. In so doing, Solomon suggests we will always have a past that haunts us and even if we lose those memories (as Oori did), we will continue to crave knowledge about our own history. As a meditation on our relationship to the Middle Passage, the Deep suggests allowing the world to move forward in the wake of slavery, while engaging in continual acts of forgetting of that history starves our society much the wajinru are.

Trauma and Disability

The Deep models a mode of memory that grapples with the intersection of racial trauma and simultaneously offers a compelling understanding of notions of disability.

Much as disability is poorly conceptualized as able to be “overcome,” racial trauma is also much more coherently understood as a pain to be continually challenged. As Jessica Tapley explains, “grief surrounding racial trauma is not something which can be healed from. Just as disability cannot be overcome, the goal of racial justice is certainly not to overcome centuries of inflicted trauma” (2021). Instead of trying to remedy the racial trauma of both this country’s historical baggage surrounding slavery, as well as its ongoing oppression of Blackness, Solomon’s work offers a way to understand this conflict through language. Modeling a narrative through which to express the complicated emotions that are otherwise difficult to convey, the *Deep* provides a compelling apprehension of remembrance that echoes the important connections between the Black studies and Disability studies.

Modern conceptions of disability are frequently best understood through the lens of “struggle,” both in its depiction of by mainstream media, and its advocacy by scholars and activists. A cursory google search of struggle and disability reveals scores of recent articles suggesting how to best overcome the “struggle” of disability, when “struggling with disability,” or the “struggle” for inclusion. Similarly, recent scholarly treatments of the subject reveal a play on word in titles including struggle, as well as meaningful considerations of the actual challenges faced to struggle for civil rights, inclusion, or acceptance. But underlying these nods to the challenges faced by the disabled is the reality “overcoming” disability is a flawed understanding. As Elizabeth Wright explains, “there is no such thing as ‘overcoming’ a disability” (Wright, 2020). While many continue to portray disability, especially disability inspiration stories as stories, as an overcoming, a much better rhetorical understanding of disability is that of an ongoing

challenge for both meaning making and against continued oppression by dominant understandings of so-called normality (Mann, 2018; Kamperman, 2020).

An intersectional approach to the way that we examine these identity categories is necessary when trying to discuss their relevance within The Deep and the broader culture. As Tapley points out, the history of Black Studies and Disability Studies is intertwined and inform each other in practice. Disability is seen within The Deep not just as a response to trauma but also as a part of Yetu's everyday life. She despairs at how much weaker she is than other historians who were able to deal with the history much more easily than she was. These comparisons, as well as her living other historians' memories, all contribute to her feelings of isolation within her own community. Historically, both Black and disabled activists have tried to use leverage sympathy from audiences in effort aimed at gaining both rights and inclusion (Tapley, 2021). By offering a model of commonality to establish a perceived humanity between Black and/or disabled people (even when such humanity existed in reality), and the audiences who continued to allow the oppression of Black and/or disabled people, activist sought to "guilt" mainstream audiences into action. The problem with this approach is that there is a limit to what these accounts are able to provide for someone. Much as the residents of Omelas ignored the suffering of the child, the "success" of the modern world is largely predicated on the suffering of Black and Disabled peoples. Exercises where non-disabled people are invited to try on a disability for a few minutes will never be able to capture the lived realities of disabled people. Such activities also paint a negative light of disability by solely focusing on the aspects of a disability that non-disabled people would find undesirable (Tapley, 2021).

While Yetu may suffer physically and mentally due to the weight of solely remembering history, she also has wonderous moments that she cannot imagine parting with her (dis)abilities. Similarly, her (dis)ability is one which both enlightens and drains her—stealing her energy but also allowing her to experience very beautiful and complicated memories—is the envy of Oori. It would be a disservice to pretend that her experience was all negative, especially because the conclusion of the novella suggests that her ability to teach the wajinru how to cope with the history made their society better and more connected. In some ways, Yetu’s (dis)ability as a historian functions similarly to Du Bois’s explanation of double consciousness—Blackness in America as both blessing and curse—and renders the intersectional nature of discussion all the more palpable through the analogy that can also be extended to disability (Blev, 2015). While this connection is necessarily untidy, it further illustrates the importance of intersectional struggles enunciated through Solomon’s model of rememory. The experience of common memory, racial trauma, and disability is hard to pinpoint within the Deep, but that also echoes its illusive nature in our larger society. As with all good speculative fiction, there is rarely a one-to-one relationships between every aspect of the story and a perfect equivalent within our own society. But just as true is that there is no way to perfectly communicate the kind of pain or trauma someone else faces, or the difficult possibility of communicatively transferring messy emotions to someone else so as to enhance better understanding. The closest thing often available to this would be marginalized communities both sharing stories of oppression (and struggles against same) with each other and being believed fully when they express those concerns.

Even though one of the humans refers to Yetu as “animal-ish” when Yetu declares her inhumanity, this distinction actually portrays her more closely to our ideal conception of humanity. By traditional standards, Yetu would appear as a monster, and perhaps a terrifying one at that. She does not look like the traditional understanding of mythical but is instead a predator of the ocean with sharp teeth and claws. The ability of the “two-legs” to treat her with kindness and respect is displayed as almost atypical given how most humans would likely. The acceptance of her “monstrosity” stands out in the unlikely romance between her and Oori. While they may be different in anatomy, they still find commonality in the people and the monsters that they both are. While some might suggest say that *The Deep*’s ending is too sentimental and full of hope, I understand the ending as offering a rhetorical vision for possibility of thinking things otherwise, and an apt ending for a story that permeates throughout the story: things do not have to remain as they were. Similarly, we should strive to conceptualize a world where oppression against disability and Blackness can be opposed through resistance to the naturalization of master narratives. The model of historical and rhetorical re-imagining that is central to *The Deep* offers a kind of change that is necessary for a world that is more loving and inclusive of all marginalized people.

Especially important in Solomon’s model of intersectional storytelling is the functional absence of the white gaze. When Yetu first meets the humans that end up extending her assistance, they are unaware of what she is and unsure of whether she is dangerous. While most humans who the wajinru have previously interacted with have been violent or looking to capture them, these humans are only curious and trying to offer aid. What *The Deep* offers is a mediation of our understanding of slavery’s continued

destructive influence on society, “without ever showing a white perspective in a tour de force reorientation of the storytelling gaze” (Publisher's Weekly, 2019). While it is true that there is no white gaze within this story, there is still a white specter who has a hand in creating the entire story. The wajinru exists solely because of the transatlantic slave trade and their persecution, as well as some of the danger they continue to face, is caused by white supremacy and ecological disaster. Nevertheless, by centering the primary characters those they find community with as Black, Soloom offers a notion of rememory that hints at the importance of community with both Black and Disabled peoples.

Conclusion

When considering the lost memories of the enslaved that never end made it to the New World, the kidnapped that did but were never heard from, and the disappeared who were not marked as historically “great,” we must treat their stories with respect and reverence. While we can never recover this lost history or remedy a collective trauma which affects us all, we are still able to imagine these stories in order to better connect with each other communally. The iterative work of Black storytelling, and especially Afrofuturistic approaches considered here, is able to build upon the past and present in order to consider other futures. The work that storytelling does may not be able to remedy all the world’s problems, but in creating a complicated beauty I think that it is able to foster a sense of simultaneous struggle against and belonging to that may not have been available to us otherwise. Appreciating the model afforded here and by great Black storytellers can inform our ways of thinking outside of the master narrative and create even more avenues for articulations of messy and complicated identities

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

To close this thesis, I want to reflect on what I have learned through writing. Black feminist studies is something I want to continue taking seriously because the many techniques and survival strategies that come from it are what are going to allow community to flourish. The joy that comes with reading and writing through and with Black feminist and queer scholars is valuable in its act of resistance because the continued demonization of Black people is a continued struggle within white civil society. Civil society continues to lie on us and create master narratives that work to wipe clean the rich history and personhood of Blackness. Looking at representation within media and the strategies that Black artists undertake in order to revitalize Black humanity and inhumanity is important because we can learn to take those strategies and remix them, make them our own, or work to connect with one another.

The way society has constructed Blackness, especially Black queerness, and Black womanhood, is upheld through the media that we consume every day. Not only are Black stereotypes prevalent within the stories and music we see, but the world is regularly bombarded with white, straight, cis stories in order to normalize the status quo. This does not have to be the case, and we have many instances of Black artistry that is combatting these narratives. I only included three different examples of these acts of resistance but there are many more that exist and many more to come. In writing this thesis I wanted to highlight these instances of Black emotionality to analyze them and to continue a study

that has been taken up by scholars like Catherine Knight Steele, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe while also exploring techniques that exist outside the academy.

Branching outside of the academy is what will allow us to move forward because the prioritization of certain forms of study is what causes non-traditional knowledge to continue staying invisible. While Black feminism has existed outside the academy for many years and does not need the academy to the influence of Black feminism on Black studies, in addition to other disciplines, is insurmountable.. The strategies deployed by each of the creators in this study have unique qualities that are impactful to the audiences that consume their art.

As stated above, Black joy and Black complexity are guiding factors within this work. Jamila Woods, Tourmaline, and Rivers Solomon each represent their own form of Black joy as resistance. All three of these Black queer artists have a unique approach to Black complexity and I think that this showcases the multitudes that Blackness contains in contrast to the overwhelming flattening of experience that exists in civil society.

Jamila Woods' counterstrategies of resistance within her music directly call out a white tradition and respond back to them with Black tradition by calling back on Black figures that inspired her. Her conversation with these influential figures is able to teach us how we can not only speak to history but also be in conversation with Black audiences. The difference between speaking of Black people and speaking to Black people is an important distinction because it creates a dialogue that is not one-sided and requires an engagement with her work that leads to further introspection. Her addition to the canon reconceptualizes the words and ideas that she herself first heard and orients us towards a new framework of revolutionary thinking. Woods' work may not solely be focused on

expressions of joy, but I think that there is joy found in the ability to articulate the many emotions she tackles within her lyrics whether it be rage, self-love, longing for companionship, or gratitude. The multiplicities that exist within Blackness are expressed uniquely within these songs and reach back into history to pull out new understandings of life.

Through different rhetorical strategies like refusal, self-affirmation, and care for other Black people we are able to find expressions of Black joy. While the song *BASQUIAT* is centered around rage it still engages in a form of Black joy by allowing the artist and listener to share in a collective refusal to allow society to dictate when and how you can express anger. This is a cathartic release from the hold that master narratives have created and continue to police. Not only can it be described as a way to affirm the anger that Black people feel but it also discusses an interior quiet that Kevin Everod Quashie finds important because it opens up a space for Blackness to be something other than resistant (Quashie, 2009). This affirmation of Blackness in all its forms is also discussed within *EARTHA* when Woods reflects on Kitt's interviews in which she declared that she did not want to compromise herself for love and instead wanted to find someone to love her the way that she was. This kind of love that declares there is nothing wrong with you is an example of self-affirmation within Blackness that strengthens the community's ties to one another. It preaches a kind of love that is often forgotten when looking for resistant strategies because, as Jamila Woods discusses, many times the complaints and calls for help that Black women and queer people try to communicate to others are either ignored or the work they do to educate others is appropriated. When this happens I think that it is important to remember that there are other Black queers that are

willing to love you and stand with you. Lastly, within the song “OCTAVIA”, we witness the care for other Black people that permeates throughout each of the songs discussed. This song contains the central message that ‘they lie on us’ meaning that society has created the illusion that Blackness is not great for fear of everything it will create. There is a knowledge that cannot be replicated from Blackness that others have tried to steal but Jamila Woods describes Black people as precious creations, invoking a love for those that she finds relationship with and laughing in the face of those that come to doubt it.

Tourmaline’s film is able to bring life and love to a Black trans icon that would otherwise be lost within queer iconicity and though no depiction of history is perfect, her interpretation of Marsha P. Johnson illustrates a powerful connection between Black trans women and their ability to tell their own stories. Queer fabulation as a tactic to revitalize histories that are lost is an important tool because it gives power back to the voices that are normally lost in conversation. *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* received a large amount of criticism due to controversies surrounding Tourmaline and David France, director of *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson*, and while many stood by Tourmaline in her accusations about her work being appropriated, many articles still laid out the facts to suggest that France had done nothing *legally* wrong, while pointing out the fact that Tourmaline had stolen archival footage for her film. This is what led me to explore this controversy and try to work through the ideas of what misrepresentation means.

Happy Birthday, Marsha! is a critical fabulation because it imagines a day in the life of Marsha P. Johnson and allows the viewer to witness an intimate portrayal of what she could have been like, what Tourmaline imagined her to be like. While David France may have known Marsha P. Johnson when she was still alive, he would not have the

same relationship to her as other Black trans women might when relating their own experiences to hers. Because of this, her portrayal in the short film becomes a rare look at a historical icon whose story is often lost when she is constructed as a martyr or mammy of the queer community. Fleshing her out as a fully realized person with desires and close friendship can allow other Black queer people to recognize her not just as the ‘person who threw the first brick’ but as another part of the Black community. My criticism of the film says that we should not reduce Marsha P. Johnson to this one momentous event, but *Tourmaline* goes beyond that and recognizes Marsha P. Johnson for who she sees her as.

Lastly, Rivers Solomon’s addition to an already existing Afrofuturist canon can teach us about how to look into the future, past, and present concomitantly. While drawing on a previously existing canon they are able to expertly weave a story of loneliness within community, disability, and monstrosity. *The Deep* is able to explore the loneliness that Yetu feels inside her own community because of the distance she feels to all the members given that she is the only one who knows their history. Yetu gets lost in the memories that her and past historians have collected and feels more connected to her ancestors than to the biologically living wajirru. This demonstrates a need for communities to collectivize through the shared experiences that they come to know as well as the history that times them together. I think this is an important revolutionary tactic because collectivizing requires this collected knowledge and can also provide comfort in understanding the communal pain that exists in the wake.

The chronic pain experienced by Yetu within the story due to these memories is shared by the rest of the wajinru once she passes along the memories. Their collective

pain is able to stir the oceans and wipe out entire landscapes and only when Yetu returns and teaches her people how to manage the pain of these memories are they able to live in harmony again. While disabled people are not able to pass their disabilities onto others in order to demonstrate the difficulties they face daily I think that Solomon showcases what it could look like when Black, disabled, queer people come together and learn from each other how to hold over that pain. They do not erase the historical violence which created the wajinru but instead offer possible solutions that can be shared amongst people.

Lastly, the representation of monstrosity within *The Deep* was interesting to me because Solomon delved into a world where frightening creatures literally rip out of the womb and are born of the violent act of throwing someone overboard. These terrifying creatures are the main characters of the story, and we exist within all of them for multiple chapters while delving into their complex personhood. Yetu is not a perfect person but is seen as equal to the humans who rescue her. She is treated with respect and though she is different from Oori they are still able to create a strong bond that ultimately changes Oori's being into something completely new so that she is able to join Yetu in forging something else.

Looking forward imagine extending this scholarship to other myths and folktales are reinterpreted in a contemporary lens, especially non-Western stories, because I think that these reimaginations tell us a lot about what writers prioritize now and how they are able to fit older ideas into our current socio-political climate. I think that there could be interesting distinctions in how the diaspora might view different iterations of the same stories as well. I also would like to explore more questions concerning iconicity and how it affects our views of history or our memories because it is always said that history is

told by the winners so by extension the people who we place as icons will continuously shift and change depending on who the winners are next. Lastly, I want to continue to explore how Afrofuturism has changed and shifted in themes over the past sixty years from its earliest conceptions to where it could be headed now because with the Trump presidency many pointed out that *Parable of the Sower* predicted many of the current issues we face now. Black feminists have been pointing out the same problems for years but only when it reaches sci-fi levels of destruction (for white people) do we begin to listen. Of course, I will always want to take Black feminism seriously and that will continue to be a guiding force in my research.

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