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THE BLACK PERFORMER’S TOOLBOX: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by
Laura D. Oliver
B.A., University of North Texas, 2012
M.A., University of North Texas, 2014
May 2023

For my father, Kelvin James Oliver.

This is our utopia. A place to consider radical desires and deepest fears. This is our lab. A space to play and produce a vision for one's social ideas. This is our magic. We cannot be duplicated. We cannot be replicated. Learn from us, but do not study us for show. We are a collective, a mixture of voices and bodies, identities and cultures, and an installation of a reality that is soothing for some and unsettling for others.

—Laura D. Oliver
"The Black Collective: A Performer's Toolbox Workshop"

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Abstract

Blackness shines bright like the moon and beams outside of identity parameters that are limiting in Western society to determine its communicative function inside and outside systems of power. When Blackness intersects with performance, various ways to construct identity are highlighted to expand our understanding of theory and methods that emphasize difference and culture. This research project aims to reimagine Blackness as a performance methodology to explore the performer's livelihood onstage and constructions of race that impact identity offstage. Additionally, this project is built from a specific method created from the continuous use of expressive work that reflects societal challenges and responds to transformative healing, such as joy. The data for this project consists of personal encounters with Black culture and a symbolic journey shaped by public discourse surrounding expectations, narratives, and stereotypes about the Black lived experience. The application of life, culture, and politics are present in this translation of characteristics about the fluidity of Blackness and performance that is not solely read as entertainment. Other themes include a look at the influences of Afrocentrism, the diversity of Black creative expression, the significance of Black Feminist critique, and insight into the future of Performance Studies. These findings indicate a need for Black performance methods focusing on the intersections of identity and creative expression to produce a framework that allows representations of Black life to speak for themselves.

Chapter 1. Walk in the Light

I believe that the Spirit is one and is everywhere present. That it never leaves me. That in my ignorance I may withdraw from it, but I can realize its presence the instant I return to my senses.
–Maya Angelou
Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now

Blackness bounces back and forth off the walls, on the floor, underneath the risers, on top of the light structures, and moves freely between white bodies in The HopKins Black Box (HBB) at Louisiana State University. I am uncomfortable whenever the HBB community celebrates the history of this space. Here "Blackness" is not defined by being but rather as a creative space that provides performance practitioners an opportunity to develop research beyond conventional forms of analysis. The possibility of such praxis "provides [a] means to discuss how 'Blackness' is performed on the stage and through the body," but to embody what it means to be Black is "counterproductive to the flavor of roux that acts as the base of the gumbo that is 'Blackness'" (Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*). Perhaps my Black body symbolizes progression, but what makes me different from my peers is precisely what they are most aware of in this space: Blackness.

I hoped my presence in the HBB would be enough to attest to how Black bodies live in constant subjection and rejection. However, this community could not discern manifestations of racism even when I was cast in roles written for white performers. Oftentimes, white performance spaces do not focus on the complexity of racism. They do not create solutions to address what it does to people of color. Therefore, I refuse to continue a reading of Blackness that makes me the object rather than the subject. Such a refusal challenges the construction of Blackness in predominately white performance spaces; if there is not a clear discussion about the significance of race in the co-creation of performance then at some point the move to color-blind

casting[1] will prevail. As a result, I took ownership of how the language and experience of performing Blackness were seen through my eyes.

Centering Blackness means seeing and understanding the world through the Black experience. Centering Blackness emphasizes a need for Black people to thrive in their humanity. This requires us to envision a world where Black people feel safe to talk about the threat and constraint of whiteness. Doing so acknowledges the history of racial hierarchy that intentionally marginalizes Black people in predominately white spaces. A physical experience of freedom must also include mental and emotional liberation, where Black people are protected in their intellect and expression. More than ever, Black people need to express themselves because it challenges others to develop a relationship with Blackness and to see us as worthy of something more than a diversity checkmark. This chapter will focus on some of my experiences as a Black woman performance practitioner that led me to reimagine performance outside a framework often defined by whiteness.

The Journey Begins

I wrote "Performing Nappy: Black Women, Identity, and My Hairstory" for an introductory class to graduate studies about my natural hair journey to highlight expressions of Black beauty as a performance of resistance. More specifically, I explored storytelling as a transformative identity practice to mark expression as something that gives freedom to oppressed voices. I then proposed the paper for a course on protest and performance; however, the instructor disagreed with the connections I wanted to make with identity and activism. I focused on three critical aspects of the paper through descriptions of personhood, sisterhood, and community to pinpoint examples of how Black beauty is discussed as a phenomenon today

[1] In "Seeing Shakespeare through Brown Eyes," Justin Emeka defines 'color-blind' casting as "the practice of casting the best actors for the job without regard to race" (35).

compared to a history of attributes that negatively portray Black women in the media. For instance, stories highlighting Black women's experiences with natural hair were shared in my childhood to enforce damaging straightening practices like presses and relaxers that later affected the relationship I developed with my hair. Storytelling shaped the paper and provided space for me to question stigmas associated with this identity performance of Black women in America.

In that paper, I emphasized that texture makes Black hair unlike other characterizations of hair that point toward a discourse of difference and dissatisfaction when compared to Eurocentric beauty. Each strand struggles because kinky/curly/coily hair challenges the status quo that teaches Black women and girls to hate their natural hair. Moreso, Blackness makes the aesthetics of natural hair a codified performance that assumes spectatorship is always present. Spectatorship refers to how Black women are viewed by Black and non-Black people who do not support or appreciate kinky/curly/coily hair. This argument generates a deeper conversation about Black hair's strangeness to concentrate on how race is desired and simultaneously rejected in public and private spaces.

I argued that natural hair is an extension of an identity performance that also serves as a form of protest because Black women openly acknowledge the politics surrounding kinky/curly/coily textures. However, my reflections alone could not fully capture this performance of racial identity and natural hair. My objection to negativity about natural hair was not a self-promoting act that challenged the idea of "good" hair. Instead, my reflections served as an example of how to understand Black women who choose to wear their hair in a textured state. The argument aligned with a more significant issue in the Black community, but a singular story was not enough to convey the message. While my experiences gave insight into the internal conflicts about Black beauty, I included other perspectives to provide a holistic response to

stereotypes, stigmas, and microaggressions related to natural hair. I turned the paper into a performance that looked deeper into the experiences of Black women with kinky/curly/coily textures.

Like many Black women in America, I struggled with the existing stereotypes related to my natural hair texture when I cut off my relaxed ends. I did not do the big chop, but seeing my hair in its natural state for the first time made me "some type of way" about my appearance. At no point did I describe myself as ugly because friends and family beat me to the punch. Gradually, I embraced the new texture because the natural community on YouTube provided a social support system that valued this shift in Black beauty. Vloggers like Naptural85 (Whitney White) led this wave for Black women and provided easy styling tips to help women who embraced their kinky/curly/coil textures. During this transition to wearing my natural hair in public, YouTube was a safe space to ask questions about healthy hair growth. Often, vloggers included stories about their struggles with embracing their hair with unwavering confidence to remind audiences that we were not alone in our journey. This stance gave me the idea to critique discourse that promoted assimilation and negatively impacted my experiences.

I wanted to focus on performance as a lens to clarify the dimensions of race on stage but also acknowledge social identity off stage. While performance provides a space for me to unfold the nuances of identity, attention to individualism limited the production. In addition, performance becomes somewhat convoluted because identity is constantly renegotiated between members of the same community. In other words, how an individual embraces their natural hair persona heavily depends on relationships with other Black women who embody resistance, as demonstrated in my relationship with naturalistas on YouTube. Therefore, including the stories of other Black women provided more insight into Black women with natural hair.

Unlike “natural,” the word “nappy” highlights a resistive performance. Historically, hair texture is a critical reason white people have minimized Black hair as ugly or unacceptable in social settings like work, school, and other public contexts. According to Noel Cymone Walker in *Is It Time to Reclaim the Word "Nappy”?* The offense is rooted in colorism that is also connected to hair texture. The first time I heard the word nappy used was when a Black man shouted it across the street to a dark-skinned Black girl. She looked beautiful with a big puff ponytail on top of her head. He laughed as she walked away with tears in her eyes. I also felt insulted, but I was confused by the exchange. His words echoed a meaning I did not yet understand to signify bad hair.

The conscious actions of Black women who embrace the nappyness of their hair in public and private spaces call attention to Blackness as an obvious aesthetic choice in everyday life. Blackness cannot be contained to a singular identity, yet collective resistance against negative discourse about nappy hair encourages individual protest. I emphasize that Black hair is beautiful despite perceptions that say otherwise. Therefore, “nappy” celebrates natural hair by reflecting on the following: “I know kinky/curly/coily textures make you uncomfortable, but it is OK because this is my hair.” I titled the production “Nappy Hairstories” to acknowledge Black woman narratives' intersections and explore opposition to wearing natural hair in public spaces. I elaborate in the following sections.

Creating Nappy Hairstories

The performance featured three Black women who are proud of their natural hair. Each performer was required to respond to a series of writing prompts I created to expand upon the concepts of sisterhood and community. From my experience as a cast member in Justin T. Trudeau and Holley Vaughn’s 2014 production of “Big Tex is…Burning” at the University of

North Texas, I gained the idea of using prompts to craft a script. This performance features cast reflections about the iconicity, burning, and reconstruction of Big Tex, a 55-foot cowboy figure featured at the annual State Fair of Texas. My experience in this production gave me the tools to develop a devised cast performance centered on autoethnographic research. Like “Big Tex,” the cast and I collaborated to create an original performance. Our process was also influenced by the mystory method, which considers the textual fragments of personal, popular, and professional discourse surrounding the performance topic. According to Michael and Ruth Bowman, the primary move of the mystory method is made through a metonymic or allegorical relation between the self and performance. The mystory method provides structure to a performance with texts that reflect history (past and professional discourse), mystery (popular culture genres and analogous scholarship), and my story (autobiographical writing). Traditional uses of the method apply structure to a singular storyline. Still, I expanded the form to emphasize a correlation between shared stories amongst cast members and divergent stories in the Black community.

“Hairstory” was established as a performance concept to address the interconnectivity of telling stories about hair derived from “mystory.” As an applied method of theoretical inquiry, “hairstory” formalizes the process used for writing and staging narratives about hair regardless of race. However, narratives about nappy hair draw attention to activism through storytelling to point to a particular perspective about the storyteller’s racial identity. Nappy hairstories are personal and collective; therefore, I argue that while our stories are individual, they are also dependent upon one another. In other words, a nappy hairstory does not exist alone because we are first taught to think about our hair by other Black women. Black women have endured similar social and political oppression, abuse, and racial discrimination that bond us together in a unique way. Popular or common themes regarding Black hair in the media were included in the

script to emphasize shared cultural commonalities in our stories. We each have our hairstory, but our experiences overlap with themes in popular culture like the big chop, product uses, and time spent at the beauty shop. Finally, the professional scholarship was integrated into the script to focus on the history of socialization that influences our understanding of natural hair in America. The research supports ideas that Black expressions of beauty have survived spectator resistance for centuries that has negatively affected social, psychological, and ethical perceptions of Black women. Diverse aesthetic texts were used to point toward a conscious exposure of our Black culture that influences our experiences.

The script for "Nappy Hairstories" points to a form of writing that is not derived from conventional fields of performance. The storytelling pattern provides a collective perspective of life and accounts for the complexities of race that influence social identity individually for each performer. In the performance, we highlighted similar elements of personhood, sisterhood, and community as a structure for the production through aesthetic choices that also shifted the boundaries of how Black women communicate their identities. For example, attention to straightening methods used to style Black hair inspired a scene specifically about hot combs, relaxers (creamy crack), and hair loss to contest the idea of straight hair as a standard of perfection. In the third scene, the performers portray a standard image of a hair straightening ritual commonly identified in the Black community on weekends in the kitchen or at the beauty shop. One performer sits on stage right while browsing a copy of *Sophisticate's Black Hairstyles and Care Guide* to resemble the actions and behaviors seen while women wait for service at the beauty shop. On the opposite side of the stage, two performers are preparing for the press, which is when a hairstylist uses a hot comb to straighten natural hair. One person acts as a mother figure, and the other sits in a chair like a child waiting to get her hair styled. The child persona

tells a story about her experiences getting a press while the other performers attend to the history of hot combs and relaxers, reinforcing her Eurocentric identity.

As the scene develops, the mother prepares to use the hot comb to straighten the first section of the child's hair while she describes the pain associated with the process. She highlights the smell of burned hair and reminisces on burn scars to express her dissatisfaction with hot combs. At one point, the performer who was initially stage right walks over to the opposite side of the stage to assist the mother with straightening the child's hair. However, they remind her to "sit still" to avoid a mistake that can leave a burn scar on her ear. The child moves slightly and screams when the heat touches her ear to symbolically capture the essence of what happens to many Black girls and women while straightening their hair. Afterward, the performers return to their original characters and remind the audience of the struggle to maintain natural hair. They also critique the styling practices to suggest that this example of pain is taught to enforce a rite of passage for Black girls that are often traumatic and irreversible.

In another scene, the performers explore the complexity of how Black women discuss natural hair practices amongst themselves to highlight the developments of hair care tips and styling practices that maintain the nappy state. However, saying that all advice is impractical is an understatement of what Black women experience when crossover into the natural community. The scene begins with a pre-recorded message to introduce the themes covered in the scene that allude to policing. One performer sits in a chair on stage left and flips through a *Hype Hair Magazine* while the two sit on stage right, mimicking the first performer's behavior. The two performers on the right begin conversing to insult the other performer's hair upkeep. The opposite performer on the stage is left to deal with the scrutiny. They all meet center stage to emphasize the behavior as the light shifts to resemble an interrogation. The two performers then

force the singular performer to sit down as they circle the chair while asking her questions about the products and methods used to maintain kinky/curly/coily hair. Questions include: "What kind of oil do you use?" or "When is the last time you cut your ends?" or "Do you still wear weaves and extensions?"

Context matters because whether the audience identifies with the products or styling methods mentioned, an understanding of offensive body language and aggressive tone plays a big part in portraying the scene. I directed the performers to accentuate a disdain for whatever responses were given during the scene to stress the division in our nappy community that promotes a negative perception of natural hair in its unaltered state. The scene develops as the performer in the chair reaches a breaking point with the interrogators, jumps out of the chair, and shares a personal story about her ability to overcome society's pressures, including stigma from the Black community. As she speaks, the other performers wrap her in white sheets to symbolize that the forces of Eurocentric beauty standards remain. She ends the narrative with an uplifting poem highlighting the art of clapping back[2] as the other performers unwrap her. In the last three stanzas, she urges the audience to reconsider how we should think about women with nappy hair. Her arms are up, still tied to the sheets, to create the image of a butterfly.

These examples provide perspective on our conversations or our choices as Black women to reinforce and communicate our identities. When an individual plays an active role in constructing their identity, they implicitly and explicitly request that the characterizations of their

[2] In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks argues that writing is an act of protest by using your own voice. For example, the idea of speaking up for yourself in the Black community is historically, and sometimes presently, considered a negative expression for children who had the audacity to talk back to authority figures like parents or teachers. hooks argues that the struggle to locate self-identification, self-representation, and self-realization are commonalities experienced amongst Black women. I lean to this application of talking back that moves stories from object to subject to underline the power of rediscovery that is inclusive to multiple voices, which is defined as a "clapback." I further explore this concept in Chapter 5.

appearance be considered in different social contexts. The performance seeks to translate those requests that generally suggest that a code of ethics governs daily life. “Nappy Hairstories” highlights how this understanding of performance is essential to Black women’s identity and is the outermost layer to protest. That is to say that performance privileges the capabilities and expansion of resistance and rebellion to support personhood beyond the surface.

However, performance needs layers of description and definition to convey the contemporary struggles for raced identities. For example, the performers use specific words and actions to consider cultural interpretations of straightening Black hair in the hot comb scene that resonates with Black audience members who share similar memories. This includes using colloquialisms like “kitchen” to describe the section of hair at the nape that is considered the shortest and tightest kink/curl/coil. The kitchen, an area in a home, is also common for hairstyling in the Black community. In the performance, we briefly describe accommodating audience members who may not be familiar with double use. Still, the word manifests in the show to honor African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

In contrast, “Blue Magic” is not explained beyond demonstrating its use during the hot comb scene to distinguish between the latitudes of cultures that assume experience is essential to this embodied practice. To clarify, Blue Magic is not a specific trajectory of AAVE but rather a product for hair conditioning grease that supports the maintenance of Black hair. We use this product to symbolize the social influences on how texts and artifacts are used in the performance. The embodiment of Blackness on stage made a distinction in the methodology used to craft “Nappy Hairstories” as opposed to other productions.

I discovered the freedom to embrace a material way of presenting Blackness as an aesthetic on stage. The cultural values connected to embodied Blackness were a source for how

we interpreted the performance. Not only did we discuss the critical implications of challenging the current stereotypes of Black women with natural hair in popular culture, but we also considered our personal experiences to be even more noteworthy in interpreting those texts. "And paying attention to that '*yes* within ourselves' [helped] us define ourselves amid all the counter-messages dominant culture" (Stewart 95-96) rendered to us before the hype to embrace "nappy" was celebrated in mainstream Black culture. The objective was to establish a style of performing narrative that marked the pragmatic and political performance of Black aesthetics and, more importantly, in a way that resonated with Black audiences. However, I could not think of a performance method that articulated anything but that emerged out of a need to explain race and culture without relying on the quality of whiteness or the materiality of Eurocentric performance practices.

After observing how audiences responded to "Nappy Hairstories," I concluded that the ability to put creative skills into practice depended on articulating the textual elements of Black culture. The interpretation and presentation of the show continued to grow as a result. I traveled to different venues that gave me new opportunities to shape the meaning of nappy as a performance of identity and protest. During one talkback for the performance, an audience member asked, *"How did you do that?"* I was confused about what "*that*" meant and asked for further clarification. In their response, the audience member pointed to the structure of how the performance was written, the characterizations of the performers, and attributes of aesthetics that aligned with Black culture. I did not have a clear response because, in essence, I was not sure how to explain that our performative choices were conceived from commonalities in our understanding of embodying Blackness. In my opinion, I did not establish a new method of saying or doing, but rather the performance was based on the actions and behaviors I learned in

my community. I could not find the “right” words to justify that decision then, but I knew this was the start of another research adventure. Writing a dissertation presented itself just after “Nappy Hairstories” ended.

Theorizing Nappy

My first attempt to write about “Nappy Hairstories” as an object of study was a failure. At first, I focused on connecting the performance's artistic, political, and theoretical elements to my personal life without theorizing about racial embodiment. What happened onstage was an expression of Black culture that influenced an artmaking practice offstage; however, the template for indicating the “what” was a challenge to explain how those methods could be reproduced. Performance, as experience, connects the question of these boundaries to widen the range of cultural representation and continuously contributes to a discourse that addresses the advances of theory and method (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Nevertheless, such developments converge to capture Black aesthetics and values.

Recent studies on theater and race-making from scholars like Dorinne Kondo shed new light on sites of cultural production through performance which previous research still needs to address. In *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, Kondo suggests that “The dismissal of “identity politics” arises from a power-evasive notion of identity, occluding the racialized, gendered, colonialist power through which that identity comes into being” (12). Kondo’s point is that perspectives on race, gender, and power are presumed separate from each other instead of acknowledging the intersectional overlap as a point of entry for theoretical questions, including those that account for the reproduction of identity. While other researchers account for the power of performance as it relates to race, few connect it to the agency as a method. Performance has evolved to include Black ways of doing. However, this is limited in

articulating how to decenter whiteness. I further explored these challenges by writing about performance to search for a specific method that characterizes Black culture as a primary source for artmaking.

Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches (BAM) by Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia M. Shaffer connects Black identity and theatre scholarship to frame the essence of Black/African ritual, processes, and methodologies as an alternative to traditional modes of performance that are rooted in Eurocentric ideologies. Specifically, Blackness is highlighted concerning acting methods to establish the positive effects of diversity in performance styles. The contributing authors center Blackness in their research and share various intellectual perspectives on why agency is critical in performance to reflect identity. They also discuss possibilities to rethink European acting practices for actors and directors invested in culturally diverse pedagogical practices. Each offering, also described as a chapter, grounds the importance of concepts rooted in Black Theatre and constructs an argument as to why the methods focus on Afrocentricity. The research does not privilege an aesthetic born from Eurocentric lineage and culture. Instead, it embraces a history of performance methods in African history and the Black experience.

BAM pays homage to Black pedagogy and prioritizes a culturally and racially diverse perspective in acting that centers a framework for Black people interested in theatre making. Luckett and Shaffer highlight the need to improve the next generation of theatre makers primarily taught to use Eurocentric drama structures. For instance, in the introduction, the writers respond to questions about using theatre processes foregrounded in Black ancestry to promote equitable education in acting spaces. Additionally, the contributing authors explore social activism, intervention, and cultural plurality methods to emphasize freedom, artistic pluralism, and diverse ways of creating traditional and non-traditional performances. The reader is asked to

transform their approach to acting or directing as each author thoroughly describes their attention to race or culture when considering the vision for a production.

BAM acknowledges that theories within performance rely on Black thought to practice and arrange creative expression. Still, there needs to be more detail for its application beyond actors and directors engaged in traditional practices that contribute to the advancement of Theatre. This anthology helps describe processes used to mold Black scholarship because the text is both pragmatic and personal. We are challenged to implement these frameworks into traditional and non-traditional spaces that engage in performance as scholarship. Meaning-making, as described by Luckett and Shaffer, is "rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and (re)presents imaginary circumstances" (2). Thus, Afrocentric approaches center on Blackness and Black identity to help actors gain agency over their history. However, this has not been the case for Performance Studies, as a pragmatic history of methodology does not include processes to conceptualize the racial effects of embodied performance.

I agree with the arguments of race and identity in *BAM* regarding my experiences in predominately white performance spaces. Regarding Afrocentric artmaking forms, I am focused on meaning-making influenced by culture through experience. However, the prevailing medium of identity in *BAM only arises* from the exchange between aesthetic texts and performers. Unlike traditional forms of theatre, the performance moves us to a way of thinking centered on cultural analysis. The study of performance is built to emphasize that cultural structures and individual narratives provide exploration sites for aspects of everyday life centered on communication. The

human experience offers critical value for the method in question. Thus, I am invested in performance to shape and reshape identity that adds value to the field of Black expressiveness.

Finding My Lane

My experience with traditional forms of Performance Studies foregrounds conversations about methods that speak to the human experience but not Black identity. For example, in “Nappy Hairstories,” the mystory method was used to craft identity narratives as a form of protest—the interdisciplinary avenues in the performance point to ritual and play processes that accentuate a community's values. However, performance takes on an enhanced experience to invoke agency for the performer that somewhat changes a means of defining oneself. I agree that traditional assumptions about performance speak to the attributes of ritual and play that continue to shape our lives. However, various societal symbols affect my construction of a Black woman identity, as demonstrated in “Nappy Hairstories.”

Though I concede that the term performance is positioned to understand the results of expressing culture, I insist that how identity is translated on stage for Black performers is uniquely embodied as an extension of Afrocentricity.[3] Black Performance connects Blackness's defining principles and methodologies as a means of critical inquiry and creative expression. This distinct framework describes the complex barriers between performances onstage that are influenced by everyday life to shape Black identity. The characteristics that signify Blackness underline the possibilities for identity, difference, and cultural exploration within performance traditions. However, there are more philosophical perspectives on race and identity in performance. Where once scholars relied on specific ways of understanding creative expression, this has not always been the case in Black studies.

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[3] I further explain this concept in the next chapter.

Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "The Characteristics of Negro Expression," is one of the earliest accessible texts transcribing Black people's performance. Hurston's essay organizes Black characteristics to reflect the slippery indications of identity through a performative lens that also serves as a vantage point for expanding Black Performance Methods. In documenting the nature or essence of Black folks' expression, Hurston asserts an ability to describe the creative agency and aesthetic subjectivity that contributes to the history of American performance. This overview emerges as the promotion of culture as the primary source of inspiration. She captures the fluidity of Negro expression through descriptions of drama, will to adorn, angularity, asymmetry, dancing, folklore, cultural heroes, originality, imitation, absence of the concept of privacy, the jook, and dialect.[4] Each characteristic provides an argument to refute claims that Black art is unoriginal. Hurston rejects the idea that Negro expression is like any other art form, which insinuates that white culture is somehow a blueprint for creative expression. Whereas traditional claims to Eurocentric art are fixed, Black art forms operate in a new light to defy imitation. I contribute to this discussion of expression to better interpret the significance of Black Performance Methods, which characterizes Hurston's descriptions into three categories: dramatization, language, and movement, to define the manifestation of Black expression in my research. Each category provides structure to the endless variations of Black life and artwork.

The Breakdown

Dramatization combines various elements of Black expression to explain the being that influences the presentation of identity (e.g., drama, will to adorn, originality, imitation, etc.). These descriptions provide claims to Black expression that emphasize the conscious and

[4] See "Characteristics of Negro Expression"

unconscious nature of drama in our everyday lives. According to Hurston, every aspect of Black life is highly dramatized to reflect the ups and downs that are then acted out and adorned ("Characteristics of Negro Expression," 1). Dramatization works to deploy these developments with a focus on the interaction between performer and performance that formalizes the method. For example, Black performers often use storytelling to think about the problems of the past in a way that keeps audiences engaged.[5] This is demonstrated in "Nappy Hairstories" as performers reflect on painful experiences that do not attempt to meet traditional performance standards but speak to the performer's soul, which also connects to a larger audience.

Language is produced through factors that influence the nature and limitations of the speaker's vernacular or speech production. Hurston initiates the organization of these characteristics for Black expression through metaphor and simile, the double descriptive, verbal nouns, folklore, and dialect. If we attach special language conventions to explain culture, then the complexities of verbal utterances could intend something entirely different that, without question, will remain in a new form. For example, AAVE is a recognizable grammatical form of speech primarily used by Black people to include linguistic features that defy Standard American English. Phrases like "she been ready" or "ain't nobody said that" are not dismissed from the Afro-American experience because they house current meanings within the Black culture that run deep into our understanding of communication. After years of scrutiny, the grammatical structure of AAVE has finally acquired legitimacy in America as a contemporary dialect of a community.[6]

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[5] Scholars like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe attend to discourse that is invaluable to learning how to read and think about community pain and Black death. This work accompanies my vision to share stories about discomfort in the lives of Black people and how the effects of slavery in America.
[6] Henry Louis Gates is currently leading a project for The Oxford Dictionary to document the influences and evolutions of AAVE.

Movement provides a critical examination of the cultural significance of nonverbal communication. At the heart of movement, the effects of race, gender, and class are suggestions made by the performer to recognize the body as an essential external force. Hurston suggests that characteristics like dancing and asymmetry are primary concepts that support our understanding of Black bodies through tests of belonging. Dancing has historically invoked strength, ability, or special features with the body to flatter or appeal to a higher being, such as the Christian God. Specifically, Black dance is embodied dialogue that relies on the presence (which also includes the audience) as an art form to focus on individual and collective engagements with racialization. (Morgan-Lee). More recently Black dance has manifested on digital platforms. In "Black Feminist Pleasure on TikTok: An Ode to Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" Catherine Knight Steele writes about the evolution of Black dance on TikTok to explain how Black women use this as a space to explore pleasure. In short, she argues that as creators on this social media platform, Black women have driven the layers of dance practices that are connected to distinct principles of visibility and audiencing.[7]

Hurston's characterizations reflect the specific influences of culture that emphasize the qualities of Black expression. As a result, the categories that I frame as dramatization, language, and movement provide a structure to analyze the possibilities of engagement between people and ideas that reimagine the aesthetic impact of Blackness. The categories of dramatization, language, and movement explain the use of Black Performance as a method that focuses on interpretative frameworks to critique systems of power. Blackness is a powerful characteristic to problematize the fixation on race in public culture. As a subsect within performance, we can then investigate the terms of Black expressiveness across performative contexts.

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[7] See page 464.

Looking Forward

My work as a performance practitioner has led me to believe that I can find my transformation process through creative expression. Writing has allowed me to discover moments of growth, awakening, transition, and trauma from third grade until now. The very act of writing about performance offers a space to shift possibilities for Black creatives. Specifically, I am invested in performance that privileges the actions and behaviors of Black people and more specifically, Black women. By drawing out the type of processes that contribute to this knowledge, I emphasize that Black Feminist Performance is a primary method of inquiry throughout this dissertation. The aspects of feminist influence are further explored in Chapter 5.

The defining principles and history of Afrocentric performance methods have minimally reached across the practice of performance in academic institutions. Several texts discuss the importance of Black Performance as a theory, but there are few concrete examples that performers can use to develop the art. Hurston's characteristics provide insight to frame how we pinpoint examples of doing within Black expressiveness, but the absence of structure demonstrates possible disruption to its meaning. "The Black Performer's Toolbox: A Critical Autoethnography" posits that in looking beyond traditional forms of artmaking, Black Performance Methods can mobilize racial identity to structure the process of creating a performance.

In Chapter 2. Decenter Whiteness, I continue to discuss the influences of performance scholarship that foreground my understanding of embodied knowledge and aesthetic communication practices to explain the contributing themes of Blackness as a frame to expand this research. Subcategories within Performance Studies such as autoethnography, performativity, ritual, play, identity narratives, and performance processes provide a range of

approaches that offer critical ideas in the field that encourage scholars to discover their pathways. I discuss the work of performance scholars who critically identify theory and method that values the outlook of diverse cultures and scholarship. On a larger scale, each subcategory contextualizes the characteristics of performance itself. However, the absence of race as a primary location for knowledge does not coincide with how I enter the conversation about Black expressiveness. This is to say, a review of literature that mainly influences my understanding of Blackness will provide a deeper perspective on the frames of discourse that foreground racial identity to discuss the work I do as a performance practitioner. The implications of traditional performance practices are theoretically rooted in and relate to what I cover. However, they are independent of the methods I establish for Black performers.

In Chapter 3. What Is Black About "It"?, I outline values essential to Afrocentric paradigms and reflect on methods for Black performers to use when creating performances that focus on identity. The terms used in the chapter characterize the impact of Black Performance that synthesizes liveness to gesture away from Eurocentric forms and structures. Blackness is also highlighted to capture the interaction at play that relies on dramatization, language, and movement to engage discourse about race as performance. I discuss the creation of the Black Performer's Toolbox (BPT) to reflect its engagement with subjectivity and agency as a process through five steps: 1. Decenter whiteness, 2. Identify what is Black About "It," 3. Pain is not the priority, 4. Passion moves the soul, and 5. Trust the process. Hurston's essay and BAM influence the guiding questions I use to create BPT. These texts provide insight into the importance of establishing performance methods for Black performers and situating the uniqueness of Black art. I argue that BPT creates a space for the performer to create art that is expressed through means of culture and blends conversations about embodiment for meaning-making. Moreover,

BPT is an original method designed to articulate the advances of performance scholarship that assesses Black aesthetics as lived experience. Finally, I draw upon my experiences with community performances influenced by the dynamic interactions between director and performer to translate a collective effort of working with BPT.

In Chapter 4. Pain is Not the Priority, I acknowledge that the methods used in BPT center on joy and community as a stance to reclaim healing. I argue that Black performers can discover joy despite the challenges presented in everyday life. Black joy is emphasized as not a romanization of struggle but rather as an alternate response to painful experiences or memories. Black joy includes horticulture and cooking to consider collective resistance and resilience. Thus, I address the work of Black joy as a through-line in this chapter to ask: *How can we get over the pain? What are the emotional consequences of this process? What draws the community's connections together as a collective act of resistance and resilience?* I also work through my pain as a Black performance practitioner to emphasize coping, surviving, and healing strategies that provide a positive outlook on performance futures. The conceptualization of Black joy also draws from “textual qualities of networked digital media” to challenge the norms of political performance and social media activism (Brock 17). Therefore, I highlight examples of how Blackness operates in online spaces to emphasize the hypervisibility of joy as an explicit use of resistance and resilience.

In Chapter 5. Passion Moves the Soul, I explore the intersections of race, gender, and class offstage influenced by Black Feminist praxis. While I primarily learned what it means to be a Black woman outside of educational settings, I slowly became aware of a specific need to include a critical perspective on discourse about Black womanhood in predominately white institutions. Tamura Lomax states, “It denotes between Black female flesh as overdetermined by

colonizing epistemologies and as determined to self-designate within contexts of thriving and oppression" (1). This perspective attends to a particular concern on the visual representation, discursive, epistemic, and ideological terms for how identity gets shaped in everyday life and mass-mediated presentations of the Black female body. Many scholars have written about the advances of Black Feminism, yet a focus on intersectionality reveals a need to adjust our reading and use of critical inquiry about Black women. What is communicated about liberation is as vital as who shares knowledge linked to representation.[8] Therefore, I build on Jennifer Nash's analysis of imagined futurities and Patricia Hill Collin's framework of self-definition to argue that Black feminism deserves more space as a practical method and theoretical framework for Black women to amplify their narratives and challenge the forces of oppression as outlined by the Combahee River Collective. I discuss the art of "clapping back" to frame fundamental mechanisms of resistance that uncover understandings of political activism as a form of Black expression. Conceptualizing Black activism here embraces a new dimension of Black feminist praxis influenced by the conscious efforts of feminists who influence my understanding of passion for social justice. I argue that the need to become more engaged in liberation is inherently an abstract and revolutionary act of resistance.

Finally, in Chapter 6. Trust the Process, a discussion on SoulWork highlights the intuitive process that helped me rediscover my purpose as a Black woman performance practitioner. In defining and developing a language for Black Performance methods, I battled with academic exhaustion. The struggles I faced were intensified by the effects of COVID-19 and racial fatigue that "negatively affect[ed] my mental and physical health as well as [my] career and productivity" (Hall and Bell 10). Within the context of embodying and diversifying a range of

[8] See Lomax's argument on "discourse on Black womanhood" in *Jezebel Unhinged*.

personal concerns, I forgot about the rich tradition of Black Performance Methods until I used SoulWork to help me break the rhythm of depression. The use of SoulWork led me to an understanding of the passion that encouraged me to explore new approaches to arts-based praxis, such as Black Feminist Performance. Therefore, I call attention to Black Feminist Performance as leverage to connect history, storytelling, Afrocentricity, and social justice for Black performers. I conclude that performance practitioners can employ more diverse and creative practices and methodologies in Performance Studies with continuous use. *What does it mean to center a critical praxis where liberation is built into existence? How can performance practitioners support these visions?* Furthermore, separately, *how can we hold space for Black performance practitioners to rewrite the legacy of their scholarly influences?* These questions guide my analysis and connect the objectives of this dissertation.

I hope that in reading this dissertation, audiences are inspired to explore identity more critically, not to center race or racism, but rather to confront the limitations of wholeness for Black performers. I wish to improve the world by appreciating the work that has taught me how to engage my intellect, voice, body, and empathy as tools to respond to injustice through creative expression that emphasizes performance as a methodology. In comparison, Black expression has primarily influenced my ideas and actions about performance, the knowledge to develop a meaning-making process at the heart of traditional scholarship within Performance Studies. Just as fighting injustice is not a solo act in the examples I describe, collective resistance is not reflected as an act achieved by one racial community. My appeal to coalition building is personal, but in Communication Studies, the voice is stronger together. Here is to overcoming systems of oppression that teach us that whiteness is a form to follow; we will not minimize our voices in a time of trouble, and we will not assimilate despite our differences.

Chapter 2. Decenter Whiteness

> To recover herself, [she] has to relearn the past, understand her culture and history, affirm her ancestors, and assume responsibility for helping other Black folks to decolonize their minds.
> –bell hooks
> *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

I hear screams, and a large black stage appears on my laptop screen. Fog lights move back and forth to signal the start of the show while a voice is projected from the speaker saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Beyoncé Homecoming 2018." Suddenly a drummer starts to rhythmically beat her drumsticks on a snare drum that hangs low from around her neck; it was as if this gesture was more official than the announcement. The rhythm becomes faster while the camera shot closes in around her upper body at a slower pace. Finally, she stops and pulls out a gold whistle from her pocket, puts it to her lips, and then blows the whistle to the tempo of a more prominent drum accompanied by cymbals. I could not see the other musicians, but I heard them, and the intensity was felt through the screen. On the last blow of the whistle, the drummer moves out of the camera's view, and a line of color guard performers and majorettes quickly move out of the screen. Finally, there is Queen Bey.

Beyoncé briefly poses for the camera and then struts off the runway to a swaggy tune played by a band that we cannot yet see. She sashays down to the main stage and is dressed like an African queen—like images portrayed in American cinema. She exits the stage while the background dancers strut to the main stage. They are dressed in Egyptian-themed bodysuits paired with black berets and Jackie-O-inspired sunglasses. The dancers complete one routine before a silver barrier rises to reveal the whole band on the mainstage, which includes a drumline, orchestra, more dancers, and a choir. I marvel at the sight of two hundred Black performers with glamorous yellow band uniforms on Coachella's stage. Before I can catch my breath, suddenly Beyoncé emerges in a different outfit from the top of the risers. She is dressed

in a yellow hoodie, custom pair of blue jean shorts, and sparkly silver ankle boots that make her stand out amongst the sea of yellow outfits. She looks marvelous. Then the horns play a measure to signal the first song. She sings her first hit as a solo artist, "Crazy in Love," and the screams from the live audience become louder. This introduction gave me chills because I felt like I was at *homecoming,* an event usually experienced at a historically Black college or university (HBCU), not Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Coachella is primarily attended by white people who probably were unaware of what homecoming was (and is) for Black audiences before the event. Beyoncé and her band maintained the essence of HBCU halftime culture that masterfully synchronized the feeling of visual and artistic communion.

Beyoncé's performance was the most anticipated that year. She was the first Black woman to headline Coachella and redefined how we aesthetically experience Blackness in white spaces. Beyoncé's talent and creativity are significant factors in why audiences gravitate to her beyond everyday levels of celebrity culture. She is an icon because she moves between rhetorical and performative frameworks of icons and iconicity by uniquely defying the expectations of Black performance.[9] Her iconicity speaks to the way whiteness is positioned against Blackness. This includes race, gender, and the measure to which society considers her work artistic and enjoyable. Nicole Fleetwood states in *On Racial Icons: Blackness and Public Imagination*, "Taking into account the normalization of beauty as white, we then see that one of the major effects of the Black celebrity as racial icon is a disruption of iconic whiteness" (63). In *Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture*, Raka Shome argues that "it is only white women around whom narratives of universal love and desire tend to be scripted" (5). This is due to the domains by which race acquires a universal status and

[9] I define an icon as someone or something which breaks social and political barriers because of their influence: therefore, she is iconic because her impact is symbolic or greater than herself.

desire for beauty that simultaneously rejects those who do not neatly constitute the connections that intersect with such a privilege (e.g., fair skin and blonde hair). Shome continues, "White femininity is never completely of the nation; it is merely the staging ground of its fantasies and, simultaneously, the site of its denials and forgetting" (72). Even though she does not meet all the categorical markings established by the music industry, Beyoncé has previously aligned with the standard of whiteness to gain national attention through appearance and sometimes musical sound. In her evolution as a Black artist, Beyoncé's alignment with whiteness has been publicly dismissed by critics and fans on numerous occasions after she released the *Lemonade* album following the birth of her first daughter, Blue Ivy.[10] Beyoncé's new brand of politics is now a site of tension for white audiences that are also linked to an expectation of performed Blackness in public spaces. Although she also gives us a lens to celebrate queer and trans people, her performances are centered explicitly on Black culture.

"Homecoming" is iconic in its homage to Black culture because all performers collectively embody Black knowledge, language, and movement on stage, thus the performance becomes much more significant than Beyoncé. This is not to say that there is a lack, but rather the nucleus of which we experience Blackness is generous as Beyoncé willingly steps back to showcase the myriad of talent and skill amongst the collective. For example, an hour into the show, a group of male dancers dressed in yellow jumpsuits returns to the main stage to deliver a skit that is like a probate.[11] Earlier in the show, Beyoncé introduces them as the "Bug-a-Boos" [12]

[10] The song "Formation" makes a powerful statement about Blackness in the South and open resistance against anti-Blackness on a national level. When Beyoncé performed "Formation" during the 50th Superbowl in 2016, she sparked outrage from NFL fans because she incorporated 'Black Lives Matter' and symbolism from the Black Panther Party in her routine.
[11] A probate is a presentation typically hosted by groups in The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), where new members are uniquely presented to the community to publicly declare their commitment to a fraternity or sorority.
[12] "Bug-a-Boo" is a song made popular by Destiny's Child in 1999.

to provide context for their presence as pledges to her fictitious Greek organization; in this segment, they perform without her. The Bug-a-Boos engage in stepping and dancing to announce their line names, which are based on different songs from Beyoncé's discography (i.e., "If I Were a Boy," "Shining," "Work It Out"). Although they have the same outfit, each performer has a different haircut and individualized step routine for their introduction. During the last opening, the stepper introduces himself as "We Like to Party," which initiates a more significant response from band members. They join the step routine with the Bug-a-Boos that transforms into collective dance on stage.

Beyoncé crafted a performance much different than previous segments by Black artists at Coachella like Prince, Jay-Z, and Pharrell Williams. What made "Homecoming" unique is that while Beyoncé is not the first Black artist to dive into the historical aesthetics of HBCUs, she is the first pop artist to deliver a tribute to its characterization in such a moving way. After watching the entire performance, I wanted to know how she did *it*? As Jason King describes Michael Jackson's *This Is It*, "'It' suggests *thereness* as a response to fans' anticipation, as if to say: 'Here you go, this is what you've been waiting for'" (188). In many ways, I longed to see a performance of Blackness that centers a Black gaze even when occupying white spaces at this level of iconicity. Thus, "Homecoming" becomes a means to visually experience Blackness as a performance that is not separate from the performer. Specifically, the aesthetics emanate from Black culture that influences how we experience the performance and continues a wave of discourse on imagining Black performance.

This level of unapologetic Blackness displays the kind of artistry that Black performers seek to convey on stage. The same night I watched "Homecoming," I wrote the first scene for "Nappy Hairstories." The preservation of Black culture inspired me throughout the show,

allowing individual creativity and skill to speak for itself. This claim to performance reminds us that the performer is also the generative force by which the creation emerges from an embodiment of knowing and being. While “Nappy” outlines the material realities of performing Blackness in public and private spaces, “Homecoming” is a visceral and immediate presentation of Black creative expression for entertainment. In both performances, Blackness serves as a master narrative to celebrate and accentuate a collective performance of culture that highlights original artistry in terms of voice and body. Black performance carries the method by which collective imagination is shaped, allowing each performance to take shape with the audience in various output forms. However, this manifestation makes each performance of Blackness worthy of analysis in scholarly discourse. Further, I am interested in the overlap of race, identity, and culture designed within a community of like-minded individuals to produce and expand our understanding of Black Performance more formally.

In this chapter, I frame Blackness as operative in distinct modes of thinking and doing to analyze what grounds Black modes of expression as a method. First, I review literature based on African aesthetic principles to emphasize the consistent use and performance of Black knowledge and language in public and private spaces. Learning and language are essential to interpret the meaning, culture, and essence of what it means to have an Afrocentric perception and appreciation. Next, I use Toni Morrison’s critique of American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* to emphasize pitfalls in Eurocentric performance scholarship that do not support a cultural framework for Black narratives to flourish outside the frame of whiteness. *Playing in the Dark* provides a structure to articulate the limitations within performance discourse. This develops a conversation about performance that resembles the culture it epitomizes. Racial identity is centered on engaging the visual essence of the performer

and influences personal narratives about life experiences. Then I analyze texts that speak to the performance structure to advance Blackness as a method of inquiry. In this section, I also highlight the evolution of Black Performance as a theory to explain the absence of a method in Performance Studies. Finally, I propose a way to study Blackness through embodiment using The Black Performer's Toolbox (BPT). In the next section, I draw attention to Afrocentricity as a critical perspective of African history, people, and politics to examine its use as a methodological framework in exploring Black Performance.

Black Traditions

In 1969, Steve Biko founded Black Consciousness as a grassroots activist movement in South Africa. The movement was established as a response to the removal of political groups like the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress. These groups served primarily as liberatory structures that opposed apartheid in South Africa. According to Leslie Anne Hadfield in "Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement," the two groups were split on citizenship and land. Pan-Africanists rejected the idea of a multiracial worldview which promotes a belief that regardless of race, anyone could claim ownership of the land in South Africa if they obtained citizenship to the country and the African national congress. After these political groups were banned, representatives of each side joined forces to establish a greater cohesiveness that refuted traditional values of European liberal opinion. As a result, the Black Consciousness movement served at the forefront of the anti-apartheid fight in South America, and after many years, each political group was re-established. The Black Consciousness movement influenced epistemological foundations in Western civilization that launched scholarly research and education in the humanities and social sciences. The first African

American studies department was founded at Brandeis University, whereas San Francisco State University created the first Black Studies program.

In 1962, Afrocentricity was birthed out of an approach to studying world history and later emerged as a scholarly movement in the late 1980s after the term was popularized by Molefi Kete Asante in *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. He argues, "Afrocentricity seeks to re-locate the African person as an agent in human history in an effort to eliminate the illusion of the fringes" (1). Afrocentricity is an essence of African culture and can be mobilized as a philosophical and theoretical perspective to explain the significance of contemporary issues in African culture. He continues, "The point is that Afrocentricity is nothing more than what is congruent to the interpretative life of the African person" (4). The conceptual ideas of Afrocentricity enable us to consider the significant contributions of African thought that demonstrate how a particular way of thinking operates in a pedagogical relationship to history, sociolinguistic, multiracial, and artistic discourse. In essence, Assante argues that Africans have the power to become agents in our research if we emphasize perspectives and experiences that affect our communities.

Primarily, Afrocentricity operates in an African consciousness to promote societal transformation in scholarship that is inherently located in the diaspora. Location, dislocation, orientation, centeredness, and agency are essential to African culture, representing a diverse worldview. Afrocentricity best aligns with my ability to interpret the realities that relate to my everyday life because I am a descendant of Africans, having lived in America my entire life. I think of belonging to a lineage of Africans enslaved in the South. I have seen photos of my ancestors hanging on trees for white entertainment in the form of a postcard.[13] My grandparents

[13] "Truth in Photography" is a non-profit mediated space curated by Alan Govenar.

shared stories with me about picking cotton as a child in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas (respectively) during the early 1900s. I was initiated into racism the day I was called a "nigger" by a white boy in elementary school. I witnessed the painful cries of my sisters and brothers that still ring loudly in my ears, chanting, "BLACK LIVES MATTER."[14] Therefore, Afrocentricity best supports my research on Blackness and Black culture.

Critics have opposed the Afrocentric framework to interpret the perspectives of Black people because their fear rests on questions of ethics, freedom, and democracy. After all, it minimizes the Eurocentric perspective. However, black scholars who primarily use an Afrocentric lens, like Ama Mazama, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Katherine Bankole-Medina, Octavia Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, Stephen Finley, and Saidiya Hartman, to name a few, have contributed contemporary works that pay tribute to the importance of sharing Black experiences. These scholars have created new approaches to advance thinking about Blackness beyond Western civilization. Perhaps we should acknowledge that many of these scholars have survived struggles within predominately white spaces. I appreciate their generous donations of knowledge toward my understanding of Blackness which has shaped how I think about decolonization. Their contributions are relevant to academia, leading to continuing programs such as Africology, Black Studies, African American Studies, or Pan-African Studies in primarily white institutions. This also points to the recent dismissal of trajectories that center Black thought regardless of where they are housed in the academic ivory tower.

Knowledge

I read *Playing in the Dark* by Toni Morrison for a graduate seminar on Southern fiction and performance at the University of North Texas. The professor included non-fiction texts to

[14] After the death of George Floyd in 2020, a series of protests sparked in America, starting in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

provide insight into the connections between characters and authors for the U.S. South. The themes presented in the fictional texts had less to do with self-identifying with feelings and more with a deeper immersion of the emotions and environments mentioned in their narratives. In other words, the outcome focused on increasing the understanding of aesthetic texts as more complex ideas regarding race, gender, sex, and class to create discussions about varying viewpoints in everyday life. Before the course, I was familiar with Morrison's fiction, like *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye. Still, when* I read *Playing in the Dark*, I learned more about the importance of intentionality when writing about Black characters. In this text, Morrison outlines a collection of essays that critically examines the way race is used as an object in American literature to diversify the human experience. She surveys texts by Edgar Allen Poe, Ernest Hemingway, and Mark Twain to demonstrate the faults in the literature that minimize or incorrectly portray Black characters. She suggests that when people write about Blackness of African descent, we potentially get a more precise notion of the "human" experience.

Morrison's explanation of the Africanist persona is provocative (*Playing in the Dark*). White literary writers often subject Black characters to function as surrogates for familiar feelings of American culture: guilt-free. A clear lineage of problematic constructions of Blackness emerges when we look at how Black narratives are appropriated in literature. Race is often discussed in subtle ways. Characters are simplified, and their depth is limited to skin color. White writers have portrayed Black characters as subordinates to maintain a power dynamic for white characters. Specifically, abolishing slavery requires enslavers to be described as good or heroic when interacting with Black characters, emphasizing racial dominance.

A generalized conception of the transatlantic slave trade points to "American Africanism," a governed way of thinking about slavery through the eyes of white authors who

subsequently do not create space for Black characters to talk about the kind of realism that portrays freedom beyond the stereotypes they are subjected to fulfill (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6). Blackness is adjacent to whiteness, yet the narratives of Black characters do not move freely throughout stories written by white authors. This is demonstrated in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, as Black characters do not move from racial object to racial subject. Instead, they remain significations of Blackness that seemed forced and phony. Here Blackness is a marker for a comparison between races to maintain racist ideologies symbolically. Unlike the characters I interacted with in Morrison's novel, *Sula,* Blackness is not independently owned by each character in *Huckleberry Finn,* which explains racism and oppression experienced in the community.

For example, Twain introduces a critique of race and class that the audience can dismiss through a traditional reading of the novel. Huck, a white boy, runs away from home to escape his abusive father. On his adventure to *freedom*, Huck joins Jim, a runaway slave who has recently departed a plantation to avoid being sold to a new master. Comparatively, twain points out the characteristics of differences between Huck and Jim through their nonverbal and verbal actions. In this, the author pays lip service to the evolution of racism vis-à-vis Blackness through white characters' narratives by offering empathy and equality between the two main characters. First, Huck is very racist throughout several parts of the novel and frequently refers to Black characters as niggers. He thinks that whiteness is the superior race in his definition of humanity and that the status of Black people is of less quality and importance. This is until Huck faces difficulties with other white men from whom he steals during his journey to freedom. Jim risks his independence as a runaway slave to rescue Huck; only then does Huck reflect on Jim's humanity as a compliment to his race because he is selfless in his attempt to protect him. While Huck is

portrayed as a child, his responses are problematic and blind to readers that subscribe to the invisible barriers within racist prose.

In this depiction of life before the Civil War, Twain does not critically offer the reader insight into the nuances of language as a violate mechanism to outline the economic struggles of the lower class. He does not include the ideas or thoughts of Jim independently of Huck. He also needs to explain the varying dialectical choices for each character. This novel is not an example of a critique of slavery as argued by literary scholars, but instead, the text reaffirms racist logic through the eyes of a child. Twain uses “nigger” throughout the novel over two hundred times, and yet he does not *master* sensibility for the problem which the word represents. Instead, we are introduced to the inevitable by which things are said. In the next section, I discuss language's importance in manifesting Blackness from an Afrocentric perspective.

Language

Many Afrocentric scholars commonly base their critiques on linguistics. The belief that Standard American English (SAE) is a model for the rest of humankind is well deserving of an analysis that scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Ama Mazama, separately, have explored in their research. In this section, I outline the social intricacies of Black vernacular to elaborate on the powerful effects of intellect geared toward diversity amid inferiority to break down the logic tied to the n-word. I will refer to the developments of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Ebonics, and Black Speech as “Black vernacular” to provide a cohesive umbrella for the variations of linguistics used by Black communities across America that influence my research. In short, AAVE is built from SAE, but the syntax and structure prioritize the evolution of Black people dating back to enslavement. Black Americans often attribute the use of English to a myriad of cultural and socioeconomic factors that differ significantly across

regions on a national scale. Here, I do not distinguish differences to account for multiracial groups that share a connection with identity through language.

In 2012, during an interview in Oklahoma City, Kimberly "Sweet Brown" Wilkins described her traumatic experience of escaping a housefire to news reporters for NBC affiliate KFOR-TV. After detailing the effects of smoke in her lungs due to the fire, Sweet Brown exclaims, “Ain’t nobody got time for that!” responding to the possibility of being diagnosed with bronchitis. Her interview went viral and was turned into a popular internet meme where YouTubers (Black and non-Black) remixed, reenacted, and did remakes of Brown’s genuine reaction to a close encounter with death. Sweet Brown is portrayed negatively in many memes due to her appearance and language use, which directly comment on race and class. Like Antoine Dodson’s “Hide yo kids, hide ya wife,” [15] YouTubers created this parody for entertainment based on a shared short phrase in the Black community. Beyond the jokes, we must address the misappropriation of language demonstrated in recreations of Brown’s interview, which is still considered a viral sensation. From a linguistic point of view, I focus on this example of Black vernacular to reflect on both verbal and nonverbal expressions that have crossed over into mainstream culture.

Even though this is an account of an everyday life experience, Sweet Brown’s interview is an aesthetic text because the reading is pleasurable to audiences. The reproduction and distribution of her interview on social media define this as a performance of race in American culture. For example, consumers of Black digital culture have misappropriated the use of the Black vernacular in the video. A closer reading reveals that some recreations of Sweet Brown stand as a proxy for racism in the reperformance of stereotypes. In *Adaptation Online: Creating*

[15] In 2010, Antoine Dodson’s interview after experiencing a home burglary with NBC affiliate WAFF-48 News went viral and became known as the “Bed Intruder Song” across social media.

Memes, Sweding Movies, and Other Digital Performances, Lyndsay Michalik Gratch considers the social and cultural statements demonstrated in both Brown and Dodson's interviews. She argues that beyond just watching adaptation trends on YouTube, these texts illustrate the complicated history tied to stereotypes and appropriation of Black culture. Gratch draws upon the connections between adaptation culture on YouTube, Black American pop culture, minstrels, and children's culture to explore the ethics of performing Other. However, this analysis is limited in terms of a distinction between language and "who" gets to reaffirm what is explicitly a part of Black culture. This is to say that while Gratch's analysis of the original interview provides insight into the defining moments in digital performance studies, she fails to consider what is at stake in the misuse of Black vernacular in each reperformance. In the next section, I focus on the use of language in Brown's interview.

As Blake and Baxter outline in "10 Things to Know About African American Language," communicative competency is essential to carry and convey the critical characteristics of Black vernacular. The authors emphasize that linguistic competence and performance are imperative rules to measure the speaker's authenticity against speech structure. In summary, linguistic competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of language patterns, while performance identifies the context and style of delivery that is more than words. This also covers body language, such as gestures that add another layer to the rules within Black vernacular. Blake and Baxter note that these measurements of Black vernacular justify our understanding of the speaker's agency concerning aesthetic texts. For example, Sweet Brown's interview provides context for the basis of communicative competency; however, the original performance is ultimately distorted through the stereotypical reperformances. We can compare the speaker's original intention to

multiple, and sometimes contradictory, parodies of Sweet Brown's interview by using the pentad to examine reperformances by non-Black performers on YouTube.

While Kenneth Burke explains the pentad in his book *A Grammar of Motives,* I am interested in something other than the traditional elements of scene or composition and the cultural limitations to action that takes place within a performance. The pentad model in *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts,* by Ronald J. Pelias and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, is helpful to examine the motivation, including a specific engagement of the speaker's motivation and relationship to empathy. They provide an overview of performance as a practice-based process to understand artistic utterances of self and Other.

In Chapter 5: "The Dramatistic Approach," Pelias and Shaffer provide a guide to explore the dramatistic nature of aesthetic texts to guide students as they create their performances. They use the pentad, or a dramatistic approach, in a series of questions that look at the many dimensions of human interaction in the text and guide the analysis. Here, I briefly outline the process for performance (62):

Agent:	Who is speaking?
Purpose:	Why is the speaker speaking?
Scene:	Where and when is the speaker speaking?
	To whom is the speaker speaking?
Act:	What is the speaker saying?
Agency:	How is the speaker speaking?

These questions help shape the performer's positionality concerning the text, but they also provide insight into significant elements of the performance. For example, one of the subset questions in "Scene" challenges the performer to consider the performance's physical and

temporal location. In other words, we are asked to consider the site from which the persona speaks. “Purpose” also asks the performer to make an informed decision about the persona’s intent for speaking. Usually, this answer is not clearly defined in the text. The authors provide a series of sub-questions to guide the analysis that helps explain the motivation as to why the persona might be speaking (i.e., to entertain, to persuade, to inform, to understand, etc.) or the cultural values that guide the utterance. The dramatistic approach also translates the discoveries made in textual analysis into actions and behavior for the performance, such as delivery, props, costuming, and staging.

I extend this approach to measure class, race, and gender stereotyping in each reperformance of Sweet Brown: Who is speaking, and what do they look like? Why is the speaker speaking, and what do they sound like? Where and when is the speaker speaking? To whom is the speaker speaking and why? What is the speaker saying, and is it different than the original text? Finally, how is the speaker speaking?[16] An Afrocentric lens extends beyond the context of everyday performance to maintain the intellectual substance of Blackness that is imperative for analyzing empathy towards the Other. A shift in language is marked in Sweet Brown’s interview when she says, “Ain’t nobody got time for that,” which evolves the questions that frame the original pentad. For example, in an Afrocentric lens, “who is speaking” points to Sweet Brown as the original speaker and calls attention to the positionality of performers who embody her as a Black woman. Additionally, “how is the speaker speaking” illuminates problems that can arise when we consider the performance of Blackness as misaligned with an intent to entertain.

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[16] Adapted from *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts,* 62-63

Many examples reveal discrepancies in the linguistic competence of performers who portray Sweet Brown as unintelligent.[17] Specifically, one adaptation does not use Brown's original soundbite or autotune remix and establishes anti-Blackness by mocking her tone and gestures.[18] I identify this type of performance as problematic because the performer recreates a character they perceive as a poor, ghetto, Black woman, with explicit labeling where race and ethnicity are constructed through props, costuming and repetitious acts like tone and gestures. In another example, the performer whitesplains, "Ain't nobody got time for that," as an attempt to provide clarity or structure to Black vernacular for white audiences.[19] While the specifics of this performance do not produce similar characterizations of Black vernacular, the use of SAE is linked to the production of social categories in the broader sense that privileges Eurocentric speaking structures. SAE also advances on the premise of falsehood and fantasy to reject the influences of linguistic structures birthed out of struggle and resistance.

We cannot be ignorant of the consequences of misrepresenting Blackness that results in a particular form of racism. This includes saying the n-word. Just as we cannot choose to eradicate it, we cannot pretend that we do not know this word is offensive. For example, the n-word distances the reader from what Twain is trying to do in his critique of slavery and anti-Black work at the expense of Black characters in *Huckleberry Finn*. The n-word, as previously stated, is uttered more than two hundred times. This bears weight on the individual who uses it just as much as the word itself. Jim's "good nature" is only established through his ability to protect Huck from other dangerous white men, despite being called a nigger. Further, Jim is tasked with

[17] See "Ain't Nobody Got Time fo Dat Remix (Parody)" and "LEGO Ain't Nobody Got Time for That."
[18] See "Ain't nobody got time for that. Three Accents."
[19] See "Ain't Nobody Got Time for That (Proper English Translation)."

the responsibility of holding space for Huck, while Twain does not provide a particular explanation for this problematic dynamic.

The flaws and imperfections of *Huckleberry Finn* are deeply rooted in American culture derived from Black/white polarity and is an example of what fuels the romanticization of Blackness in America today. Scholars like David E. E. Sloane further explore this matter to suggest that Twain's use of the n-word is problematic and repulsive to readers offended explicitly by it. These specific examples limit descriptions of Black characters and what Morrison addresses in her analysis of representation in literature. Although Twain initiated dialogue about race in 1885, his portrayal of Black people is not collaborative. It does not include space for all characters to respond to the outwardly offensive pressures of racism. Twain instead communicates no consequence for those who perpetuate racist language and welcomes a space to misinterpret meaning.

J. L. Austin argues in *How to Do Things with Words* that language is often based on a categorization of utterances that are both descriptive and evaluative to mark the characteristic of a statement that is an action. These speech acts, or utterances, are performative and explicitly function to describe what one is doing and make a statement that one is performing an action. This notion of linguistic behavior can be used to distinguish the theatrical meanings that the speaker uses within the functions of the n-word. In "Introduction to *Performativity and Performance,*" Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick extend connections of performative utterances to demonstrate qualities that structurally establish a pattern for speech acts and articulate its uses that emerge from a myriad of performance practices. Specifically, the authors look at the quality of individual speech acts to examine how one opposes social order through performativity and performance of Blackness. For example, if a white man calls a Black man a

“nigger” to express their discontent with upward mobility, is it possible (and even more suggestive) for the respondent to say, “Yes, sir”? In this example, I borrow the structure that Parker and Sedgwick use to point out the contradictions of interpellation (204). However, I am more concerned with the underwriting relations on the negative side of utterances that declare war and account for far more than a singular expression.

Scholars provide a framework to discuss the nature of linguistics as a critical theme in Afrocentrism that we should consider when forming new research questions about Black culture and language that is explored in both Sweet Brown’s interview and *Huckleberry Finn*. As an extension of Asante’s work, Ama Mazama points out the epistemological foundations of language regarding the experiences of Black people in *An Afrocentric Approach to Language Planning*. She states that dominant language techniques are intricately linked to measuring the means of humanity based on the European experience. This control extends to so-called Third World countries and declares that those who follow the rules of SAE have achieved a high level of education in settings like school or work. However, Black vernacular speakers are linguistically versatile due to the demands that require us to operate between two modalities of speaking, otherwise known as code-switching. The phonetic sounds of Blackness are foundational and demonstrate a grammatical difference rather than an error, as portrayed in mainstream media. Those who communicate in a language pattern inherently based on Black consciousness appreciate the unique expressiveness found in grammatical structure and innovation. Abusers who mock sounds or do not fully grasp the concept of the syntax of Black vernacular demonstrated in recreations of Sweet Brown’s interview violate her by stereotypically portraying her. In the next section, I advance an interpretation of Black Performance to emphasize discussions of Black knowledge and language concerning performance.

A Letter to Performance Studies

Performance Studies, a sub-discipline within communication, uses performance as a theory and method to measure embodied knowledge in ephemeral, emotional, and physical contexts. As a theory, performance studies argue that performance is a way to understand people and culture and focuses on concepts like ritual, play, and performativity to make sense of everyday life. As a method, performance practitioners make performances and explore the implications and ethics of originality, imitation, and aesthetics to explain human interaction as essential to our knowledge about culture. According to Elizabeth Bell in *Theories of Performance*, the intersections of communication and performance create a common ground to explore practical applications of meaning in our everyday lives (16). Performance is a communicative process that marks the expressive nature of information transmitted through people, culture, and society. Information is not only communicated, but performance has the power to transform lives and make them better.

In Chapter 6 of *Performance Studies*, Pelias and Shaffer introduce a five-step method to explore voice and body that encourages the performer to develop a deeper understanding of their performance. First, a performer identifies performance choices for the presentation through the steps of playing, testing, choosing, repeating, and presenting. Next, the steps lead the performer through a physical analysis of verbal and nonverbal behavior. For example, I have discovered nuances in my voice by releasing the stress of choosing the perfect delivery style. In this step, I play with the highs and lows of vocal inflection through a warmup exercise before reciting my text(s). This allows me to pinpoint my vocal strengths and influences my choices for final performances.

In Chapter 7, the authors focus on empathy as a tool for the performer to use in exploring the aesthetic communication of others. They argue that empathy is an important skill when trying to adopt another's feelings in the development of a performance of another. Empathy can be developed through vocal and body expression to the degree to which the performer shares their feelings and recognizes the emotional state of the persona. Pelias and Shaffer describe the empathetic process in three phases: recognition, convergence, and adoption. Recognition asks the performer to characterize the broader relationship of the speaker to persona and audience. Usually, this initiates reflexivity and encourages the performer to prioritize listening to gain insight into the other person's feelings. Convergence follows recognition as the speaker merges listening to create unity with the other. In this part of the empathetic process, the performer discovers new ways to make the experience more meaningful by asking questions to view the world through the other person's eyes. This challenges the speaker to adjust their personal feelings and move to the final stage of the process, adoption. Adoption fuels the relationship between self and others by supporting a fixed dimension of empathy to demonstrate understanding. This generally encourages the performer's ability to establish a genuine connection with the Other, enhancing the overall performance. The exploration of empathy in *Performance Studies* has provoked questions of intent in my research that deals with performing marginalized and oppressed identities, particularly my identity as a Black woman.

Methods covered in *Performance Studies* provide more understanding of performance as a transformative process. Pelias and Shaffer outline the general layers of oral interpretation to explain a performer's relationship with aesthetic texts and offer procedures that guide the performer through the different dimensions of dramatism, the development of fundamental skills for presenting, and a deeper relationship with the other through empathy. I argue that

performance enables the performer to describe the difficulty of engaging self and other by reimagining the boundaries of aesthetic texts as a dynamic process onstage. However, studying performance as a constitutive element does not consider the implications of consciousness tied to doing. The knowledge of interpreting aesthetic texts is only a performance fragment compared to the meaning discovered onstage. My experiences with performing texts have expanded my knowledge of verbal and nonverbal utterances, gestures, and movement. However, I believe that performance practitioners must be concerned with embodiment to respond to the critical developments in society that look to culture for inspiration.

Embodied research has served as a primary development in my scholarship and is reflected as a method in this dissertation. When mobilized and embodied, performance can be a means of critique or resistance to social boundaries. According to Julie-Ann Scott, performance justifies the performer's establishing identity in a way that creates space to implicate the body critically. The body is a site of struggle that serves as a primary carrier of historical meanings, often extending into the discourse of race. Specifically, race is a social value based on the perception that is always already embodied to situate discourse on the subjectivity and agency of the performer. Historically Black bodies are connected to painful histories in performance that focus on disenfranchisement and objectification that does not engage with healing or wholeness. Performance offers a vantage point for Black performers to practice and participates in the embodiment of their research that redefines the world and the lives of raced bodies who live in it. We can use reflexivity intentionally and apply tools like empathy to generate critical performances that affirm safe spaces for performers at the margins.

Autoethnography focuses on the body as a site from which research is generated. According to Tami Spry in *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*,

autoethnography is a self-reflexive method that counters traditional ways of representing the self. The autoethnographic performer seeks validity and truth by reflecting on interactions between self and Others and their surrounding contexts. Autoethnography also inspires audiences to reflect critically on their own life experiences. This method taps into the material experience of the performer and its relevance in the broader culture. I argue that we must expand and rethink performance in terms of positionality and its application to include the perspectives of performance practitioners who are marginalized and oppressed. Autoethnography provides an opportunity to situate those experiences through performance with responses that can significantly impact a person's everyday life.

Scholars often study identity by analyzing the social, cultural, and historical influences on everyday life performance. In Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* the performance of identity exists for the benefit of self and others. "Goffman uses the term 'performance' to refer to all the activity of an individual in front of a particular set of observers, or audience" (Crossman). He suggests that our presentation of self depends upon the stage/setting and audience by which we "regularly function in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman 13). While art and everyday life connect, the two are not the same. Mary Strine analyzes an aesthetic form of performance praxis to expand upon the material and particularity of production that engages history as an aspect of cultural experience. Here, the relationship between praxis and aesthetic communication encourages scholars to consider everyday life performance critically, reflexively, and socially responsive. Strine's analysis creates a new perspective on art and everyday life in the field of performance that generates new conversations about personal narratives, rituals, media events, and politics. However, the interconnectedness between possibility and culture does

not create a point of entry for scholars who believe their identity serves as a conception of art to explain performing the self in terms of race.

Race is certainly not limited to the effects of racism and bias in America. There is no accurate representation of marginalized groups in the media, and today many people in the Black community still do not feel *safe*. The countless efforts made by Black people to learn and grow from this history of racialized violence stem from our communities' creative, academic, professional, and cultural contributions. Therefore, erasing our contributions to performance as a theatrical and contemporary practice limits Black agency as a resistive practice. The origins of creative expression and art specifically are highlighted here to frame the struggles and pleasures of Black life that provide a path to affirm who I am as a Black woman and what I do as a Black performance practitioner. Here, I ask the kinds of questions raised with identity to shape the inner workings of traditions within Performance Studies that do not intersectionally connect race, gender, sexuality, and class. The issue is not that Black representation does not exist, *so why is there such an absence in our discipline as a primary contributor to our understanding of Black methods?*

When I think about scholars who influenced my early understanding of performance, the sum of the parts is white. This is not to say that every text I have encountered before BPT is inherently Eurocentric (written by a white scholar or a singular representation of race), but rather that performance scholarship is often segregated by specific measurements of technique that hinders my ability to flourish as a Black performer. In the next section, I develop my discussion of Blackness to expand upon scholarship that has used a decolonial agenda, whether found in communication studies, feminist studies, or African epistemologies, to reach a common goal of decolonizing the discipline.

Blackness

Blackness is fundamental to the characterization of culture from the very beginning. Theorizing Blackness is difficult because its meanings shift in analysis depending on the presentation of everyday life as performance. According to E. Patrick Johnson in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, "the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of Blackness is the very thing that constitutes 'Black' culture" (2). Johnson's point is that the rigidity of Blackness can manifest in various sites within a culture that highlights productivity, spontaneity, immediacy, interruption, and a feeling of intimacy. He continues,

> But how does one theorize these various citations and cultural significations and the politics they engender? What happens when 'Blackness' is embodied? What are the cultural, social, and political consequences of that embodiment in a racist society? What is at stake when race or Blackness is theorized discursively, and the material reality of the "Black subject is occluded? (2)

What do we overlook when we shift our attention to the outcomes of analyzing what Blackness is rather than the stake to which it produces embodiment through seeing, thinking, and being? Johnson gets at the need to analyze Blackness in a way that is aware of the unpredictability of authenticity as it relates to cultural exchange and understanding. Blackness (itself) defies categorization because it is not self-constituting and exists as more than a placeholder to construct and deconstruct culture.[20] Studying the embodiment of Blackness can be repositioned as "an ongoing opportunity to redo [or clarify] the past" (Colbert 14). Blackness is dynamic, shaping and shifting in everyday life to signify new points of consciousness and patterns of expressiveness. Its primary claim to performance is about the presence of culture and preservation of play with form and structure, yet without a model to describe what performed

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[20] See Appropriating Blackness p. 2

Blackness looks like or does not look like, “the substance of aesthetic impact in promoting varied forms of identification [does not generate] consequence, or even, ‘change’” (Batiste, “Black Performance II,” 2).

Johnson claims that while performance is a method of inquiry used to ask questions through live performances, it only sometimes accounts for race as multifaceted (“Black Performance”). Blackness and performance have structures that move in cohesive and conflicting ways. As a through-line, race connects a less-than-settling articulation and elaboration of issues constituted when Blackness is embodied. Blackness, performed, is positioned as a form of resistance that can be interpreted as a pawn, a consequence of performance, or as eradicated from it. Much in the sense of what is unstated and indescribable, Performance is an effective tool to consider aesthetic communication beyond itself, but Blackness produces discourse beyond intentionality. Blackness performs. Blackness is fluid, timeless, and unconventional and can be used to describe the everyday life experiences of Black people that also highlights joy and pain. From a theoretical perspective, Blackness emphasizes individualism and works against the belief that identity is fixed.

Performance creates a space to reimagine what it means to describe performed Blackness, but the material ways of describing Blackness are underdeveloped in Performance Studies. For example, “Homecoming” demonstrates how Blackness is more than an executed experience of race, self, and community. Blackness is the backdrop of this performance and shows up most clearly in its negation of whiteness, but Blackness is more than just an appearance of what is not white or skin color. This is highlighted in the resistance to objectification as formal stylistic inspiration from the HBCU structure. We also hear what “must not only be seen but heard if it is to be understood” (Jenkins 344). There is an instructive example in reading the dynamism of

Blackness as a conflation against the nature of experiencing in a world where one can observe by looking and feeling in the performance of "Homecoming." However, this is not a traditional reading of everyday life performance. We do not have access to the language by which Blackness is constituted as stage culture to signify histories of Black life and, at times, invited audience participation or employing what Johnson calls "appropriate" boundaries to include non-Black individuals.[21]

While the above analysis implies that Blackness is a distinct phenomenon, performance lays the groundwork to transform these identity narratives. According to Stephanie Leigh Batiste, Blackness relies on the symbolic shift of the performer to 'transgress, transcend, and even subvert established racial categories," which is therefore used as a tool to make the change on and off stage (1). Blackness is ongoing and conversing with identity's role in our social interactions. I make a connection here that points to the fluidity through which people are classified through verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, such as speech and bodily gestures, to explain how Blackness is performed. The theories that attempt to foreground praxis for Blackness in a patriarchal, white supremacist, homophobic, and capitalist society reemphasize a promise they cannot fulfill. Therefore, Black Performance points to social change and marks Blackness as visible on stage to spectators instead of the invisibility to which it is perceived through whiteness as a desire for skin color. Next, I reflect on Black Performance theories and methods to understand racial identity and culture as social phenomena on stage.

Black Performance

In the introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera argue in "Performance at the Intersections" that "performance has evolved

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[21] See *Appropriating Blackness* p. 3

into ways of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world" (7). The authors address the ongoing challenges within the field that demonstrate the use of performance as a site to cover issues concerning language's role in theory and practice. I understand performance in this broader context to uncover the complexities of meanings and practices that uniquely embrace culture. Intention, questions, and claims overlap to create deeper conversations within the performance to examine everyday life's material, physical, and situational aliveness. [22] While Madison and Hamera offer explanations for the "means" by which things are "done,"[23] I am drawn to theories and methods that critique power outside of the original site of performance, like racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism.

Bryant Keith Alexander and Mary E. Weems stretch the notions of critical reflexivity and social responsibility in performance to reach an understanding between discourse and textuality that guides speech about everyday life performance for Black people. In *Collaborative Spirit-Writing and Performance in Everyday Black Lives*, the authors draw upon lived experience to lay a claim to the struggles and fears that positions Blackness concerning whiteness that is described as superior. The authors highlight terror designed through slavery and manifested in structures around race and anti-racism today, such as the Trump administration and the Coronavirus pandemic. Alexander and Weems share their experiences as two Black people to provide evidence for the possibility of art that engages social injustice as a site of discontent. Similarly, Batiste offers a myriad of ideas about the capacity of performance, which opens a space to

[22] Here, aliveness refers to what Kevin Quashie describes as aesthetic texts that "can be read for what they tell us about our being: about how we are and about how we can be," 2.
[23] xv- xviii

examine the Black lived experience and captures Black systems of knowing and being to reflect on race, self, and community ("Black Performance II").

As a theory, Black Performance is an interdisciplinary area of study that critically considers how Blackness is mobilized as performance. In the introduction to *Black Performance Theory*, editors Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez address the early histories of life and culture that influence Black performance styles and sensibilities associated with expression through works by Robert Farris Thompson, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent, and Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Kennell Jackson to frame a path of defining "Black Performance" as a field of study. DeFrantz and Gonzalez argue that these works have collectively contributed to the academic discourse on performance and broadly consider the concept of Black expressiveness in public. Their discussion broadens the scope of how we think about Blackness as an art form which has previously emerged through Hurston's essay. DeFrantz and Gonzalez manifest theories with Black Performance as interdisciplinary examples, but they do not articulate the methods that mark race as a resistive response in performance.

For example, in their analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," DeFrantz and Gonzalez discuss the early implications of Blackness as its site of production to communicate the means of language and gesture as a foundational practice in a community that embraces originality. As outlined in Chapter 1, Hurston, while not the first scholar to frame Black art,[24] creates a list of expressive forms of Blackness[25] DeFrantz and Gonzalez highlight Hurston's text to discuss the broader implications of sites, modes, practices, and performance styles to emphasize the evolution of Black aesthetics. They argue, "she allows Black performance to be in dialogue with itself, the world around it, and the lives of Black

[24] W.E.B. Dubois' essay "Criteria of Negro Art" was published in *The Crisis* of October 1926.
[25] See "Characteristics of Negro Expression"

people" (3). The author's point is that Hurston's essay serves as a lens to investigate the context and meanings of Black performance. Furthermore, "Negro Expression is an act of confirmation that is aesthetically motivated and foundational to understanding the community that practices it."[26] However, DeFrantz and Gonzalez neglect to engage in a closer reading of how to use Hurston's essay in terms of what constitutes performance practice. Instead, they focus on a reading of aesthetic concerns to document the evolution of Black Performance.

Fred Moten offers a reading of Blackness that can be understood as a performance that performs possibility in terms of encounter, ensemble, and improvitazation,[27], which resists objectification. In his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, he suggests the kind of radicalness that cannot be separated from performed Blackness to emphasize that hearing Blackness is also an extension of how performance comes to life. When Blackness manifests as an aesthetic, it is possible to think about the negations of materiality and an immateriality[28] that cannot be separated from Black performances. Batiste supports the idea that Blackness is a characteristic of creative play that shapes performance foundations. Specifically, she emphasizes the possibilities of characterizing performance as "a layered relationship with the capacity of Blackness to be about itself and about things beyond itself" (1). In "Black Performance: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," Johnson sustains the argument that Blackness is a site of inquiry that demonstrates significance within performance already embedded with race and ethnicity. In other words, Blackness is deployed through performance. This is to say that

[26] See introduction to *Black Performance Theory* p. 3
[27] Improvisation is an interpretation of art and politics and that works within disruptions, traditions, and frames of spontaneity.
[28] "'Animateriality' is described by Fred Moten as 'the material reproductivity of Black performance' and that this is 'an ontological condition'" (Crawley, 128). See *In the Break* p. 18.

Blackness moves in and through performance as a lens to construct an image of identity and culture that highlights how we transform ways of doing in the future.

According to Harvey Young in "Black Performance Studies in the New Millennium," Black Performance has demonstrated significance as theoretical action. The field has flourished in its readings of enactment and experience about race, gender, and class mainly due to five factors that Young outlines: (1) The explorations of intersectional identities that explicitly exist within minority communities that consider the performance of Blackness as scholarship; (2) Blackness is seen as a nuanced critical trend that ranges across disciplines including Performance Studies to account for the lived experience that expands knowledge about social sciences and humanities; (3) Black Performance scholars who studied under prominent Blackademics have emerged in performance and cultural studies that speaks to experiences with race and gender; (4) Intersectional research has been embraced by institutions and professional organizations that support scholarship centered in Black identity to inspire future conversation in the field; [29] and (5) Critical writings by Black Performance scholars constitutes a core foundation for Black Performance as a field for readers to engage with Black artistic expression and provides a guide to understand its influence globally.[30] Black Performance theory maps out a space to theorize the importance of Black traditions. Young's factors support the development of a set of ritualized actions that speak to markers of Blackness.

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[29]"These groups include professional associations like the Black Theatre Network; the Black Theatre Association and the Latino/ Latina Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education; the Black American Literature and Culture Division of the Modern Language Association; the Minority Scholars' Committee of the American Studies Association; the Collegium for African American Research; the Hemispheric Institute; and the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas, among others" (*Black Performance Theory* 290). In addition, scholars have created their own collectives that are not affiliated with professional associations, such as BPT: Black Performance Theory, which is curated by Thomas DeFrantz and emerged from a symposium organized by Richard Green in 1998.

[30] In his review, Young analyzes textual contributions by Stephanie Leigh Batiste, Toni Perucci, and Michele Elam to the developing field of Black Performance Studies.

In sum, Black Performance is grounded in lived experience and provides intimate reflection about meaning-making that can be traced back to the performer and not solely the process. Meaning-making is rooted in an Afrocentric paradigm that prioritizes Blackness as theory and Black expression to improve our understanding of Black culture. When Black performers find themselves in an awkward position of aligning with traditional forms of performance to explain what transcends lived experience, a conflict to authenticate Blackness in whiteness arises, resulting in a description of race as a qualifier instead of embodiment. Many white performance practitioners do not engage in Black performance because, on the surface, they cannot assert their own racial identity in the origins of African history. This is true. However, a basic understanding of this subset of performance does not directly relate to racial identity but rather the rituals, processes, and techniques that center on Black culture.

As Gloria Nziba Pindi puts it, "African scholars decry how Western/white-centric epistemology has historically served as the criteria of knowledge production and validation, leading to the suppression of non-Western ways of knowing" (331). Pindi's point is that decolonization extends to our preferences of all Western scholarship over other ways of knowing, which is demonstrated in research about Black Performance as a method. Earlier, I framed Afrocentricity and Afrocentrism to establish a focal point on a Black perspective to discuss scholarship about Black culture, life, and people that reassess the widespread assumption that whiteness implements the standard for knowledge and language. This is compatible with Pindi's argument that considers the goals for decolonization as an execution of a movement that advocates for different ways of knowing. In discussing Blackness, *on what basis are Western concepts primarily deplorable?* This is not to say that they do not help provide insight into the regenerative process that occurs on all levels of social organization, like relationships between

self, others, and groups. Though I concede that the fight for decolonization specifically rests in ways of knowing, I also acknowledge that Western epistemologies provide some structure to how I consider the method in performance studies. For example, we can talk about language myths and the repercussions of the misuse of Black vernacular. However, verbal expressions have often crossed over into the performative, as outlined by Austin, and to an extent, Black vernacular is always performed. Further, the impact to which Blackness is performed includes more reflection on the embodiment. I return to Morrison to show how one may portray Blackness as an embodiment rather than a qualifier.

Conclusion

Morrison writes a fictional story about a Black heroine who comes of age named Sula. She presents independence, strength, and pride uniquely compared to other Black women in her community. Morrison characterizes Sula as someone who does not find a balance between a happy and whole life because she lacks empathy with others as she bravely faces adversity until death. Her behaviors and romantic relationships are not ideal. Still, she does not care—Sula is not worried about other people's thoughts and often confronts the other characters about their opinions of her promiscuous lifestyle. Morrison welcomes an opportunity for readers to respond to Sula's actions as a mother to protect her children through the narratives of Nel (her childhood best friend) and Eva (her daughter). We recognize Sula's love/hate relationship with her mother, which affects her unorthodox actions and behaviors as an adult. These factors are mobilized in various ways to make for an exciting culmination of *Sula*.

A primary stance shared by the characters is that the influence of whiteness is not a focal point in their community, even if most of whom are Black are affected by the oppressive structures that control them. Their town is called “The Bottom,” a name derived from a story

about a white farmer who played a trick on his slave. The story is told by many that the farmer promised the slave freedom and a portion of his land in exchange for labor, but he gave him unfertile land (The Bottom) that is worthless. Morrison acknowledges the role of race and racism in the novel to note how Black people systematically suffer the aftermath of manipulation through examples of law-making, lack of access to health care, property, unwelcoming social norms, and language barriers.[31]

Additionally, the use of agency for each character is an essential literary tool that influences how readers experience the community. Unlike the traditional narrative structure demonstrated in Huckleberry Finn, the storyline is circular as Morrison primarily concerns with the ideological construct of womanhood through Sula's life from birth to death. In this way, the Black experience is not framed in a white narrative, but rather Sula emerges with a sense of power through resistance. This move in literature pushes us to think about the presence of Black characters more collectively and individually in examples of creative expression. Specifically, the exploration of conflict and society in *Sula* builds on a sense of community manifested through Morrison's eyes to create possibilities for Black narratives to grow outside oppressive environments. She challenges our traditional ideas about identity to highlight an important principle when writing about Black characters: let them speak for themselves. The most exciting take from her critique is that the literal representation of race in literature is just as important in our everyday lives. The concept of representation misses the mark in *Huckleberry Finn* when Twain describes Black characters as flat and buffoonish. Every non-Black author has not committed such an offense. However, Black writers must participate in the conversation and

[31] See texts like *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon*.

develop stories that include Black characters to enhance their understanding of the American experience and beyond.

Mazama provides a new script for writing about the Black community by suggesting more development to validate knowledge and language. For example, concrete experience is often a factor in determining the narrative's authenticity and operates as a symbolic representation of everyday life commonly expressed in a community. Interpreting concrete experience requires little to no scientific or historical verification to construct what is *true*. Sojourner Truth delivers a speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio which highlights an interesting example of lived experience,

> And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (1)

Here, Truth justifies the criteria to interpret her experiences through descriptions of realistic images such as body parts and physical labor to deconstruct stereotypical perceptions about the strength of Black women. Although her audience is primarily white, she asks a rhetorical question that embodies Black womanness to prove her point which is also found in her description of child labor. Her narrative addresses the criticism associated with sexism and racism and the paternalistic treatment of white feminists. Stuck between the hardships of being Black and a woman, truth demands equality by telling her narrative through a method for epistemological tenants in Black vernacular that is also applied in the works of authors like Zora Neale Hurston.

According to Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: The Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Hurston prioritizes the Black experience in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to make

use of Black vernacular, rituals, and traditions that outlines narrative and rhetorical strategies within literary discourse. Gates argues that this complex form carves out a metaphorical perspective only available to Black authors who mark the beginnings and endings of their scholarship in an African American "signifying" practice. Signifying, as Gates notes in "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," is used in Black discourse to explain different connotations within SAE that describe a technique or style of literary language done in a particular way (686-691). In other words, signifying defines the use of irony to convey ideas and opinions in Black vernacular, specifically used in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, this is also demonstrated contemporarily in "Homecoming" by Beyoncé, Sweet Brown's interview, and *Sula* by Morrison. Many Eurocentric depictions of Blackness do not provide enough evidence to support Black people as speaking subjects because they are fundamentally portrayed as objects in telling histories aligned with slavery. Indeed, there is more accuracy in reading a perspective written by a Black writer, as demonstrated in the examples by Hurston and Morrison. However, the paradox of what remains is only written text and fails to capture the liveness of oral communication in Black culture in examples of "Homecoming" and Sweet Brown. Essentially the tension between the spoken and written voice is not transformed.

Personal reflections highlight the social and cultural constructs that shape lived experience to establish an aesthetic space for scholars of color to tell their stories. The process by which people interpret situations or discourse about their lived experiences gives power to the speaker. For example, critical autoethnography emphasizes the power of personal narrative because this method actively engages the present voice of the speaker. While not a specific investment in Black Performance, critical autoethnography emphasizes the power of the personal

narrative. In *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Identities in Everyday Life,* editors Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe define autoethnography as an analysis of culture through personal narrative to describe the more significant layers of our social identities. They argue that identity is ever-present in critical autoethnography because there is no distinct claim to hierarchical oppression save what the speaker feels is most important in their telling of the narrative. Most criticism about autoethnography is typically focused on whether this form of scholarship counts as legitimate and if theorizing lived experience can be engaged in multiple forms beyond writing. I argue that the legitimacy of critical autoethnography is contested to uphold canonical forms of scholarship.

Theorizing personal experiences allows for the revision of stories about Black culture that is often liberatory for the speaker and community. This shift in discourse moves between the physical and material conditions of race, which scholars like Bryant Keith Alexander, Robin M. Boylorn, Amber Johnson, and Omi Osun (Joni L. Jones) [32] engage in the reality of oppressive systems that affect them and share narratives of resistance to reflect on the nuances of individualism. They frame the process of writing their stories and the moments that give voice to what has already happened to gain perspective on what is happening and what will happen. The act of critical reflection is not used to tell a good story; instead, the authors create transformative texts that extend from the page to the reader because they reproduce a model of freedom which, in this case, is only achieved through personal reflection.

I emphasize critical thinking involving identity, emotions, and lived experience to focus on a shift in approaches to performance methods grounded in Afrocentricity. There needs to be

[32] For more material related to lived Black experience, see "Killing Me Softly or on the Miseducation of (Love and) Hip Hop"; "Confessions of a Video Vixen: My Autocritography of Sexuality, Desire, and Memory"; "Writing/Righting Images of the West: A Brief Auto/Historiography of the Black Cowboy (Or "I Want to Be a (Black) Cowboy" . . . Still)"; "'Sista Docta': Performance as Critique of the Academy."

more within my performance communities to focus on methods within Africanist paradigms primarily because performance politics occur within the contexts of the related subjects. I do not want my research to rely on the racial dynamics of Black performers and white performers to negotiate circumstances that may impact identity and representation. Performance should be used as a lens to clarify the dimensions of racial performance, but only sometimes to emphasize the nature of social identity on stage. This is to say that performance creates space to unfold the construction of race as an identity performance by providing attention to the efficacy of individualism as it relates to embodiment. Exceptional insights emerge when using the performer's potential to transform the location or position, which can, by design, investigate the progression of life.

Performance practitioners can construct research through actions, behaviors, and events; therefore, many of my insights exist within a fluid spectrum of performance processes that reach beyond the boundaries of skills and techniques. Performance acts that reject the ploys of traditional theatre similarly reflect these ideas, so in separating performance traditions from one another, I do not centralize one intelligence but instead use my experiences to support the understanding of Blackness' effect on individuals, groups, and societies. When I cannot describe how these choices have expanded my knowledge of Performance Studies in predominantly white performance spaces, I think about what constitutes Black culture. In the next section, I elaborate on BPT as a method to decenter whiteness in performance. In shifting from a normative structure to creating performances, I locate intersectional markers that provide structure to situate the performer's lived experience before, during, and after the performance. This goes beyond a separator based on race, but figuratively, Blackness is a site of signification to interpret Black culture for all audiences.

Essentially, performed Blackness imitates the construction of Black culture in everyday life. Therefore, as a method, Black Performance addresses the creative resources used to engage with Blackness on stage and in expressive art making. Performances that mobilize Blackness apply specific lived experiences to create meaning, critique, and transform the object of analysis to the subject as a research method. Identity can function at any time during any performance that places lived experience at the center of the process by which performances are composed, rehearsed, or presented. Therefore, when we consider the politics associated with performance, it includes a conversation about the performer's authenticity. Here, I frame authenticity as a complex process of aligning personal values alongside others in the Black community to discover a "true" self. Johnson argues that authenticity outlines the racial boundaries associated with Black performance to explain why individuals cannot singularly define Blackness (2). The dynamic at play is community-based and responds to the ever-shifting influences on individuals that place significance on a broader self.

Later in this dissertation, I use performance to contextualize the specifics of cultural production like vernacular, writing, gestures, clothing, music, dance, joy, gardening, food, digital culture, activism, and much more. *Can we understand ourselves and simultaneously make sense of the past objectively?* If we reimagine the future, we can connect performance through methods that surface outside whiteness. Many scholars in this section discuss the importance of Black Performance as a lens to reflect on the modality activated through Blackness to provide insight into the cultural implications that frame Black culture; however, they do not offer concrete approaches to structure the performance itself. I specifically shift my attention to Black Performance as a method in the next chapter to generate a discussion that centers on Blackness at every stage of the performance from page to stage.

Black Performance is sustainable as a method of inquiry on or off stage. Specifically, I look at the development of Black Performance as a method to demonstrate the depth, innovation, and critical value of Black performers and highlight tools that are significant to scholars who write about Blackness. As a Black woman performance practitioner, my experience with different performance traditions offers a unique perspective on advancing Black Performance Methods. I position myself with this research because I believe that lived experience, as studied in Black Performance, is integral to theory and method. To read Black Performance as merely an isolated instance of racialized performance is to deny the dissonance that lays the groundwork for this analysis. While I am not solely concerned with the discourse surrounding Blackness as a prediction of what has been reduced to the name, the interpretations of race that historically marginalize a culture should not be disregarded.

Furthermore, a color-blind philosophy has explicitly contributed to the dissonance I often feel in predominately white performance spaces. This dissertation is a structure for scholars (who are in proximity to Blackness) to pinpoint inconsistencies within the discipline of performance that do not explore the material conditions of Black practitioners. Therefore, I must ask a few questions to those folks before I move any further: *How do you perceive the experiences of Black practitioners in your world? Do you even perceive them? Does their presence impact the sort of consciousness required for you to establish a new future? What does a new future look like for everyone? Moreover, what kind of work are you engaging in outside of experiencing their work in public spaces to unlearn a vital part of anti-Blackness in performance?*

Chapter 3. What Is Black about "It"?

Blackmoor. Ethiopian. Negro. Free person of color. Yellow. Maroon. Mustee. Dusky. Mulatto. Bright Mulatto. Dark Mulatto. Quadroon. Octoroon. Griffe. Creole. Negro again. Colored. Afro American. African American. Black.
–Azie Dungay and Evelyn Ngugi
"Are you 'Black' or 'African American'?"

I was raised in a Black Pentecostal church. My parents took my siblings and me to church twice on Sundays, Tuesday nights, Thursday nights, and Saturday nights. Later, the pastor removed Thursday night service from the rotation, but our family still attended Sunday School, Bible Study, choir rehearsals, and other gatherings when scheduled. I considered the church a sanctuary where my family could interpret the word of God through music and praise as it relates to the everyday struggles of the lower class. The roots of resistance from the preached gospel later created a framework for me to speak out against racism and sexism, which is still essential. My earliest lessons of self-worth were learned at church. I was taught that salvation stems from God's love where once received, [33] we gain the confidence to be ourselves. Therefore, I do not believe it is wrong to say that since I have accepted Christ, I have learned to love myself. Additionally, love is magnified through God's grace that is used to build an argument about care for others. [34] While self-love is not a flawed concept, too much can be considered an attempt to think of ourselves as more valuable than others regardless of their belief (or not) in God. As a life principle, I love others more than myself and live an extension of this in my pedagogy.

I also learned a lot about Black expression and aesthetics at church. Every year for Easter and Christmas, a group of women would write plays for the children to perform about the birth and resurrection of Christ, respectively. The tradition of performing in these plays was an

[33] 1 John 1
[34] St. John 3:16

essential part of my childhood and served as a rite of passage to join larger organizations at church when I got older. I played many roles, but I was cast twice as Mary (the mother of Jesus). This was the most exciting moment in my experience until I realized that she only had two lines throughout the entire production. Songs were an integral part of the play. We started each rehearsal with a song and closed off with musical praise to God. We all assumed the words came from scriptures in the Bible, but when I was old enough to join the main choir, I learned that our director wrote many of the songs for the play. While the rehearsals were long and many were unstructured due to the unpredictability of the spirit, I learned a lot about the Black theatre rooted in love and religion from Black women who saw this as ministry work.

Zora Neale Hurston writes about Black Pentecostal churches in a series of essays in *The Sanctified Church*. *The Sanctified Church* is a text that surveys and analyzes the Southern Black Church and other forms of Black culture during the 1930s and 1940s. Specifically, Hurston accounts for her experiences as a participant observer while attending various Holiness-Pentecostal movements in the early twentieth century. [35] She describes the sanctified church as an institution incorporating a style of worship. She praises more African ancestry versus traditional Christian practices through essays about conversions and visions, spirituals, shouting, and preaching. What Hurston describes as "Christian" serves as a placeholder to emphasize white religious forms of expression that are different in the Black community. In other words, she stresses specific, individual, material, and communal beliefs uniquely magnified in Black churches to establish a critical lens necessary to highlight areas of analysis that scholars do not consider in describing Black expression.

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[35] Thomas explains that "she refers to the Saints of God in Christ and the more well-known Church of God in Christ [C.O.G.I.C.], founded and incorporated as a chartered denomination in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1897 by Elders C. H. Mason and C. P. Jones," 35.

In “Reflections on the Sanctified Church as Portrayed by Zora Neale Hurston,” Marion A. Thomas argues that many of the styles of worship demonstrated in the sanctified church were also found among white believers in the 1800s. She also states that “the division between white and Black Pentecostal believers [was] because of incipient racism and differences of administrative policy rather than over styles of worship” (30). However, Hurston maintains in *The Sanctified Church* that the type of church which sustains “Negro religion” features intensity and vividness that is most distinct in preaching, spirituals, and shouting. Despite the intellectual split described by Thomas, certain semiotic principles of Black expression are crafted with careful attention to cultural values in the church.

I am drawn to the vibrant textual contributions by Hurston, which gives space to the voiceless and breathes the urgency of empowerment and salvation. In a way, she has struck me as a woman with colorful recollections that celebrate the rich history of the Black church examined in *First One* and *The Sanctified Church.* Hurston’s textual contributions to Black expressive culture are also demonstrated in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” which provides a structure for interpreting elements of preaching, singing, and shouting parallel to my experiences in the Black Pentecostal Church. In Chapter 1, I briefly highlight this essay[36] to emphasize how Hurston’s descriptions of nonverbal and verbal markers provide a gateway to claim originality regarding Black expression. She dresses up in plain words to describe the qualities of Black art and artists. She is responsible for creating a practical manuscript (intended for the Black reader) that flourishes as a bright and powerful affirmation of culture. I streamline her descriptions of “Negro expression” into three categories which are dramatization, language,

[36] See p.15

and movement, to construct a path that bridges my understanding of performance and informs my positionality as a Black practitioner.

In this chapter, I use the categories of dramatization, language, and movement to provide more detail about how Black expression is deployed through the Black church. Each category will generate an interesting discussion that speaks to the markers of spirituality and makes a connection to Black Performance. Next, I look at the contributions of Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia M. Shaffer in *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* (*BAM*) to reinforce a commitment to praxis that serves the performer in "Offering Two: The Hendricks Method." Therefore, I also analyze The Hendricks Method's influences that reinforce fundamental values within Black culture focused on building confidence and provide a throughline to explain The Black Performer's Toolbox (BPT). Then, I describe BPT in detail and reflect on my experiences with spirituality which is an integral part of the themes in the method. After this chapter, I take a final look at the emotive dimensions of BPT that explains how individuals may be transformed through body language and vocalizations and describe a common embellishment of performance through form and style. This inserts a new interpretation of the Black experience and informally asks if such a thing exists offstage.

Though it took some time to respect and cherish the traditions I learned in the Black Pentecostal church, I am grateful for three lessons: reverence for God, perseverance to walk through pain and suffering, and the importance of community. Of course, all cultural institutions have faults and blind spots. However, I find the humility required to partake in the sacredness of identifying with God a valuable tool that grounds the body of this chapter. Specifically, the lessons I learned in the church place a high value on how I talk about the transcendence of God in the next section through sacredness, such as preaching, singing, and shouting. These actions

have been a part of my life for so long that I cannot imagine a world without them. However, I do not speak about these topics as general aspects of Black culture, even though they are suited for description.

Zora Neale's Sermon

Hurston grew up in the first self-governed Black town in America. Eatonville, Florida was a space for her to imagine a life independent of the white gaze. She gathered tales and songs in Eatonville depicting the pleasure of Blackness that influenced a lot of her work. No matter the financial status or achievement of her characters, Hurston developed undertones of racism that influenced the portrayal of the intellectual and cultural authenticity of Black people in the South. A leader in her own right, she was revolutionary in preserving Black culture and reverent in her writings which became more popular after *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937. Before literary success, Hurston won second prize for originality and creativity as a playwright in 1926 with *Color Struck*. Hurston expanded a memorable buzz on the tongues of audiences worldwide with her works, but she was not the only author during this time who accounted for the presence of Black artists through written texts.

W.E.B. Du Bois published "Criteria of Negro Art" in *The Crisis,*[37] the same year Hurston published her play in *Fire!!*[38] magazine. In this essay, Du Bois argues that the conception of African American art should begin with an idea of drama that elevates the audience's intellectual level. He writes, "We Black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be" (Stanza 9). However, he maintains the argument that Black theatre groups miss the truth of

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[37] Du Bois created *The Crisis* magazine and co-founded the NAACP. He presented this speech at a celebration for Carter G. Woodson before he published the essay.
[38] *Fire!!* Magazine is a literary journal influenced by the Harlem Renaissance created by Langston Hughes and Richard Nugent.

defining drama that is for Black audiences that is "about us, by us, for us, and near us"[39] emphasizing society, morality, and education. Du Bois' standards stood as the core of his ideology regarding art and responded to the stereotypical images of Black people in the public eyes of white dramatists.

Also, in the same year, Alain Locke wrote a counter piece that encouraged Black artists to focus on drama that is a true reflection of Black life on the stage. In his chapter, "The Drama of Negro Life," Locke outlines a fundamental need for experimentation in style and form for the future of Black artists, also called the "New Negro." He emphasizes the beauty of oral folk tradition in vernacular through themes and images in written form, where the artist is free to develop aesthetics independent of a need to be refined by the white gaze. This also includes a conversation about how the audience should be free to experience art, divergent from Du Bois' statement. Although these two scholars preach a divergent principle of how Black artists should conduct themselves as artists, they raise questions about the appropriation of Blackness.[40]

However, Locke describes a form of production that heightens the relationship between the performer and the audience. According to Carme Manuel in "Mule Bone: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston's Dream Deferred of African American Theatre of The Black Word," Locke's critique "encourages Black artists to search for roots that made their cultural inheritance unique" (70). The desire to define authenticity places confidence in a Black folk culture that is not stressed in Du Bois' essay. Manuel writes that artists like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale implemented the New Negro mindset during the Harlem Renaissance. Many educated Black artists were afraid to adopt this way of thinking in published texts. Still, Hughes and Hurston

[39] Krasner 214
[40] See *Appropriating Blackness*

implemented a range of verbal and nonverbal language that distinctly celebrates solidarity, survival, and storytelling in Black folklore.[41]

Hurston continued to publish stories, plays, and essays around Black vernacular, love, and myths about the Black community. Her work ranges in structure but carries the underpinnings of Eatonville and the Black church. Hurston's textual legacy continues to serve as an example that applies the kind of analysis Locke describes for the New Negro that, to me, is a way to produce, experiment, evaluate, and study the "vocabulary of movement and gesture that not only conveys meaning but that sends out vibrations of recognition, of togetherness."[42] Specifically, in "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston connects an overarching theme of community stylized as a performance genre to trace the elements of Black expression. I list them for a second time because I categorize them in this chapter: drama, will to adorn, angularity, asymmetry, dance, Negro folklore, culture heroes, originality, imitation, absence of the concept of privacy, the jook, and dialect.[43] No doubt, this essay is rooted in Black aesthetics, an essential guide for the ethos inspired by a community and pathos required to guide the technique. However, a present-day analysis enhances the intricacies retained throughout generations.

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[41] "Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life" is about two men (Jim and Dave) who are in love with the same woman (Daisy) in Eatonville. Jim attacks Dave with a mule bone and is arrested. The incident divides the town based on religious beliefs symbolically connected to a split between the Methodist and Baptist churches. The Methodist church wants to pardon Jim because a mule bone is not listed in the Bible as a weapon. The Baptist church wants to punish Jim for the crime committed against Dave. After a bit of back and forth during the trial, Jim and Dave reconcile their relationship by the end of the play and dismiss their interest in Daisy. "Mule Bone" was not staged until 1991 because Hughes and Hurston experienced significant differences in their creative process that led to a natural life split as friends, like the characters in the play.

[42] Eroll Hill 31

[43] See "Characteristics of Negro Expression"

In her dissertation, "Ah'd Save De Text for You: Exploring Zora Neale Hurston's Characteristics of Negro Expression," Shondrika L. Moss argues that Hurston's essay is not a manual, but instead she "suggests consistent pattern in African American artistic expression… [that] enriches our understanding of the exchange between African American performance and the African American community" (6). In other words, Hurston's essay is not based on the various devices that deploy performance as a method and does not build a structure for Black artists to follow in their expression. Moss also argues that while "Characteristics of Negro Expression" has been studied by numerous scholars, including, but not limited to, Lynda Hill, Mella Davis, Anetha Kraut, and Carme Manuel, the significance of the characteristics is discussed only in comparison to Hurston's previous work. This type of analysis, according to Moss, is limited in terms of application to contemporary art by Black people that moves within performance. Specifically, she adds that her take on Hurston's essay mobilizes the characteristics to look at contemporary approaches to art but does not abandon the original form. Instead, Moss creates eight additions to Hurston's list: nommo,[44] call and response, ritual, community, African American ethos, ancestral memory, spirituality, and signifying. These additions expand our understanding of modern artworks as she manifests them through a performance lens to identify an overlooked way of knowing in our field.

While I find Moss's additions comparably crucial to the elements of Black Performance that preserve an awareness of Afrocentric continuities, I am not interested in creating new characteristics for "Characteristics of Negro Expression." These Black women have already provided a path to reconsider the kind of application of performance necessary to analyze themes in Black culture as a form of expression. The conditions of performance, which I pinpoint

[44] Moss refers to the nommo as a conception based on emotion and spiritual experience to emphasize that words have purpose and meaning beyond reality.

throughout this chapter, focus more on honoring the construction of Hurston's essay to provide clarity to the creative process that can offer a throughline of action for Black performance practitioners. As a result, I have categorized Hurston's and Moss's lists (see below) to outline Black performance as dramatization, language, and movement. I do not include Hurston's description of culture heroes in this analysis because it is difficult to place within the paradigm I write about in this chapter.[45]

While I define dramatization as a claim to Black expression which gives special attention to the nature of drama in everyday life, I include the importance of the relationship between performer and audience. My reading of dramatization also includes the linguistic and physical characteristics of Black expression outlined in Chapter 2.[46] Therefore, the categories of language and movement are highlighted as a continuing conversation of dramatization to demonstrate the multiplicities of expression rather than as separate entities of application. In the next section, I will examine each category with examples familiar to my spiritual upbringing and align with themes highlighted in *The Sanctified Church*.

Black Performance as Dramatization, Language, and Movement

Dramatization	Language	Movement
Drama Will to Adorn Originality Imitation Asymmetry Angularity Ritual (Moss) Ancestral Memory (Moss) Spirituality (Moss)	Metaphor & Simile Double Descriptive Verbal Nouns Negro Folklore Dialect AA[47] Ethos (Moss) Call & Response (Moss) Signifying (Moss)	Dancing The Jook The Absence of Privacy Nommo (Moss) Community (Moss)

[45] However, there is a complex significance of its use in Chapter 4 to describe the work of Black activists.
[46] See p. 35
[47] Abbreviation for African American

Dramatization

Drama means "to do." It is action, friction between people/things. Dramatization covers linguistic and physical characteristics,[48] like drama, will to adorn, originality, imitation, asymmetry, and angularity. In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston claims that "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Every-thing is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life" (46). In other words, Black drama is tied to the material conditions of life on and off stage that is conscious of sustainable aesthetic practices and images—hence the ones that go unnoticed in dominant culture. I also include Moss's additions of ritual, ancestral memory, and spirituality in this category because they extend contemporary understandings of Black culture.

Dating back to the 1700s, the Praise House provided a space for fellowship, worship, and community for Black people (South Carolina Encyclopedia). The house, or church, was an intimate space for enslaved people living on plantations even after they were free. Church remains a sustainable location to establish a community between Black people in the Christian community. While the "house" has evolved in size, believers still operate on a stance based on faith despite an uncanny introduction to the religion by white enslavers. A critical contribution to the church follows a formulaic authority of the preacher who intricately explores the relationship between dramatization and tragedy as a production of Black expressiveness on a pulpit. The pulpit is a source of drama in churches where the preacher draws from scriptures from the Bible, which connects to everyday life in a way that is also aesthetically pleasing to an audience. This action is not bound to a specific racial group, as the preacher is commonly viewed as a masterful

[48] See "Black Feminist Pleasures on TikTok"

storyteller who relays a message from God that uniquely enhances the service across Christian congregations.

However, in "The Pulpit and Grease Paint: The Influence of Black Church Ritual on Black Theatre," Anthony Hill provides a simplified outline of Gerald Davis' preaching formula that emphasizes specific Blackness styles. As initially described by Davis, this formula serves as a guide to understanding an experience traditionally shared in the Black church as an essential ritual of oratory style. Therefore, I outline Davis' rules of Black preaching as follows:

I. The preacher lines up his congregation
II. He begins his narrative with an abstracted sacred context and develops it through specifically identified secular illustration
III. Expands the sermon's theme with an exemplum to intensify the message and to brings the highly emotional sermon to a climax
IV. Harmonizes the Christian life with the secular world (Hill 113).

This specific form adheres to an oratory style that satisfies what I categorize as dramatization. The evidence is demonstrated through the interpretation of the text, and an embodiment of the sermon emphasized through delivery to the congregation.

According to Hill, literacy was a crime during slavery. Therefore, Black ministers had to recite scripture by memory and relied heavily on their ability to interpret messages orally rather than through written texts. Black pastors often implement exemplum, "a device for the preacher to 'anchor' the text of his sermon in a definite and concrete reality, making the text more realistic and relevant to the congregation" (Davis 84). This ritual is a personal and political action that recurs regularly throughout the sermon to subjectively confirm the "call to preach."[49] Additionally, ministers often improvise when the spirit moves to accommodate a state of emotional intensity conveyed through the audience's verbal and nonverbal feedback during the

[49] See *The Sanctified Church* 84

message like “preach preacher” or “make it plain.” According to Hurston, “the religious service is a conscious art expression. The artist is constantly creating carefully, choosing every syllable and breath. The dialect breaks through only when the speaker has reached the emotional pitch where he loses all self-consciousness” (*The Sanctified Church*, 78). In Black Pentecostal churches, the dramatized minister knows not to lose the moment. They respond to heightened emotions in the congregation by swelling their words or increasing the volume to emphasize the importance of the message. The preacher evokes various congregation responses that manifest through cadence, style, tone, and rhythm.

Moss’s additions of ritual, ancestral memory, and spirituality are illustrated through the preacher’s ability to function as a mouthpiece, or narrator, for God. A vital qualifier during the sermon is that the preacher informs the audience that the text is not their own but their words parallel events from the Bible. This is an action performed since slavery that has sustained through generations and recognizes a simple art form of Black creative expression. For example, the minister may say, “Let’s hear what thus says the Lord” at the beginning of the sermon or “I’m just giving you what God gave to me” if the congregation does not appear to like the sermon. Both are satisfactory responses to the congregation because the spiritual reference demonstrates the preacher's credible connection to the divine. The preacher’s job is to bridge an understanding between God and the congregation to facilitate a particular listening experience for the believer. This is similarly demonstrated in the theatrical production of Black church culture.

Hill highlights *The Gospel at Colonus* as an example of a production demonstrating the theatrical immediacy of Davis’ formula that also connects to dramatization, as described in this section. Like a Black Pentecostal church service, this play is the Black musical version of

Oedipus at Colonus, 47. The traditional Greek myth is replaced by the structure of a biblical narrative and presents a message of redemption after death. The revised tragedy of Oedipus celebrates being blessed after being cursed, redefining the traditional American theatre experience. Specifically, the role of the narrator is portrayed as a preacher who ranges from the intimacies of scripture to the musically tuned moaning, humming, and singing that brings about a new rhythm to storytelling. The narrator also rhetorically addresses the congregation in several waves throughout the show on themes like death, war, forgiveness, and love, where they verbally respond to his questions.

I have watched this production several times, and each time I experience a new connection to the production that reminds me of home. From beginning to end, I am hailed as a congregant who actively responds to the discoveries of suffering and joy narrated by the preacher. For example, I am moved when the preacher evokes sympathy for the misguided Oedipus, who asks for forgiveness from God and his community before he dies. When his faith is restored, I think about my journey to redemption, which also started with asking for forgiveness after listening to a sermon about God's grace and mercy. In my experience, the preacher articulated a message in dramatic form that encouraged me to understand that the choices I previously made in life do not have to impact my future. The *Gospel at Colonus* deploys a parallel discovery of the moments in everyday life that reminds the audience of how marvelous we are in the sight of God.

Language

Language, here, is an extension of dramatization that conveys the speaker's vernacular or style of speech pattern. In Chapter 2, I outlined the structures of Black vernacular that are recognized through phonetics like syntax and grammatical features. In this section, I extend this

concept of vernacular to an analysis of musical composition rightfully influenced by Black aesthetics. I put this into conversation with the dramatized descriptions in Hurston's essay about Negro expression to demonstrate the aspects of folklore and dialect that are stressed in specific examples of metaphor and simile, the double descriptive, and verbal nouns. I also include Moss's additions of African American ethos, call and response, and signifying[50] to comparably emphasize examples of singing in the Black church.

Part of the church's foundation matured based on musical selections that functioned to further the service, and singing also engaged the audience. Singing is mainly demonstrated by a soloist, group, or choir that emotionally charges the congregation and sets the tone for the preached gospel. Singing connects the rhetoric of the sermon through melody and has the power to unify large numbers of people regardless of physical location. Specifically, spirituals are folk songs that are informally coordinated and delivered by a solo (or group) that is enhanced by audience participation. Spirituals are rooted in biblical values and are generally used to encourage the believer during hardship.

Historically known as Negro spirituals, these songs were initially created by enslaved people on plantations who adopted the principles of Christianity and used singing to cope with enslavement. Contextually, Negro spirituals are resistive messages that built hope amongst

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[50] Moss outlines Henry Louis Gates' definition of signifying(g):

1) It is a black term and a black rhetorical device.
2) It can mean the "ability to talk with great innuendo."
3) It can mean "to carp, cajole, needle, and lie."
4) It can mean "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point."
5) It can mean "making fun of a person or situation."
6) It can "also denote speaking with the hands and eyes."
7) It is "the language of trickery, the set of words achieving Hamlet's' direction through indirection."
8) The Monkey "is a signifier, and the Lion, therefore, is signified." Gates, *The Signifying Monkey,* 75

enslaved people who believed that God would deliver them from the hand of their masters despite their current circumstances. Enslaved people were not permitted to read the Bible, so they would memorize stories they overheard and craft those pieces into songs that were used to communicate with each other. Negro spirituals could be randomly sung by individuals or several enslaved people while working on a plantation to express a deep feeling about their faith. The audience often cheers on the singer(s) or joins in to increase morale amongst the group, which is sometimes structured through call and response. Once slavery ended and Black folks were allowed to congregate in the Praise House formally, Negro spirituals were adopted in the order of service to usher in feelings of excitement that took place before the preacher's sermon.

The use of original slave dialect is reflected in the way words are pronounced in Negro spirituals. According to Randye Jones in "The Gospel Truth About the Negro Spiritual," the vocalists were modified to fit the melody and to secure the rhythm and emotional charge of the song. The omission or addition of certain syllables ("Win de race agin de course),"[51] irregular conjugations ("Jesus stand on t'oder side"),[52] double descriptives (Jesus mount de milk-white horse)[53], and verbal nouns ("De Lord is per-wide")[54] are found in traditional spirituals that are documented in the U.S. slave songbook.[55] In *Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negroes,* Howard W. Odum notes that spirituals were commonly considered a "characteristic music of the race" that was "composed by Negroes, passing from generation to generation, with numerous modifications, retain[ing] many of their former characteristics" (6). In other words, the peculiar

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[51] "I An' Satan Had a Race" 40
[52] "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" 23
[53] See "I An' Satan had a Race"
[54] "Jehovah, Halleluiah" 2
[55] See *Slave Songs of the United States*

melodies that are expressed in Negro spirituals describe the sorrowful memories of slavery and cherish the possibility of freedom in their delivery.

For example, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” is a traditional Negro spiritual that celebrates a narrative of perseverance. The story of Daniel is about God’s miracle of shutting the mouth of lions in the den when he refused to bow to King Darrius.[56] Daniel understood that his commitment to God was greater than man’s attempt to destroy him. Therefore, he remained consistent in his faith when put into the lions’ den. The lyrics remind believers that by faith, God can deliver them out of trouble or great suffering. In the original presentation of “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel,” the singer becomes conscious of an individualistic fight established through chant, with each syllable made possible by rhythm. Hurston argues that traditional Negro hymns do not move in a mechanical form, however, the original song has been modified for many years.[57] The arrangement written by Moses Hogan still carries African American ethos. Here is a portion of the most performed version of the song:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Then why not every man?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not a every man?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not a every man?

He deliver'd Daniel from the lion's den,
Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
And why not every man?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,

[56] Daniel 6: 1-28
[57] Paul Robeson’s version

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
And why not a every man?

Hogan's arrangement opens with a throbbing bass line that moves the piece forward and eventually builds a powerful conclusion. The lyrics retain some form of slave dialect. Still, there are moments when audible breathing and lack of breath after holding a particular syllabus are part of the embellishment and are regarded as an essential ornament in delivery. Perhaps it is with this emphasis that the interpretation of Negro song structure comes from within the race.

In the ninth grade, I performed this song with a concert choir at a regional competition for the University Interscholastic League in Texas (UIL). The all-Black chorus sang this Negro spiritual for a panel of all-white judges who awarded us a "2" for our ability to blend and precision in conveying the meaning of the lines. This was considered a good score because partially what makes this a well-performed song depends on the good impression of sound and the ability to satisfy rhythm verses through a feeling of expression as traditionally demonstrated. I also performed a more modern arrangement of this spiritual titled "Deliver Daniel" by Dexter Walker with my church choir that followed a different delivery structure; however, the audience's emotional response indicated a deeper connection to the lyrics than previously performed with the concert choir. For example, during the song, some members of the congregation shouted out things like, "Have mercy," "I know that's right," or "Amen," which was like feedback provided during the preacher's sermon. In addition, the song's message indicated a shared knowledge of biblical teachings, and the lyrics signified or affirmed their role as believers.

Spirituals have been whitewashed and adopted by many vocal groups who do not mobilize what Moss describes as African American ethos. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first formalized group to present Negro spirituals for entertainment in public spaces that reached

international audiences. However, because Black vernacular was considered minstrelsy, John Graziano argues they "avoided the use of [Negro] dialect when they performed spirituals as part of their program" (261). As a result, the term "Negro" was dropped from the description of this genre because recording studios prioritized white musicians who performed spirituals and not their derivatives. As a result, more people started to perform these songs for entertainment despite the history behind the lyrics connected to slavery. This is not to say that non-Black audiences cannot appreciate the musicianship demonstrated in the delivery of Negro spirituals; however, having a spiritual connection is not enough to sing about slavery. Negro spirituals are representative of the struggle and hardship that enslaved people had to endure on plantations in the 18th and 19th centuries. They created these songs to get through a workday, encourage themselves and others, and make sense of why God *chose* them to be tormented in such a way. To dismiss the significance of such a history is merely entertainment.

I saw a white choir perform (Negro) spirituals for a public concert during Black History Month in a predominately white church in Southeast Louisiana. A white woman invited me to enjoy the concert, and I accepted with hopes that more Black people would attend, but I was wrong. I felt uncomfortable the entire show and thought it was because I was surrounded by white people (which is a thing entirely on its own in Louisiana). Months later, while walking to my car after class, I heard someone singing a familiar tune. I recognized the song because the person kept repeating, "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel." I stood idly by to hear the remainder of the song, and when the person stopped singing, another person in the room shouted, "You need to sound BLACKER!" They laughed and I froze. Before I could walk away, they opened the door, and two white men looked at me in disbelief. We did not exchange words, but the tension between us could cut the room with a butter knife.

After that moment, I decided that I never wanted to hear a non-Black person sing Negro spirituals ever again. While I understand that the white church choir members may not have performed with the same intentions as the two students, how does one *appreciate* such a history by singing songs created with a reality of the racial experience? Is the guidance of a Black director enough to justify the performance?[58] This is not to say that all music is "white" or "Black," but instead, there is a particular embellishment of Negro spirituals that cannot be taught or mimicked to interpret the lyrics. Therefore, I emphasize the essence of Black vernacular in Chapter 2.

Movement

Movement operates within Black expression and is related to identity. Movement is used to entertain and witness heightened expression within the Black community. Movement has the power to inspire, inform, and transform, which can emerge in familiar and unfamiliar ways. Movement can be an individual or collective action influenced by the environment regarding temporal or spatial representations. Movement is more important to the audience because it presents an exciting manifestation of something ambivalent even though they may be familiar with the action. Specifically, dance identifies an umbrella of Blackness that is evident from the beginning of slavery and is survived through the dramatization of music and oral storytelling.

Hurston argues that dancing is a primary concept to identify Blackness through tests of rhythm and dynamism. The values demonstrate originality through spontaneity, restraint, and skill by measuring one's ability to maintain rhythm based on listening to an inner voice that guides the body on how and when to move to the beat. "The jook is a gathering place for

[58] In "University Choir Sparks Questions Over Who Can Sing Black Spirituals," Anagha Srikanth writes that students at West Michigan University also negatively react when a majority white choir sings Negro spirituals. When questioned about his intent, the Black director replied, "I do not feel the need to have to defend what I'm doing and I've done this for 30 years."

members of the African American community to interact with one another with such activities as ritual, drama, and dance," which emphasizes the absence of privacy as described in Hurston's essay (Moss 38). Moss's contributions to nommo and community response to the notion of what may be qualified as "togetherness" in Black movement. Thus, framing a conversation about movement does not romanticize dance as anything but an extension of Black culture that understands perpetual motion in public spaces.

Dancing has served as a way of invoking strength or ability with the body. In "Dance as an Integral Part of Black Performance Studies," Nia Callender examines the cultural implications that honor the long, complex, and varied connections to religion and spirituality in the history of Black dance to offer a global perspective on an important part of everyday life. She states that,

> Dance throughout the African diaspora has taken many different roles and positions throughout the world, but two themes are consistent. First: a representation of culture rooted in tradition and Second: Resistance. Everything above points to the importance of culture and tradition from slavery and Black spheres all over on the progression of dance. In both West Africa and the native people all around South America, dance was a part of everyday life and it was a part of performance. It was a part of connecting the mortal to the immortal in religion and spirituality. Today, all throughout the world, dance has these same effects.[59]

Historically, movement was linked with spectacle and was less mundane and caught up in flamboyant examples of singing and dancing during a time of oppression like minstrel performances. Callender argues that the ability to overcome oppressive representations redefined the context in which Black people claimed dance as an art practice.

The quest to radically change dance did not ignore their ability to discover identity in racially safe spaces, like church.[60] Consequently, some Black people adapted spiritual dances to reveal their passionate connections to music and to release the stress of racism that seemed to

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[59] This is a blog post on *AFRI 009 S01: An Introduction to Africana Studies*

[60] See "The Search for Authenticity and Freedom of Expression in Black Dance Performances" 5

cause a visceral reaction during this emotional journey. In “Reading ‘Spirit’ and the Dancing Body in The Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson,” Carl Paris states that the spiritual connection to dance carries a variety of meanings that cannot be reduced to a single definition. His statement is based on personal experiences in the Black Pentecostal church, providing additional context to the points I make in this chapter. Paris also affirms the secular use of dance in the Black community, calling attention to the creative view of performance as practice. While I do not mean to imply that one is of more importance than the other, I explain that dance maybe be understood in terms of “Blackness” in a myriad of ways.

Shouting is both an individualistic and communal expression that involves a combination of rhythm through footwork and handclapping to respond to feelings of joy or to initiate praise. When a person shouts, they demonstrate a dance that is based on joy that fills them to the point that they begin to loudly praise God in a way that cannot be stopped. The joy flows through a source of God and continues to flow as a river of expression that extends to other congregation members. This practice has mainly influenced my understanding of movement as an impromptu and joyful response to feelings of relief and release at church. To outsiders, meaning those not a part of the Black Pentecostal church circuit, we appear to be “caught up” in a frenzy of impromptu emotions and reactions. However, our actions mirror what we are feeling and are outwardly expressed in dramatic ways with the body. In short, these are physical expressions that the believer has adapted to attend to an urgent matter: the Holy Ghost.[61] Colloquially, “catching the Holy Ghost” is an expression most often used to suggest that a spirit is manifest in a person through verbal or physical response.

[61] Act 1: 1-8

Contextually, Black expression is exhibited in dance through the spirit, the body, response, technique, intent, and aesthetic value. The choreographer's orientation is profoundly explored as an artistic interplay between impulse and structure which Paris argues helps interrogate the lived traditions of the Black Pentecostal church. I note that to honor spirituality as a cultural value in my upbringing, a claim to shouting as a tradition can only exist in a conversation about the spirit due to how the spirit explicitly interacts with the believer. I am not the only scholar to convey this deep ethos as Hurston, Paris, Ronald K. Brown, and Gerald Myers describe the metaphorical philosophies that recall histories of shouting primarily in a church setting. This conclusion has significant application in embodied knowledge as well as an emphasis on Black expression, including the steps and gestures to use when one is witnessing a person shouting by raising a hand in their direction (as if also to catch the same spirit they feel), ushering them in case they are in danger of falling or fainting, fanning around their head if they are hot or out of breath, and most importantly, verbally affirming the shouting itself (e.g., "Bless her, Jesus", "Let him use ya").

Hurston continued to publish stories, plays, and essays around Black vernacular, love, and myths as a vital force in the Black community. Her work ranged in structure but always carried the underpinnings of Eatonville and the Black church. Hurston's textual legacy applies the kind of pressure Locke described for the New Negro that, to me, is a way to produce, experiment, evaluate, and study the "vocabulary of movement and gesture that not only conveys meaning but that sends out vibrations of recognition, of togetherness."[62] The nature of dramatization, language, and movement in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" provides substance to suggest that Blackness is reactive or performative. The kind of rhythm that Moss

[62] See "Black Black Theatre in Form and Style" 31

introduces speaks to the styles of performance that affirm liveness and subjectification. Still, both examples are limited in their ability to suggest approaches of specific structures onstage that I respond to in the next section.

A New Approach

Luckett and Shaffer describe the influences of African/African American acting methods in *BAM*. The editors acknowledge various pedagogical approaches specific to theatre and overlap in Black culture to introduce methodologies invested in developing an expression for Black actors and directors (i.e., SoulWork, Nudging the Memory, and The Hip Hop Initiative). These critical approaches, rooted in an Afrocentric framework for character building, audience analysis, and presence on stage, distinguish themselves from those predominately presented in European theatre spaces or traditional performance programs.

Molefi Kete Asante states in the forward that "Afrocentricity says that Africans should examine all forms of knowledge and experiences from the standpoint of Africans being the makers, creators, inventors, and actors in our own narrative" (xvii). In other words, Afrocentricity reflects a revised method of acting that prioritizes Black knowledge and language in theatre and performance spaces by centering the influences of culture in the theoretical framework. Luckett and Shaffer argue that Black perspectives need to be documented in theatre and performance spaces to provide detail about diverse methodologies and preserve a future that includes Black and brown bodies, which I find necessary to advance the conversation of expression and culture.

However, this anthology is primarily a resource for actors and directors invested in theatre as practice. While methodologies centered in Afrocentricity and performance pedagogy is a modern approach to theatre, the text is limited in the arrangements that give pattern or

organization to art that does not exist within these realms. This is not to say that they purposely left out a community that remains connected to the interdisciplinary uses of performance. Yet, in "Offering I: The Hendricks Method," Luckett and Shaffer reflect on the praxis of their childhood mentor, Freddie Hendricks, who created an original method for Black actors in the Youth Ensemble of Atlanta (YEA). Freddie Hendricks is described as a leader who works with Black teens in acting and focuses on developing their talents by intentionally creating a space for them to flourish.

They describe "The Hendricks Method" as a form that complements the influences of Black culture through script devising, ensemble building, and activism. Luckett and Shaffer continue to explain that "the [Hendricks] methodology is purposefully infused with verbal and physical acts of positivity, such as uplifting speeches, pats on the back, or compliments about appearance and talent" (20). As a result, many of the YEA members embraced the liberatory effects of Hendrick's method that later influenced a career in acting. Luckett and Shaffer acknowledge using The Hendricks Method in their work and highlight the success stories of Black actors who were a part of YEA under his leadership. The Hendricks Method engages three principles: Devising, Spirituality, and the Hyper-Ego.

While I have come across other texts in Performance Studies[63] that consider devising, I expand on the definition provided in *BAM* to maintain its uses in YEA. According to Luckett and Shaffer,

> Devising is a theatrical process in which the actor(s) create their own script or performance based on an idea, picture, theme, object, or some other form of inspiration. Within the Hendricks continuum, devising by nature is political, demands authorship from participants, and cultivates a collaborative, communal space, sans a written script (24).

[63] See "Big Tex is Burning: Performing Iconicity by Means of Collaborative Directing"

By extension, Hendricks mobilized this concept of devising to add something more to the participant's understanding of theatre that motivated them to contribute their ideas as a liberatory practice for both director and actors. This exchange promoted a solid connection to plays they compiled for entertainment and gave voice to Black actors who could not relate to traditional texts by playwrights like Shakespeare.

Spirituality is like a connection to a higher calling, as previously mentioned in the Black church. Hendricks is the kind of director who allowed the Spirit to guide his pedagogical practices. For example, the authors recall moments where Hendricks recited a story about a vision that he received to understand his calling; a group of children called out to him for salvation, and he interpreted the vision as a calling from God to "save them"[64] through civic responsibility, activism, and politics that were later developed through YEA. They claim he recited the vision numerous times to the group to reestablish morale and connect the explicit precedence of a spiritual framework that was not separate from creating, rehearsing, and performing. Moreover, a circle of unity was established in YEA that included all participants (regardless of belief) and encouraged them to share their creative ideas and hardships to uplift each other outside of the space.

Hendricks also developed the Hyper-Ego to address issues with low self-esteem. Many YEA participants experienced this. They claim that "a hyper-egotistical performer feels as if they can defy gravity" and is not afraid to move beyond a vocabulary where "can't" takes priority over the ability to try.[65] Luckett and Shaffer elaborate on the definition of the hyper-egotistical performer to explain the care that Hendricks provided to his actors. In other words, Hendricks constantly affirmed young teens in YEA who did not receive positive feedback at home.

[64] 27
[65] 30

Specifically, Luckett and Shaffer reflect on how he regularly nurtured them as young Black actors, which later built a path for their professional success. These components of The Hendricks Method are not static and are a reliable reference for how I conducted "The Black Collective: A Performer's Toolbox" workshop.

I spent less time explaining the complexities of Black identity to a majority white audience and more time describing fixed moments of directing rooted in Afrocentric principles. As a result, the performers were able to communicate freely using Black vernacular, which helped us quickly establish community. This is emphasized in the term "collective" to describe a position of togetherness that combats the void of feeling alone in predominately white spaces, unlike the participants in YEA. Further, we retained a position of harmony in moments where we discussed uncomfortable topics inspired by The Hendricks Method. Although I created an original structure, the fundamental principles of The Hendricks Method acknowledge the ancestral success of training Black performers with guidance rooted in Afrocentrism. In the next section, I provide deeper insight into my process.

The Collective

I was unaware of performance methods highlighting techniques and skills I learned in childhood. I dismissed the origins of my lineage because I needed help to foreground the theory or method within Eurocentric scholarship that I read in academic spaces. Traditional approaches to Performance Studies taught me that methods are not mutually exclusive; however, those ontological practices did not include material that centered on my racial identity as a point of reference., I *needed* a practical structure to preserve my object of intellectual inquiry through performance on stage and the page to elevate interdisciplinary methods that analyze, critique, and theorize Black expression. What started as an idea to work through descriptions of "Nappy

Hairstories" evolved into a primary practice for what I do as a performance practitioner today, demonstrated through the construction of this dissertation. One of the main advantages of The Hendricks Method is that the immediate reflections on devising, spirituality, and the hyper-ego gave me insight into how to establish a community of trust with those directly affected by the infrastructures in which we have a stake to explain.

I proposed "The Black Collective: A Performer's Toolbox" workshop to the HopKins Black Box (HBB) shortly after presenting a lecture on "Nappy Hairstories" to students at Xavier University in Louisiana on behalf of the Performance Studies Laboratory and the South Louisiana Performance Research Consortium. I was interested in the relationship between Black scholarship and Performance Studies and wanted to heighten my understanding of transferable techniques and skills to Black performers. In the proposal, I described the workshop as a process that would establish a toolbox for Black performers to produce art that would center Blackness as a primary source of knowledge for both thinking and doing. I did not expect to conceptualize an entire method; however, the communal influences on this project shaped the outcome into something new.

For six months, I guided Black artists through an intimate process of self-discovery that inspired each step outlined in the method. What started as a group of 22 people dwindled to ten artists who completed the final part of the presentation. We collectively read and watched texts by Black performers or scholars who influenced our understanding of performance. For example, the introduction chapter to *Appropriating Blackness* by Johnson and *Homecoming* by Beyonce were foundational texts in the toolbox that brought substance to the critical value of Black expression. Many participants needed to become more familiar with traditional performance scholarship, so I used a variety of popular and professional texts. Initially, I asked each

participant to respond to a series of prompts I created from random conversations I had with Black people in my community. Each participant had to answer questions like, "What color represents Blackness to you?" or "Where is your favorite 'Black' centered space?" to help them generate responses for our first group discussion on the definition of Blackness.

Johnson provides an argument to refuse the definition of Blackness as something tangible.[66] Still, in the workshop, we collectively distinguished a parameter for thinking and doing to establish a frame of reference throughout the process. Our definition of Blackness is considered a cultural connection to Blackness that was determined by the whole instead of the opinion of one individual. This is not to say that we were interested in capitalizing on Black culture or micromanaging how Blackness is performed, but rather the stakes of everyday life provided a vocabulary of movement and gesture to recognize global togetherness within the collective. I was introduced to *BAM* by Jade Huell, another Black woman performance practitioner, during the second month of the workshop. Additionally, I did not come across Hurston's essay until I started to write this dissertation. For these reasons, a specific method was not pre-determined before the workshop; instead, the steps were generated through continuous trial and error in discussions and rehearsal. In the following, I will outline each step within BPT that was created during "The Black Collective" workshop: 1. Decenter whiteness, 2. What is Black about "It"?, 3. Pain is not the priority, 4. Passion moves the soul, and 5. Trust the process.

The Black Performer's Toolbox

1. Decenter whiteness. The concept for this step was established during the initial framing of the workshop. I explained to the interested participants that we would not focus on texts or methods that did not inherently inform us of Black culture. In other words, before

[66] See *Appropriating Blackness*, 2-7

delving into the depths of performance, we had to address how we thought about our work as artists and future performers to maintain the perspective of those who claimed Blackness. Decentering did not require us to reduce our understanding of norms, practices, behaviors, and content reflected in white culture. However, decentering refers to focusing on what reflects Blackness or Black culture as it serves as the primary location for the collective. I asked each participant to contextually strip away the desire to prioritize the white gaze in their performance. Instead, I required them to stretch into the depth of their soul to discover a new approach that was inherently their own.

Pedagogues such as E. Patrick Johnson, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Patricia Hill Collins have long discussed the need for Black scholars to look beyond European approaches to scholarship because they do not privilege Black thought, space, and time. These authors do not necessarily call upon Afrocentric forms to establish a reciprocal relationship between Black culture and performance; still, they speak to the critic's negative expectations of the artist that is relatable to their own story. As a result, this step gives agency to build a narrative that supports Black identity and focuses on transformative change. The collective opposes anti-Black racism to maximize the individual liberties of Black people.

I asked everyone in the workshop to return to what is conveniently absent or appropriate in their interests and instead locate the rituals or processes grounded in Black ancestry that can be traced in everyday life. First, we introduced each other to concepts or ideas learned in our respective communities. Then, we curated new patterns or actions because of our undetermined self-discovery during the workshop. Sometimes participants struggled with this concept because they perceived decentering whiteness as something to "check off" when they chose their area of interest for the workshop. They neglected to consider decentering a constant practice to address

political, social, and cultural parts of their identity. I realized that decentering begins with the director/leader of the performance that inspired the second step of the method.

2. What Is Black about "It"? For this step, I asked participants to identify the cultural influences that reflect the Black experience other than the demographics that live at the intersection of our skin color. We were required to bring our ideas to the collective and discuss the validity of our argument that did not rest in proving one's Blackness but rather locating the commonalities between the culture initially expressed in the writing prompts and defined in our first discussion. Sometimes the participants assumed that they had to prove their Blackness to the collective or sometimes to me. However, while the scope of this step is established to help participants identify the "thing" that qualifies their performance to the whole, that "thing" refers to the culturally exclusive connection that we believe impacts Black understanding and expression.

For example, one participant proposed exploring dance as an area of interest for the workshop. They compiled an argument for their project and expressed their interest in dance as existing not only in a realm of Blackness because they were technically trained in white spaces; they also confidently proclaimed that these understandings of dance were essential to their interest in movement. I gently listened to this proposal and encouraged the participant to revisit the concept of decentering whiteness to craft a new statement focused more on the artistic legitimacy of whom they wanted to be as a dancer (which we later decided could still be informed by Eurocentric techniques). Finally, I challenged them to do another writing exercise to reflect on their experiences as the minority in those spaces to understand more about social norms. The participant returned with a response that identified feelings of being left out or

overlooked in those spaces, which they said was not their focus in the earlier stages of learning choreography.

In our intimate discussion, I asked them if there was a dance they wanted to do, but maybe the larger group still needed to welcome the idea. The participant immediately responded with various examples, so I asked them to choreograph a routine representative of their feelings. After they presented the routine, I asked, "so, what was Black about that?" I did not ask this question to ostracize the participant because this was a routine conversation I had already developed with other artists in the workshop. The objections were clear, but I wanted to ensure we overcame the barriers of stereotypes, stigmas, and overall negativity about our culture. Still, I did not want to exclude the previously established elements as a collective. The participant explained that the song was by a Black musician, and they expressed their feelings about being Black in white spaces; therefore, the sum of these parts was Black.

We engaged in a deeper conversation about what that meant. Finally, we concluded that the only layers of this routine connected to Blackness were the implications of race as a social construct. I realized that this participant struggled to take the risk of identifying with Blackness under the academic conditions of purposefully referring to culture. However, the shape of the workshop was an appropriate venue for such politics. As a result, I created a physical exercise to pinpoint actions repeated in the original dance routine. Then we assessed five actions individually to gain an understanding of their connection to Black culture, which was already present in the first presentation. My goal was to help the participant gain confidence in their ability to explain this original course of artistry. By the end of the workshop, they could communicate their definition of Blackness to "The Collective" without my assistance.

3. Pain is not the priority. Testimony service is an integral part of the structure in Black Pentecostal churches. My childhood pastor often encouraged congregants to share the goodness of the Lord at the beginning of every service because testimonies were considered a powerful tool in continuing the mission of Christ. Before inviting people to stand up and share their stories, he reminded us that testimonies build faith. Therefore, the focus of the testimony should uplift or demonstrate fulfillment in growing closer to God that helps someone else.[67] If the main points did not indicate victory or reinforce the gospel, the story was incomplete or ready to share with the public. In other words, the urgency to share God's ability to save, deliver, or heal someone other than the preacher made a lasting impression on the congregation that could not be demonstrated in a story that ended in pain or struggle. Many times, I heard the same testimonies over and over again—to the point where I could recite the narratives of others as they were saying them in church.

My favorite part about this ritual was that as I got older, those testimonies often gave me hope in difficult times when I could not attend service. I have always thought of a testimony to reveal the truthfulness of God that is ever-changing based on an individual's growth in Christ. When applied outside of a religious context, sharing personal narratives should still move past the present to convey a new future to audiences. My experience with testimony service influenced the way I encouraged each participant to reconsider the founding principles of a personal narrative in The Black Collective. There is healing in a conversation of liberation; therefore, I established a standard that strictly contributes to the concept of joy in the Black community regardless of theme or topic. Individual liberation was not guaranteed nor required in the workshop; however, we ventured into a primary state of joy as a response to pain. This is not

[67] 1 Thessalonians 5:11

to say that I asked participants to ignore their discomfort, affliction, or suffering memories. Still, instead, we crafted narratives that prioritized a concept of transformation through the telling and retelling of our stories.

One participant understood the first two steps in the process very well, so they decided to pull from a personal repertoire of poems that satisfied the nature of the workshop to focus on their skill and technique development as a performer. During our first meeting to stage the poem, I realized that their piece was hyper-focused on painful memories with family members that did not move beyond a point of emotional release and was limited in its ability to engage a broader audience. After they finished reciting the poem, I asked a few questions about the piece to help me understand the intensity behind each stanza. This led us to a conversation about the purpose of testimony service in my childhood. I explained that while the poem was beautifully written, I could not ignore the pain. We discussed the mental nakedness required to enable a concept of joy that could transform the performer's memories to a place of release to radically imagine a new future and inspire the audience to do the same. During another rehearsal, the participant performed a new version of the poem. The revision remained faithful to the original message but celebrated their fight for freedom in their familial lineage. As a result, I decided to qualify transformative expression in three stages: originality, healing, and possibility.

As Hurston described, originality speaks to the origins of Black expression, birthed from the misconception that Black artists are only imitators. Hurston states that "the Negro is a very original being. While [we] live and move in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that [we] touch is re-interpreted for [our] own use" (Hurston 56). I expand this concept to include the nuances of what can be reinterpreted from your perspective, even if previous versions of the story do not point to joy. Healing promotes originality by asking the participant to accumulate

new material that implies something different that is also significant to the teller's experiences. The concept of healing stems from a spiritual context that deserves more attention in the next chapter, where I discuss the importance of rest. We aim for long-term healing during the workshop, but results may vary depending on the participant's willingness to embrace the concept of possibility. Thus, the final stage of transformative expression defines possibility without an expected outcome to leave the participant with a stronger sense of purpose and less of a desire to quantify their problems in their everyday life. Participants who keep treating the same symptom and not the root of the pain are always encouraged to revisit step one.

4. Passion moves the soul. Participants who needed to familiarize themselves with performing needed help delivering aesthetic texts. I understood their dilemma and tried to develop impromptu strategies to help with confidence, and I reminded them not to alienate the audience during the presentation. At one point, I realized that my advice was based on a traditional understanding of public speaking, which focused on tips to overcome anxiety or nervousness experienced while delivering a speech. Although these participants were unfamiliar with the technicality of public performance, they were comfortable with public speaking, demonstrated fluency in articulation and engagement with vocal variation, and considered body language an extension of emphasis. Some even moved to a level of delivery that was more than a standard presentation, but I felt a need for more connection to what they were saying. I then asked the collective to give feedback to the performers during rehearsals and withheld my personal views from the discussion. Input from the collective provided a moment to openly discuss the influences of Black expression by comparing examples we previously discussed when looking at texts like *Homecoming* by Beyonce, stand-up comedy by Richard Pryor,[68] and

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[68] See *Richard Pryor: Live & Smokin'*

The Gospel at Colonus. Our discussion provided more feedback for the participants and challenged them to create a new threshold that was less threatening than my feedback. However, I noticed that one participant still needed help to develop a style of delivery that was independent regardless of the feedback given by the collective.

We scheduled a separate rehearsal, and I asked the participant questions about the text, which revealed their hesitations about presenting a good performance compared to other collective members. This example of self-criticism almost had a detrimental effect on their ability to complete the final performance, so I took a different route. I told them a story about a girl who was given a solo to sing with the choir at my church. Although she had never led a song before, the director believed in her ability to grow in an area out of her comfort zone. I explained how she practiced for weeks before it was time to rehearse with the choir. During rehearsal, she froze and refused to sing the song because she felt the choir was comparing her voice to the original record. At the end of the rehearsal, the director encouraged her to control the thoughts that shackled her to a place of comfort. He specifically reminded her to focus on the lyrics that conveyed a message of hope to the believer. She continued to rehearse the song in a way that did not focus on technicality but instead prioritized the purpose of the message. The next time she performed the song during rehearsal, she was able to deliver it with more passion. The director congratulated her, saying, "I knew you could do it, but if not, I was going to give the lead to someone else." After sharing this story with the participant, we laughed, and I explained that the girl was me.

At the next rehearsal for "The Black Collective" workshop, the participant presented a new and more confident version of the performance, so much so that the other performers gave them a standing ovation. This same passion was carried over into the final product, which crafted

the language for the fourth step. Passion speaks to an expression of the soul that moves the audience. At the same time, I encouraged all participants to discover a new lane of expression that engaged a sense of aliveness, joy, and freedom within the heart and mind, and feelings of confidence surface when performers commit to a continual level of energy activated through each reperformance. Passion is also connected to a power not developed until the individual moves past pain in constructing their narrative. The purpose is not necessarily passion, but it triggers a connection to the divine energy within. Functioning with passion guides the performer to a new place of destiny where they can confidently approach fear.

5. Trust the process. Trust the process is so cliché, but it is also a direct way of saying "let go." Two main types of goals can be distinguished when using this method: outcome goals and process goals. Outcome goals focus on the result, such as winning a race or setting a personal record. In contrast, process goals specify the behavior in which an individual will accomplish their outcome goals or otherwise perform satisfactorily. I encouraged every participant to focus on process goals because this allowed for sufficient time to develop confidence and enhance skills necessary for the final performance. Process goals such as being less worried about a perceived outcome helped the participants gain control over the performance. However, reaching the destination required them to surrender to the steps thoroughly.

First, I established empathy between the director and participant that allowed me to understand what the person was feeling or thinking when they had trouble during the workshop, whether it was related to the art or just a feeling of everyday life stress that is previously discussed in steps one through four. Then, I focused on building empathy between participants in the collective to promote a sense of unity that is prioritized in the Black community. Unity did

not require the participants to present one characterization of Blackness. However, something remarkable happened when the performances were organized into a cohesive show. As the director, I realized that the individual narratives overlapped emotionally, mentally, and spiritually in ways, I did not have the authority to manage independently. I considered my position of authority to guide each participant through a realm of self-discovery, but I was more democratic in my approach to building the show. I asked the, now, performers if they wanted to participate in each other's pieces to help bring their visions to life. I allowed them to co-direct these pieces, and the performers learned a new approach to leadership as a result.

Each creative process was different because the results reflected the individual and their unique interests (like a fingerprint); however, we were all required to follow the steps. Hardships certainly happened throughout the process that made us aware of our own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes we carried about the Black community and each other, but everyone did not trust the process. For example, one participant quit the workshop a few days before the final presentation. They could not move past step three, which required them to rewrite a narrative about pain. I understood the difficulty in this step, so I encouraged them to consider a new idea that was more fleshed out and where they felt more comfortable navigating in front of a larger audience. Unfortunately, the participant did not listen to my advice and continued to push through the original narrative; they even devised the performance to include other members of the collective, and many felt uncomfortable performing the piece because of the trauma layered in delivery (i.e., screaming, moments of prolonged silence, and aggressive body language). This process was new to me, so I needed to figure out when to set a boundary after this participant started to cause problems in the group. As a believer, I did not lean to my understanding and trusted the voice that encouraged me to "trust the process." In the end, I continued my original approach to

collaboration with the performers, and together we executed the final performance by offering reconciliation to the disrupter so that we could move forward.

Conclusion

BPT establishes a vision for identity and race through the live embodiment of performance represented by Black bodies through solo, duet, and small group works. Black performers advance our understanding of performance because, throughout history, Blackness (and the lack thereof) has played a critical role in developing identity and cultural performance. Collectively, Black performance scholars have considered the scope and complexity of theory to demonstrate broader themes in African and African American aesthetics that lay claim to its production's historical, social, and political terms. As a theory and method, Black Performance has helped me recognize which skills to explore and reinforce when teaching Black performers how to explore identity connected to a larger societal conversation.

Johnson offers insight on how to be aware of the dangers of authenticating Blackness even though it empowers marginalized people to critique problematic representations of themselves in the media (*Appropriating Blackness*). He argues that individuals and groups consider Blackness a boundary to exclude others. When Blackness is seen as exclusive of others, it becomes political.[69] Further, when identity and cultural performances coincide, the stakes at play can harm many people watching. I agree that we can eliminate everything that seeks to micromanage a form of Blackness that is individualistic to our world today. Nevertheless, if we judge performance in terms of its awareness and recognition of ancestral heritage, we can generate indisputably Black discourse. I argue that this exchange can be reevaluated in a mutual construction and deconstruction of Blackness by members of the same community that is

[69] See *Appropriating Blackness* 3

exhaustive, exhausting, and deserving of a full-bodied exploration as practiced in "The Black Collective."

I recognize that some workshops about race or those involving race are not invested in a more profound critique and project more of an experimental approach to preservation efforts. Instead, these workshops focus on the philosophical implications of constructing performances considered "good," as validated by other performance scholars, and are not necessarily resistant to oppressive structures. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks argues,

> Many unlearning racism workshops focus on helping white individuals to see that they too are wounded by racism and as a consequence have something to gain from participating in anti-racist struggle. While in some ways true, a construction of political solidarity that is rooted in a narrative of shared victimization not only acts to recenter whites, it risks obscuring the particular ways racist domination impacts on the lives of marginalized groups. Implicit in the assumption that even those who are privileged *via* racist hierarchy suffer is the notion that it is only when those in power get in touch with how they too are victimized will they rebel against structures of domination. (13)

This is to say that white fragility is everywhere without saying it. Countless attempts to revitalize our counterparts (since the days of Martin Luther King, Jr.) often failed to denounce racism and express solidarity with Black communities beyond keynotes on diversity. What hooks offers is a perspective that points out the messiness in committing to the anti-racist struggle and the hardships that exist on the shoulders of minorities who host workshops on diversity. I did not want to create a safe space for Black performers at such a cost. Despite the joy that lies in consciousness-raising, the temporary absence of white bodies permitted Black performers the freedom to speak when their voices were not invited to be heard or only heard when spoken to in specific contexts.

After the workshop, I deliberately chose the parameters for the method to exist in the description: the "Black Performer's Toolbox." At no point did I want the fight for liberation to be misinterpreted in its future use; therefore, I prioritized in continued explanations of the

method that this is for Black performers. When I spoke on the method before I found my voice, my colleagues often questioned me about the necessity of reconceptualizing the method in ways not conceived without struggle. The performer's ability to be self-reflexive and self-conscious acknowledges the importance of the personal narrative. Still, the uniqueness of BPT frames exclusivity to Blackness that cannot be duplicated by simply switching terms to describe its use.

This is demonstrated in the uses of the method outside of performance spaces that encouraged participants to consider creative expression as a tool for intentionally reckoning with current events surrounding police brutality. Shortly after the shooting of George Floyd, I began conversations with Black pedagogues who wanted to think through policies and practices in their classrooms that delicately guided students K-12 through a process of reflection. When I considered the most critical layers of issues related to Black students, I committed myself to bridge performance that lives at the crux of dramatization, language, and movement initially defined by Hurston. I encouraged the educators to review the recent posts of social unrest associated with police brutality. I asked them to consider the rights of their students who were not of age to vote or attend protests without supervision. In my continued response, I challenged them to be more responsible in their actions moving forward, which engaged a mindset of joy with their students to move the discussion to action. In their feedback, they identified meaningful ways, including dancing, singing/rapping, drawing/painting, and cooking. I realized that the weight of difficult conversations about racism is not limited to educators in higher education. This understanding can quickly shift into a movement that spends more time acknowledging what is happening by creating material contributions that we can pass on to the next generation.

In this chapter, I have linked the essential nature of Black aesthetics to Performance, which is not only a dream of a new future but also takes action to craft a structure centered on

identity. The premise is that BPT calls for an aesthetic method that centers the identity of Black performers as empowerment. Performance becomes a space where stories can be shared through different art forms: performing, singing, and dancing. However, the possibility for artmaking is more exhaustive than these outlets. In the following chapter, I reflect on Black expression as an essential tool to explore joy as a necessary roadmap for liberation.

Chapter 4. Pain is Not the Priority

Joy is an act of rebellion. And so is allowing ourselves to feel our grief.
–Octavia Raheem
Pause, Rest, Be: Stillness Practices for Courage in Times of Change

When I think about moments that bring me joy, I think about my family, friends, and community. I think about the smiles on the faces of loved ones when I greet them in familiar spaces. I feel a sense of belonging that eases my spirit when I am away from them for too long—sometimes, just to be acknowledged is *enough* until the next visit. (I also think about moments when I have overcome situations where I lacked care for my being as a Black woman.) I do not rejoice when others have failed to see me as more than nothing and less than invincible; however, I have survived the traumas of patriarchal systems. Despite all obstacles, I have found joy.

In moments where I am grieving loss personally and in proximity to others, the heaviness is lifted when I channel spiritually centered joy. Gospel artist Tye Tribbett and choir G.A. sing a song titled "Still Have Joy" that encourages my soul when I am troubled by the woes of this world. For example, the first lyric is a scripture from the story of Job, which says, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust Him." [70] Believers commonly interpret this scripture to mean that he trusted God despite Job's losses. The song's message is amplified with other scripture-based lyrics like, "Weeping may endure for a night, but I'm glad that I still have joy"[71] to stress the point that although you may have to cry after a painful experience, opportunities to reflect on joy after the trial will come. [72] The music also symbolizes the highs and lows of joy as a continuous transaction with God. For example, the fast-paced tempo gradually pauses in the hook before the

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[70] Job 13:15
[71] 00:47
[72] Psalms 30:5

choir says, "After all that I've been through, I still have my joy,"[73] to emphasize the anticipation of relief from difficult experiences. They repeat the chant, "After all that I've been through,"[74] several times to outline the root principle of spiritual joy that translates to a feeling of jubilee. Finally, the choir sings, "I still have my joy."[75] This song exemplifies the resistant nature of spiritual joy to tribulation and resilience in the face of adversity. The sermonic message replays in my mind even after the song has ended.

I love the optimism that runs through my veins when I look at an adverse situation with new eyes. As an observer, participant, and sometimes curator of joy, spirituality is my philosophy to reflect on what feels good and what is good in my life. Even for a moment, I find peace and can reset for the next day. This form of joy prevails for extended periods versus a temporary feeling of happiness and is a choice when life is unpleasant. Joy is not limited to the believer, yet I mark spiritual joy as a sensation of great delight, [76] or a spiritual pleasure. Joy can be inwardly produced regardless of race or ethnicity because it is an emotion that one chooses instead of a focus on anger, frustration, sadness, or helplessness in unfavorable situations. Joy is a mysterious feeling that I often express through art, whether on the page, on stage, or in other narrative forms, to tell a healing story. I use storytelling to share my experiences as a Black woman or retell the histories of the Black experience in America; however, joy is not a specific characteristic of the Black community.

Specifically, Black joy is often enacted as a collective response to pain and a celebration of hardships, with examples during slavery and the Jim Crow era that showcase resistance and resilience. Today systematic and structural oppressions within the government, education, and

[73] 00:57
[74] 02:42
[75] 03:08
[76] 2 Corinthians 6:10

societal culture continue to reinforce racial mistreatment patterns affecting Black people. In response, we have transformed trauma through behaviors that constitute joy and well-being. This is to say that Black people have sustained a consciousness of joy from generation to generation that has survived some of the most oppressive situations and echoes the message, "After all that I've been through, I still have my joy."[77] Nekeisha Alayna Alexis highlights, "Black joy's *center* is *not* pain nor racism. Its center is Blackness: it is pride in Black forms of beauty, creativity, ingenuity, and thriving" (53). In other words, Black joy is always already aware of anti-Blackness and inhabits the tragedy of white supremacy, exploitation, and the reality stemming from those. Therefore, we rise from the ashes despite being burned by hatred and injustice. Though challenging, endless opportunities to write a new narrative for the future exist that do not prioritize pain instead curate joy for others.

The performance of Black joy is a force that moves with the desire to cultivate (or attempt) an existence beyond the norm of respectability politics. Black joy can be understood as a pleasurable experience between the personal and the political that is reframed through storytelling. Performance gives a framework to share stories about Black joy as resistance and resilience. Through specific rituals and behaviors, we constitute a method for discovering strength, support, and solace to mobilize a narrative of what it means to practice joy. Through storytelling, we can organize new ways to create awareness about history, knowledge, and power that contribute to how we experience pleasure. For example, in a performance presentation for TEDxFSU titled "Granny's Garden: Growing Black Joy," Chris Omni reflects on the use of rituals and behaviors that provides structure to cultivate joy to affirm the positive experiences of Black people. She states that we grow Black joy as a counternarrative that responds to the

[77] See "Still Have Joy-Live"

negative stories of Blackness in the media. She explains that growing Black joy reconceptualizes the past to create new terms that help us exist in the present. Joy becomes a primary stance for the future as Omni's method for growing is divinely connected to a path for restoration and healing. She reflects on her grandmother's garden in Pensacola, Florida to describe the symbolic effects of growing Black joy rooted in love. Omni frames the process for growing Black joy in four steps: 1. Soil, 2. Seed, 3. Self-expression, and 4. Slow down.

The first step encourages the individual to acknowledge the richness of Black ancestry that grounds logic and reflexive behavior outside of Western ideology. My soil is texts situated in and around a dominant episteme of Afrocentricity. [78] Ultimately, Afrocentric texts suggest that Blackness remains at the center across space and time and intentionally actualizes the terminology of our culture. We are the seeds. Thus, in step two Omni encourages the audience to consider our potential that is often overlooked in society and gives room to nurture voices that engage in a Black consciousness above what is usually disclosed to us. The production of research produces knowledge for others, whether already or still to be discovered. In step three, Omni claims self-expression values originality and propels joy as a response to pain. Self-expression is a critical method to analyze and discuss the constraints of pain inherent to the layers of Black joy. I agree that self-expression adds to a collective response of the beauty in Blackness that is formidable through verbal and nonverbal techniques. Finally, in step four, Omni urges the audience to slow down and be present, reducing the attention to pain and prioritizing care for what is inside the garden. Here, the garden is contextually a sanctuary where one nurtures self to regrow the things lost within whiteness, like mental, physical, emotional, and

[78] See *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*; *You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays*

spiritual well-being. Therefore, growing Black joy is a conscious process that must be slowly nurtured and protected to maintain joy.

Growing joy as a Black artist creates tension between presenting messages of resistance or resilience to my community, even when I need time to recharge. On the one hand, I am pressured to create something that heals the woes of my community after a dark period of civil unrest. On the other hand, I struggle to express joy for myself because I am also broken, busted, and disgusted with America. Omni's steps for growing Black joy outline a praxis that values liberation, agency, and originality. This message defines a specific way of growing Black joy and creating a community that honors the efforts of Black people who "Blacktivate joy." According to Omni, Blacktivating Joy means "to activate a new conversation about what's right with Black people instead of perpetuating the typical deficit narrative" in the media (00:13:08). In other words, Blacktivating joy is the production of dialogue about the Black community that transforms a legacy of racial politics alongside enriching culture in the public sphere. Blacktivating joy is not understood in terms of a hierarchy but must exist outside a reaction to oppression that focuses on the need for change within our communities. Omni argues that even though we cannot stop weeds like "police brutality, mass incarceration, health disparities, and other forms of systemic racism" from growing in the garden, we can continue to fight these forces of nature as a long-term praxis.

I connect the central conversation of growing Black joy as a method to explore the critical distinctions, connections, and emotional conditions within the Black community. Explicit counter-messages in a dominant culture define our community in so many negative ways. As a response, growing Black joy reflects lived experiences to teach us about history beyond a deficit experience, in practice, that serves members of the community. First, I will further explore the

soil of Black joy that is discursively enacted and fundamentally defined. Black joy is often used in different ways; therefore, acknowledging the soil in which we grow joy amid pain and trauma can connect a fight to move toward wholeness. Next, I examine resistance and resilience as fundamental seeds of joy individually and collectively in the Black community and acknowledge what the performance of joy can look like in practice. Continuing Omni's model, I will reflect on self-expression as a consistent by-product of joy that honors resistance and resilience through horticulture and soul food examples. I discuss gardening and cooking as tools intended to Blacktivate joy in my life and reflect the Black community. I also believe it is essential to celebrate and center Black joy as a revolutionary spiritual practice that embraces self-care and love to continue the work. Therefore, I discuss rest as necessary to survive the work more intentionally with determination and power to thrive as a community. In the conclusion, I analyze the globalization of Black joy in digital culture as a public space invested in liberation beyond a specific inquiry site. I look at the development of community storytelling that is inherently performative to understand what unites themes of private resistance and resilience for public interpretation online.

Omni's steps create a structure to analyze Black joy that, when examined at length, lends itself to performance traditions that overlap with identity and relationships with others, places, things, events, etc. When I apply these steps to my life, I discover an avenue to joy that first requires me to reconnect with the spirit to achieve liberation in my mind. Black joy does not replace what I know about pain, especially that which is fueled by white supremacy and is damaging in material ways. Black joy, however, is an awareness that I can tell a different story—I can rewrite a new narrative about that pain. Throughout this chapter, I emphasize Black joy as a method of happiness. I emphasize that the process cannot be rushed and must be nurtured from

within to show up outwardly, but I do this in ways that are not necessarily connected to known performance traditions. Furthermore, my examples illuminate Black joy as a practical experience that may not include all identifying members of the Black community. In the next section, I elaborate on the praxis of Black joy as both resistant and resilient, yet the implication of this work is not limited to a singular perspective.

Soil

Anyone familiar with the history of Black death should know about the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. He was accused of being too "friendly" with a white woman and suffered a gruesome death at the hands of white men. The men were charged and taken to court when Black folks were not given many rights. The defense's lawyers appealed to a jury of more white men and enforced a commitment to white supremacy that returned a not-guilty verdict for Emmett's murderers. After they were acquitted, Mamie Till-Mobley (Emmett's mother) rose to spread the story of the horrific events that happened to her son. She refused to leave Emmett's story in silence, so Mamie put his body on public display for the world to see the brutality. This public display of Black death spoke louder than any court decision. Her sacrificial contribution catalyzed the Civil Rights Movement and inspired activists nationwide. Yet, this case is only one example as whiteness and police brutality are still against Black and brown people. Other examples of wrongful murders at the hands of whiteness are demonstrated in the cases of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Botham Jean, Breonna Taylor, Andre Hill, and Daunte Wright.

After watching news reports on Black public death for two years, I was overwhelmed and anxious when Donald Trump was elected as President of the United States of America in 2016.[79]

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[79] The following deaths happened prior to Trump's presidency: Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Walter Scott (2014), Sandra Bland (2015), Freddie Gray (2015), Alton Sterling (2016), and Philando Castile (2016).

I was concerned that the country would enter four years of civil unrest based on his politics, and shortly after he took office, my fears were confirmed. Trump is a master of fear who invoked his power in material ways that continues to validate white supremacy in America even after his reign as head of state. Trump's presidency identified a shift in American civility as he performed a provocative leadership style that lacked transparency, ethics, and democratic norms. This truly hurt our country, and I held onto the stress he placed on my family and friends for a while. I grieved the public murders of Black people and the country's demise as one awful experience. This is not to say that everything Trump did was intentionally cast at the Black community; his administration negatively impacted the lives of many marginalized people.

However, the overlap of issues related to the Black community was both concrete and abstract. Prominent examples include the overturn of President Barak Obama's community policing program under the Collaborative Reform Initiative and turning a blind eye to deadly acts of white nationalism in Charlottesville (Clayton et al.). This intensified with Trump's public threat to use dogs to regulate enraged Black Lives Matter protesters after the death of George Floyd. Public Black death has moved from a place of protest to public hostility that preserves whiteness's material and mental interests (Onwuachi-Willig). This shift deprives the Black community of fundamental human rights and functions to uphold the legacies of anti-Black domination (Anderson and Samudzi).

Christina Sharpe's mantra of "wakefulness" responds to the cultural structures of Black death as a foundational metaphor of citizenship in her book, *In the Wake: On Black and Being*. According to Sharpe, wakefulness is a mindset that recognizes the unresolved and unfinished narrative regarding the past and present traumas of slavery (13-14). I call us to perform the labor of wake work within spaces that question Black citizenship and identity. This consciousness is

aware "of itself as, and in, the wake of an unfinished project of emancipation" (5). Thus, wakefulness draws from the complex presence of the history of transatlantic spaces in the U.S. to analyze the impact of generational trauma now etched in the 21st century. While the public display of Black death has negatively evolved since Mamie Till's efforts, we cannot ignore the contextualization of whiteness that embeds our social structures. Regarding blatant forms of oppression, biases continue to negatively affect Black people.

The criminality of Blackness has led to many discriminatory policies that continue to fuel violent behavior and surveillance from policing white supremacists in the post-Jim Crow era. In "Policing the Boundaries of Whiteness: The Tragedy of Being 'Out of Place' from Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin," Angela Onwuachi-Willig explores the levels of policing that maintain racial separation, facilitates white solidarity, articulates Blackness as a threat, and regulates the presence of Black movement (1151). She demonstrates how the type of thinking that explicitly punished Emmett operates under the same race-based inequalities today. Being Black in America means you must develop the kind of grit that transcends difficult situations. (I am talking about the grit required in the face of evil and still managing to make something good, as many demonstrated during Trump's reign in the White House.)

Enduring racism as a Black artist is not just about developing a response to what is happening around me. I am responsible for addressing the oppression through the appreciation of my community instead of appropriation that feeds on stories of abjection about the Black community in the media. I define appropriation here as a public response to pain or an obligation to publicly honor the Black community with a pathos that satisfies the interest of white folks. In comparison, I acknowledge the importance of spirituality that promotes sentiments to "love my

neighbor as myself."[80] The effects of discrimination are still in infancy in America. Thus, I refuse to offer a narrative of Black suffering for entertainment or education for white folks. This approach also points to the lack of diversity amongst the decision-makers of art. Minority contributors can offer a range of creative and impactful responses through visual and performing arts. For example, Sharpe's view on wake work promotes a technique that helps interrogate racist behavior by exposing the hostility of whiteness. If I consider Black joy to be a branch of wake work, then joy in practice is attached to the idea of breaking cycles of generational harm caused by whiteness. Further, the politics of Black joy is connected to liberation as a state of mind that suggests a shift in how we interpret those power dynamics.

Black joy, as Tracey Miche'l Lewis-Giggetts argues in "Black Joy in Pursuit of Racial Justice," is a force that recognizes the terribleness in which Blackness has come to exist. She claims that,

> Joy is Black when it lives within the particular historical and cultural experience of Black people across the African diaspora. Our joy transforms those often-traumatic experiences—the results of White supremacy—into something distinctly ours. By virtue of this 400-year liberation journey we've been on, Black people have always held joy simultaneously in our bodies with rage and sorrow. That part isn't new.

Here, Lewis-Giggetts reflects on how the slave trade contributes to the inadequacies of our experiences through generational pain. Nevertheless, we continue to find joy. In other words, slavery is an inherited trauma amongst Black people that lingers. In *Go Tell It on The Mountain*, James Baldwin asks, "Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or the moment?" (105). Baldwin alludes to the history of enslavement and provides a perspective beyond the evils on plantations to acknowledge oppression as an effect in America that places a more significant burden on Black people. Black joy opens the door to the possibility of

[80] St. Matthew 22:37-40

redirecting and transforming this inherited pain, but this concept does not replace the trauma in our minds. Instead, how black people express themselves beyond the shame of racism in America produces a consciousness that advances the trajectory of joy.

In *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience: An Anthology,* Tarana Burke and Brené Brown organize narratives that acknowledge that the trauma of whiteness has produced a feeling of shame in the Black community. We are ashamed to say that we have been bruised and scarred by racism, so we suffer in silence to avoid the anxious feelings associated with being dependent on a white savior. White supremacy harmfully contributes to shame because historically, Black people were not allowed to express their feelings, whether happy, sad, or angry. Whereas the expression of fear satisfied the philosophy of racism, the suppression of pain was ideally shifted by white people to normalize abuse. Over time we internalized the shame of racism and became ashamed to outwardly show how we felt due to a fear of overvaluing ourselves in front of white folks. According to Burke and Brown, vulnerability is an integral part of humanity but does not have to be a painful part of the Black cultural experience. Vulnerability is a catalyst to acknowledge the importance of expressing ourselves in an emancipatory world.

Ashley R. Hall and Tiffany H. Bell state, "We must reclaim, renew, and transform our minds, bodies, and spirits to combat existing and compounded emotional, mental, and physical trauma, stress, and anxiety" (9). Specifically, the nature of structural violence against the Black community produces adverse outcomes that affect our mental health, which must be repositioned to account for the fact that racism affects our well-being, both individually and collectively. In "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," Zora Neale Hurston argues that shame is not a primary aspect of how she sees herself as a Black woman: "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does

not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me" (189.) Here, Hurston raises questions about the shame central to Black identity. She reclaims agency and critically recognizes the personal as political. She considers a critical response to shame as countering the destructive attitudes that seek to stifle Black identity.

Tanya Denise Fields mobilizes this rejection to shame that transforms how we understand vulnerability through storytelling in her essay, "Dirty Business: The Messy Affair of Rejecting Shame." In her narrative, Fields reminds us that "shame is a liar, a thief, a murderer of dreams and vision. It is a manipulator; it, too, is an abuser," and in many ways, shame will confine a person to the bounds of pain (00:3:13- 00:3:21). In making this statement, Fields shifts her attention away from the toxic thoughts that impacted her ability to recognize the joy in her own life despite overcoming issues of sexual abuse, domestic violence, housing, gender stigmas, and colorism. Her focus on venting these frustrations is a perfect example of affirming a person's humanity despite the obstacles that strip the joy from her life. She does not pretend that violence has not happened in her life, and she does not hide from the fact that shame is a deeply personal experience that impacts mental and physical health. While Hurston's commentary is more pointed to the treatment of Black people during Jim Crow, Fields's words describe a survivor's everyday resilience. Thus, Black joy profoundly influences a person's social well-being. Instead of being stressed, anxious, or fearful, a critical shift in how we see ourselves outside of pain enables us to be more alert and confident. Resistance and resilience are the heuristic components of our stories that shape the outcome of empowerment in the Black community. They often act as the seeds of revision to change how we reflect on racism and share stories about Black joy

with future generations. In the next section, I elaborate on the characteristics and reproductive structure required to produce Black joy.

Seeds

Resistance and resilience are meaningful descriptions of the seeds that produce Black joy. Resistance opposes political and economic control that maintains racism and white supremacy (Haynes et al.). In other words, resistance effectively challenges the violence against the Black community and defies those who operate within that system of power. Resistance is not limited to a social justice conversation, but this output of Black joy embodies a refusal of respectability politics as a tool to focus on self-determination. Situated somewhere between remembering and forgetting, resistance connects the past with the present, perhaps because the Black community has endured a legacy of oppression in America.

Resilience describes an individual's ability to adapt to oppressive contextual factors, whether environmental, financial, physical, structural, or emotional (Bryant et al. 16). According to the authors of "Revisioning the Concept of Resilience: Its Manifestation and Impact on Black Americans," resilience is a process that involves change, growth, and transformation in the face of adversity (17). However, resilience is often seen as a strength pushed to the limit. This is illustrated in the story of John Henry. Folklorists tell the story of John Henry, a strong Black man who died shortly after winning a battle against a steam-powered drill because he wanted to uphold his title as a man of unparalleled strength. [81] He overextended himself to death to prove his strength while competing against a steel drill. Scholars have coined the term "John Henryism" to critique the extent to which many Black people have (and continue to) persevere

[81] See "Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend"

amidst stress or pain (Bryant et al. 18).[82] A focus on strength does not acknowledge a history of misaligned resilience in America that teaches Black people to perform grand tasks at a level that often leads to mental or emotional exhaustion or death. An extended example follows.

Eric Garner died from police brutality in New York City in 2014. His daughter, Erica Garner, became an activist after her father's death (Wamsley). She openly spoke out against the effects of racism that led to her father's death and assumed what most people would define as a resilient position. Erica became an activist despite the heaviness required to manage personal issues mentally and emotionally. First, Erica publicly grieved her father's death while raising an 8-year-old daughter and continued the fight after receiving an enlarged heart diagnosis following the birth of her second child. Then, on one Saturday morning in 2017, Erica had issues with an asthma attack that quickly led to a heart attack. She was rushed to the hospital, where she later fell into a coma and died at 27 (Wang).

Erica was a victim of maternal mortality, yet she ultimately suffered the traumas of whiteness that suggested her father was guilty in the first place (Lockhart). The effects of racism stressed her, but she refused to pause even when her health was at stake. I do not use this example to blame her loved ones or those who relied on her activism—we are all witnesses to these effects. Instead, I tell this story to acknowledge that a blueprint for resilience in the Black community continues to outline strength in actions that directly harms the individual rather than redefine what it means to endure. In other words, resilience should not be limited to a definition grounded in the person's ability to resist for as long as they can endure the pain. If an individual decides to be resistant and fight against systematic powers, they should not be punished by whiteness for their attempts to demonstrate resilience. While some would characterize the

[82] Stewart offers a reading of enduring pain in *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism*

actions of John Henry and Erica Garner as resistant, the public shame associated with Black pain did not allow them to be resilient and heal from the effects of stress, anger, depression, and anxiety. As Bryant et al. note, "It is easy to see the positive accomplishments achieved by individuals characterized as resilient" because we cannot always see damage to the body, mind, and spirit in those dimensions (25).

Resistance actively disrupts oppressive systems like racism, sexism, and colonialism to create new conditions that protect individuals and their families. However, a narrative of resistance without resilience does more harm than opposing can yield in return because it runs the risk of suppressing narratives beyond political discourse. Resilience offers a frame for longsuffering that resonates collectively in the Black community to understand endurance outside of activism. However, without a look at resistance, resilience dismisses the silent harm done to the body under the guise of strength. Both entities focus on a conscious way to fight the traumas of oppression and strive for joy in myriad ways. In essence, a combined perspective negates the romanticization of Black suffering. We use the terms interchangeably, but the tension between resistance and resilience holds different parts of joy that are rooted in how we feel, what we think, where we find purpose, and how we are connected to other people. I know what it means to suffer and to grieve despair in the world. When you are rattled by loneliness and loss, sometimes you struggle to see the light in dark situations. This is indeed a stifling feeling that affects many people regardless of demographics.

I also understand the emotions that create anxiety and lead to depression because of traumatic situations. Sometimes I have difficulty sharing these struggles with people because I fear they will judge my weaknesses. Creative expression helps me translate a new way to show up for myself that is produced by resistance and resilience. When I think about what it means to

resist whiteness and be resilient despite oppression's effects, Black joy includes the engagement of creative expression to move beyond painful memories. In the interest of Omni's steps to growing Black joy, I reflect on creative expression in the next section as an example of what it means to embody resistance and resilience through art. My reflections on horticulture and soul food contribute to the spiritual terrain of how Black joy shows up in my life. Horticulture and soul food have created opportunities for me to experience joy primarily connected to themes of creative expression in the Black community beyond the stage.

Self-Expression

After my father, Kelvin James Oliver, passed away in September 2018, I temporarily let go of joy as a point of entry to heal my pain. I completely removed raw and vulnerable conversations with others and dived deeper into my research to distract myself from my emotions. My father's death stunned many people who knew, loved, and appreciated him, but my dad was sick for quite some time. He spent the last few years of his life preparing us (my mother and siblings) for a transition that did not include a definite timeline. He specifically taught me how to focus on joy under challenging moments, so I remained a symbol of strength for my family during the funeral. However, nothing could prepare me for the days I spent crying alone after things settled down. I never thought about the grief my parents experienced when their fathers died. My grandfathers were old in an age when they died. I did not know that death was so close to my father's door, but I could do nothing to stop the process when it happened. My daddy was present for as long and as much as he was able, but he died young—he was 53 years old when his heart failed him for the last time.

My father rarely complained about the pain in his body, so I have many fond memories with him. The pain never prioritized pleasure in his moments with God, family, and friends. He

lived a Christian life, nurtured the growth of his children, loved my mother (Patsy), and created beautiful art through photography and graphic design. As a professional visual artist, he captured moments of joy for others to keep forever. For example, during a mission trip to Israel, he took many photos to tell a collective story about the people, places, and events experienced on tour. Even though he was in physical pain for most of the trip, my father took photos of everyone and each event during the tour. After returning, he edited the photos and strategically arranged them into a self-published visual book titled *The Israel Experience.*[83] The book includes reflections written by members of the congregation who also attended the trip to provide collective insight for others.

I learned a lot about art from my father, yet in his eyes, I still had room to craft my journey. The art I create reflects who I am and typically responds to what is happening. Black joy does not require me to leave so much of myself at the door, but above all shows up in my intimate relationships with myself and others. Specifically, engaging with art makes me feel whole even when I have lost so much. The liberation to fully show up as me requires me to understand who I am; I must approach expression as a necessary process to cope with the effects of trauma on the Black body. While I specialize in performance practice, I also garden and cook to explore more deeply what it means to be an artist.

Horticulture

I received many sympathy plants as gifts from friends after my father's funeral to show concern for my loss. I researched how to care for the plants and took special care of them because they represented my relationship with my father. I did my best to keep them all alive. The plants remained a source of comfort, and in my care, they produced much growth in one

[83] *The Israel Experience* remains an exclusive text in the L & S Christian Bookstore at Full Gospel Holy Temple in Dallas, Texas.

year, so I gave them away as gifts of love to other people in my life. I consciously decided to redirect the lingering sadness in my heart that was pivotal in my journey to mental wellness. The investments of ritual, intent, and delivery activated joy, and I discovered a new approach to spiritual joy. I later realized that I was not alone in my journey as a Black horticulturalist with historical examples of notable figures like George Washington Carver, Malcolm Stubblefield, Anne Spencer, Marie Clark Taylor, and Edmond Albius[84] who made significant strides in the fight for equality. Specifically, Anne Spencer dedicated a portion of her life to resistance during the Jim Crow era as a poet, botanist, and activist who often wrote about religious themes and her garden that received national recognition in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry.* Spencer tended to her garden, Edankraal, for over fifty years in Virginia, which served as a sacred space from the terrors of racism in America. Edankraal provided refuge to traveling activists like Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Because of this work, the house and garden are considered a museum (Hall & Beam). The property is now known as "The Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum," which teaches people about the cultural, political, and social advancements of a thriving Black home.

Black people have found ways to translate joy through horticulture, but our approaches to gardening are not limited to flowers and plants. Black planters continue to develop joy in their gardens, farms, and homes that remain safe spaces in the Black community. For example, Tanya Fields is the executive director and founder of The Black Feminist Project. She started the "Black Joy Farm" as a space for the MaGes[85] to grow plants and food in the South Bronx of New

[84] See "5 Historic Black Figures in Horticulture You Should Know"
[85] On The Black Joy Farm's website, The MaGes, is defined as an inclusive term to describe marginalized genders (womxn, girls, and femmes) and considers the low-income and immigrant people who intersectionally suffer with hunger due to racism and economic exclusion with an emphasis on mother-led families.

York. The accessibility and affordability offered through the Black Joy Farm "restores agency, justice, joy, and health" and empowers the people by encouraging the MaGes to put self-needs at the center of their world. [86] This joy does not happen in a single effect. Still, the model used in this project directly points to the possibility for disenfranchised communities and deeply grounds itself in love as an immediate response to meet the needs of Black womxn, girls, and non-men.

Filmmaker Tabia Lisenbee-Parker captures examples of this work in "Seeds of Resilience," which features the stories of Black agrarians who have cultivated gardens and farms in Atlanta on behalf of the Food Well Alliance. Lisenbee-Parker compiles a myriad of experiences in this visual project with dialogue that focuses on the "socio-historical impacts on urban agriculture, exchange generational wisdom, and offer[s] a deeper understanding of the investments they make into building healthier communities" (Food Well Alliance). In S1E2, Filomena (Mena) DeAndrade and Haylene Green discuss the joy they discovered in farming and emphasize the importance of continuing this legacy for future agrarians. Mena is from West Africa, and Ms. Green is from Jamaica, but they share a passion for teaching others the skills they learned from their fathers in their childhood. According to Lisenbee-Parker, this docuseries allows growers from different walks of life to appreciate new possibilities within themselves and the communities they serve. The frequency with which each story is framed celebrates the resilience of Black joy committed to growth. Black agrarians are the primary focus of this docuseries, highlighting farms as a site of creative expression to experience joy.

Alice Walker writes about the artistry of Black women who possess unique talents and skills in everyday life in the book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She highlights the overlooked efforts of a Black woman's creativity during times of gendered

[86] Again, see The Black Joy Farm's website.

oppression. I use this work to frame a conversation of resilience as demonstrated in the contemporary works of Fields and Lisenbee-Parker. Walker discusses her mother's garden as a vibrant space that cultivates inspiration for her and the community. What makes her descriptions so necessary is that the garden signifies artistic talent beyond the formal qualifications of art, including horticulture as something we can appreciate under the lens of creative expression. She reflects on the roots of her brilliance:

> And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read. And so it is, certainly, with my own mother. Unlike "Ma" Rainey's songs, which retained their creator's name even while blasting from Bessie Smith's mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. (240)

Here, Walker reflects on her mother's skill to create beauty that is not honored on a mass level. In many ways, the garden symbolizes inspiration that influences Walker's writing as a poet and storyteller. She writes with an urgency that we should continue to tell the stories of our mothers and grandmothers because they matter to the art we create as women. But, as Walker emphasizes, if we look hard enough, we too can discover the power in our gardens. Whether curated in our homes or nurtured on the land, horticulture opens the door to the imagination expressed as art.

With each bloom, Walker realizes her mother's resilience despite the hardships that may have stifled her ability to express her emotions outside the garden. Similarly, I feel a spiritual connection to God that brings me joy when I garden. When I prepare my plants for the dormant season each November, I welcome the possibilities that live on the edge until the growing season welcomes me back in March when the buds start to peak. I feel this shift each time I plunge my hands into the soil, water the plants, and watch droplets trickle down. In "Seeds of Resilience," Ms. Green states, "It's a joy to grow. And it's therapy to play in the soil" (00:4.50-00:4.57). I

agree with her reflections based on my own experiences with horticulture, which is now in the early stages of growing food. Like Anne Spencer and Walker's mother, my garden is my safe space to grow art that is personal and for the community. No matter who we are and where we are, Black people may positively reconnect to nature in ways that teach us how to write a new narrative in the soil.

Soul Food

I am reminded of my paternal grandfather, James Oliver (Pops), who grew squash, greens, green beans, cabbage, tomatoes, peppers, and potatoes in his backyard garden. Gardening was not popular in Dallas, and so, at the time, I did not understand what he was doing outside. Pops, a sharecropper's legacy, refused to become a product of capitalism, so he assessed different ways to improve his social environment and livelihood. When my siblings and I visited our grandparents during the summer, Pops fixed three meals daily between the lessons my grandmother taught us from the breakfast table. Many of the vegetables we ate were gathered from his garden of love, and for that, I am genuinely grateful. After his death, I realized my rich heritage to the lessons of the land; however, what Pops created with the food from his garden is what I remember most about him. He could not make a bad meal except when he served oatmeal without bacon. He made everything from scratch and took pride in bringing the family together over home-cooked Sunday meals after church. Pops was not the only cook in our family, yet he defied traditional gender roles in the kitchen.

When I close my eyes, I smell love in the kitchen. My mother's pot roast is simmering in a crockpot, grandaddy's greens (with the hammocks) are boiling in a pot on the stove, grandma is putting the final touches on her potato salad, and my sister just took the mac and cheese out of the oven. On the table are fried chicken, ham, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, sweet potato pie,

peach cobbler, cabbage, black-eyed peas, string beans, corn, cornbread, many cakes, and a pitcher of Kool-Aid mixed with ginger ale and sherbet. The entire family is gathered around the table to pray before we all indulge in the food. Some of us will be back for seconds, some thirds, and still, there will be more for the next day. My grandmother tells us to *catch* hands, bow our heads, and close our eyes. My father leads us in a word of prayer to bless the food. I look up while everyone plots the quickest route to the greens. My mouth is watering, and the other children are drooling over the food across the table. Our eyes meet, and we giggle, but my aunt sees us and gives off a look so severe that we tightly close our eyes and bow our heads, for real this time. *Amen.* I am too young to serve myself, so I ask my mother to load my plate with the goods. Finally, I take a bite in peace. This food is comforting to my soul: prepared by hands who hold me and served by those who love me.

Soul food originates in the history of Black resistance, rebellion, and revolution in the Deep South (Ganaway). During the slave trade, Black people braided rice into their hair to survive the brutal conditions of their environments. Enslaved people were given low-quality food with hardly any nutritional value, which led to malnutrition and death. Groups like the Gullah Geechee maintained growing plants and rice traditions to create familiar dishes of their homeland (Satterfield). Other enslaved people took the scraps and leftovers from the big house to adapt meals with corn meal, lard, some meat, molasses, peas, greens, sweet potatoes, and flour.[87] If the enslaver allowed them to grow gardens, they planted patches of okra, peanuts, and watermelon to add to their weekly meals. Some took food from the owner to sustain their strength for the next day. These efforts serve as the earliest examples of food resistance in the Black community, contributing to the history of soul food (Hayford).

[87] See "The Slave Experience: Living Conditions."

Black people have continuously made something unique and delicious out of nothing, documented during the Civil Rights movement. For example, Georgia Gilmore fed activists in Montgomery, Alabama, from her kitchen to help protestors sustain their strength during the bus boycott that lasted for 382 days. Klancy Miller explains in "Overlooked No More: Georgia Gilmore, Who Fed and Funded the Montgomery Bus Boycott" that Gilmore was fired from her job for participating in the boycott, so she used her skills to make a difference for the people in her community and cooked meals for people who participated. She later started the Club from Nowhere. The members of the group prepared homecooked meals like fried fish, greens, and macaroni and cheese to sell at protest meetings. Her efforts influenced a central aspect of the Black Panther Party's mission to deal effectively with food inequity in Black communities. Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale noticed that many Black students did not eat breakfast before school, so they started a system to provide free meals to all hungry students regardless of race. Although the Black Panther Party is typically characterized as a violent group of people who terrorized society for radical liberation, their efforts inspired the free food program in schools today (Ganaway). These examples of resistance in the Black community highlight the joy that ends up on our plates despite racial oppression.

Many Black people have also practiced resilience through documenting the history of food justice and Black culinary practices that expand how we share knowledge and culture in the Black community. For example, in S1E3 of *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America,* Stephen Satterfield connects the origins of Black chefs who shaped American cuisine for centuries, which is first exemplified in a story about James Hemings. We learn about the life of Hemings, a Black chef that served Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in the late 1700s. Jefferson allowed Hemings to learn French cuisine in Paris, but he later returned to

his duties as a cook in Philadelphia. Although Philadelphia was considered a free state for Black people, Hemings was in bondage until he found a way to negotiate his freedom from Jefferson. Satterfield explains that Hemings created a "pie called macaroni," a popular dish now called macaroni and cheese. However, he is rarely credited for this contribution to American cuisine because Jefferson took credit for this dish published in Marie Kimball's cookbook in 1938. In addition, [88] Black culinary scholars have revisited the history of American cuisine to mark the practices of Black people by documenting their recipes in published cookbooks.

In "Blackness and Food Resilience: Black Culinary Epistemologies, the Slow Food Movement and Racial Justice," Marilisa C. Navarro argue that cookbooks are a collection of Black culinary epistemologies. Here, the emphasis on Black epistemology highlights how race is projected differently through embodied experience in the kitchen that traces the origins of cultural norms in the Black community. Black foods, voices, experiences, and histories are compiled in cookbooks to cite the truth of Black culinary contributions as a form of racial justice and social equity. A shift took place in the millennium as the stories of Black cooks and chefs are now archived and celebrated with attention to a sophistication that honors the traditions and practices of enslaved people throughout centuries.

My friend Deah Berry Mitchell wrote a cookbook titled, "Cornbread & Collard Greens: How West African Cuisine & Slavery Influenced Soul Food" to highlight the connections of race, sustainability, and health that connects a history of Black culinary epistemologies in West Africa to America. Deah builds on the influences of specific foods and techniques through the personal narrative to reflect on soul food practices passed down through her family. She adapted the recipes after her travels worldwide to reimagine more healthy options to fifty traditional

[88] See *Thomas Jefferson's Cook Book.*

recipes, an extension of food justice activism. Her creative interpretations capture the essence of Navarro's definition of Black culinary epistemologies to teach readers the history of foods like collard greens, sweet potatoes, and black-eyed peas. Her research has evolved into the "Soul of DFW: Food & Black History Bus Tour, " including trips to Houston, Galveston, and East Texas.

After grieving people who lost a fight with COVID-19 and coping with the public deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, the dynamic of wellness shifted in my life. I felt alone because I was separated from friends and family. One day I had a craving for Pops' greens, so I went to the store and started to cook. My grandfather did not document his recipes but welcomed others to watch him cook. His lessons are embedded in my memory, so I started a journal to compile the recipes of my favorite dishes. Soul food became a more significant part of caring for myself during the pandemic because, for the first time, I understood the art of cooking as an "intellectual exercise"[89] to fuel Black joy. While I could not share my dishes with many people, I enjoyed sharing pictures of my food with friends and family on social media. They responded with delight as if they could taste the sweet and savory dishes inspired by my grandfather and Deah's cookbook.

As an artist, sometimes I find myself leaning into grief. Grief awakens the emotions a person experiences after losing someone of significant importance in their life and shows up in different forms each day. Grief forces me to navigate a new wave of sadness, but I deal with the long-term effects through creative expression. These hobbies are examples of positive gateways I use to recenter the way I view my pain which is to say they are a prescription to healing. Since my father's death, I realize that if I permit myself to grieve, I can nurture the joy in my world that is always guiding me. The visual representation of plants and food demonstrates the joy in

[89] See Navarro 214

my life that is unique to my journey, but my work as an artist is not limited to matters of nature and the culinary world. I refuse to subscribe to a singular dimension of what makes me feel whole because I have developed a sense of ownership of art that is part of radical self-care. Sometimes I pause and reflect on what is happening to remind myself that joy lives in the simplest pleasures. I reject toxic thoughts that tell me that I must contribute to the discourse about social injustice daily that is worthy of recognition. It may not be insanely radical to garden or to cook but thriving is a form of activism all on its own. These practices create the joy that I and those in my community feel necessary to continue fighting for justice, equality, and fundamental human rights. As we continue fighting, rest should also be considered a necessary component of survival and combats lessons that teach us to exist beyond an unrealistic standard of perfection. In the next section, I reflect on the impact of rest to emphasize that a level of comfort can be attained.

Slow Down

Atatiana Jefferson was playing video games with her nephew when she heard people outside her window in the middle of the night. She grabbed a gun. The people did not identify themselves, and in a split second, Atatiana was killed. On October 12, 2019, while scrolling on social media, I learned that a police officer shot my childhood friend from church. We shared mutual friends on Facebook, so that day I read numerous posts about her life from people who knew her and those who did not. After reading a reflection written by her sister, Amber Carr, a fire in my spirit was ignited. Amber's post reflected on the characteristics that affirmed what I already knew about Atatiana—she was educated, kind, motivated, and a loving family member. She was babysitting her nephew and caring for her ill mother the night she was murdered.

Amber's son was present when everything happened, and although she stated that he did not show any signs of emotional instability, I was deeply concerned.

I could not physically rally with them in Dallas, but I wanted to show my support for Atatiana because people needed to know who she was and what happened to her. Shortly after, I posted flyers for participants to join "The Black Collective: A Performer's Toolbox" workshop at LSU. The workshop helped me navigate feelings of anger during these tragic events (and those to come during COVID-19). However, sometime between planning a revolution and writing a dissertation, I started to experience hair loss due to ongoing stress in my life. After meeting with a therapist, I paused from the frequency of stories about loss, pain, violence, and fear that I saw in the media. I temporarily deactivated my social media accounts, stopped watching the news, and rarely discussed issues of racism with others. This was a moment to breathe and practice self-care more intentionally. I realized that activism could be exhausting; therefore, rest must be linked to Black joy in praxis. However, I feel guilty when I pause from intense periods of activism as if the fight will not continue without me.

However, while writing this dissertation, Amber passed away from heart failure. Her death was untimely and almost put me into a state of depression. While she dreamed of a new world, the circumstances of losing her sister, mother, and father and the aftermath of trial[90] pushed her health to the point of no return. I highlighted her narrative because she believed in my creativity and brilliance. She supported me and held space for me to rewrite a story about Black joy that evokes an emotional stir and gives the community something more than a mantra of how to flourish. The call for rest is now.

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[90] According to Stengle and Bleiberg, "A former Texas police officer was convicted of manslaughter for fatally shooting Atatiana Jefferson through a rear window of her home in 2019, a rare conviction of an officer for killing someone who was also armed with a gun" (PBS News Hour).

Pause

Stand-up comedian and actress Marina Franklin describes Black guilt in her 2019 comedy series, *Single Black Female,* to critique discourse on wokeness in the Black community. She comically characterizes Black guilt as "when you're Black and you haven't done enough," (00:22) to frame a narrative about people who suffer from the burden of activism that insinuates we must always be involved in the fight against injustice. This critique stems from the origins of the term "woke" which describes a person who is assumed to be always already aware of political consciousness.[91] Woke is a persona used in conversations about social and racial injustice that has shaped activism in its marketization of political influence in the media. Franklin's joke points to a broader conversation in the Black community that treats wokeness like a duty to prove one's attention to social justice issues, but the work of wokeness cannot be determined by the thread of a person's public commitment to activism. Wokeness is different from a position of conviction to fight for the Black community.

An example of this marketed wokeness is presented in Pepsi's ad featuring Kendall Jenner. In the commercial, Jenner instantly resolves a protest when she hands the police officer a can of Pepsi (00:2:05). This ad misrepresents the aesthetic of social movements like Black Lives Matter to sell the kind of activism that appeals to mass audiences but fails to impact the reality of racial inequality. Other examples include groups on social media platforms like Facebook[92] and Twitter[93] that increasingly promote policing social issues or use the #staywoke hashtag to increase awareness of oppression that affects marginalized people. Sobande et al. argue that performative wokeness "[has] become a shorthand for assessing [an] antiracist activist identity,"

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[91] This refers to "The hypervisibility and discourses of 'wokeness' in digital culture."
[92] See "Woke" Facebook page
[93] See #StayWoke on Twitter

which is presumably met with responsibility, as demonstrated in the Pepsi ad. In other words, the desire to be responsible takes an affective expression of sincerity attached to a brand of wokeness.

However, Black guilt is not the same as white guilt. In "White Guilt," Shelby Steele describes this dynamic to be a stance that moves white people "from the obligations of dominance to the urgencies of repentance" (498). White guilt is for the benefit of white people to acknowledge a feeling of racial innocence and, as Steele further explains, is a terrible enemy to Black folks. White guilt does not liberate or protect those oppressed but rather positions itself toward whatever angle is available to make amends for past injustices. Whereas Black guilt demonstrates a shift to protest invisibility that rejects a social identity of wokeness, white guilt acts to protect itself from the core principles of equality and, in certain circumstances, kills the idea of freedom.

Wokeness is a mythical strength that one cannot possess. Certainly, convictions matter—but they should matter beyond a word or phrase. If I am "woke," why should I deny others the privilege to regularly and vulnerably admit that activism is hard? Black people are tired of the fight for racial reform, but not because we are complicit in our oppression. The feeling of this grievance is independent of the actual grievance of racism that makes us victims of discrimination in the first place. I am worried about what is at stake when I say and do certain things in the Deep South. I do not want to miss out on an opportunity to stand up for my community, yet I feel unsafe in an environment amongst white supremacists. Some people have risked their lives for the sake of being woke (I will not name their names to protect the integrity of their work). I respect them, but this is not the direction that I want to continue in the future as an activist.

Rest

Sometimes I put joy on hold or store away deposits of happiness into a layaway plan as if one can achieve the perfect version of Black joy. The impact of generational trauma makes me feel as if one day, I may not be able to feel joyous or that I should minimize moments of celebration for the sake of others experiencing a much greater difficulty than my own. When I feel disconnected from my energy, rest offers me a chance to regain peace. Rest is an extension of joy that helps me honor myself by practicing stillness. According to the American Psychological Association, "Experiences of racism against people of color build on each other and over time, can chip away at one's emotional, physical, and spiritual resources" (APA website).[94] If we continue to push through more trauma that lies ahead (e.g., the pain, rage, and grief after witnessing Black public death), then we begin to occupy the same vessel as our stress. This is to say that experiences of oppression render negativity linked to a history of posttraumatic stress. Acknowledging the pain is the first step to protecting our mental health aimed at removing the stigma of shame in the Black community.

Rest stems from a place of resistance but also critically and crucially deepens our joy that we might reject white supremacy without pushing the limitations of our health as resilience. Ingrid Fetell Lee states, "little moments of joy can help restore the emotional resources that become depleted when we are dealing with so much stress and worry so that we have more energy and resolve to take action" (Aspen Ideas website). Lee's statement is true, as oppression has not been minimized or decreased in the Black community. When we allow ourselves to resist the effects of social injustice on our health rather than a temporary distraction to our problems, we become better equipped to face what seems like an endless stream of bad news. Physical rest

[94] See "Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of Racial Trauma and Stress"

allows us to pause from the labors of activism, but a release is a way to maintain the sacred space within. The inclination to resist oppression with the body induces an ethos of self-care in every aspect of life that stems from the spirit.

In *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara A. Holmes frames a conversation of spiritual well-being that embodies and exercises joy through praise and worship. Praise and worship are undefined spiritual actions with the voice or body to evoke God's presence with anticipation of (immediate) relief from sorrow or suffering.[95] Regardless of race, praise and worship are rituals that reinforce a model of faith for the believer that includes restorative options for the spirit. In practice, spiritual joy is gained through movement with the voice and body to release emotions like sadness, anger, and stress that helps a person gain deliverance from their pain. Holmes argues that "when deliverance comes and they have crossed over into the next phase of the journey, they will celebrate, reenact, and remember" (99). This is to say that the feeling of God's presence operates as a catalyst for the believer to defeat the weight in their minds that battles the metaphysical reality of joy. However, even if deliverance does not come, the believer moves with confidence that God will be faithful to his promise. Song and dance, as discussed in the previous chapter, are rituals that maintain the dynamics of praise and worship. In the Black Pentecostal church, praise and worship are considered tools to express gratitude that can be understood as a ritual performance. Praise and worship do not directly correlate with music but are the outcome of how a person perceives God's love in their situation.

Holmes' take on spiritual joy that focuses on praise and worship of God resonates with me. When I am tired from the depths of activism, praise, and worship open a door for me to nurture my joy back to light. This is fuel to show up for the next fight and a reminder to recharge

[95] Acts 16: 25-26

the body and mind. Expectations of activism can make the everyday needs in life seem unimportant, but rest is a priority. Rest does not mean that I am a lazy activist; rest is an indication that I care about myself. I model this mantra for the people around me because rest is important for us to achieve our best selves. Spiritual joy feels like a destination to which you never truly arrive; nevertheless, like the authors in "I Will Rejoice: Reflections on Black Joy" claim, I rest in this "anchoring space where peace can transcend and transform when understanding has gone on vacation" (56). Further, spiritual joy is "defiant as it is uplifting" that radiates happiness despite the pain from patriarchy, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and more. This type of joy is particular in how I express myself because no matter how I release the pain, the portal to my healing is always through God's grace and mercy.

Be

Holmes also frames the layers of spiritual joy as a communal response to pain through storytelling. Storytelling maintains collective memories to remind us that the practices of rest and restoration are necessary for survival. Like biblical stories are interpreted and passed down, Holmes describes a *griosh* as a unique method of storytelling based on Africana interpretation that transmits spiritual-based words, values, and beliefs. This term is derived from *griot, which* describes "African storytellers who were also historians and keepers of cultural memory," and *sh*, a "symbolic marker of the hush arbors where Christian diaspora faith perspectives were honed" (94). In short, a griosh combines African traditions and a particular language style in the Black church. Like a griot, the griosh is the keeper of oral culture and generates words and meaning for interpretation that evolves with each retelling of the collective memory or value. The creative style of the griosh is then determined by the methodology to highlight and interpret

spiritual themes, events, and circumstances shared amongst members of the same community. The following provides a concrete example.

"A Change is Gonna Come" is a song by Sam Cooke that addresses social issues in a direct way to shape a narrative of hope and vision for the Black community in 1964. The song carries a tune for civil rights as Cooke tells a story about the hardships of a Black man who is optimistic about the future. The artistic and political influences that structure the message create awareness that embraces a philosophy of joy and moves past experiences of grief and struggle. The song was a groundbreaking hit as Cooke tells a story of self-determination and Black pride with gospel undertones that influenced Aretha Franklin to record her version in 1967. Franklin begins with a personal tribute to Cooke, but the uniqueness in her voice shifts the storytelling style. She reshapes the story of hope with more intensity, which earns notable attention from the Black community. While Franklin carries the exact sentiment of activism as Cooke, she transforms the complexity of the times with a spirit of creativity that launches a culture of storytelling on its own. Kim Burrell's 2021 "A Change is Gonna Come" performance at the Spirit of Faith Christian Center enacts a similar creativity that I elaborate on in the following.

Burrell's rendition is a fusion of gospel and jazz that begins with a message to remind the audience that "God cannot change. He's always looking out for us" (00:00:11). While the tune of the song is the same, the lyrics are focused on change that is spiritually centered when faced with disbelief or difficulty. Burrell shifts the nature of community storytelling that includes a small chorus and band who propel the unique message of resistance and resilience that is pleasing to the ear of the believer. Burrell revises past versions of "Change Gonna Come" with the inclusion of a chorus and band and performs the work of a grioish who maintains the biblical call for liberation to encourage the community. This interpretation does not discount the success of the

original song and those who have associated its message with the fight for social justice, but rather Burrell addresses the contextual meaning of *when* a change will come. The singers mark a shift in the telling of the story when they repeat, “Change has come”[96] to align the story of hope with a position of faith. Burrell’s revision is like Cooke's in that her lyrics are personalized to fit the scope of hope; however, words like “deliverance” and phrases such as “we believing God with you”[97] provide a contemplative reading of the song that emerges from Holy scripture.[98]

Black joy’s core is personal and collective. While Black joy often begins as an individual journey, the path leads to a collective cultural exchange as a source of hope in a dark and sometimes hostile world. The collective provides comfort in times of weakness with examples and stories that are a source of rejuvenation when the world's weight has drained me. Collective Black joy contributes to the advancement of the Black community, which ultimately feels like a responsibility to honor the ancestors such as enslaved Africans, trailblazing activists, and deceased grandparents. Moreover, Black joy requires an ontological shift in the collective. The knowledge to cultivate the defiant and uplifting posture stems from Afrocentric principles to resist whiteness based on what was previously said or done. To sustain a political context of antiracism, we must find new ways to share our stories of survival that fully recognize the importance of rest and stillness. The overarching theme of Omni’s steps to grow Black joy anchors resistance and resilience by reinterpreting the elements exchanged as currency between individuals and their communities. Based on my observations of the characteristics that work with and produce Black culture, I have considered the central argument of this structure to be essential in the pursuit of liberation. In the next section, I consider the evolution of Black joy as a

[96] See 00:04:45
[97] See 00:04:49
[98] Psalm 40: 9-10

collective praxis that compiles stories in digital culture for people to connect globally in various modalities. This is more than just something new in the place of how we share Black joy but instead serves as an example of social activism in the necessary advancement of Black expression.

Conclusion

I think Black joy is a strategy not geographically confined to a single location. Indeed, this does not just mean within the United States of America. Black joy also extends to a global perspective that includes the Haitian Carnival leading up to Mardi Gras,[99] texts like *The Girl with the Louding Voice* written by Abi Dare, and the 1977 film, *Black Joy,* set in the United Kingdom. These texts also provide a narrative about joy that reflects Black diasporic experience. Black joy in the diaspora functions with a reckoning of culture that also moves toward the community's terrain. The mix of language, knowledge, tradition, and being is celebrated by highlighting things that make life enjoyable for Black people worldwide.

After Thanksgiving Day in 2015, Kleaver Cruz posted a picture of his mother smiling on Facebook to combat a state of sadness in the world that portrayed Black trauma. Cruz states, "My social media timelines needed some smiles amidst the sharing of important information, thoughts, art, photos and videos that can be upsetting and at its worst depressing and traumatizing" (Cruz' website). He asked others to join him in posting photos of happiness using "#Blackjoy" to compile images of happiness online that represent the Black community in a new light. Cruz launched "The Global Black Joy Project" on social platforms to encourage people worldwide to contribute their interpretation of joy as a response to overwhelming sorrow in the media. #Blackjoy shifted the frequency and duality of joy in the diaspora because people could

[99] Also described as Carnival au Cap Haitien.

focus on positive reflections of their community without limitation. The desire to align positive depictions of Blackness across the globe is attainable in the digital space whether the individual is physically or mentally connected to a specific site.

Digital platforms are functional places to express joy in multiple contexts, including the production of physical textuality and multimedia, such as information or entertainment on social networks, streaming services, and video-sharing websites. Black digital culture specifically centers on technologies and rhetoric to survey a collection of conversations about the Black experience that remixes the context of storytelling and creates an imaginative space for people to experience joy worldwide immediately. André Brock, Jr. defines this phenomenon as "Black cyberculture" in *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures.*" Black cyberculture, as Brock argues, is "how [we] understand and employ digital artifacts and practices as it relates to how Blackness is constituted within the material (and virtual) world of the internet itself" (5). The users of Black cyberculture actualize alternative realities for themselves and people whose identities exist on a spectrum of oppression. Brock challenges us to consider this type of digital space for the distribution of positive, negative, and political examples of Black joyous practice that is marked according to individual or collective work. The Black digital space emerges as an essential area to perform a highly engaging practice of communication that contributes to cultural production and public imagination.

Black cyberculture codifies the nature of individuals who produce digital artifacts, services, and practices as information, expression, and appreciation online for Black culture both individually and collectively to tell stories of resistance or resilience. A narrative is a powerful tool in the digital world; therefore, no matter who we are and where we are, there is always an opportunity to share a story with others (Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*). Adam Banks

formalizes this communication style to shape community storytelling in *Digital Griots* that blends race and technology. This new approach to storytelling is achieved by Banks' definition of the digital griot, who weaves the past, present, and future of Black culture online. Banks elaborates,

> In linking traditional figures griotic figures like the preacher and storyteller with the more contemporary example[s]… positioning the digital griot as a model for multimedia writing calls for a focus on the interconnectedness of print, oral, and digital media, a thorough knowledge of and grounding in African American discursive and theoretical practices, and an ethos of commitment to community, in all of the rich ways writers might understand that term (24).

The digital griot takes on a responsibility to deliver the principles of storytelling for identity formation and establishes a code for shaping a collective identity. Banks describes this as an intentional rhetoric for the 21st century that demonstrates the knowledge, skill, ability, awareness, and purpose which, on a basic level, offers value for technology (26). What I find most interesting is that temporality on digital platforms moves the terms of resilience and resistance forward by presenting inclusive pathways to continue the soulful work of our ancestors. The digital griot assumes a role that produces contemporary discourse about the Black community.[100] I regularly engage with digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube to watch content around the world that makes me laugh.

For example, when Disney announced the live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* in starring Halle Bailey as Ariel, fans of the classic shared their excitement on Twitter.[101] When racist fans of the 1989 classic discovered that a Black woman would take over the traditional white princess role, negative responses flooded Twitter.[102] Even though Ariel is a fictitious

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[100] In *Digital Black Feminism*, Catherine Knight Steele emphasizes that the work of maintaining Black digital platforms is often done by Black women.
[101] TRACE Southern Africa
[102] arigato grande

magical creature, Bailey's Black body threatens whiteness because she fails to construct a desirable princess identity. Other white racist ideologies that contest the depiction of fictitious characters in the digital space include Zendaya as MJ in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and Michael B. Jordan in the 2015 remake of *Fantastic Four*.[103]

Black cyberculture's response to this intentional racist and negative discourse about "Black Ariel" calls attention to the actions of digital griots who operate as community protectors, also known as goons (Bey). The goons radically responded to racist tweets defending problematic discourse about Bailey and other fictitious black characters. A tweet by @Darealbigfine1 says, "So after all the Africans yall threw in the ocean yall surprised a mermaid is Black?"[104] This tweet made me laugh out loud because her statement reflects a collective critique of the transatlantic slave trade. As a digital griot, she provides a perspective of the past to recognize the history of racism in America by questioning the absurdity of the attempt to limit Black joy. I am not the only one who thought this tweet was funny because many people in the digital world shared the post on Facebook and Instagram. The overlap of comedic and critical texts on social media platforms like (Black) Twitter presents a new approach to joy that cuts the bitter taste of racism. Like honey to vinegar, the sweetness of laughter balances the sourness of racial exhaustion. Yet social media is not the only platform for digital griots to flourish. These findings have broader implications for the trajectory of the digital griot who strategically envisions resistance and resilience for future generations.

For example, Andrea "Philly" Walls launched "The Museum of Black Joy" online at the beginning of 2020 as another response to stories of violence against people of color that

[103] Gramugalia
[104] Darealbigfine1 is now on Twitter as @Durkioooolilsis. Also, the original tweet ends with the "thinking face" emoji in place of a question mark which I have substituted here to accommodate the difference in style guides.

dominated headlines on social media. The Museum of Black Joy is “an interactive archive, a hybrid exhibition space, a living document of non-traumatic Black life in Philadelphia and beyond, utilizing traditional storytelling and emerging technologies to acknowledge and advance experiences rooted in Black joy” (The Museum of Black Joy website). The composition of texts and voices in this digital space blends history and popular culture with recognition of the legacies of people, places, attitudes, and engagements of Black life. This "borderless exhibition" synchronizes oral and digital communication where users can intimately scroll through continuous loops of pictures, videos, stories, sermons, songs, and poetry, giving new meaning to multimedia discourse on race and community (Ulaby). Walls sufficiently bends time[105] for audiences to experience resistance and resilience in the comfort of their homes. Examples of this work are also demonstrated in digital spaces like the “Black Joy Archive” and the “Creating Joy Film Festival.” In these examples, the digital griot serves the community. Therefore, persuasion is a necessary tool for the digital griot because the ability to influence the crowd sustains the genre of production (Banks 26). The digital griot shifts the means of modality to bring together complementary and competing texts that align global stories about Black humanity. The work of the digital griot is vital to share the stories of Black joy despite the physical location.

While mainstream media primarily engages in terror, death, and violence, digital platforms are instrumental in sharing joy as a part of the collective Black experience. Black cyberculture allows scholars to grow seeds of resistance and resilience in digital soil to present new examples of creative expression for individuals and groups. Collective joy is at the center of this exchange that visibly documents the materialization of joy. This discursive-social space mobilizes the globalization of Blackness. What makes Black cyberculture unique is that the

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[105] Banks borrows the term “time binder” from Tom Hale in *Griots and Griottes* to conceptualize the importance of the digital griot’s role to celebrate, critique, preserve, or connect culture on demand.

digital griot's method of storytelling activates what Omni describes as Blacktivating Joy by repositioning the histories of pain on a collective canvas. Alexis emphasizes that, "It is good to be in the melanin we're in, to speak with our tongues, to laugh with and at ourselves, to wear our hairs the way we want. It is rejoicing in our cultures… and our histories which comprise [of] much more than shackles and chains," (53). Here, she highlights the freedom and agency, for example, that is typically absent in aspects of public spaces that showcase Blackness. Whereas no matter where the space is located, the Black digital collective inhabits the kind of togetherness to expand the concept of joy. Digital practices deserve more recognition in the future of Black joy. That is, "to reimagine what care, support, and healing can look like for us amid and beyond structural precarity" (Hall and Bell 10). Here, the context of joy is not confined to the pressures of systematic oppression as demonstrated in the past. I argue that this dynamic can emerge through digital griots as keepers of history and influencers of popular culture.

As previously mentioned, collective joy informs public discussions about the ways that Black people respond to transformative possibilities on an individual and global scale. As individuals, we influence the characteristics of collective Black joy by centering empowerment as a mantra of pleasure that improves our chances of liberation. Black joy provides the community with strength, support, and knowing that we are not alone in our struggle. As a result, we can collectively organize narratives that highlight survival and self-care to normalize the power of pleasure that reframes the way we tell our stories about pain (Baker). Specifically, we practice certain rituals and behaviors, including writing, singing, dancing, gardening, cooking, resting, and engaging technologies, to navigate the pressures of life that are confined to a white gaze that demands suffering and dependency. The most important principle of these practices is that we shift our attitudes beyond the pain that we have witnessed toward building and serving

the communities with which we are aligned. Holmes argues that "Joy beckons us not as individual monastics, but as a community" to contextualize the need for openness and solidarity. The community draws from the divergencies in Black oral and visual expression to suggest a synthesis that can bridge the old and new kinds of textual literacies in social activism. This is to say that our practices signify our well-being and gives a different lens and voice to the oppressed.

The essence of collective Black joy lives at the heart of pleasure that is a fusion of resistance and resilience. While traditional discourse about resistance and resilience tracks the practice of politics that are detrimental to Black joy, the edification of pleasure enriches our understanding of sustainable happiness. In *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism*, Lindsey Stewart argues that the danger in a traditional response to oppression limits agency under the guise that it "cannot be captured by the category of resistance. Instead of directly protesting oppression," Stewart explains that progressive "Black joy [is] more like a refusal to entertain the white gaze" (9-10). She gets at the decontextualization of what so many scholars and artists, including myself, have critiqued in the reproduction of Black joy that is lost under the public guise of liberation. We have been historically denied the opportunity to shine in just about any context outside of our communities. Yet, there is a tipping point that demonstrates how Black people have overcome structural barriers. We are not interested in projecting narratives that dismiss our pain; however, we must refuse the urge to appeal to a version of "public good" for white audiences (Clay).

In this chapter, I have discussed my positive experiences with spiritual joy that extends to gardening and cooking. I recognize that the joy I speak about is mainly linked to the love and care in my family history. However, this joy is not a means to overlook the diversity in Black joy

that is different from my practices. According to Imani Perry, Black joy is “immense and defiant”[106] about the instant rhythm of rest established after a social trauma after a protest of police brutality and political uprisings around the country (“What If Digital Activism, Such as via Twitter, Doesn't Really Do Anything?”). Others may organize a picnic in park[107], camp and hike[108], or twerk on Tik Tok[109] that, contributes to the global idea of Black joy in which we are the creators and consumers of our pleasure. The “do it yourself culture” critically considers the immediate possibilities of joy as a value that can stand on its own to reshape the negative discourse in the media. DIY Black joy refuses to satisfy the guilt of our oppressors. History demonstrates that we have built spaces to experience joy and celebrate our culture despite the pressures of white supremacy, but attacks on utopias have left our communities unrecognizable. [110] I want to establish more non-traditional spaces to showcase Black joy that exists in the privacy of our homes but also ventures to the internet as demonstrated by digital griots.

Digital platforms allow this generation of intellectuals to share stories of resistance and resilience through the mass distribution of ideas and language. My recent contributions to discourse about Black joy online are positioned to inspire students to continue the work outside of the classroom.[111] This is marked in recording, sharing, and preserving the oral stories of Black people who have survived the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters that caused personal trauma. Storytelling is a method to share these narratives because in exploring the power of the

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[106] See “Racism is Terrible. Blackness is Not”
[107] See “Joy as Resistance: The Founders of The Lay Out on Black Joy”
[108] See “The Universality of Black Joy- Conversations with Rue Mapp”
[109] See “Black Feminist Pleasure on Tik Tok: An Ode to Hurston’s Characteristics of Negro Expression”
[110] According to Randi Richardson, The Tulsa Race Massacre (Tulsa Riot or Black Wall Street Massacre) was started because Dick Rowland (Black male) was accused of assaulting a white girl in 1921. A mob of 2000 white men grew, and the National Guard declared martial law, bombing the entire town.
[111] In 2020, I started “Vivid Green Thing,” a business and digital space to help people with grief through gardening. Additionally, I produced “Black Collective 2.0,” a digital performance about the second year of living in the pandemic.

griot, I honor and celebrate the embodiment of joy in community expression. The performance of Black joy is consistent with a push to heal wounds hidden from the world through telling our stories. There is magic in releasing the pain bottled up to produce joy and encourage other people. I formalize some practices and processes in this chapter as an extension of growing Black joy to emphasize the significance of artistic expression off stage. While this dissertation looks at the fundamental components of performance that have contributed to my journey as a Black woman practitioner, I do not doubt that the emergence of joy in my life is essential to continue the critical work that responds to anti-Blackness. Omni states that "there is something about growing [Black joy] that makes you feel alive" (00: 13:47). I agree; there is something special because growth always contains an element of surprise to awaken the soul.

In the next chapter, I connect this discussion on joy to demonstrate how wellness contributes to how I see and process my calling in the world. Joy has allowed me to rediscover my passion for performing and teaching to find new ways to inspire the next generation of Black practitioners. Not only am I passionate about the practices that have rightfully ensured my liberation, but I am also drawn to the kind of work that places value on helping my people discover their passions. I understand this to be work from the soul. While the decorum of my scholarship assumes that I only engage in discussions of Black life, I am not opposed to pedagogical strategies that help other marginalized people engage with ideas that relate to their own experiences. I will also frame the theories of Black Feminism that have influenced me to engage in critical and welcoming pedagogical practice.

Chapter 5. Passion Moves the Soul

The special distinctiveness of most Black women writers is the knack to keep their work intriguing and refreshing amidst its instructiveness. They know how to lift the imagination as they inform, how to touch the emotions as they record, how to delineate specifics so that they are applicable to oppressed humanity everywhere.
–Katie Geneva Cannon
"Moral Wisdom in The Black Women's Literary Tradition"

I discovered Black feminism in my second semester in graduate school at The University of North Texas in Denton. A challenging introduction to the program meant constructing a new academic identity while managing overt racist remarks from peers. Suffocating from the margins of oppression in the ivory tower seemed to be a part of the process for me as a Black woman, so I silenced my feelings. One day I read *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks. While the book is mainly about a transgressive approach to pedagogy, hooks discusses the overlooked struggles that Black women face with issues of gender and race in "Feminist Scholarship: Black Scholars." Specifically, hooks highlights the experiences of Black women from a feminist standpoint to expand on overlapping oppressions that can be experienced by both a teacher and student of color in the classroom. The radical view of race and gender equity in this chapter caught my attention and introduced me to a very deliberate engagement with liberatory thinking.

I learned more about feminism through assigned readings from professors; however, we did not read scholarship that included the perspectives of Black women. I received an institutionalized guise that all feminist scholarship was committed to greater liberation engagement until I discovered more scholars like Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and Olga Idris Davis, who illuminated Black women's experiences to reshape the span of respectability politics. These scholars discuss feminism focused on race, gender, sex, and class

as overlapping oppressions that speak to the intentionality of the Black feminist movement.[112] These Black feminists advocate for a fundamental shift in the fight for liberation to account for the visibility of interlocking oppressions which have more significant implications for Black women's experiences. This knowledge was necessary to understand hostile remarks from peers who claimed to be feminists.

One day two white women openly used the word "nigga" during class as an example to describe the evolution of derogatory language amongst Black people. They were competing for space to speak in a room of dominating white men. Still, their actions offended me, exceeding the typical challenges students are expected to face during graduate school. Both white women stated that because I did not negatively react to their comments in public, they assumed I was okay with it—that my silence as a Black woman meant contentment with their use of the n-word. I filed a formal complaint within the department, and a few faculty members met with me to whitesplain[113] that the incident was a misunderstanding of language rather than a distinct instance of discrimination.

As hooks argues, "white women [are] more willing to 'hear' another white woman talk about racism, yet it is their inability to listen to Black women that impedes feminist progress" (102). Her words hold as the significance of the incident proved to be nothing but a mere exercise of privilege, as demonstrated in the history of feminist organizing. This is to say that the illusion of gender equality for white feminism rests on basis of "shared power over systems with men" that the founders of the Women's Movement desired back at in Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. The offenders were apologetic to the department but did not directly apologize to me and

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[112] On one hand, Black men were dismissive of Black women's issues because they believed the fight for equality should prioritize race. In contrast, middle-class white women focused on voting rights for themselves which excluded their counterparts in the process.
[113] See "Stop 'Whitesplaing' Racism to Me"

continued to define themselves as feminists who were changing the system. *They were changing the system all right.* I hid my anger to discredit the stereotype that Black women are irrational in discussions of race or racism. This means I hid my genuine emotions to avoid being labeled as the "angry Black woman" even though my aggravation was justified (Williams).

There are countless examples of failed justice for Black women (and girls) at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, which fuels the work of Black feminists. I share this passion for multi-dimensional liberation because the work is not linked to worthiness, neatness, behavioral decorum, or other forms of respectability that have functioned as gatekeeping to the Feminist Movement. I identify as a Black feminist because I believe that centering Black women in discourse about the past, present, and future of transformation presents a broader message of change that liberates people everywhere. The Combahee River Collective Statement argues, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (7). This statement captures the concept of furthering emancipation for oppressed people that distinguishes Black feminism from white feminists and Black-nationalist organizations that exclude different experiences in their politics. To that end, Black feminism is concerned with liberation that includes the needs of all oppressed people, emphasizing Black women. The application of this politic does not take an elitist standpoint which places one oppression over the other but instead centers the personal experience from a general perspective to acknowledge the presence and struggle of Black women. Black feminism is a specific approach to liberation that stretches beyond racist and patriarchal thought (Taylor 13). Thus, to critique how power works in society is a righteous orientation that ethically implies social reform

and rejects the premise of feminist discourse that is inherently racist and supports white supremacy.

Black feminists provide a platform of critical consciousness for others to perform intersectional work, yet society still depends on our intellectual and physical labor to envision liberation. I am angry because the stress and trauma associated with performing our race, gender, sexuality, class, and other identities are still abandoned. I am angry because the pressure to pave the way for others is always a responsibility given to Black women. I am angry because the misuse of terms like "intersectionality" still prevails in feminist critique. However, scholars like Jennifer C. Nash point to a type of healing for Black feminists that does not rest upon our labor to save everyone, which includes issues with defining intersectionality.

We live in a place of marginalization that preserves the rights of others who do not truly understand that a model of intersectionality necessitates that the personal experiences of Black women be centered. While the narrative of feminist practices has shifted to acknowledge harm being caused, the gap in this progression still fails Black women. In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Nash argues for the evolution of Black feminist theories that imagine new ways of world-making without expecting Black feminists to save the day. "Holding on," as she explains, is the continuation of a political response that broadly articulates defensiveness as a primary resting place to police scholars on their engagements with intersectionality and disdain for feminist practices based on Black feminist scholarship but without the presence of Black women (3). This paradox engages a history of the treatment of Black women; however, we do not move forward. Thus, "letting go" of white supremacy and patriarchy requires us to heal from the pitfalls of feminism and unleash more opportunities to radically dream about what Black feminism truly offers as a practice of freedom (138).

In this chapter, I further articulate my stance as a loving Black feminist in how to live, act, and respond to the oppression of daily life in public and private spaces. I engage in an analysis of feminism that particularly values the vulnerability and intimacy required to ask tough questions and provide complex answers. However, I am also interested in a politic that takes stock in reimagining the landscape of Black feminism that unapologetically asks people to change themselves. First, I discuss Black feminism as both an academic framework and an activist movement that continues to provide insight into how to move beyond oppression's devastating personal and political impact. I discuss why Black feminists are angry. It is impossible to theorize a place of feminist praxis without Black women and ignore the impact that scholars have made to render a vision of liberation for all.[114] The development of intersectionality on social media in movements like #BlackGirlMagic has not fully gained resistance to patriarchy and whiteness. In the second section, I explain the performance of the strong Black woman manifested as "Black Girl Magic" to challenge how success has created an expectation of perfection for Black women in the academy.

In the third section, I analyze *Starkeisha*, a short film on Hulu, to tap into a discussion on the social and political agency that promotes self-love and healing. The film provides a premise to explore what Patricia Hill Collins frames as the "power of self-definition" realized through relationships Black women have with each other, the Black woman blues woman singer, and the work of Black women writers (*Black Feminist Thought*).[115] I focus on the Black woman blues singer's presence and activism to characterize how contemporary artists like Solange Knowles have gained traction in the fight against racial injustice. In the conclusion, I explain "clapping back" to reject feelings of inferiority that haunt Black women in academia.

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[114] The Combahee River Collective and their individual contributions
[115] See page 89

Although Black feminists have shifted how we respond to the deficits in identity politics, many obstacles remain. Eventually, the responsibility to raise consciousness and fight for equality becomes a burden again. Consequently, the clapback is used to surrender the notion that liberation requires the destruction of occupying white spaces but instead can be envisioned wherever Black feminists choose to see the world's profound realities from our standpoints. Therefore, Black feminists cannot wait until the world decides to see us as important because, ultimately, what is at stake is the assertion that our identities are not dependent upon the totality of our race and gender. As a result, this chapter communicates my passion as a Black feminist interested in revising the fight for liberation.

The Foundation

Any investigation into the lives of Black women highlights overlapping experiences of race, gender, and sexuality. While it is difficult to quantify these categories of suffering while also creating new terrains to examine inequality, the early works of Black feminism build on a statement written by The Combahee River Collective. Kenyatta-Yamahtta Taylor outlines the statement in four main points: "(1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) what we believe; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice" (15). These four points serve as a guide for understanding the analytical framework for Black feminism as a discourse for revolutionary activism that is not limited to time and distance. Point one provides an overview of the development of contemporary Black feminism as a position tied to antiracist and antisexist oppression (18). The history of Black women's relationship to society is charted to explain the progressive structure of feminism concerned with identity and essentializes race, gender, sexuality, and class. Specifically, the authors make a compelling case for "a politic that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression" (17-

18). Point two focuses on articulating Black feminist beliefs and "the expansion of the principle that the personal is political" (20). Black feminism is defined as an identity politic that considers personal experience a way to make oppression visible and challenge racism, sexism, and classism. Black feminism responds to cultural and political structures of society like capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy that pervade Black women's lives and strive for the liberation of all people.

Point three describes the material conditions of Black feminism, which is difficult to sustain due to a lack of resources and access to power that affects societal change. It argues that Black feminism needs visibility and solidarity from white women's feminism. The authors reflect on the difficulty of organizing a political consciousness reflective of Black womxn who share the weight of oppression by emphasizing an internal disagreement within the collective about the political difference. The disagreements emerge from a place of prioritizing everyday hardships alongside race and gender to include class and sexuality. Finally, point four emphasizes the work of Black feminism that is "committed to a continual examination of… politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice" (27). In other words, the political goal of Black feminism is ongoing, with a particular focus on liberation. Still, there is no definite path to which feminists must perform the work.

The Combahee River Collective Statement is a specific and political force to address the concerns of Black feminists. The authors developed a nondiscriminatory analysis and critical lens based on the fact that systematic oppressions interlock as the statement evolved out of issues with racism and sexism during the second wave of the feminist movement. They explain, "Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence" (17). This does

not reduce all experiences of Black women to gender or sexuality; instead, the politics of Black Feminism account for all aspects of identity. The Combahee River Collective Statement also presents a vision of self-love and loving others that respectively promote the continuation of work despite the struggles Black women experience. Black feminism grows out of learning radical care for self and others that can lead to transformative love—love deeply rooted in resistance and reimagining what we have lived or experienced. However, inequities and traumas are still intertwined with pursuing transformative love because good-intended discourse becomes toxic if rooted in whiteness as self-care praxis. More concretely, "there is much more to our living than simply white supremacy" (Stewart 101).

Black feminism has been contemporarily mobilized as a multidimensional analysis that refuses to rank oppressions based on race, gender, and class. Although we continue to see the word "intersectionality" as a primary term that drives descriptions in political approach, I feel as though the embodiment of this framework has since evolved in works by Black feminist scholars like Jennifer Nash, Brittney Cooper, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Catherine Knight Steele, Imani Perry, Nicole Fleetwood, Christina Sharpe, Tressie McMillian Cottom, and Tamura Lomax. These women continue to divert from racist and patriarchal thought to develop the framework of Black feminism (i.e., Intersectionality, Womanism, Radical Black Feminism). Their works embody culturally relevant discourse surrounding Black women that draws upon personal experiences to make connections that support a model for feminist scholarship.

Black feminism is a framework that strategically moves between the immediate demands for freedom and imagines a course of action that reflects the future. Brittney Cooper argues in *Eloquent Rage: Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* that the world typecasts Black women with emotions such as sass and loudness as angry because most people assume this is a

characteristic of our feelings instead of a response to the effects of oppression. Negative emotions like anger and sadness have fueled political movements. Yet, a Black woman's anger is a force that makes others fearful of her and undermines our reasonable expression of pain.[116] *Why is our anger perceived as unfavorable or misplaced in public discourse?* Cooper explains that we try to detach ourselves from this label by showing less anger in public or remaining calm in moments that upset us (*Eloquent Rage*).

Black women are often labeled as overemotional because we have an angry disposition perceived as internal or external by others. An internal attribution implies that the anger is about the person, whereas an external attribution happens when anger is associated with an unfair situation (Motro et al). For example, an internal attribution indicates that we may characterize a Black woman as aggressive, loud, irrational, or too difficult because years of stereotypes teach us that these are her emotional responses when angry (Walley-Jean). Deborah Gray White argues that this depiction of Black women is not a new practice. In her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, White traces the trope of the angry Black woman in American culture that dates to slavery. She explains that during slavery, expressions of anger were justified but mainly were not permissible toward white people. This trope later evolved as The Sapphire Caricature in media, which is a dominant image of Black women that specifically fuel the Black angry woman trope.

Today the angry Black woman trope persists throughout decades of political, social, and cultural texts and represents unreasonable and ugly images of Black women, mostly in television, films, and politics. For example, former First Lady Michelle Obama, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth of "The Apprentice," and Serena Williams are Black women who have

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[116] See description of Mamie Till in Chapter 4

been publicly depicted as “angry” in situations where they had the right to be upset. In contrast, “Sheneneh” from Martin Lawrence’s self-titled 90s sitcom and Tyler Perry’s “Madea” are male-led characters who exploit, subordinate, and humiliate the bodies and lives of Black women for entertainment. In both depictions of anger, the Black woman is still read as someone who is unnecessarily emotional about her experiences.

Black women have a unique experience with anger that deserves an intersectional analysis of race, gender, sexuality, and class. This approach explains and complicates how institutions or individuals exploit our emotions, bodies, skills, worldviews, and care. Historically and presently, Black women have been stakeholders in communities that oppress us and depend on us to free everyone else despite our pain. We often remain committed to spaces while withholding our anger as mothers, othermothers, teachers, and friends. This is undoubtedly problematic because our needs are pushed to the margins, as demonstrated in the battle to reclaim intersectionality and the #BlackGirlMagic movement. This is a reality that many Black feminists, including myself, have come to realize as a part of our identities as scholars and activists. I further discuss this problematic identity in the following two sections.

Intersectionality Wars

No matter where I lie on the privilege continuum, how I perform my identity, or how much education I obtain, society will always see me as a Black woman. What I mean is that racism and sexism frequently converge in my life in a way that is tied to a history of oppressive treatment in America, leaving behind the deep inequalities of marginalization. In her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Crenshaw explains the term “intersectionality” to analyze how women of color experience overlapping issues of raced

and gendered violence within systems of oppression, domination, and discrimination (140). Specifically, she critiques the way that Black women's experiences are silenced, ignored, and misrepresented to examine the multiplicity of structural and political impacts of intersecting social identities (i.e., gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, etc.) that acknowledge the nature of oppression. Part of what makes intersectionality essential to Black women is that a single word can analyze the simultaneous experiences of different oppressions, but this is not a new argument.

Pioneers like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett took a stand against oppression regarding their experiences as Black women that grounds a legacy of liberation. They recognized the community's collective needs and were leaders that aspired to improve the value of life for Black people in the U.S. For example, Tubman is best known for her role as the conductor of the Underground Railroad. She lived a life dedicated to freedom and guided over 300 enslaved people to the North despite the risk of death because Tubman believed everyone deserved freedom. She also assisted the Union soldiers during the Civil War as a nurse, cook, spy, and leader who led the Black troops to the Combahee River Raid in 1863. Secondly, in "Ain't I a Woman," Truth critiques the invisibility of race and gender in the collective fight against inequality amongst women's rights which reminds listeners of her struggles as a Black woman. The efforts of Black men and white women did not include the specific political situation of Black women, even for those who were active in those movements. Therefore, Truth describes her experiences in the speech to advocate for more inclusive politics. Her message points to a need for the fights against racial and gender suffrage to coincide because, ultimately, separating those identities proved problematic for Black women.

Lastly, the work of Wells-Barnett carries the essence of activism and feminism through writing that challenges the act of lynching for men, women, and children. Her efforts established a need for free speech that included the voices of Black women as advocates for equality which helped launch the National Association of Colored Women. Wells-Barnett faced numerous death threats due to her anti-lynching activism. Still, her aggressive approach to liberation built political power amongst Black people that remains a position of importance for Black feminists. The bravery and activism of these women influence the work of the Combahee River Collective and Crenshaw, who have manifested the concept of intersectionality to validate Black women's everyday experiences and analyze identity and liberation in the academy. This brings me to my next point, which examines how the misuse of intersectionality harms the trajectory of Black feminism by separating the goals of reviewing interlocking oppressions clearly outlined in the Combahee River Collective Statement.

The Abuse

Most critical/cultural scholars are familiar with intersectionality as a framework because the basis of its theoretical practice allows researchers to focus on intersecting identities and how these intersections contribute to power, discrimination, and oppression. Intersectionality also enables scholars to consider how their social and political worlds are constructed. For example, in "Placing Sex/Gender at the Forefront: Feminisms, Intersectionality, and Communication Studies," authors Sara Hayden and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein argue that,

> Our commitment to feminism specifically—the exploration of sex/gender and the eradication of barriers to women's agency—means that our efforts to engage in intersectional work are coupled with a commitment to placing sex/gender at the forefront of our research, albeit always in the context of multiple axes of power (97).

They advocate for a revision of intersectional thinking that places sex/gender at the forefront of oppression with all its complexities. From a feminist standpoint, this perspective reflects an

epistemological focus on power that begins with a gendered analysis while also drawing attention to other aspects of identity. As a result, Hayden and Hallstein argue that such a focus is "inevitable" and "necessary" to develop a method of intersectional thinking that puts reflexivity into practice (104). Based on the meaning of intersectionality, this argument resists a balance between factors influencing identity and thwarts the authors' attempt to mobilize intersectionality.

Sometimes scholars problematically approach intersectionality as a framework reiterating a white and patriarchal system Black feminists have argued against (Nash 47). Many white feminists prove this point accurate as the term "intersectionality" is colonized to name and recognize multiple and different social identities instead of acknowledging an interconnected experience as a unique effect on how positionality is constructed in a system of domination. This is demonstrated in Hayden and Hallstein's use of intersectionality, which centers on sex/gender as a primary location to analyze the relationship between identity and power. In their articulation of intersectionality, they justify why their focus on sex/gender deserves recognition, as other scholars focus on race to explore the implications of oppression.

Hayden and Hallstein compare their analysis to E. Patrick Johnson's reflections on his grandmother in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. They argue that Johnson centers race because he "had to choose his focus and his method of analysis" that compliments a specific reading of Blackness. Additionally, they claim that Johnson does not focus on sex/gender in his grandmother's experiences, yet the primary politic of intersectionality does not separate identity or create a hierarchy for analysis. While they explain their reasoning, the authors fail to provide a deeper reading of how race, gender, and class simultaneously affect Johnson's grandmother. Their use of intersectionality does not create greater awareness of

interlocking oppressions but is a distraction to the larger purpose of liberation. While their analysis is noble in concept of pursuit of new scholarship, I argue it is misguided activism and does not enact true intersectional work.

In *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation*, Imani Perry takes a similar approach to intersectionality, which is a deliberate and dialogic critique of race and gender that focuses on praxis rather than position. Perry argues that her approach is "liberation feminist," which "conceive[s] of feminism not primarily as a set of positions or doctrines but as a critical practice for understanding and working against gendered forms of domination and against the way that gender becomes a tool of domination and exploitation (5-6). She makes sense of the fundamental parts of gender and the development of patriarchy in a way that also accounts for the racial accumulation of domination to understand how that happens. For example, in "Producing Personhood: The Rise of Capitalism and the Western Subject," Perry provides an example of an enslaved person named Lydia, who was hired to work for John Mann, a white man (49). Although Lydia was considered a slave, she did not belong to Mann because he was in debt to Lydia's original owner, Elizabeth Jones. Mann shot Lydia for not performing a minor task, and Lydia sued Mann for permanently disabling her as a form of property damage. However, Mann won the case because "the court determined that for a slave master to maintain his status… the domination of the enslaved must be absolute" (50). Although Jones technically owned her, Perry argues that Lydia was considered property with no authority over her own body and did not have the right to claim personhood. The conceptual argument in this example expands gender in the logic of patriarchy that moves away from a theoretical focus on just race. Perry's use of liberation feminism reminds us of intersectionality as a critique that still centers the experiences of Black women to expand on interlocking oppressions.

My introduction to Black feminism was small but it changed how I saw the world. The framework of “racism” could not capture a full critique of the oppressions that Black women experience. The effects of racism have left most Black people angry after the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 and again after Trayvon Martin's tragic death. I understood these traumas, but I failed to realize that Black men are at the forefront of these moments while Black women are fighting in the shadows against racism. For example, Latasha Harlins was fatally shot in the head when a Korean store merchant accused her of stealing a bottle of orange juice during the LA Riots (McKennett). A jury convicted the merchant of manslaughter, but he did not serve any time, and Harlins’ story was overlooked.

Additionally, the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement reflects a model for civil rights characterized by intersectionality, possibility, and community (Haynes et al). The movement is an entry point to social and political change birthed from the bellies of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Yet, the names of these three Black lesbians are often left out. The long-lasting effects of patriarchy are primarily attentive to Black male death. At the same time, the stories of women, queer, and trans communities struggle to gain the same attention sanctioned in racial justice movements. The Black feminist platform challenges the absence of our stories in social justice movements by prioritizing issues essential to Black women.

I use intersectionality as a framework to analyze or critique structures of power that affect Black women because understanding the role of privilege and oppression has become a pitfall of feminist scholarship. Nash argues, “intersectionality…has been most emphatically called upon to do corrective ecological work in the context of women’s studies, and that it is in relationship to academic feminism that intersectionality’s institutional life has taken shape” (2). The misuse of the term disengages a myriad of oppressions and positions itself to be an alternative to “white

feminism" obsessed with the transformation of white feminism (15). This is demonstrated in the essay by Hayden and Hallstein which compromises the necessary principles that ground intersectionality.

Holding on to Anger

Another misconception in the evolution of intersectionality is in its expectation for Black feminists to continually correct or defend the premise of how the framework should (or should not) be mobilized. Even though one purpose of intersectionality is to combat the dominant discourse about discrimination, Black feminists cannot regulate every manifestation of this politic. Expecting Black feminists to filter through problematic feminist discourse or to identify the complexity of power in the world continually limits the reach of intersectionality that asserts the abstraction of oppression. Nash identifies the fact that some of us are tired of this dynamic because, in many ways, "the labor of Black feminism is to treat intersectionality as territory under siege and to protect and safeguard it from violent 'appropriations,' 'commodifications,' and critiques" (136). We are defensive when scholars demand an intersectional analysis of identity that leaves out the broader ramification of a single categorical axis. Still, we are also angry that the world waits for us to fix the faults of others. This dynamic creates a barrier for Black feminists who want to move beyond the span of intersectionality to shed light on new ideas that foster a space to perform liberatory work. I provide an extended analysis in the following.

When I started the doctoral program at LSU, one of the most consistent remarks that faculty told me was that I am a positive example for other students. My conversations with my peers indicated that they, too, knew the extent to which my academic performance was considered exceptional. The implications of such an honor meant that other students desired

mentorship, which (unsurprisingly) led to many moments of microaggressions. Eventually, the rate at which I was expected to affirm the mediocracy of others took a toll on me and affected my mental and emotional health. For example, one day in a seminar on feminist critique, during a discussion on *Ain't I a Woman?* by bell hooks and Marilyn Frye's article, "On Being White: Thinking Toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy," a white woman posed a question asking if the class could give her tips on how to practice anti-racist behavior in her everyday life. I was baffled at the question because I thought the point of taking a course on progressive feminist principles was to engage in anti-discriminatory behavior—*at what point did race become a different interpretation of that framework in the course?* Before I could respond, another white woman advised the other student to focus more on donating to causes that stood for anti-racism as a form of advocacy.

At my core, I was angry because their comments were an endorsement of righteousness that was supposed to demonstrate how "woke" they were in an academic environment. I was frustrated with the entire conversation, so without warning, I asked her, "Did you even do the readings this week?" She responded, "I read a bit here and there but did not get a chance to finish everything." Our professor offered feedback that addressed the lack of student engagement with the readings, directly pointing to what the authors highlighted in their essays. *However, I wondered why the student raised her hand in the first place.* After class, a few others (more white women) shared with me that they were scared to participate in the discussion after that moment for *fear* that I would also call them out. When I asked "why," they explained that they were more comfortable hearing my thoughts on feminism as a Black woman.

Frye recognizes the performance of white feminism, which is an illusion of equality for women of color, in her article. She states,

> White women can dip into our own experience as women for knowledge of the ways in which ignorance is complex and willful, for we know from our interactions with white men (and not necessarily only with men who are white) the “absence” imposed on us by our not being taken seriously, and we sense its motivation and know it is not simply accidental oversight. If one wonders at the mechanisms of ignorance, at how a person can be right there and see and hear, and yet not know, one of the answers lies with the matter of attention (III)

Here, Frye addresses the racial privilege often attached to white women’s construction of ignorance that runs deep and mainly shields them from social responsibility. She urges white women to consider the easiness that traditional feminism presents because it does not challenge them to look inward and locate the privilege that is harmful to others.

Strong Black Woman

The histories of the feminist movement do not require us to evaluate racism that allows white women to perform toxic feminism. This dynamic allows scholars to distance themselves from the responsibility to address their racism that creates a dependency on Black women scholars to guide them on a journey to wokeness. My example demonstrates that toxic white feminists believe that they do not need to fully engage in a praxis that holds them responsible for their problematic actions. Therefore, toxic feminism assumes that scholars can dismiss concerns about the racist aspects of their praxis because ignorance maintains the privilege to claim that critical feminist practices are the responsibility of others. Specifically, when Black women are expected to fulfill the role of critic and teacher, we are exploited for our intelligence, power, and activism, which can be seen as superhuman strength.

I appreciate the positive feedback from my professors. Still, the pressure to perform at such a level always results in an emphasis on double oppression: race on one end and gender on the other. A closer look reveals many moments of marginalization, the invisibility of labor, and missed opportunities for mentorship from Black women professors that I desperately needed. All

graduate students build critical thinking skills through rigorous discussion, develop new research, and learn from other scholars because we will be the next leaders in the field. According to Ferguson et al., “faculty are responsible for developing leaders and scholars, and attention to their experiences in performing these duties is significant, especially through culturally relevant practices” (141). However, the underrepresentation of Black faculty in most graduate programs at PWIs highlights how Black female graduate students have overperformed in fixing the system. Still, the magnitude of toxicity will kill us in the future.

I needed someone to say, “Hey, maybe she needs a break from all this extra labor,” but the more success I achieved, the less help I received. In other words, my ability to thrive beyond painful experiences validated misconceptions about my strength. This is demonstrated when I was forced to hold the hands of peers and professors who did not show reciprocity when my anxiety and depression resulted in a pause in academic performance. They did not see how much I was trying to overcome because they were blind to their problems or wanted me to help them. In these moments, I often recreated a stigma of resilience that commonly traps Black women in anger and defensiveness more than it frees us of these everyday struggles.

Strength is a seemingly positive stereotype, but the invisible layers assume that Black women do not need protection from the pain they experience daily. In “Stress and Mental Health: Moderating the Role of the Strong Black Woman Stereotype,” Donovan and West argue that the strong Black woman stereotype implies a “perception that Black women are naturally strong, resilient, self-contained, and self-sacrificing” (384). The authors also explain that the strong Black woman complex limits our ability to implement healthy coping mechanisms, which results in the outcome of stress. Black women bear a heavy load that includes repressed anger. This often impacts our physical and mental health, including issues with high blood pressure, heart

disease, diabetes-related death, anxiety, and depression. We often do not ask for help; the world misreads our pain and does not believe stories that depict us as weak or fearful. Therefore, the strong woman trope is dangerous to promote because it imposes impossible expectations on Black women, supposing we are always meant to rise from the opposition.[117] This idea implies a myth that we are superhuman or "magical" because we can achieve significant accomplishments despite sacrificing our own needs. An example of this may be seen in Black Girl Magic.

Black Girl Magic

Linda Chavers argues in "Here's My Problem with Black Girl Magic. Black Girls Aren't Magical. We're Human" that the phrase "Black Girl Magic" holds Black women to unfeasibly high standards which celebrate us when we achieve great successes that criticize us when we do not. The phrase "Black Girl Magic" is just another way of saying "be strong" to generations of Black women who endure hardships in silence that, includes bearing the burdens of others (Mason). This expectation slowly suffocates the individual and therefore is constricting rather than freeing. Such a phrase is smothering and stunting because the term "magical" does not convey hardwork or the expectation for us to perform beyond the standard for others. We do not have inherent access to strength, nor do we stop experiencing the reality of oppression. Like everybody else, Black women most certainly feel pain, and denying us such emotion is detrimental to our emotional, mental, and physical health. Further, the word "magical" implies that we are not human and creates a false dichotomy that too is praised for such strength, we must not fail at anything (Williams).

Chavers asks what happens when a Black woman does not achieve a measurement of success that is deemed "magical" due to the structural implications that society defines success

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[117] See *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and The New Racism*

for her (i.e., marriage, education, and financial stability)? *Do we consider her to be magical? Or is she confined to a social class of normalcy that remains a figment of our imagination?* I do not believe that "Black Girl Magic" turns Black women and girls into superheroes who can fend off attacks and oppressions with only a hip thrust, hair flip, side-eye, or clapback.[118] In "#BlackGirlMagic as Resistant Imaginary," Qrescent Mali Mason argues that the phrase is intersectional and "explores how Black women have taken up #BlackGirlMagic as a critical reimagining of their subject positionalities as Black women" (707). She explains that Black women have created a critical genealogy on digital media and social networks that alters the transmission of knowledge and suggests that the conditions for resistance are not limited to a dominant western framework. This work is exceptionally committed to reclaiming a future for the work of Black women in oppressive spaces and critically challenges stereotypes of womanhood and Blackness.

I agree that Black women have built a resistant imaginary community from the context of personal narrative that contributes to an intersectional analysis of identity and power in Black digital culture. I also recognize the collective resistance to using a hashtag that unifies a movement online. #BlackGirlMagic represents how Black women reject invisibility under a patriarchal sphere in a similar way that #BlackJoy resists controlling images of Black death and embraces ethnic pride. They both employ a type of Black rhetoric that equalizes access "and offer a model for writing that thoroughly weaves together oral performance, print literacy, mastery and interrogation of technologies, and technologies that can lead to a renewed vision for both composition and African American rhetoric" (Banks 13). The use of digital media and social frameworks brings together storytelling traditions in Black culture, feminist practices that

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[118] Further explored in section three of this chapter

center Black women's voices, and the growing direction of technology that engages "useful" violence that Perry argues for in the state of gender liberation (Vance). The creativity to express everyday experiences online is essential because these platforms are often used to imagine the possibilities of liberation individually and collectively (Brock). However, the broader message of "Black Girl Magic" communicates an unintended mantra to perform racial and gendered strength that diverges in community interactions with outsiders who expect resiliency despite the cultural implications placed on us. I am referring to the word "magical," which leaves some women in the darkness.

Examples can be found within academic institutional environments, which suggest the characteristics of hidden service and the emotional labor to "mother" our peers and professors is justification for the controlling images that portray us as magical. This includes rescuing other people from their self-serving feminism that "connects them to inexorably to sources in white privilege and to consequences oppressive to people of color (especially to women of color)" (Frye III). In "Spokestokenism: Black Women Talking Back About Graduate School Experiences," Subrina J. Robinson argues that there is a fight to constantly perform intellectual merit in a culture that stereotypes Black women as lazy, unintelligent, and difficult (158). As previously stated, this complicates the interpretation of harm to Black women within the academy with little regard to addressing how this pressure makes us feel.

Eloquent rage liberates Black women to embrace their anger as a tool to bring forth immediate change and reclaim the right to be mad. Such a deep and personal feeling expresses the emotional responsibility to navigate this ground (Williams). As Cooper argues, "to be Black is to grow up in a world where white feelings can become dangerous weapons," therefore, anger is an acknowledgment that a problem exists in our environments (5). When positioned as a critic,

"the angry Black woman scholar" raises questions about institutional change and pushes back against the social, economic, and cultural inequities that devalue her within academic discourse. The emotional recovery of Black women deserves more consideration in research about healing and self-definition, which I will expand on in the next section.

Let It Go (Healing)

Starkeisha is a short film about a Black woman who travels through her subconscious to explore aspects of her self-identity.[119] The main character, Starkeisha Mary Jenkins, struggles to embrace her Black identity: she straightens her hair, puts on clothing that she thinks is appropriate for corporate culture, and practices introducing herself as "Mary" instead of "Starkeisha." During a phone call with a friend, Starkeisha slips and falls on a spill of water that, knocks her unconscious. She awakens in a fantasy world of mirrors wearing a spacesuit and frantically looks in the mirror to see that her hair is no longer sleek and straight but rather a thick short afro. While Starkeisha panics, a disembodied voice says, "you'll always be heard if you speak loud enough." She responds to the voice with lots of aggression, "Let me say this as loud as possible: I have to get out of here," but concludes with a bit of uncertainty in her voice, "and I need my hair and my clothes back." Suddenly, her doppelganger appears and interjects her demands with, "Girl, stop."

Throughout the film, the disembodied voice responds positively to the confusion, but the doppelganger is an inner critic who encourages Starkeisha to escape the dreamlike world. The two voices structure the main character's internal thoughts and guide her through the chambers of an inner consciousness. The doppelganger represents who "Mary" aspires to be and sets a

[119] According to Alex MaGaughey, "Andscape debuted its first film, *Starkeisha,* on Hulu. Written and directed by Mo McRae and inspired by the *Music for The Movement* EP's, *Starkeisha* is a visual album that showcases a journey of a young Black woman thrust into a fantastical world of Blackness" ("Andscape Debuts First Feature Film Feature 'Starkeisha' on Hulu")

negative tone in the film that Starkeisha is controlled by her fear of embracing her Black identity. Subsequently, the doppelganger appears anytime Starkeisha is fearful of change. On the other hand, the disembodied voice symbolically suggests what "Starkeisha" fights to embrace in her everyday life. The voice encourages her to return to her true self which is related to increasing one's knowledge about Black epistemologies, or what Andrew Rollins' describes as Astroblackness.[120] To overcome her fears, Starkeisha must embark on a journey of personal growth to accept a Black consciousness that centers self-love to envision a social change in her community. Finally, Starkeisha realizes that she has adopted a new attitude and accepts the resources that remain available to her within the Black community, but her inner self has not accepted these changes. She must make a major decision regarding her future that causes a fight with the doppelganger. Ultimately Starkeisha defeats the barriers in her mind. When she wakes up, the trajectory of her career has developed a new narrative of resistance that demonstrates opposition to negative representations of Black women and looks for alternative ways to embrace Black culture.

Overall, this short film highlights the intersections of race and gender to establish a futuristic character who struggles to overcome a performance of anti-Blackness. Starkeisha's conflict calls attention to double standards, microaggressions, and unconscious biases that are difficult barriers for Black women to overcome. In essence, an identity that is not constructed in resistance risks the opportunity to develop what hooks argues is an "oppositional gaze." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, she explains that for Black women, the oppositional gaze problematizes the contemporary critical practice of constructing "an understanding and

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[120] "Astroblackness is an Afrofuturist movement "in which a person's black state of consciousness […] becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (Wemakor).

awareness of the politics of race and racism" in feminist film criticism (123). Even though there are images reproduced in mainstream media that mock the frustration and pain of Black women, a radical intervention does not assume a posture of subordination, but rather problematizes perspective through identification. hooks explains that "the extent to which Black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations" (127). We reimagine identity through the complexity of ideas in *Starkeisha*.

The implications of race and gender in the film speak to similar challenges that I have faced within academic institutions like the notion of straightening my hair or producing a scholarship that is deemed more appropriate to white audiences. Starkeisha's journey acknowledges a collective experience in the Black woman community to overcome the presence of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity that carries liberation beyond an appeal to follow these traditional structures.[121] She exists beyond a composite image of her fears and embraces a new passion for her work. I am inclined to point out the direction that the film takes because there is an opportunity to break free from societal expectations in her dreamworld that similarly drives the politics of Black feminism and recognizes the power to "establish self-definitive performances to which women of color can look to, to garner their activism" (Snider 13). Her dreams are constructed as an opposition to the dominant imagination from the inside out.

Something extraordinary happened to me after I watched *Starkeisha*. The deeper I looked at her story and saw the passion spark through her eyes, the more I felt joy. The more she excluded thoughts of what dictated limits to how Black womanness should be, the more I wanted to project an image of my truth, history, and memory to the world. When I consider the

[121] See *Black Feminist Thought*

possibilities of Black feminism, I think about healing. This type of healing leads to critical transformation and love. Starkeisha's journey acknowledges the importance of self-definition as a strategy to focus on the behaviors we can change about ourselves "from a place of fulfillment and not from a place of lack" (hooks, *All About Love*, 67). Additionally, she turns the layers of her pain into creative expressions that redirect anger and transform emotion into an art form. This deeper perspective allows others to connect to anger as a humanized experience concerning wellness in our lives. In the next section, I expand on the concept of self-definition that provides a space for Black women to use their voices to communicate change in a new way.

The Power of Self-Definition

The power of self-definition is one of the most liberating things we can do for ourselves as Black women. According to Angela D. Coleman, "self-definition is the process of knowing, understanding, appreciating, accepting and loving who you are as a unique, special individual along with a posture of resistance against the forces that threaten your identity."[122] Self-definition is rooted in Black feminist practices that are essential to survival and help Black women respond to the social context of oppression that confronts our livelihood. According to Idrissa J. Snider, "while similar to other forms of self-actualization, self-defining differs from widespread identity-based psychological concepts in that it explicitly addresses Black women's resistance to stereotypes" (13). This is also a rejection of work not organized for our collective benefit and does not recognize our need to dismiss the negative images of Black women presented to us as children. Ultimately, self-definition removes the burden of always having to prove ourselves by concentrating on Black feminist discourse that envisions a revolutionary society in which Black women are concerned with self-love.

[122] See "The Power of Self-Definition for Women"

Building self-love is an essential step to critical transformation. Self-love gives us the freedom to move beyond anger to find healing. As hooks argues, a commitment to love is "the capacity to [re]invent our lives, to shape our destinies in ways that maximize our well-being" (57). Well-being is an extension of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health that provides a productive foundation to cultivate empowerment that Black women can use to enhance their lives. A Black feminist perspective engages a healthy awareness of self-love that regards wellness as a priority and offers scholars a practical method to work through trauma and stress.

Themes of self-definition often show up through narratives that depict Black women in a positive light and specifically focus on self as a primary subject matter. If the individual attempts to present a representation of multiple narratives, then a multidimensional response to stereotypical images of Blackness is a starting point for the message of empowerment. In *Black Feminist Thought,* Collins discusses Black women's relationships with one another, the Black women's blues tradition, and Black women writers as examples of safe spaces to explore self-definition and combat the negative portrayal of Black womanhood. These sites are safe spaces to advance Black women's empowerment that "resist[s] the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black civil society but within African American traditions" (89). We must initiate this process because the application of this framework recognizes the uniqueness of our needs and desires.

Black women often have complicated relationships with one another; however, these relationships identify an important component in developing one's voice. Sometimes Black women are more vulnerable among our sisters because, in telling our stories, we recognize the commonality in our experiences. For example, I learned what it means to be a Black woman

from my mother, grandmothers, and aunts, who struggled before me. These women do not identify as Black feminists, yet they gave me the formula to survive in a world that seems always to echo pain from the past. Their stories motivated me to pursue a graduate degree, but I needed mentorship from Black women in the academy. I have made connections with Black womxn scholars who make me feel *seen* because, to some extent, they understand the impact of my experiences. Whether from a distance or an immediate connection, I have patterned many aspects of my career based on the advice they share with me personally and professionally.

The mentorship and love from Drs. Andrea Baldwin, Ersula Ore, and Amber Johnson have helped me develop an essential aspect of my academic identity in different ways. It serves as an example of the connection I need as a budding scholar. Each person fosters a space of care for others as a quality of their pedagogical praxis that is also fulfilled throughout every area of their lives. I met them during moments when I was silently suffering in my academic circle at a PWI. They have shared tips on how to do well academically. Still, their feedback primarily focuses on teaching me how to maintain a sense of well-being from within despite what is happening around me. They do not wait to hear stories about my pain, but they challenge me to embrace my voice and body each time I am in their presence in ways that may seem unorthodox to outsiders. Even though we are miles apart, there is never a pause in how they love me with forceful grace. They also remind me why I can do better and provide realistic solutions to help me get there. I appreciate their support because it does not add to my pain.

Blues

Self-definition has become a foundational part of contemporary rhetoric that critiques stereotypes about Black women's strength and power through song. Specifically, in her analysis of the blues music tradition, Collins argues that the voice is an aesthetic tool that can encourage

political action. She states that “Analyzing the particular controlling images applied to African American women reveals the specific contours of Black women’s objectification as well as the ways in which oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect” (*Black Feminist Thought*, 90). Black women blues singers highlight the voice as a medium to explore objectification that attaches itself to women of color and racial tensions within America. In her strides, the Black blues woman uses the voice as a primary tool to express emotional resilience and sexual liberation that patriarchy and heteronormativity made invisible (Davis). Through song, she provokes true revolutionary change.

The voice can express individualistic experiences because it provides a space to transform the boundaries of collective activism. When we use our voices together, we tap into a power that creates meaning, conveys our emotions, and communicates our presence in rooms designed to make us feel invisible (Beauboeuf-Lafontant). A vocal critique moves between the discourse of strength and embodied Black woman’s pain that grows out of a need to express ourselves. Therefore, blues music offers an example of how individual lyrics exemplify the unique negotiation of that pain as an alternative path to express emotion. Collins states, “when Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African American women” (*Black Feminist Thought*, 116). This work brings forth a kind of solidarity for Black women around the idea which Black feminism is idealized and realized.

Examples of the Black blues woman’s resistance are developed in Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. She analyzes the traditions of legendary women like Ma Rainey who reject the exploitation of a woman’s sexuality, Bessie Smith who reflects on social independence, and Billie Holiday who

freely mourns the burden of racism.[123] Rainey and Smith are well known for the fluidity in their sexual desires and discussion of same-sex relationships in their music. They sing about the nuances of Black female sexuality as a response to the social propriety expected of women during the early twentieth century. Davis explains that as Black queer women, their music was considered low culture because "they developed a tradition of openly addressing both female and male sexuality [that] reveals an ideological framework that was specifically African American" (4). Holiday pursued lesbian relationships after her time in prison. Still, she is most credited with exploring personal tragedy that appears in one of the most haunting protests of lynching in "Strange Fruit."[124]

Holiday sings about racial injustice and the effects of hate that fueled lynching mobs in the early twentieth century, which immediately unfolds in the time listening to the first verse. The lyrics sear graphic images into the consciousness of the listener as she says,

Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

In her book, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*, Emily J. Lordi argues that the intentional choices that Holiday made in conveying the "sudden smell of burning flesh" prompted emotions including sadness and anger (158). In an interview with BBC Culture, Lordi states, "There's a real minimalist aesthetic to [Holiday's] recording that calls attention to just how striking the lyric is… There is simmering rage in how she clips the syllables and that 'drop'. But there's also a deep mournful quality to Holiday's performance" (Amoako).

[123] "Prove it on Me"; "Nobody Knows When You're Down and Out"; "Strange Fruit."
[124] Originally a poem called "Bitter Fruit" written by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol). According to Aida Amoako, Allen wrote the poem after viewing Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Indiana. See "Strange Fruit: The Most Shocking Song of All Time?"

The political nature of the song calls attention to how moving lyrics can be when "performed, recorded, and advertised by a female Blues singer" (Chirila). These singers are vital because they sang songs in untraditional ways that demonstrate the artistic opportunity to develop complexity and autonomy with the voice.

Contemporary R&B

Today, the Black woman blues singer continues to consider "the importance of self-definition as a part of the journey from victimization to a free mind" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 123). She has extended her reach to include stylized rhythmic music that reflects the diversity in Black culture in a post-civil rights era. This is exemplified in the artistry of Jazmine Sullivan, Ari Lennox, and Solange who have boldly created an avenue for themselves through public declarations of their sexuality in R&B music that is not removed from racism and violence in America. [125] Specifically, singer and performance artist Solange honors the intersectional evolution of feminism in her music by attending to discourse that is indicative of self-love for Black women and protests racial injustice and sexism in general. Her music is also open to community building within the Black community that includes collaboration with Black male artists and queer musicians to describe the commonality in our painful experiences with racism. Solange's 2015 album, *A Seat at The Table,* reflects a politically conscious critique of what it means to be Black in America that projects a message to think freely about expression. Each song celebrates Black culture and poetically outlines traumas associated with public Black death that emerges alongside narratives about the conditions of other people's lives.

Solange notably marks a positive mantra of defiance throughout the album that promotes a message of mental and emotional well-being. Songs like "Mad," "Don't Touch My Hair," and

[125] *Heaux Tales; age/sex/location; When I Get Home*

"F.U.B.U." speak to healing and Black empowerment in a way that showcases the multiplicity of responses to everyday racism and sexism. In *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*, Tamura Lomax emphasizes that "Healing is an internal and communal work—opaque socio-political-spiritual struggling, transformation, and dumping. It is collective. It is revolutionary. It is ongoing and inconclusive. It is messy. And it is human, not super heroic" (205-206). Lomax emphasizes a call to be critical and self-reflexive that is necessary to build a conversation around new liberating and restorative practices, which is the shared goal in Solange's music.

For example, "Mad (ft. Lil Wayne)" is a song about the arduous process of suppressing the anger in the Black community that recognizes the dual position of being angry and the desire to let go of the impression that reinforces the stereotype. "Interlude: Dad Was Mad" is a track that plays prior to "Mad" to situate the quantifiable consequences of living in a world that disproportionately impacts Black people. This is a selection from Solange's interview with her father, Matthew Knowles, about his personal experience as a child when schools were desegregated in Alabama. He talks about the death threats he received while in the back of a police car and the long-term anger that grew inside him. His reflections serve as a basis for the next track.

As the title implies, "mad" is an emotional reaction to significant challenges not necessarily permissible for Black people. Expressing anger is a type of currency to access that power. The song begins:

You got the light, count it all joy
You got the right to be mad
But when you carry it alone, you find it only getting in the way
They say you gotta let it go

In this verse, Solange invites the listener to release the burden of resentment that fuels anger. She sings the message tenderly, contrasting with the negativity associated with pain and reinforcing a healing message. Shortly after, rapper Lil Wayne enters the song with a response to the emotion of anger that offers insight into why he has "a lot to be mad about." He raps about an everyday struggle to withhold anger as an embodiment of pain related to the stereotype of seeing Black people as irrational or unhinged. He says:

Now tell 'em why you mad son
'Cause doing it all ain't enough
'Cause everyone all in my cup
'Cause such and such still owe me bucks
So I got the right to get bucked
But I try not to let it build up
I'm too high, I'm too better, too much
So I let it go, let it go, let it go

Solange continues to probe the intensity of anger with a series of questions from an imagined interaction representing a lack of understanding of Black people's issues in everyday life. Instead of hearing us, many powerful systems in society like schools, hospitals, corporate culture, prisons, and governments continue to inaccurately interpret our emotions, leading to stereotypes about our personality unless we live under the premise that our anger should be silent. We are less likely to express our frustration because we feel undeserving despite the toxicity forced on us. Solange sings,

I ran into this girl, she said, "Why you always blaming?"
"Why you can't just face it?" (Be mad, be mad, be mad)
"Why you always gotta be so mad?" (Be mad, be mad, be mad)
"Why you always talking s***, always be complaining?"
"Why you always gotta be, why you always gotta be so mad?" (Be mad, be mad, be mad)
I got a lot to be mad about (Be mad, be mad, be mad)

Where'd your love go? (4X)
Where'd your love, baby?

Then Lil Wayne delivers a few bars that further explore the depth of his anger. He makes space to discuss resilience despite the hardships of life that sometimes has nothing to do with racism when he says, “But it’s hard when you only/Got fans around and no fam around/And if they are, then they hands are out.” While there is a world of anti-Blackness, he creates a space to universally reflect on our relationships with people who take advantage of us. However, the message to release anger is still anchored as a yearning for healing when he says, “Man, you gotta let it go before it all get up in the way/Let it go, let it go.” Following his intense testimony, Solange acknowledges the dismissal of Black anger even when we provide vulnerable reflections about our pain. She repeats a verse to frame questions we often receive following our expressions of anger. Solange does not shift from a place of self-love. Still, in the conclusion, she offers a different response to these insensitive questions that ultimately capture the complexities surrounding Black anger in the song. She sings,

> I ran into this girl, I said, "I'm tired of explaining"
> Man, this s*** is draining
> But I'm not really allowed to be mad

“Mad” is an example of the internalization of the strong Black woman identity that also extends to other members of the Black community in two ways. First, the song acknowledges anger as a valid response to racism and does not try to dismiss or control how one expresses that feeling. The reminder to release anger is consistent because it calls for Black people to reclaim their emotional, mental, and physical health as a commitment to joy. Second, the collaborative efforts of Solange and Lil Wayne advance a mantra for Black people to pursue healing individually and collectively despite the pendulum of pain that resurfaces our anger. They include personal reflections relatable to many people and articulate the commonalities in how we process. They do not subject us to a singular narrative, but the lyrics support the need to release

pent-up emotions. However, it is imperative to understand that Solange creates the space to transform the Black blues woman tradition by producing knowledge on and constructions of anger that also deploys healing. Solange "holds that *what* is communicated is just as significant as *who* is doing the communicating, particularly as the "who" helps frame what becomes knowledge, and thus what can be known or what we think to be true" (Lomax 2). This song is an excellent example of the philosophies of Black feminism, specifically self-definition.

Black womxn have created spaces to analyze the harsh pressures of life that speak to the ongoing lineage of Black feminism. Suppose liberation happens when we center our experiences. In that case, the work of early activists, scholars, writers, and thinkers like Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and the Combahee River Collective creates a platform for the Black feminists of today to develop more groundbreaking philosophies about the way race, gender, class, and sexuality are interconnected. While nuanced interpretations of intersectionality challenge the scholarship of those who moved the conversation of feminism beyond the immediate concerns of white women, the pressure to fix the lineage is too much and tied to a narrative of defensiveness (Hancock).

I agree with Nash that a revolution to take back the basis of intersectionality does more damage than good. Because white women's feminism is superior in the context of racial privilege, Black feminist discourse cannot survive if we focus on the rules and regulations of intersectionality. The truth is that liberation is not chained to the theoretical abstractions of intersectionality or dispassionate moments of feminism that move beyond our control. True liberation is obtainable, yet the truth of that reach is limited to a subjective experience. Therefore, Black feminists must continue to release the tension intersectionality produces to acknowledge the power of self-definition that can develop more discourse about creative

expression. Perhaps the most influential interpretation of self-definition includes a willingness to "let it go."

However, consequences remain for those who wish to explore self-definition in a society that is not well. In "Black Women and Wellness," Collins argues that society's commodified construction of Black women's health, healing, and wellness lends itself to more stereotypes of mammies, matriarchs, bad mothers, and jezebels that justify subordination. She states that "Black women's empowerment requires cultivating self-defined knowledge that both criticizes the existing social order that makes Black women unwell *and* reconceptualizes wellness within these social relations."[126] The rejection of this kind of social script attends to the political manifestation of Black feminism that has always been (and will always be) a "development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective Statement). In the conclusion, I describe the most generative way of clarifying our politics as a "clapback" that insists Black women who choose to respond out of frustration are not always angry because we are fed up with systems of domination, but rather we are "eloquent" in our articulations of what needs to change.

The Clapback: A Conclusion

Spaces that rely on whiteness and patriarchal traditions attempt to regulate the way Black women develop confidence in their abilities. These spaces have robbed me of girlhood, oppressed me in womanhood, and will fight to slander me in motherhood. These spaces rely on systems within schools, churches, and governments that forcefully lead Black women to pain in every place of society. How we explore the realms of diversity in these spaces matters more than what we consider the narrative of feminist practices to be. I find examples of Black feminist

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[126] See abstract for the article.

legacies in almost every area of critique positioned to call out violence or erasure in these spaces, but rarely do I see the result of that work paying attention to Black women. Black feminists have provided countless examples of harmful rhetoric, but the job to call out injustice somehow always falls on us.

One day after class, a white male student shared with me that my lecture on social justice and advocacy made him uncomfortable. He said that while some parts of the lesson were important to learn for his future in business management, racism in America was hard for him to digest and that I should "tone it down." I did not respond negatively to his comment. I invited him to reconsider the realities of life for minorities and how his remarks might negatively impact people in our classroom. He stood there momentarily and then responded, "I see the point you are trying to make, so maybe I should do some research to understand." We later discussed the long-term support he could offer to others as a white man. He did much research on his own and brought discoveries about structural racism to me after every class. His efforts impressed me because previous experiences with white students left me traumatized and stressed, but I still walked away feeling exhausted from answering his questions. The energy to help him become a good ally required too much sacrifice of my emotions and mental health.

After this experience, I started to think about my impact as an educator in the ivory tower. My motivation and desire to educate white students about a history of systematic and structural racism and marginalization are genuine in that I want to transform the conversation of oppression as it relates to education, political disempowerment, health care, the beauty industry, sexual violence, housing, environmental justice, and the criminal justice system; but, I need space to exist as a scholar without carrying this burden all the time. My students would probably describe me as someone compassionate and fiercely engaged with the implications of the Black

experience in America. My colleagues would probably say that I am a creative and critical scholar who intently deals with discourse about social injustice for all oppressed people. *But what does any of this mean when I am suffering in silence?* For example, the following categories often define my identity at PWIs: social and academic achievement, home and family life balance, and aesthetic presentation (e.g., clothing, hairstyles, grammar). Efforts to overcome these barriers have become increasingly difficult to control. Given that anti-Blackness has functioned as a primary stance in most PWIs, discrimination is the siren song of white supremacy (Barton). I have searched for a safe space with people and within organizations that perform social justice work, but I felt heard in a few moments.

I have primarily existed in PWIs, so my proximity to whiteness further demonstrates that certain forms of power are invested in a particular version of my Blackness that is good and intelligent (Ferguson et al). The significance of what I do as an educator and scholar account for how I am perceived by the communities I serve. This also emphasizes the expectation linked to who I am inside of classrooms and departmental meetings. I was tired of feeling overworked, inadequate, isolated, and defeated at PWIs, so I left and accepted a teaching position at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) to focus on educating Black students about the world of performance as a method and embodied praxis. I perceived this shift to mean something different than the same old same old that I had experienced for the past ten years as an instructor.

Being in an environment with other Black people resonated with my soul in a way that was much different from previous experiences in higher education because the mission at an HBCU shapes the educational structure and identity of the students, faculty, and staff of color. In other words, the history and legacy of Black excellence contribute to the fabric of the university.

Becoming a part of that lineage was a conscious choice to give back to the Black community. However, the dynamics of teaching about oppression felt redundant, so I was forced to shift my approach to topics such as racism, sexism, and classism. This decision focused more on Blackness's intrinsic values and made a difference in how students thought about their intersectional identities beyond racial encounters with white people. As a result, many students felt inspired to talk about the abuse of power in their lives and wanted to learn about strategies to overcome them.

A few students learned about my research and advocacy for women’s rights across campus. During my second semester at an HBCU, a Black female student disclosed her painful experience with sexual assault to me. I encouraged her to report what happened to the Title IX office since the incident was recent and did my best to encourage her throughout the process. Shortly after, more cases of sexual assault were brought to my attention. Being an instructor, confidant, and mandatory reporter was exhausting. When I expressed my frustration to the administration, the duty to follow up with each student still fell on me. During the last week of the school year, one of my colleagues touched me inappropriately. My emotions were significantly harder to manage now; however, I was still expected to perform my teaching duties throughout the summer. No one checked on me, and like other institutions, I realized that HBCUs certainly have their problems. While the emotional connection to the student population was tremendously different, the stresses that I faced were layered in ways that were not easily recognized. The intersectional overlap of race, gender, sexism, and class was not considered in my case or the cases of the other Black women who made a report that year. Moreover, the administrative response to these incidents reveals a need to change due process that directly

confronts sexual harassment and assault by replacing the stigmas associated with reporting with a culture that supports Black women.

If radical refers to the ability to move beyond the fundamental nature of something in an extreme way, then clapping back is just that. Hip hop artist Ja Rule released a single titled "Clap Back" in 2003 that shifted how the Black community responded to public criticism or insults. A clapback is an art form because the practice is a creative response to someone being rude. However, not all offensive moves deserve a reply. Clapping back is an extension of what hooks describes as "talking back" to discover, claim, and invent new ways of speaking our mind "that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice (*Talking Back*, 9). Sometimes a clapback implies that a witty comment will be used to establish a boundary and shut down a conversation; however, scholars like Nicole D. Nave argue that "Eloquent rage [is] a methodological practice [that] explains how Black women can engage in political clapbacks as resistance to the political dismay they endure (21). She builds an argument for Copper's definition of eloquent rage that strikes and arises with precision to critique oppression. Accepting the messiness in our rage allows room to revise how Black women process pain in public and private spaces. There are possibilities for Black women to work outside the barriers of anger that still pushes toward liberation and healing, which we all deserve.

Am I angry? Absolutely. *Do I have a grudge?* Absolutely not. The immediate problem for Black feminists is not constructed much differently from the struggles that Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett experienced during periods of slavery and colonialism, yet the work of contemporary Black feminists is ironically praised as more "progressive" to the extent to which others are also liberated. One of my principle arguments as a Black feminist includes greater awareness of freedom for all, which consists of an imperative to

maintain the issues important to Black women. The sophistication of Black feminism offers analysis for those suffering from oppression, but I am not sure I can help with the action to confront pain for everyone. This is, perhaps, why some Black women have moved away from the possibility of a revolution that asks us to "save the world" because the pressure to lead everyone to freedom might be somebody else's job.

Initially, I did not understand my place in Black feminism. Still, the context of today's issues creates a path for me to consider my voice as a power agent to survive in academia that reaches beyond the ivory tower. In *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Lorde argues,

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women, those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference… know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structure in order to define and seek a world which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (2).

Here, Lorde points out that society often expects those in oppressed groups to educate or create a bridge with their oppressors. However, this model keeps the oppressed occupied with the concerns of their oppressors instead of liberation and possibility for themselves. Therefore, liberation is achieved when we utilize self-defined knowledge for group empowerment. In making her point, Lorde speaks to Black feminists who desire to produce knowledge that moves away from the standpoint of an academic to contextualize liberation. This call recognizes a need to create a counterspace that manifests from our epistemologies, methodologies, and praxis.

My stance and work as a Black feminist are something of which I am very proud. At the same time, this expertise is not always welcome in spaces that do not outwardly challenge racism

and sexism, leaving me with unanswered questions and unresolved crises. I feel invisible and marginalized because I am expected to perform service and research beyond what is required. I am a model for others within intuitions that harm me, and I am tired of this toxic relationship. Sometimes I am in constant conflict with what moves me because the pressure to produce research that responds to a deadly virus, economic crisis, or political unrest tears at the hem of stability in my mind. It is difficult to feel inspired when the never-ending cycle of stress is constantly knocking at my door. I want to produce meaningful work, but I am met with pushback that tells me these efforts are in vain.

Academics are often taught to excel even if the process harms us. Particularly for scholars who produce research to disrupt oppressive systems, we are often expected to excel with minimal structural support from our institutions. The boundaries between work life and home life and the emotional toll it takes to deal with everything sometimes make me feel like my work has lost purpose. I contemplated an exit from the classroom altogether, yet the premise of my research raises the question: *If not me, then who?* Sometimes I want to resign from this occupation for fear that my mental health will reach a limit that forces me to exist from the confines of my home. My clapback is the very act of doing this work that confronts what I know needs to change, whether I am changing the system from within a PWI, HBCU, or outside the structure of higher education.

Opportunities exist for Black women to change today's political structure outside of academia. Still, the reproduction of a platform that discriminates against us continues to interfere with the future of freedom discourse. Countless examples in history stem into the present, with most recently the works of Stacey Abrams (who helped expand voter turnout in Georgia in 2020) and Tarana Burke (the founder of the “Me Too” movement). Abrams and Burke have sustained

an ongoing space of fighting the patriarchy for Black people and women. Still, society does not properly recognize "the relationship between liberation and work" these women have achieved (hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 53). Black feminism must continue to evolve in the production of knowledge and criticism that reflects the struggles of today by accounting for the variations in how we not only discuss the misuse of mainstream terms that define overlapping identities but also the inclusion of all Black womxn to question whether this framework is resistant to other forms of oppression. The road to liberation is not ours to hold alone, nor does the shift need to draw from a defensive posture against non-Black scholars. Black women who have begun this chapter on the dimensions of oppression are hardly invisible to me because their impact is in solidarity with the politics born out of our foremothers' gardens.

In this chapter, I have discussed the nuances of feminism committed to changing the narrative for Black feminists, addressed structural biases within the academy, and pushed for the analysis of texts that cultivate liberation for Black people. The usefulness of this argument is critical for the survival of Black feminism, which is focused on the next steps of healing as an agent of change for the future. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I focus on the development of Black performance that merges with a critical examination of cultural texts to produce Black Feminist Performance. This concluding chapter's focus demonstrates how the previous chapters' underpinnings will flourish in my journey as a Black woman performance practitioner. The final chapter also summarizes the methodology used to create the Black Performer's Toolbox. This will not be an exhaustive summary but rather the introduction to a new method that speaks explicitly to the future of performance pedagogy. I do not apologize that this dissertation's conditions have seriously mirrored my reality because these writings are essential to how I will continue to survive in academia.

Chapter 6. Trust the Process

How does a Black feminist grapple with a future that hasn't happened but must, while witnessing the mounting disposability of Black lives that don't seem to matter?
–Tina Campt
Listening to Images

My eighth-grade English teacher, Ms. Burns, inspired me to embrace poetry. One day she recited "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou at the beginning of class to introduce our next big project. Ms. Burns explained that we would learn about different styles and forms of poetry by Black writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Maya Angelou to create our poetry book. Each week we considered different texts that expanded our imaginations. As a result, we gained more experience with writing our poetry. For each assignment, we responded to her prompts to consider themes like beauty, poverty, death, love, confidence, and friendship using one of the poetic forms we learned the previous week. Writing made me feel good about myself, and the more I wrote poetry, the more confident I became with my emotions. The power to transport people to a new world through words excited me.

In the third week of the poetry unit, Ms. Burns pulled me to the side in the hallway and asked me to recite a poem I wrote titled "Rebirth and Hope" in front of the class. I crafted this piece in response to the prompt about death, but I did not consider this to be my best work. I told her no, but she insisted and offered to work with me on my presentation after school. During our rehearsal, she recited four poems by Black women to me. I was mesmerized by her voice and use of body language to convey meaning beyond the page. She sounded glorious. This felt like home. Her serious tone, playful cadence, and rhythmic speaking heightened my senses like the smell of a sweet potato pie fresh out of the oven. What she did with her voice moved me to tears. I was connected to her delivery and wanted to be just like her—confident and vulnerable with my delivery. When Ms. Burns finished reciting all the poems, she asked me to stand up and close

my eyes. She spoke positive affirmations to me and asked me to think about what the authors were trying to say with their words. I thought about the last two stanzas in "I Am Accused of Tending to the Past" by Lucille Clifton, which says, "when she is strong enough to travel/on her own, beware, she will." When I opened my eyes, I told Ms. Burns I was ready to rehearse. The next day, I read my poem in front of the class passionately. The students loved the presentation and gave me a standing ovation.

When I became an educator, my life changed forever. Everything I loved and hated about the classroom shifted because I was now in a position of power to establish the culture and inspire a new generation of students to be their best selves. I reflect on my moment with Ms. Burns to note that while I often claim my introduction to Performance Studies happened in college, I developed a love for performance practice in Black communal spaces from Black women who saw the best in me and took the time to cultivate my gift. Surprisingly, most Black students have never had a Black teacher (El-Mekki). Even more so, it is rare that they will ever encounter a Black woman professor in a PWI. The latter is true for me, as my first experience with a Black woman instructor was during the second semester of my master's program with Dr. Laila Amnie. The second time I received instruction from a Black woman in higher education was during the second semester of my doctoral program in an Anthropology course on Black music with Dr. Joyce Johnson.

Dr. Laila Amine taught a course on Black literature that allowed me to explore the qualities of Black life in a way that was not crafted through a white lens. She took the time out to ask me questions after class about my well-being and gave me so much advice about how to practice self-care in a PWI. Dr. Amine made many attempts to love with intention, but when she told me about her struggles within her department, I did not want to burden her with any more of

my problems. This was also during the same semester I read *Teaching to Transgress,* so I somewhat understood the emotional pain of what she was experiencing too. As previously stated, I saw my trajectory as a scholar and educator much differently after I learned more about Black feminism. I realized that teachers like Ms. Burns and Dr. Amine used Black feminism in their pedagogical practices, but this was not entirely clear to me until students offered insight into their positive experiences in my classroom. Specifically, when Black performers expressed that I created safe spaces for them to grow and be themselves, the magnitude of my journey as a performance practitioner became more meaningful.

The exciting thing about being a performance practitioner is that you will always have moments to mold others because the nature of being a director is mostly tied to a process that helps people grow. I did not plan to work in the academy, but a need for diverse representation in Performance Studies undeniably pulled me in. I want to continue this path in a way that speaks to the future of Black performers because there are creatives, curators, musicians, dancers, activists, and institution builders, like me who need mentorship and guidance that only another Black person can provide. I am doing more than one thing to contribute to the future of performance by creating experiences and educating all audiences with each performance and lecture. While I recognize that a return on (emotional) investment is not always practical, I still choose to craft research consciously that delineates the outcome of this kind of occurrence for others., what I do is just as (if not more) important as how I do it.

Mainly, I am attracted to practicing performance and training others how to do it because there is something special about the aesthetic nature of expression that elicits a visceral response from the performer and the audience. The limitless feeling that emerges while creating or experiencing performance is ultimately the kind of scholarship I desire to continue. This

approach to Performance has taught me that there are many formulas to get something done save the process of committing ourselves to more than what we already know. Cultural worker and educator Cristal Chanelle Truscott writes in "Offering 2: SoulWork"[127] that in terms of the quality of the work, our mind, body, and soul influence how we create art. Truscott explains that "the term 'soul' is used and understood in African American cultural expression to describe an esoteric, aesthetic occurrence that moves someone 'spiritually' in the sense that it cannot be explained through words" (38). Soul transcends beyond our physical bodies; therefore, we understand what is soulful through feeling, emotions, embodiment, and expression. Truscott argues that "SoulWork is about making art that lingers while creating a space that allows for a visceral experience where the collective journey is an ongoing, fulfilling process of discovery and exploration" (39). SoulWork is essential to creating aesthetic experiences that move people beyond words.

As Truscott explains, the "work" is developed critically and theoretically as an aesthetic practice that the artist must uniquely cultivate. SoulWork is like a fingerprint; our choices represent who we are and want to become. There are four principles of SoulWork: 1. Intention: The Call, 2. Living in the Call and Response, 3. Emotional Availability and the Unending Climax, and 4. The Dream. The first principle teaches us that intention establishes a purpose so that we are focused on our goals. Truscott emphasizes that "Intention makes the work personal and SoulWork is not meant to be objective" (44). In this, we are more connected to what we want to achieve because we are clear about what to do. This is developed from mindfulness that blends the creative and critical practices visible through action. Second, call and response in artmaking is an ongoing commitment to discovery. Living in the Call and Response "invites the

[127] See *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*

uniqueness of the individual, the collective, the moment, the piece, the process, and the circumstances for this present work" (45). This requires deep listening to the soul and constant engagement with our interactions with others to create art that is not only our own but also in tune with everybody else.

The third principle of SoulWork centers on who we are because being open with our emotions is an integral part of the process. She explains that "creating from a state of Emotional Availability connects and liberates emotional (breath, voice, etc.) and physical functions (action, movement, gesture, etc.) to/from intellectual analysis to explore the essence of a piece, at once spontaneously and deliberately" (46). This means that the artist is present with their emotions so that they can fully experience what is happening now, which also creates an opportunity to explore variations to the notion of linearity in our work. How we respond to our process's beginning, middle, and end deals with emotional sincerity that might decide how we complete the work. Furthermore, "with the Unending Climax, one begins in a state of emotional urgency and ends with stakes higher than previously thought possible" (47). This recognizes the possibilities of developing a piece without prematurely defining the outcome. Finally, The Dream is an ode to remix culture that is invested in the process of making something new out of what we already know to re-envision the future. As Truscott argues, "the remix reveals new discoveries and sharper perspectives that design the understanding, visceral engagement and/or emotional impact on the listener" (48). Overall, SoulWork is a call to engage deeply with others so we can experience the outcome of the art together.

When the principles of SoulWork come together, they help artists reignite their passion, purpose, and creative sustainability. Through meaningful actions, artists can investigate the emotional and physical connection to establish a consciousness of purpose. When applied to

performance, the process becomes a critical exchange between performer/self and separate performer/audience. The benefit for Black artists is that SoulWork is centered in African American traditions, which engage the voice and body in a specific way that offers a unique perspective of racial identity. For example, Truscott explains that chants and dances can arouse the heart's flow, allowing us to experience something different while creating art. This use of our voice and body reveals an emotional power that can affect the brain, nerves, and muscles of the performer. In efforts to focus on *doing* rather than dictating how to feel, SoulWork pushes artists to choose actions that we naturally know consciously and do with our bodies to help us rekindle the passion in our work to offer something valuable to our communities.

While my cultural roots have taught me to "make a joyful noise"[128] whenever I am weak in my spirit, after my recent experience with sexual harassment, I did not know what to say or how to express what I was feeling on the inside. Every time someone asked me how I was doing, I wanted to scream, "FINE," but instead, I responded gently with, "I'm making it happen one day at a time." My response meant that emotional healing does not happen overnight, but the pressure to explain what I was feeling seemed directed toward a solution that others could not provide. To overcome this stress, I had to acknowledge what I felt in a comfortable way that made sense to me. I wrote a poem to describe the frustration and anger I felt inside.

She sits
She writes
She sings
She fights
Studying the newness
Breathing for the first time in a while
Inhale, exhale slowly
Breathe easy
Inhale, exhale slowly
God why I gotta deal with all of this and that?

[128] Psalm 100:1-5

How come so-and-so don't seem to be dealing with as much as I do?
How come…?!
He stops me in my tracks
He reminds me to be thankful
He reminds me to look in the mirror and see myself
I saw God in me
It's the realness I feel
Sometimes I forget He's there
Still, I know He loves me
Inside/Out

When I finished writing, I recited the poem in a mirror. I said the poem out loud and then a heaviness came over me—my heart started to race. I closed my eyes and took a couple of deep breaths to ease the tension in my body. Then I released a sound and loudly sighed with an "ahhhhhhhhhhh." I continued this process until I could form words:

Beautiful.
I am beautiful.
I am beautiful, and I am loved.
I am beautiful, loved, and should be appreciated more.

I repeated this statement in different ways until I started to cry. On the last release, I said, "I am beautiful, I am Black, and there's nothing that nobody can do about that." This phrase evolved into a rhythmic chant and I danced across the room with lots of handclapping and foot stomping. I felt relieved. I was able to reignite my passion for creative expression which positioned me to welcome the next stage of healing.

According to Truscott, "the SoulWork artist is expected to have something to say and bring to the process that which only they can give" (44). After, I started to reflect on my "why" as a performance practitioner in a more meaningful way. I thought about the impact of my work on Black women who felt disconnected from the conversation in the realm of Black performance. As a Black woman that means I must keep talking about my experiences with other people because I have discovered this is how many activists and allies find clarity about

structural oppressions that cannot easily be seen. I explored my revelations after doing SoulWork because the direction of performance that can inform, teach, define, and appreciate culture to illuminate social change begins with addressing the failures of society that make us unwell. Holding onto my anger and frustration led to feelings of worthlessness that caused me to feel stunted in my growth as a performance practitioner. As a result, I am now more conscious that my race, gender, sexuality, and social class play a big role in how people perceive me in performance spaces.

I could turn to other Black people and hope that one day I can bring my whole self to my work as a feminist. I could also turn to other feminists and wait until they figure out how we all can get free in a white supremacist culture (Taylor). I have learned many lessons about these dualisms and hoping and waiting leads to more rejection for the sake of keeping things easy. From my perspective, the work of Black feminism demonstrates what is constantly floating around in my mind that requires more attention in Performance. I had not yet learned how to communicate the connection between the two until after I tried to respond to my experiences rather than allow the politics of what I experienced to overtake me. On that day, "Black feminist performance" came to mind. I typed the phrase in a Google search bar and after reading, "Everything but the Stage: Toward a Feminist Theatrical Praxis" by Nikki Owusu Yeboah, things made more sense.

A Look into the Future

Yeboah places Sara Ahmed's book *Living a Feminist Life* and Tina Campt's work with photographs in *Listening to Images* in conversation with her production, *The (M)others*, as a "tentative model for staging our feminist futures" (57). Their work is theoretically and conceptually centered in practices that consider the contemporary political climate and the

historical significance of diverse experiences of women of color and for Campt, specifically, that means Black people. Yeboah argues that we should engage feminist politics with performance to approach the creative process with more intentionality that radically shapes the outcome of theatrical productions. Ahmed's ideas of a feminist self are applied to what Yeboah describes as "feminist work" to describe the process by which feminist theater is created and the expansion of critique that materializes our use of performance (59). In this, she points to what Campt argues "must be" in the present moment of feminist performance to respond to the current issues surrounding Black life in America (63).

For example, *The (M)others* is "a community-engaged oral history performance based on the narratives of local Bay Area [San Jose, California] women who have lost loved ones to police violence" (57). In the article, Yeboah reflects on the emotional process of collecting interviews and gathering insight into the experiences of the women who were used to construct the script for the production. She talks about the long process of gathering their stories as a critical ethnographer and the patience required to listen to their expressed pain as Black women deeply. Specifically, she describes the time it takes for the interviewees to reflect on their experiences, but also the importance of careful processing and translating what was said during the interview. Her feminist approach is emphasized, here, because she is resistant to the common academic pressure "to rush toward a finished product at the expense of constructing a praxis that feels ethical and sustainable" (65). There are other moments of care that Yeboah notes in her presenting *The (M)others* off-campus and during talkbacks which further demonstrates the continued application of feminist practices during every stage of the production.

Yeboah's purpose is not to settle the debate of how to conduct ethnographic research or how to stage critical performances, but rather her descriptions provide insight on how to care for

others and self in every stage of the production process that also includes how we interact with the audience. The article then raises the question of how we focus on social change at the beginning, during, and end of our creative process to opt for more "feminist futurities that exist beyond the stage's limits" (76). This interpretation of feminist theatre challenges the work of scholars who romance the idea of equitable theatre practices by moving toward what Dorinne Kondo describes as "reparative creativity." In *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*, Kondo argues that reparative creativity is developed from "the ways artists make, unmake, remake race in their creative processes, in acts of always partial integration and repair" (5). Yeboah elaborates on this idea by evoking a culture of political resistance to traumatic memory, racial trauma, and subjectivities of the living that projects based on a compounded truth about public and private Black grief. Instead, she presents an argument that the past is always with us.

While the invitation to study Black women's performance practice from a feminist perspective proves to be a central aspect of Yeboah's process, the words "Black feminist performance" is not conceptually tied together. She does not characterize this approach to performance as a branch of Black feminist practice precisely. Maybe this is because Ahmed is not a Black woman, or the term "Black" limits her research interests' future directions. I do not claim to make an argument for either; instead, I mention this point to clarify why Yeboah's analysis of feminist performance and theatrical praxis does not entirely tend to the needs of Black feminist practices. Nevertheless, she accounts for a process that interweaves critical theory and praxis, but the future use of this method deserves a defining moment in the field.

The future is Black feminist performance. This move toward Black feminist performance is an argument to produce more creative conversation where Black feminist politics are centered

as a form of "methodological implication for arts-based processes and research" (Lepere 1). Black feminist performance puts the connections of feminist thinking into conversation with what I am thinking about regarding Black aesthetic communication. While attention to this topic does not currently exist in Performance Studies, scholars like Lisa M. Anderson, Refiloe Lepere, Sandra L. Richards, Glenda Dickerson, Lynette Goddard, and Daphne Brooks, [129] are doing the necessary work to connect these values as theatre praxis. They provide a framework to analyze theories and methodologies that approach performance production where Black women are the subjects of their empowerment. As Lepere claims, "theatre becomes a space where [stories] can be told through different art forms… that narrate the interior lives of [Black] women" (4). The relationship between the self and the text becomes the concepts of exploration that repeatedly act as discourses of resistance in feminist theatre, which these scholars mobilize in their works. Thus, the form of Black feminist theatre-making serves as an example of insight into how Black women become subjects rather than objects on stage.

For example, in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, Anderson transforms the broader theme of Black aesthetics to blend the ideas of double patriarchy and Black feminist criticism by posing questions about the Black female body onstage and in society. She unites Black, feminist, and theatrical concerns to propose a shift in theoretical paradigms that embody a critical level of engagement in how we talk about aesthetics that enriches the other. By aesthetics, Anderson argues that she means "the context in which a work is situated, how its construction and production are shaped, and how that shaping is informed by its politics" (2). The primary function of aesthetics, as used in this text, centers Black life and culture through a

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[129] See "Women, Theatre, and Social Action" at the Breaking the Surface Conference and Festival in Calgary; "The Cult of True Womanhood: Towards a Womanist Attitude in African American Theatre"; *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance; Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom*

range of possibilities and representation that is attached to an idea of liberation. One of the evolutions of this framework is Anderson's attention to Black sexuality in history to advance a concept of "imagined histories."[130] That is, she calls for a focus on the histories of Black queer communities who have been commonly left out of discourse in theatre and performance. She situates the presence of Black lesbians, gay men, femmes, and other Black queer people to include a philosophy of reimagining a future that embraces the push for collective liberation that Black feminists have already pursued. Black aesthetics are always already about the use of imagination; therefore, the foundations of Black feminist theatre remain open to the intersections of gender and sexuality.

Although performance is a trajectory of theatre, I insist that there is room for Black feminism to get us to a point of critical analysis by infusing the logic of liberation with aesthetic communication. The linguistic aspects of Black feminist theatre theory are present in works by D. Soyini Madison, Olga Idriss Davis, Omi Osun (Joni L. Jones), Amber Johnson, Robin Boylorn, and E. Patrick Johnson[131] who construct intersectional arguments of race, gender, sexuality, and class through discourse that deploys a critical analysis. However, the term "Black feminist performance" is not a specific form these scholars claim in Performance Studies. What I suggest is not that their works are incomplete, but rather that the ontological consciousness of Black feminist performance helps us distinguish a crucial act of resistance through aesthetic praxis that is important for the future of the disciple. Black feminist performance is not an

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[130] See "Signifying Black Lesbians: Dramatic Speculations" and "Black Feminist Aesthetic" in *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*

[131] "That Was My Occupation": Oral Narrative, Performance, and Black Feminist Thought"; "Locating Tulsa in the Souls of Black Women Folk: Performing Memory as Survival"; "Sista Docta"; "Confessions of a Video Vixen"; "Gray or for Colored Girls Who Are Tired of Chasing Rainbows: Race and Reflexivity"; *Black. Queer. Southern. Women: An Oral History*

avoidance of revolution from whiteness and patriarchal structures, rather the principles reflect on the thematic concerns of this project, that is Black creative expression and Black women.

Are We There Yet?

White performance scholars often ask me if I will help them learn how to be less racist and more equitable in spaces where our identities co-exist. However, I refuse to construct this dissertation in a way that caters to that thinking about Blackness and Black folks. Instead, I want to be clear: goodwill is not enough to reject an attitude of racism or prejudice.[132] This analysis does not prioritize how whiteness is mobilized as "goodwill" in performance studies because it does not get at the core of the issues that affect Black practitioners. Instead, a focus on whiteness reinforces traditional modes of critique that have rendered plenty of problems for people of color. Here, I define the problems in Performance Studies as a system of preferences that privileges white people to make them feel better about differences simply because goodwill is at the center. However, what is goodwill without the personal feelings or opinions of the "objectified"?

One year I attended a performance-based session at the National Communication Association about an autoethnography of a Black woman who struggled to maintain her authenticity in predominately white spaces during graduate school. The audience was mixed in terms of race, gender, and class. I identified with her experiences as a Black woman in graduate school and embraced her reflections, but I did not claim them as my own. In other words, while

[132] *In Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks reflects on an experience during a talk when a white woman asked her if she believe if everyone was affected by racist culture in the same way. hooks responds that she "was weary of the way in which white people want to deflect attention away from their accountability for anti-racist change by making it seem that everyone has been socialized to be racist against their will" (14). Here, I use this example to justify my reading of "goodwill" to be a deflection of prejudicial feelings or willingness to conform to institutionalized white domination because one chooses to identify as a victim.

our experiences were similar, they were different. The performer called attention to what white people said regarding her appearance and their negative comments on her work as an academic which resonated with me. At the end of the performance, everyone applauded her for such an engaging performance, and then two respondents, both Black women, read their reflections to the performer. I was moved by the words of affirmation shared at this moment—this was an exchange of ideas and emotional connection between Black women that I was unfamiliar with in academic spaces, and I desired such a bond.

I raised my hand to share gratitude and feedback with the performer; however, a white woman raised her hand before me. When called upon, she said, “Wow, that was such a beautiful and thoughtful performance as you discussed your experiences as a Black woman. I am deeply moved by some of the things you have experienced. I could relate so much to what you were saying because I, too, have dealt with my oppressions in academia that marginalize me. I just wanted to say that you are not alone and thank you for seeing me too.” The performer did not respond negatively to the audience member. Instead, she framed her response as trying to smooth over the commentator’s intent to exercise goodwill. While the performer consoled the tension expressed by other Black and brown scholars in the audience, I realized that while her narrative was based on lived experience, the performance was manifested through creative practice that exposed her to whiteness in its consensual realm of identification. Perhaps her light was dimmed because the narrative's methods unintentionally repeated the type of language, writing, and critique that inherently limits Black Performance.

Suppose white people can move past the idea of having good intentions as a component of how they think about Black performers and scholarship. In that case, they are likely to adopt pragmatic anti-racist strategies independently. The focus on loving Blackness becomes more

about liberation for all instead of a temporary remedy for their feelings. According to hooks, "We cannot value ourselves righdy without first breaking the through walls of denial" (*All About Love*, 20). The alternative bears such a troubled history that constantly requires me to reduce the presence of Blackness to include whatever else strives to unmake and revise its discourse. I do not discredit the work by Black studies or Black performance scholars who have engaged in works that offer such explanations; however, my argument in this chapter prioritizes seeing, thinking, and being that is centered in Afrocentricity to create space for a scholarly perspective and writing that moves with performance. In the next section, I primarily consider Blackness as a lens to discuss the experiences that specifically affect Black people instead of that which might be revised in these means through whiteness.

Audiencing

In many instances, the racialized parts of identity have been taken out of context in performances by non-Black audiences who struggle to address their issues with Blackness. I realized this after the fourth "Nappy Hairstories" show at LSU. Therefore, this dissertation's layers of critical performance analysis as praxis must include race, gender, and sexuality to consider how Blackness is presented on and off stage. Specifically, my struggles as a Black woman performance practitioner are overlooked in research about identity. When Black women are overshadowed in discourse about our narratives, we are viewed as more of an intersectional invisibility that moves our marginalization to a place of congruence with the audience. As previously discussed, "goodwill" is not enough to protect us from painful moments when others seek validation. We should not be required to minimize our experiences to create a safe space for our oppressors. We need reform, but it is clear that some of us (Black women) are not entirely comfortable with this type of praxis as a form of performance scholarship. I am familiar with this

sort of problematic exchange—moments where I have explained my experiences in terms of race and gender through a performance only to be questioned about my criticalness as a scholar who leaves the stakes too high for my audiences. My job is not to make everyone comfortable. If we are going to "decenter whiteness," we must decenter whiteness.

Consequently, I realized that although the relevance of topics in each chapter attends to Black aesthetic expression as identity and the effects of racial justice, the outcome of audience behavior impacts how this document is written. My desire to create a method for surviving in predominately white performance spaces has refused to center whiteness; however, five white professors formally provided feedback and evaluation for my dissertation. For this reason, I used codeswitching[133] to communicate insight into what sometimes seemed necessary to expand their understanding of Black expression separate from that which is typically considered entertainment. Although I do not claim to trace the entirety of Blackness or Black Performance, I locate the relationships between what is quickly recognizable to my community and what may be invisible to non-Black audiences through detailed examples of language, religious practices, joy, music, and other forms of cultural expression. These examples acknowledge the ongoing texts in popular culture that provide balance to this analysis of Black Performance Methods.

At first, I was frustrated with the idea of formally translating private strategies and interpretations of Black life to white people in the ivory tower at the expense of losing value in autonomy and agency. Then I remembered that Black people have walked this path for centuries, even commenting on the awareness of this paradox with terms such as double-consciousness.

[133] "Racial codeswitching is one impression management strategy where Black people adjust their self-presentation to receive desirable outcomes (e.g., perceived professionalism) through mirroring the norms, behaviors, and attributes of the dominant group (i.e., white people) in specific context" (McCluney, et al.).

W.E. B. Dubois writes about double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (3).

This quote demonstrates while an understanding of Black life is important, a recognition of these political consequences in our work and everyday life must include explicit attention to the audience (or gaze) of white people (Pittman). The short-term effects of writing this dissertation lean into what Hurston describes as an absence of privacy in the Black community and especially for Black women (Steele, "Black Feminist Pleasure on TikTok"). Samantha Pinto and Shoniqua Roach argue that "Black privacy is something that has been refused by white supremacy and used as a mode of resistance in Black art, activism, and scholarship" (1). As awareness, this provocation works as a critical resource to identify transformative possibilities that are relevant to this moment of hypervisibility.

The long-term effects present much more of a reactive suggestion that appeals to future directions of how performance is studied by academics and the public. We should examine the attachment, ownership, and authenticity of our art as a scholarly practice that operates before non-Black audiences attempt to build it up. For example, before submitting each chapter to my advisor, I discussed the information with family, friends, colleagues, and students who identified as Black. It is worth noting that these conversations helped me focus on the interests of Black people to set a higher bar for topics that, could over time, advance how we think about culture in Communication Studies. In turn, my awareness of double-consciousness further mobilized how I

used codeswitching throughout the dissertation. Thus, codeswitching is useful to emphasize how Black performers might navigate predictive audience behaviors such as The Custodian's Rip-Off (selfishness), The Enthusiast's Infatuation (superficiality), The Skeptic's Cop-Out (cynicism), and The Curator's Exhibitionism (sensationalism) in the future interpretation of their works.[134] This is highlighted in "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance" where Dwight Conquergood outlines "four ethical pitfalls, performative stances toward the other that are morally problematic" (4). While Conquergood presents these points to cover the complicated behaviors of doing ethnography, I also consider them to include strong similarities to toxic characteristics of non-Black audiences that arise before, during, and after engaging with this work. I describe these characteristics as Plagiarism, White Guilt, "I'm a not a racist", and a Performance of Wokeness to emphasize the evolution of harmful exchange during critique or moments of commentary. I push for a dialogic performance that has an emphasis on (auto)ethnographic work to build on the dimensions of how culture is performed and perceived.[135] This provides an analysis of how we should evaluate behaviors that are disengaged with diversity to help scholars create more dialogic liberation with the audience (Conquergood).

I must also acknowledge the norms of respectability politics[136] that expect me to adhere to a traditional way of writing or performing Blackness for Black audiences. While respectability politics also rings deep in church expectations for Black women (Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham), we can extend this viewpoint to beliefs about the standard of scholarship that is considered

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[134] See pages 5-10 of "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." A dialogic performance offers a framework to interact and collaborate with other cultures without disrespecting or monopolizing differing views.

[135] Soyini Madison adds in "Co-Performative Witnessing" that we interact and observe as subjects to better appreciate the performance.

[136] "Politics of respectability" was first defined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.

"good" by Black academics (not to be confused with Blackademics).[137] I refer to respectability politics as a measurement of Blackness when it is portrayed to be a construction of Eurocentric standards and behaviors that are more acceptable in academic settings (Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*). For example, these measurements include omission or disassociation of AAVE and especially words like "nigga" in publication; an idealization of gender and sexual propriety; and high value for success stories that demonstrate one's ability to overcome hardship. Jordan Madison and Josee' Muldrew argue that "Respectability politics can create a sense of shame, anxiety, worthlessness, identity confusion, racial trauma, and systemic oppression for those who constantly engage in policing themselves," ("The Skin I'm In"). I do not engage in a strategy of respectability politics because I spent too much time in the trenches trying to earn the approval of white people only to still be disrespected and ignored.

Additionally, respectability politics traditionally devalues people who are considered poor, uneducated, queer, and ratchet—I argue that they, too, deserve seats at the table to create liberation. *What constitutes an acceptable portrayal and conversation about Blackness and Black people if we cannot be ourselves when writing about ourselves?* Freedom of expression should change the way we speak about what is predicated on our experiences that includes perspectives and sources that extend beyond academia and political structures which uphold a certain style, regardless of environment. I altered the way I speak in this dissertation to appeal to an intellectual inquiry that determines my ability to earn a doctorate degree with expectations of scholarship that read as whiteness. However, I do not dismiss what I include to move a conversation about Blackness, Black Performance Methods, and Black Feminist Performance forward for my people and scholars in Performance Studies.

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[137] Blackademics is a colloquialism to refer to a nigga who is well educated.

Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation has focused on the place of performance practice, creative expression, and aesthetics related to Black culture to communicate the importance of how "texts perform Blackness as much as we perform it" (Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*). All the issues presented have been critiqued, reflected on, and revised by Black scholars who understand the fixated meaning of "the Black experience," which can only be understood in terms of racial identity's historical and cultural context. In their efforts to legitimize Black expression, we might ask if the crossroads between what is appropriated and what is undeniably Black continues to dictate how we consider our identities and the continuation of scholarship within or outside of the academy.

"The Black Performer's Toolbox: A Critical Autoethnography" argues for a shift in how we discuss and engage in Black cultural aesthetics to produce and understand creative expression through performance. I specifically engage in a thoughtful analysis of performance as a social response to what is happening in the lives of Black people to remind us that there is no representation without representation; "we cannot be seduced into a single point of view" (Kondo 117). I point out the extent to which "sista doctas" are a necessary presence in the academy but are still absent on the roster. In Performance Studies, they show up as specific, distinct women we see always doing the work to liberate others at the expense of our promised freedoms. Performance offers a place to communicate the gray areas in our experiences, but why are we strained when we rise? In some ways, we are shackled to the labor of sharing our truths. Therefore, I pose the question of liberation to navigate this space moving forward because I am worried that the "hypocrisy surrounding the academy's inclusion… granted to African American

women is given flesh" (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression, sickness, anger, loneliness, sadness, grief, hunger, forgetfulness, tiredness… death) (Jones 53).

Additionally, the current state of Performance Studies is not adequately situated to address these issues because the vision and execution of diversity initiatives is still (somehow) the responsibility of Black women who are tired of doing the labor for everyone, me included. Imagining resistance around these fractions is becoming more complex and almost impossible. The failures of performance and how we currently consider the discipline's future explicitly require medicine to put the community's vision back together. I do not claim to have the perfect remedy for these issues as that would conclude that I am somewhat of a *magician,* which supports a narrative of dependency on Black women that I aim to move away from in Chapter 5. I will, however, note that this dissertation is a discussion about the future of Black Performance that articulates the necessary shift in how we should respond to this (and other) intersectional moments.

While the future of Performance Studies should include a conversation about how the field is in shaking up the status quo outside of a white gaze, the exciting thing is that if Black performers are here to diversify our discipline, then why are we still doing things the same? Therefore, I also offer a perspective on why it is imperative for more scholarship on Black Performance to be professionally presented in academia, even when many practitioners are questioning whether the discipline wants them here. If the field of Performance Studies does not include the philosophy I want to implement as a Black feminist, then I need to change it. I need to make my demands clearer and my voice louder. In the words of DJ Kool, "let me clear my throat."[138]

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[138] See "Let Me Clear My Throat (Remix)"

I argue to form a collective amongst critical/cultural performance scholars that seek to enact theory beyond the page to unite our forces. Attention to Blackness accounts for a complex relationship to whiteness that many performers, including myself, have within Performance Studies; however, there are boundaries to this kind of analysis for non-Black performers. This is not to say that we owe anyone anything, especially not our space, time, or energy. Yet, I am forever committed to the progression of the academy for the future generations of artists who need to see themselves represented because they deserve to be heard on multiple platforms that include Performance Studies. The opportunity to do things differently is a permanent installment of liberation for the continuation of our discipline, including allyship.

We are all incapable of something, and some Black women make mistakes. For example, my fifth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Davis, called me “stupid” in front of the class and told me I would fail because I refused to take her paddle as a punishment. She thought I was disruptive when I responded to another student’s request for a pencil to take the pop quiz. This was the first time I was in trouble, so I explained to Mrs. Davis why I spoke out, but she did not want to listen. Errors of this magnitude are damaging and extremely destructive based on the context in which you receive them. Thankfully other Black women came to my rescue and rebuked her when I complained. Notice my point here: "I made a complaint, and other Black women stood up for me.” Regardless of her race, gender, or class, they stood up for me. At this moment, I am standing up for my communities too.

I have made my own mistakes as an educator, but when I started to embrace growth as a part of learning, I realized that no one is perfect in the human sense. Despite the complexity of how I arrived, the only way to free myself from the deadly grasp of the past is to create a path for the future. Any opportunity to grow as a performance practitioner and educator is an opportunity

for me to inspire someone else. Black feminism has taught me how to listen to others so that I can create safer spaces, but I do not limit myself to these viewpoints. I believe that a safe space considers all contributors to knowledge and acts upon what liberation is all about—respecting others and exercising love. I am here today because of the love and encouragement I have received from multiple educators. The work of Black feminist performance praxis is the reason I will remain a part of the field and continue to change the future. Respect and love are not radical, but when we use care and love to change the system, we uproot issues that change the narrative. We can all bring something that needs to be heard, recognized, and included, so I am listening for what will be.

BPT is outlined throughout the dissertation because I sought a language to articulate my interest in Black Performance Methods. To decenter whiteness, identify what is Black about "It", shift pain, locate passion, and trust an unknown process speaks to a varied framework of processing that enables us to see the performance of identity and culture as Blackness because each step is dynamic just as much as it is powerful. What I created eventually became a way to frame a conversation about personal and collective transformation. This also speaks to the difficulty with the development of the dissertation itself. I had to look at my artistic way of asserting identity outside of a collaborative cumulation of practicing and studying Black Performance. The traditions of Black culture often suggest that our histories or accomplishments are always about all of us. Still, they also function as an important moment of self-reflection and intervention. While conceptually distinct, my discoveries with using BPT speak to the reality that instant gratification is only sometimes readily available when something requires intention and patience. Specifically, the time it took to conduct research and write this document serves as an

argument to recognize why Black creative expression should be taken more seriously in academia.

Furthermore, this type of research can only be produced by profoundly listening to my and my community's feelings, imaginings, and sounds.[139] By contrast, I also recognize the influences of canonical scholarship that contribute to my understanding of Performance Studies that foregrounds structure in my research. Since BPT is an original method, the insight throughout this dissertation recognizes non-Black scholarship primarily to pay tribute to the people who have supported my journey as a performance practitioner despite differing areas of expertise. Furthermore, as a mantra, I challenge all scholars to trust the influences of their culture that positively embrace a logic of liberation to critique oppression.

[139] In *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience,* D. Soyini Madison argues that such a sensation is "a relentless assault on the senses [with] a level of intensity that requires focused attention" (33).

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Vita

Laura D. Oliver is a performance practitioner, educator, and scholar. She was born and raised in Dallas, Texas and completed her B.A. and M.A. in Communication Studies at the University of North Texas. Shortly after finishing her master's program, Laura started her professional journey as an adjunct at community colleges in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. After almost three years, she decided to pursue her Ph.D. in Communication Studies at Louisiana State University with a focus in Performance and minors in African/African American Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Oliver's work is primarily focused on Black Performance, Identity Narratives, Spoken Word, Black Feminism, African American Theater, and Black Performance Methods.

Oliver has won numerous awards and received recognition for her solo performance work, directing, casting, and writing. She is a traveling guest artist and scholar with selected shows such as "Nappy Hairstories" and the "Black Collective: A Performer's Toolbox Workshop." Currently, she is a Lecturer in Visual and Performing Arts at Grambling State University. In her free time, Oliver likes to spend time with family, cook, garden, travel, and sing.