UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title
Returning to the Vessel: Archival Opacities and Fabulating Black Futures Post Reconstruction to Present

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xn8j1mw

Author
Hamby, Iyanna

Publication Date
2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Returning to the Vessel:

Archival Opacities & Fabulating Black Futures

Post-Reconstruction to Present

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of

the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Theater & Performance Studies

by

Iyanna Charise Hamby

2024

© Copyright by

Iyanna Charise Hamby

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Returning to the Vessel:

Archival Opacities & Fabulating Black Futures

Post-Reconstruction to Present

by

Iyanna Charise Hamby

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater & Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Michelle Liu Carriger, Chair

Claiming the “right to opacity” for historical Black subjects has been an evolving epistemological method used by present-day black scholars. Advocating for the refusal of dominant legibility, *the right to opacity* contends with ostensibly unknowable and complex experiences of the enslaved. As Black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman further contextualizes Edouard Glissant’s stance as “that which enables something in excess,” my research questions how historical and existing Black people act as vessels through which these inter-Trans-Atlantic subjectivities are mobilized. In my dissertation, *Returning to the Vessel: Archival Opacities & Fabulating Black Futures Post-Reconstruction to Present*, I impart my neologism “opaque-

fabulations" to study enigmatic reperformances of American slavery that adopt the utility of reimagining and complicate the expectations placed on Black performances as freedom projects," to decolonize" dominative impositions of transparency" and represent underwritten diasporic histories. In examining reperformances of American slavery from the 18th century-Reconstruction alongside current Black historically minded fabulations—in theater, performance art, film & television, I study Black reembodied performances as intimate methods for reveling in concealed and radical ways of knowing. Shade, redress, and transgressive tactics are employed as productive performances of the opaque to destabilize violent structures that circumscribe Blackness to dual conditions of hypervisibility and absence. Although the notion of opacity and fabulation dually evoke realized possibilities for resistance amid domination, the acknowledged impossibility of historical revival through embodied narrative emphasizes the necessity to respect a complicated history of enslaved lives that may exceed contemporary expectations for recognition. The methodological framework of "opaque- fabulations" adaptably extends emerging black feminist and queer scholarship from theorists such as Daphne Brooks, Saidiya Hartman, and Tavia Nyong'o to address the re-imaginings of black insurgent practice that reject desires to be *understood.* Via a study that centralizes the utility of reembodiment, "opaque-fabulations," importantly brings into relation – the afterlives of slavery, its *affects*, and the Trans-Atlantic histories that inform them.

The dissertation of Iyanna Charise Hamby is approved.

Shelleen Maisha Greene

Richard A. Yarborough

Harvey Young

SA Smythe

Michelle Liu Carriger, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

Table of Contents

EPILOGUE 1

INTRODUCTION.......... 7

CHAPTER ONE : REPERFORMING AS PLANTATION RELICS: ASK A SLAVE; SPILL THE TEA 27

CH. TWO VIRGINIA PLAY: ASSEMBLING MYTHIC RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SALLY "HEMINGS-ES".......... 79

CH. THREE "SLAVE PLAY": VESSELS AS AN ORGAN AND REPERFORMING SPECTRAL SONG.......... 125

CH. FOUR REPERFORMANCES OF THE GRAPEVINE: DRINKING VESSELS AND THE BUBBLING SITUATION OF EMANCIPATION.......... 159

CONCLUSION OR WHAT NEXT?.......... 197

BIBLIOGRAPHY 204

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for aiding me in the completion of this monumental endeavor. Firstly, those on my dissertation committee who have guided me, fed my writing with wisdom and shaped me into the scholar I am today. I would also like to thank the Black women in my life: my Grandmother and Mother who have always been pillars of knowledge and inspiration. I will also take this opportunity to thank Dr. Harvey Young, Dr.Patrick Fleming and Dr. Katherine Burnett for fostering my matriculation into the doctorate and walking through this journey with me after my undergraduate career (at my beloved alma mater) Fisk. Lastly, I would like to thank my previous students at Williams College and at UCLA who have challenged me, and further enhanced my academic experience in Black studies, Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies & Performance studies as if I am the one sitting in the classroom. It's been a joy to be so intellectually nourished and supported by all of you.

.

Vita/Biographical Sketch:

Iyanna received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from Fisk University in Nashville Tennessee. During her time at Fisk Iyanna was a recipient of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship and submitted her undergraduate thesis titled, "Subversive Playwrights and Racial Tensions: The Dangers of Spotlighting Race in Cross-Racial Casting." In her undergraduate thesis she explored the reifications of harmful racial stereotypes in contemporary productions like Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon*. Iyanna is soon to be published in the anthology titled *August Wilson in Context* submitted to the Cambridge University Press. Her chapter is titled: August Wilson's "Generative Gem for Reembodiment, Materiality, & Migratory Transformation." At UCLA Iyanna is a Cota Robles Fellow, and a recipient of the Rising to the Challenge African American Studies-Summer Graduate Award (2020) which recognized new research that centered on decolonial perspectives and Black histories.

Epilogue

On October 6th of every year, local Nashvillians, students, alumni, and faculty of Fisk University begin their morning with an early convocation and end their afternoon with a pilgrimage to the cemeteries that entomb some of the founders of the institution—the original 9 Jubilee singers. To most Fiskites the drive to the gravesites are deemed a traditional excursion during their four year residence at the school, but during my attendance I got to regard more than the buried prodigies of Nashville's acclaimed "Music City."

On a rainy afternoon of my first traveled "Jubilee Day," I trekked to Greenwood cemetery, the same cemetery that many of my family members were buried. Unknowingly, my closeness to Fisk and its history was something more than mere academic legacy. Centuries apart laid my grandfather: William Hamby and a few steps ahead the Fisk founders: Minnie Tate Hall , and Georgia Gordon Taylor.

I can visually piece together a few memories. An assemblage of umbrellas, a gloomy sky, my grandfather's name written in stone, and the engulfing melody of Negro spirituals sung by the then Jubilee ensemble serenading their departed predecessors and fellow onlookers. What most stands out from that day was the comment I received from the once esteemed Fisk music director and professor Dr. Paul Kwami, "You look as if you are in another world." The epiphany struck: *a world within a world*? Would that world be sorrow and death? Did Dr. Kwami *know*? Saddened by the realization that I was in proximity to my departed loved one, my grief overcame me and a sudden feeling of oddity. A perceived coincidence or an uncanny homage to the past? My buried loved ones had neighbors and it was my rite of passage to exhume them.

Around a year later I auditioned for a role in Fisk's rendering of McKinley Johnson's *A Train Is Comin*', an acapella musical centered around the Jubilee Singers' formation and their esteemed international touring company. Due to my perceived likeness to former Jubilee singer- Minnie Tate, I was requested to play her and participate in the lineup as an official cast member. When I received the role as Minnie we were assigned to research the historical figures we were *playing/becoming*.

So I did— I dug up Minnie in archives, special collections, online and in books, though the constraints of the archived history offered no insight into Minnie *by Minnie*. Still, I read about her what I could. The research led me to identify her free parents, and her previously enslaved grandmother's labor in procuring her and her children's freedom.[1] I learned that Minnie was musically and intellectually astounding, learning to read and write at a young age, she attended Fisk while being the youngest in the Jubilee ensemble. Minnie was born free, but was indebted to the pursuit of recovering that freedom. She compromised her education to focus on music and compromised her health and vocal capability all to salvage what one could deem as an esteemed socio-political position of Blackness both at Fisk and on a global scale. It was through her international performances where she helped facilitate new perceptions of Black peoples as "cultured" and "accomplished" individuals rather than their stereotypical markers as uncivilized or unintellectual. The reperformance that the Jubilee Singers offered in their recreation of work songs, and their ostensibly lived or once (generationally) removed memory of slavery can be regarded as a more predominant/affluent reperformance of American slavery as the musical reenactments relied on a strange form of slave play indiscernible to listeners and a diversion from the *real thing*.

[1] "Early Jubilee Singers." African Stories in Hull & East Yorkshire. Accessed April 15, 2021. https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/early-jubilee-singers.html.

During my quasi-possession of Minnie's vessel through embodied performance, what was conveyed in my research of 19thcentury Black livelihoods is what Fred Moten would explicate as a Blackness that is not merely an "effect of slavery but survives horror and terror."[2] What I came to know is that Minnie's time in the Jubilee ensemble became an instrument through which ostensible healing for a likely bodily and psychologically mapped trauma could continue to mobilize. The reperformances of these songs carries multiple temporalities and gave new interpretations to Black futures/histories intersecting all at once.

In the case of ostensible emancipation, what is perceived "contained" in/of Blackness begins to exceed itself from the material and the symbolic: through the body or through a limiting cultural repertoire. While slave vessels proliferated the transport of Black people during the Middle Passage it is through this transport that Blackness found its socio-political emergence. Blackness defined Western modalities of thought or what Spillers coins as Blackness that is "vestibular to culture,"[3]and it is through this violent course that Black people became central to the constructions of modernity itself. The corporeal nature of the vessel additionally transports the fugitive nature of Blackness that could be reembodied in performance. By reclaiming what Paul Gilroy would term as these "Jewels Brought From Bondage,"[4] Minnie became the channel through which her formerly enslaved grandmother could communicate her experience. The work songs were jewels formed in the intercultural marriage of suffering and these songs of

---

[2] Gillespie, Michael Boyce. *Film Blackness : American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 13-14

[3] Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[4] Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993

emancipation were inevitably relearned and sung by Minnie in a familiar echo of social access and freedom she came to understand and desire.

Eventually, I too had to reconcile with the spirituals. Whether it was amid my grandfather’s burial, or walking the hallowed grounds of the institution on my way to rehearsal, I relearned and sung in similar tribute—but why? Was it just for the sake of character portrayal or was it always inevitable for me to succumb to this ritual? Also, was a 21st century Black woman performing these songs similarly impactful in the continued longing for emancipatory progress and healing? While I didn’t fully come to terms with these questions *then,* I irrevocably query in retrospection now. Was it habit or ritualized gesture? Was I possessed and was it an exorcise/exercise? Was it my narrative or Minnie’s or our ancestors? Did I like *becoming* her? Did I have to?

By incorporating the notion of “becoming” via these bodily vessels of the past, I acknowledge the loaded aspect of the term vessel in relation to its impact in cultural memory. The “vessel” triggers both trauma and potential. The vessel is a static artifact of historical tension and a moving site of transformation; a landscape for Black expression. It is where enslaved occupants were bounded in the Atlantic, but a site where Black individuals also remembered their unboundedness.

I ask you to focus on that image of enslaved Black people in chains on a ship (the only scene of violence I could ask my reader to visualize), in the same way Gilroy asks his reader. Focus on the space… the stacking, the packed aspect of it. Focus on the closeness of Black people to each other. The proximity that bred the creation of Blackness. The intimacy that bred Black love, and care. It is that bodily closeness that yields access? It is an access to a way of knowing, a way of being, a memory, or a gaze exclusive to Black people? It is what one cannot

access in archives, but metabolizes at the moment of the haunt—the joint meeting between specters: presences and possibilities.

Occupying Minnie's "vessel" and reproducing the "poetics of landscape"[5] that signified these relations begets a connection between Minnie and I or rather—past and present Black people, and Black world-making potentials. Gilroy wrote that the "Jubilee Singers' music can be shown to have communicated what Du Bois called 'the articulate message of the slave to the world.'" To extend, the message conveys the slave's world, a world I was submerged in amid my visit to the cemetery, and in rehearsal and onstage for McKinley's musical. Perhaps not "another world" as Kwami speculated or *a world within a world* as I thought but a slow drift to a distant but familiar place due to the way it informs my present.

While my proximity was without a doubt emergent via the spirituals being sung, the unknowingness of my eventual relation to Minnie and vice versa was a closeness literally sedimented with my body as my blood-kin lay near her. Moreover, the preservation of erected memories in Fisk's architecture stood for my utility as a student and performer as it did Minnie's. The traces of her footsteps were mine to follow on those old cobblestone walkways. From the buildings, to the gravesites, to the spirituals and our inevitable meeting. Arguably, I was always somewhat close to Minnie, but I just kept getting *closer and closer*. My connection to Minnie's plight reveals a relational subjectivity between her and I rather than any mere affinity for the past. There is a liminal position between us that borders on stagnancy and tendency. My body made mobile a possibility that the archives were incapable of rendering. Her fabulated construction was performed by me in consideration of alternative livelihoods that were erased. Despite the limitations of my reperformance of Minnie within McKinley's counter-

---

[5] McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds : Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006. . Accessed 15 Apr. 2021.

historical project, what can most be illuminated is what Saidiya Hartman describes as my "relational tethering"[6] to Minnie and the effects of slavery we both became linked. It is through this project that considers what that proximity of our fleshly tethering reveals.

[6] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : A Journal of Criticism* No. 26 (2008), P. 1-14 (2008).

Introduction

How do we explain a desire to go back to periods of enslavement? What does it mean to reembody previous people and do something with history? What if impossible narratives were imagined in attempt to create alternative futures of the enslaved that presently render new ways of being in the present?

The notion of "what if" or the fabula within Black counter-historical projects is what Saidiya Hartman delineates as critical fabulation in her work "Venus in Two Acts." In efforts to imagine the lives of the two captive girls aboard a slave vessel named the *Recovery,* Hartman fictionalizes an embrace between Venus and her friend to deliberately work against the archives constraints, "to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration."[7] Hartman admits that the endeavor is an inevitable failure in many ways due to the fabula's inability to exceed the limitations of the archives, and the unthwarted violence rendered upon exhausting more from the girls amid their already state of precarity.

Still, what becomes visible and valuable within Hartman's perceived failure to rescue the two captive girls is the recognition of that liberatory endeavor as incomplete and the bounded connection between those freedom projects past and present. The fascination or desire to return to the past or reanimate the lives of the enslaved within the present convey an unrequited longing to both mourn and accept the impossibility of revival. Much like Hartman's meditation on Octavia Butler's *Kindred* as a representative model for navigating the tensions of failure and subversion that critical fabulation produces, I too seek to explore reenactments of slavery that

[7] Ibd pg 11

negotiate the endured and generational traumas even as the "arrangements of power occlude the very object"[8] of rescue.

The formation of relational subjectivity that critical fabulation embarks begets a study on how these ongoing poetics of freedom were developed, documented/erased and reperformed overtime. While Hartman asks her readers: "How can a narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know"[9] –like that of Tavia Nyong'o's *AfroFabulations*— I mutually extend to ask how performance specifically figures into that conversation? Given the fact that the element of fabulation has an intricate relationship with theatre, what about performance makes tangible a fiction brought to life? As Nyong'o elucidates, "how is that a story we know to be untrue can nonetheless inspire belief, emotion, and attachment."[10] In addition, how can embodied reperformances of black historical fabula realize the proximal tethering of these emancipatory reenactments? As the body legitimizes these links, embodied performance further makes palpable the "afterlife" of slavery and its ongoing presence within the contemporary world.

My dissertation places emphasis on works of Black expressive culture in cinema, literature, performance art and theater that are doing this kind of project of critical fabulation. As Hartman previews the utility of reimaginary when reckoning with enslaved histories, a focus on how reembodiment specifically gives narrative to those who are underrepresented. As Hartman calls us to imagine the two girls' embrace, I ask what if that embrace could be performed now? The importance of reembodiment for this project allows the work to center on the Black body

---

[8] Ibd pg 14

[9] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : A Journal of Criticism* No. 26 (2008), P. 1-14 (2008).

[10] Ochieng' Nyongó Tavia Amolo. *Afro-Fabulations : The Queer Drama of Black Life*. Sexual Cultures. New York: New York University Press, 2019.

(and the Black female body more closely) as a vessel through which radical potentials for Black expression can mobilize. The extensive treatment of the body as vessel in association of Hartman's methodology speaks to where Hartman first decided to envision the notion of fabulation take shape… on the *Recovery*. My research also begins at the vessel as a relational site of potential and an analytic that aids in the examination of insurgent reembodied performances pertaining to enslavement or present-day racial adversities. As Hartman started the project of elucidating experiences to make inclusive what the archives lack in their preservation of violence on the Middle Passage, I work in tandem to her efforts by analyzing performative vessels: Black historical reperformances as mutually illuminating and destabilizing of dominant histories.

<u>The Vessels Analytic</u>

Vessels not only allow us to locate the body's function in Black performance, or its insurgent implication in fabulated practice but it serves as an analytic to think critically about its passage in the African diaspora as a landscape for radical Black expression. The vessel paves news ways for feminist theorizing, deconstructs subject/object relations as well as revealing subaltern and material ways of knowing. In her article, "Toward Mythic Feminist Theorizing: Simone Leigh and the Power of the Vessel," Amber Musser observes Simone Leigh's installation *Loophole of Retreat* (2018) which specifically explores the facilitation of fiction to imagine "the self-determinate actions of Black women across decades and across the diaspora."[11] Through appropriation of the vessel, Leigh's sculptures invites her viewers to challenge/disrupt ways in which Black women are rendered legible within universal configurations of race and desire. Musser reflects on the arrangements of Leigh's sculptures to delineate how the vessel serves as a charged motif for theorizing mythic formations of Black feminism through

---

[11] "Artist Profile: Simone Leigh." The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation. Accessed April 15, 2021. https://www.guggenheim.org/video/artist-profile-simone-leigh.

performances of objecthood, epistemology, and fabulation. Musser's examination of Leigh's installation serves influential for this project because it employs the vessel as method for creating alternatives epistemologies.

Most notably, Musser's implementation of performance scholar Uri McMillian's theory of performance "that emphasizes objecthood rather than situating subjectivity as ideal"[12] from his work: *Embodied Avatars*, enabled Musser to consider the invocation of movement in Leigh's installation. Musser writes:

> I come to movement in two ways: through the outstretched arms and the sculpture's tiered skirt, which comprises much of the height. Though these elements also gesture toward other things—Oshun and a dwelling, perhaps—taken together one can also imagine a dancer with skirt twirling and arms raised. The invocation of dancing is important because it, too, destabilizes the static projection of black femaleness in addition to giving us another way to sense race's workings outside of disciplinary frames. .[13]

Even though Musser does not take up performance in the context of an acting subject, objecthood pushes the bounds of performance derived from the vacillation "between alternative self and abject object."[14] The sculpture rejects compressed representations of black womanhood and institutes performances that challenge dominant systems of knowledge.

Musser's discussion of Leigh's vessels enables to me to return to my previous incitation of the vessel's operations in the project as both moving and static; subject and object. Leigh's installation depicts projections/formations of selfhood from the object's performance, and my

---

[12] Musser; Amber. Toward Mythic Feminist Theorizing: Simone Leigh and the Power of the Vessel. *differences* 1 December 2019; 30 (3): 63–91.

[13] Ibd 79-80

[14] Ibd 81

research additionally considers manifestations of objecthood in relation to the performing subject. The deconstructions of subject/object relations provide room for investigation of reembodied performance that also regard the inextricable connections to materializations existing outside of self and are mutually informed by slavery's afterlife.

Reembodied performances that incorporate that perceived tethering to slavery and pushes toward identifications of objecthood through notions of becoming, gestures toward positions of "thingness" or "non-being" that get us to think about slavery's production of abjection and the critical potential of its inhabitation. Christina Sharpe discusses this as "wake work" in her text *In the Wake: On Blackness Being that* also serves influential for this project. Sharpe states:

> "we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us to particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world. And we might use these ways of being in the wake in our responses to terror and the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation. I want *In the Wake* to declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there"[15]

Sharpe's notion of "wake work" allows this project to mutually acknowledge slavery's ubiquitous unfolding in our everyday and to examine projects that embark on the fortitudinous processes of Black survival. The allusion of the wake behind the slave vessel provides substantial imagery of transport and the lingering traces that reverberate from these diasporic histories. To toil in and inhabit issues of abjection or objectification—"thingness," is to practice

---

[15] Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

such wake work. To situate Black expression within instances of opacity is the practice of wake work. Just as Sharpe suggests, the inhabitation of these haunts or occupying the position of abject allows Blackness to exist between both social and corporeal death. The occupancy of this gap leaves room for a critical acceptance and affectivities for these endured traumas, as well as promptings for rebellious mobilizations that forge possibilities for Black sustainability.

The "afterlives of slavery" or the "wake" lead this project to study the global ramifications of these remnants and its integration of reembodied scenes of resistance in the contemporary that may grapple with the paradoxes of "thingness," black freedom, death and revival that undergird the difficulties of black life. Such interruptive performances like Dragonfly's *Absconded*: where Dragonfly /Robin Lavern Wilson embodies the awakened monumentalized Black historical figure: Ona Maria Judge Staines, further display how acts of freedom are redefined in occupancy of the interstice (or what I continue to note throughout this project as (historical gaps/archival opacities).

As current contestations on monumentalized confederates question the apotheosizing of such figures, Dragonfly's performance begets a dialogue on fabulation, reembodiment and the socio-political ramifications of slavery that I seek to bring into focus. What's radical about embodying Judge as a monumentalized fugitive slave while negotiations of her erected oppressors are still unclear on being dismantled? Additionally, how is the abstraction of flight used as a means to embody figures of such fugitive perpetuity submerged in dystopic worlds? Hartman makes clear that in survival of these afterlives of slavery comes a return to the past and creation or affinity for fabula. Fictions are written on blank pages of erased Black lives, and the realization of your corporeal belonging to worlds are both here and there and possibly elsewhere.

The justification for this project figures in all of these conversations that are influencing my research and doing likeminded work, but I also seek to make a contribution with this study that places performance at the forefront of the project. "What does it mean to return? Is return possible?"[16] These are questions that are queried by notable scholars mentioned previously, but they are also ones that are central to the study as I argue that. . . performance (as it revels in the fabula) makes that return possible. In extension of this question, I present what the possibilities of Black reperformances are and how they (have) affect(ed) the past, the present, and shape new futures.

In analysis of performances like *Vessels* (2019) we can see works center reembodiment and fabula at the site of the vessel. Rebecca Mwase and Ron Rangin's speculative-historical performance titled *Vessels* showcased at the Annenberg Center, depicted a seven-women harmonic meditation on the Middle Passage which focuses on the questions: "what does freedom sound like in the space of confinement," and how reading between the lines of violent Western paradigmatic archives offer praxis for reinvention. Set on the concept of a slave ship, emphasis on sound and music is utilized to explore Black feminist strategies of survival whilst framing the vessel as a medium through which ulterior forms of Blackness can derive. One aspect of the performance that proves fruitful for brief examination are the "boat movement exercises" exhibited in rehearsals.

In preparation for their world premiere, co-creators Ragin and Mwase integrated ideas of movement where the transference between the body and the vessel become intertwined. Influenced by the tumultuous nature of the ocean wake pressing against the ship, Mwase and Ragin worked to imagine physical moments between the impact of the swells and the vessel that

---

[16] Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016
.

unsteadily misdirect the vessel from its course and subsequently render non-forced/ wayward movements. Due to these very sways and drifts, Ragin and Mwase construct physical possibilities that lead the seven women to their insurgent interactions and eventual embrace.

The preparatory performance of "boat movements" obscures the way in which the body is framed in the enactment. As the traveling vessel obviously influences how the body moves, the body and the vessel become connected by the ship's projection and orientation. In this case, boat movements can be perceived as body movements. The performance also renders the vessel as a site of relational potential where boat movements can be regarded as Black movements given the slave vessel's function as a poetics of landscape for amalgamated Black expression. Through this objectification or action of *becoming vessel*, Mwase and Ragin's boat movements additionally challenge overdetermined conditions Black femme expression. Ragin and Mwase's work serves as an insightful entry their reembodied performance that get us to rethink what McMillan argues, "how Black female bodies move and are perceived by others." Mwase and Ragin highlight these ulterior movements within the speculative that get us to challenge how Black women are *seen* within these sexual-racial terrains of violence and illuminate these imagined performances complex performances or survival disregarded from visibility or misrepresented within by instigations of freedom projects.

The Vessel & Opaque Fabulations

Emerging from Glissant's poetics of the "open boat," I argue that the slave vessel catalyzes relational potential. Similar to Paul Gilroy's conception of the vessel as a chronotrope, the vessel analytic can point us to a migratory framework across time and space that provides entry into these diasporic and historical contexts of the Middle Passage that inform present-day subjectivities. The methodological framework I impart from this thinking: "opaque-fabulations,"

adaptably extends emerging scholarship from Black scholars such as Edouard Glissant, Saidiya Hartman, and Daphne Brooks and Black feminist poets/scholars like Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Bell Hooks to address archival opacities, and center re-imaginings of Black expression that have complex articulations of freedom,

What is it that brings slavery out of the archive and into the plain sight of the late contemporary?" Tracing the varying proliferations of Black women's bodies in visual culture as both invisible and hyper-visible records of slavery, Kimberly Juanita Brown invites us to consider how these excess reiterations of "Black-Atlantic subjectivities" are seen within our contemporary moment. What I consider to be most illuminating about Brown's query is that it conveys a complex engagement with black enslaved histories that oscillate between transparency and opacity. When black histories lie within the gaps of dominant discourse, "the right to obscurity" of the enslaved can bring them into relief and provide a tool to traverse oppressive demarcations of race solidified by socio-political imaginaries of whiteness. Archival interstices are situated as productive sites for negotiating the Du Boisian problem of "the veil." The veil illuminates imagined constructions of blackness whilst simultaneously concealing possible alternative ontological formations.

In extension of Brown's initial question I reemphasize to ask: How do we explain the desire to revisit scenes of enslavement? What can performance/ the body displace within traditional engagements with the archive? What remains hidden, and what wayward movements enigmatically take place outside of visibility? As Black women's bodies become "sites of memory" that reveal these violent intimacies I additionally ask how embodied technologies radically center the complexities of historical and contemporary Black women outside of one-dimensional forms of recognition? The utility of fabula allows Black artists to represent or re-

perform as the "enslaved subject" without relying on historical accuracy or transparency. Subsequently, fabulation can lead us to imagine radical Black futures or alternate ways of existing in our present. I seek to further these pertinent discussions.

My research initiative is characterized by an interpersonal poetics scholar Tavia Nyong'o conceptualizes as "afro-fabulations." Nyong'o's concept is a critical method for problematizing the global ramifications of slavery and re-imagining post-slavery subjects beyond an anti-Black world. My dissertation imparts the neologism of "opaque-fabulations" to think critically about affective epistemic engagements, and the centrality of the body as a vessel of relational transport and tethering. I consider the complex performances of insurgency by post-slavery subjects (from the 19th century to our contemporary moment) and the past and present subjects brought into relation via these diasporic mobilizations.

In my historical case studies I ask-how does the refutation of transparency or the notion of singular "facts," further resist dominant narratives that seek to classify or regulate Black truths, Black histories, and Black forms of expression? (Although I am still coming to terms with the scholarship) the new neologism of "opaque fabulations" illuminates the lack of conversations that exists regarding both contemporary and historical enslaved reperformances and the freedom seeking agendas that are always attached to these narratives. I want to complicate this kind of performance regarding the utility of play and the radical poetics that emerged from the vessel during the Middle Passage. It is important to not just think critically about the afterlives of slavery in a contemporary sense but how the previously enslaved navigated their own emancipation and radically performed complex modes of navigating their recent but complicated performance of emancipation. As the rhetoric of freedom obscurely maintained an active

suppression of Black ontological formation—the introduction of my evolving neologism: “opaque fabulations” considers the productivity of these reperformances and their tethering to these histories.

Archival Inspirations

For my 24th birthday I decided to visit the Hermitage Plantation… twice. As I began to iterate this sentence to many, what was most clear from the varied responses I received was the befuddled idea of a Black girl’s planned desire to return to such a site and on her birthday no less! In recognition of the socio-political upheaval surrounding the murder of George Floyd, living history museums across the United States began to revitalize their tours with consideration of the enslaved stories that dwelled there. “In Their Footsteps: Lives of the Hermitage Enslaved Tour 2020” was the newly developed narrative at the Hermitage that purported to give entry into the everyday lives of the enslaved in lieu of strictly historicizing the plantation in affiliation with its previously esteemed owner. Most intriguing was the newly marketed representation of the tour— the formerly enslaved Alfred, who spent 98 years residing on the plantation pre- and post-Emancipation. In his final years Alfred occupied the plantation as a tour guide in affiliation with the Ladies of Hermitage Association. Regarded as a prized “relic,” Alfred’s reperformances as a guide predominantly relied on the lived memory of his enslavement to maintain the narrative of the plantation’s esteem in its heyday. Alongside Alfred, I performed archival research for another Hermitage contemporary, Hannah Jackson. I later examined the historical fiction titled, *Unholiest Patrimony: Great Is The Truth & It Must Prevail*. Written by a descendant of Hannah, I interrogated how the creative fiction – which asserts an intimate relationship between Hannah and Andrew Jackson– renders a radical engagement with the archive. In fact, the literary fabula

yielded potential for destabilizing archival hierarchies, and centering alternative epistemologies. As Alfred and the descendants of Hannah contemplate the utility of fiction, expand on these affinities for fiction as an opaque fabulation. I find these imaginary practices are essential when unpacking enslaved experiences often undocumented, without detail of their interior lives, and made static by historical desires for "authenticity." Does the speculative help us get to a kind of truth that presumed "evidence" cannot

I set out to visit the Hermitage Plantation and access their digital and material archives with interest in studying early implementations of Black reperformances before and post-emancipation period. In the case of Alfred Jackson specifically, I queried on the time spent during and after his enslavement under the enforcement of 7th U.S. President, Andrew Jackson. Alfred was the generational product of Trans-Atlantic slavery and was born on the plantation.[17] Currently, Alfred has been narrativized as the sublime servant of the Hermitage, dedicated to his tending of Jackson's estate even after his own liberation. Upon condition of his proximal burial to Andrew Jackson's grave, Alfred's lived experience was assembled—thanks to aid the Ladies of the Confederacy's & Ladies of Hermitage Association and their restoration of the Hermitage--as an emerging historic landmark. In recounting his memories of the plantation's function in its glory days, and his own enslavement one can posit Alfred's retracing as the first incarnation of return that is unpacked in the dissertation. I ponder on how Alfred's own enslaved histories were employed in his reperformance as an early strategy of resistance. If the restoration of plantation in its heyday conjures a fabula for reinvention how is Alfred also offered this opportunity for

[17] "America-American Slave Cabins-Alfred's Cabin." Sankofa Archives, July 17, 2020. https://www.sankofaarchives.com/american-architecture-slave-cabins-alfreds-cabin/.

recreation upon reflecting on his life as a slave? My research investigates subjects like Alfred and his trajectory.

In furter context of "opaque fabulations," the subtle indirections, drifts, or previously buried revelations Alfred gave his touring participants is fruitful intervention for the project. Due to the limitations of the archives, the question of authenticity and Alfred's agential participation during his labors as a guide instigates queries on what stories are told. Despite Alfred being the face and focal point of the Hermitage's own investigation of enslaved networks and practices on the plantation, documentation on Alfred's participation is without Alfred's own transcription. Following in the footsteps of Hartman, these gaps did not necessarily derail progress but allowed opportunity for my own deliberation of this erasure. Arguably in Hartman's view, I would have always succumbed to this toil of fabulation as the "arrangements of power occlude the very object of [my] rescue."[18] Nevertheless, given Alfred's buried proximity next to his previous owner, I question if this notion of "rescue" is ever my objective when Alfred's perceived affinity for historical preservation has in fact— solidified his status as "benevolent slave." His memorialization on the Jackson estate and esteem burial perhaps suggests a complex articulation of self-procurement and survival his reenactment enabled.

Across the diaspora, one can similarly trace these tour guide reenactments of the Black Atlantic and their public reception. For example, Grenada exhibited recent contention over the utility of slave reenactments despite desires to generate more tourists and revenue through the spectacle surrounding these reperformances. In 2017, Grenadian Attorney Jerry Edwin was arrested after criticizing and disrupting the National Heritage Committee's funding of a slave reenactment that intended to create "better understanding of the way the slaves lived on the

---

[18]Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : A Journal of Criticism* No. 26 (2008), P. 1-14 (2008).

various estates in Grenada."[19] Edwin's rebuke of the reenactment was evident as he wrote "It is very difficult to accept that not a single person on the National Heritage Committee realizes that genocide is not reenacted. The victims do not imitate the tragedy. Slavery was not an event. This was a crime against humanity."[20] While one could perceive this debacle as an interference in the project's essentiality, I find productivity in the controversy. Likewise, I question if newly reenacted narratives actually "repair" the withdrawn autonomy of the enslaved aboard a ship in the Atlantic, on the plantation, an auction block, amid an insurrection, in the archives or diasporic histories altogether? I view that these confrontations of trauma and disillusionment of reperformances are actually intrinsic to the reenactment altogether.

Mostly what the disruption of the reenactment's debut reveals is a direct confrontation with the complex histories that provoke conversations around Black self-efficacy, and prosperity amid these reperformances. Edwin sees no justification in the reenactments rendering other than to ostensibly quench the unsatisfied pornotroping of Black lives even when the afterlives of slavery are still ongoing. As stated previously, the "afterlives of slavery" or the "wake" lead this project to study the global ramifications of these remnants and its integration of reembodied scenes of resistance in the contemporary that may grapple with the paradoxes of "thingness," Black freedom, death and revival that undergird the interiorities of the Black experience. My chapters further extrapolate on this thinking.

<u>Chapter Breakdown</u>

---

[19] "Grenada Attorney Jailed After Opposing Slave Reenactment." News | teleSUR English. teleSUR, April 29, 2017. https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Grenada-Attorney-Jailed-After-Opposing-Slave-Reenactment-20170429-0012.html.

[20] Grenada Attorney Jailed After Opposing Slave Reenactment." News | teleSUR English. teleSUR, April 29, 2017. https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Grenada-Attorney-Jailed-After-Opposing-Slave-Reenactment-20170429-0012.html.

Chapter One titled : Reperforming Plantation Relics," uses Uri McMillan's analytic performing objecthood and extends Daphne Brooks' concept of "spectacular opacity" in her assessment of the "blind spots and ruptures" performed by racialized bodies in 19th-century theater that subverted expectations of blackness. I analyze the *reperformances of slavery* enacted by the previously enslaved subject, Alfred and the creative fiction developed by Hannah Jackson's descendants. I argue that Alfred's body resumes what performance study Rebecca Schneider refers to as an enduring materialization of the historical event. These historical case studies (of Alfred and Hannah Jackson) expand my analysis of reembodied imaginings as complex projects not particularly defined by emancipatory efforts. Tracing these early Black reperformances such as Alfred's experiences as a guide and the residues that inform fabulatory projects such as the Dorothy Price Haskins' creative fiction begets a study that places these Black histories in tension with historical desires for authenticity and the utility of play. I ask—how do these historical and contemporary figures draw on this notion of "opaque fabulations" to imagine new ways of living or "get to a kind of truth." The chapter is also in conversation with performance studies texts (like Rebecca Schneider's *Performing Remains*) that analyze historical projects that depend on forms of deviation within re-enacted performances. Like Rebecca Schneider, I seek to identify new narratives not existing in evidence, and acts of transgression of the past that may give new meaning to the histories and futures not yet presented.

The incitation of new meanings given to these histories/futures supplies further commentary on the function of historical redress. Drawing from Black/Quare orality and aesthetics, I employ the performance of "tea-spilling" to encapsulate the surreptitious performances of the enslaved (like Alfred/Hannah) and the examination of contemporary fictions

or racial comedies that evoke visceral responses. Works like Azie Dungey's web series "Ask A Slave" satirize the evolution of Black (living history) "tour guides" to critique how people situate or reflect on the history of slavery in modern culture. Moreover, works like Issa Rae's show within a show and dramedy titled "Due North" unpacks the of contemporary Black femme sexual expression that might *stick* or be informed by imaginary/historical scenes of enslavement and the complex instances or articulation of pleasure that might exist on the plantation. How is pleasure conceived through Alfred's reperformance, and what intimacies inform Dorothy Price Haskin's imaginary? The contemporary case studies certainly showcase an entanglement with these histories. Dungey utilizes the fictional Lizzie Mae's rhetorical redress as the primary form fabulation/*play* while Rae *spills the tea* on colonial representations of desire that helps character Issa perform her hoe-tation phase." As the works complicatedly provoke the voyeuristic affinities of the tour guide experience—giving readers/audience members entry into the secrets/absurdities/promiscuities of an enslaved past— the opaque composition of the tea itself suggests that the gossipy and wayward elements of the "spill" render these reperformances as undefined articulations of liberatory expression.

In Chapter Two : "Virginia Play": Assembling Mythic Reconstructions of Sally "Hemings-es asks how fabulation may enable us to reimagine Sally Hemings beyond the confines of her subjugation. Drawing from William Wells Brown's own autobiography and revised fictionalizations of the rumored auctioning of Sally's kin in his work(s) Clotel/lle (1853-1867), I find that these Hemings related installments helps us critically discuss these excess "reproductions" of Sally, and her repeated/re-edited mythic configurations. Brown's early imagination of the Hemingses also aid in his negotiation of freedom and the mobilizations of the post- slavery subject. As Clotel takes flight in his first iteration of the

imaginary, the obscure articulations of freedom are materially represented by an erasure of *Jeffersonian legacy intimately connected to the subsequent stifling of Hemingses autonomy.*

Alongside Brown's works I also place into conversation James Ijames' production of *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever*, Monticello's virtual installation titled the *Life of Sally Hemings,* Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's creative fiction *My Monticello* (2020) and a (*Clotel*) still from Kara Walker's "Chronology of Black Suffering." In conversation with Kimberly Juanita Brown's writing, I examine these works to re-assemble or even *dis*-assemble "Sally" in both current and historical visual productions which allows me to address the ways that these images/narratives/performances are "superimposed" on top of one another.

The superimposition of Sally and Brown's conception of the "afterimage"-a deposit in film which serves an ideological representation in Brown's study for the historical residues of colonial violence that supersede the depictions of Black women in history—conveys a distortion in the efforts to make legible and find a correct picture of Sally. The notion of this superimposition serves as potential for a study of Sally and opaque fabulations as I analyze the mythological function of Sally's likeness to situate how the post slavery subject (historical and contemporary) might utilize Sally's vessel as a way to reimagine, Black love Black sustainability and social progress. Beginning with the displayed silhouette of Sally, the chapter opens with the Monticello's artistic configuration of her carnal vessel. Reimagining the ways Sally "looked" or dressed, imposes a fabulated configuration of her and Sally's perceived "likeness" at the Monticello exhibit distorts a matter-of-fact position for such necessary historicization. The secret of Sally's intimate relationship with Thomas Jefferson heightens her occluded status, upon which the Monticello exhibit finds useful for interpretation. The symbolization of Sally's silhouette at the exhibit functions as a repository socio-historical

reinvention. By reimagining Sally, these visual, narrative, and performative reenactments rely on her very opacity to imagine new ways of conceiving Sally's/enslaved histories, or creating Black futures.

Chapter Three: "Slave Play" Vessels as an Organ and Reperforming Spectral Song," considers the analytic of the vessel more closely in relation to Black phenomenologies of sound. As mentioned previously, vessels not only allow us to locate the body's function in Black performance, or its insurgent implication in fabulated practice but it serves as an analytic to think critically about its material configurations within the African diaspora and its situatedness a tool for Black expression. In analysis of Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play* I reconfigured the title of the production to convey the varying instigations of *play* i.e., via Black musicality, corporeal intimacies and embodied practice O Harris' productions takes up. In the chapter I ask how the vessel functions as an organ—a piano (as shown in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*,) as an 18th century steam calliope and carnivalesque caravan (as shown in Jason Moran and Kara Walker's moving exhibition *Kastastwof Karavan*) and as an "ear" of sorts as depicted by O'Harris' therapeutic provocations of Antebellum Sexual Reperformance Therapy in *Slave Play*.

The shift of the vessels configuration as a bodily and instrumental organ prompts an affective turn. As the notion of "slave play" encourages an exorcising/exercising a form of study which centers Black lived experiences not entirely comprehensible to its listeners, the case studies allotted convey a restored practice of *playing with/in* enslaved histories and "slave songs" that communicate particular ways of knowing and being in the world. While it is unclear how these songs are entirely derived as their very compositions suggest a phantasmic and uncanny orientation, I instigate "slave play" to suggest a contemporary approach to Black

aesthetic practice and musicality that is not seeded in emancipatory longing, but instigates a complex; cathartic and pleasure-seeking communal performance. Slave play is a deconstructive analytic of opaque fabulations, hauntingly memorializing sounds of slavery within our contemporary moment.

In Chapter Four: Reperformances of the Grapevine: Drinking Vessels and Fermentation/Bubbling Situation of Emancipation, I instigate a Black and Queer socio-ecological perspective in analysis of the grapevine. I examine grapevines from a performative lens; the way they've been employed/proliferated on the Plantation by Black insurgents and their likened function as material culture for extractive agricultural production in the Plantation economy. The chapter also places grassroots initiatives as derelict to capitalism and fermentation as a concept to think about Black cultural production and bubbling situation of emancipatory longing. By entering the polemic with an analysis of Charles Chestnutt's *Goophered Grapevine* I center the tensions between industry and Black efficacy that shaped the mobilizations of early Black people post-Reconstruction. Moreover, the ways the grapevine facilitates a fabula for reinvention (in similar practice of historical figure, Alfred Jackson) Chestnutt's centralization on the profitability of the scuppernong grapes poses potential for economic or social repositioning of his Black characters. Considering the way Chestnutt's evokes discourse around the wayward function of the grapevine tale, their composition as "goophered" (bewitched/magical) and the ostensible likening of their arrangement to Blackness and its mutually extractive potential, I also consider the grapevines alchemical processes for opaque fabulations.

Drawing on Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection Holding History*, a *Drunk History* episode titled, "Harriet Tubman Leads an Army of Bad Bitches," and performance artist Dred Scott's grapevine organized reperformance of the "1811 German Coast Uprising," the vessel analytic

mobilizes multiple enslaved histories migrating within and beyond enslavement. The vessel is also reconfigured in the context of drinking/drink, as these grapevines transform and take up new compositions overtime these affinities for enslaved histories and their embodied reimaginings suggest a woozy and uncontrollable corporeal disposition in which these grapevines take over without clarity or clear point of origination.

Chapter One : Reperforming as Plantation Relics: Ask a Slave; Spill the Tea

"What is a monument but a standing memory? An artifact to make tangible the truth of the past. My body and blood are a tangible truth of the South and its past."[21]

-Caroline Randall Williams, New York Times

***spill (v)** informal*

reveal (confidential information) to someone. "He was reluctant to spill her address."

SYNONYMS: reveal, disclose, divulge, blurt out, babble, betray, tell, blab

"He's spilling out his troubles to her."[22]

-Alexis Paulin Gumbs Spill: Scences of Black Feminist Fugivity

An Introduction On Performing as Plantation Relics & "Performing Objecthood"

The notion of "performing objecthood"[23]— as theorized by scholar Uri Macmillan in his work*: Embodied Avatars*— becomes a productive site for reimaging "black objecthood as a way toward agency rather than its antithesis; a strategy rather than a primal site of injury."[24] My research considers this disruptive reliance on subjectivity as an entry into alternative epistemic

---

[21] Williams, Caroline Randall. "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 26, 2020.https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html.

[22] Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Spill : Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity / Alexis Pauline Gumbs.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Web. Pg 62

[23] McMillan, Uri *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance***.** New York: New York University Press, 2015.

[24] Ibd Pg 9

engagements. The Black body serves as a vessel; an embodied technology through which one can access, stage, reimagine autonomy otherwise rendered inaccessible. As stated previously, reembodied performance that incorporates a tethering to slavery's afterlife and pushes toward identifications of objecthood through notions of *becoming*. These positions of "thingness" or "non-being" generate thinking around slavery's production of abjection and the critical potential of its inhabitation.

In conversation with Hortense Spillers, "the interstice" encompasses the positionality of inbetweeness that abjection alludes. These historical or archival gaps serves as a productive space for radical Black, queer/feminist imaginings, modalities and livelihoods beyond violent universalisms. (Introduced in my earlier discussion of the dissertation) Dragonfly's titled artistic rendering "Absconded # Election Day 2020" and her silent reembodied performance of Ona Judge--as a living monument, can be viewed as performing "objecthood" and a decolonial engagement. Due to the way Dragonfly disrupts the static nature of historical documentation, performing Judge's fugitive expression now destabilizes traditional interpretations of history. Tavia Nyong'o asserts this conception of the "'past as it really was'. . . as a fetish."[25] Dragonfly negotiates the affinities for stable and static histories that exalt the original event. Is it possible then to memorialize Judge if her radical act of fugitivity is seemingly situated within our present moment.

As Judge stages and mobilizes her performance through Seneca Village, Drangonfly/Judge is shown plastered in white paint, mimicking the statuesque depiction of the

---

[25] Nyong'O, Tavia. "Period Rush: Affective Transfers in Recent Queer Art and Performance." *Theatre History Studies* 28 (2008): 42-48. https://doi.org/10.1353/ths.2008.0016.

monumentalized and esteemed figures and sites Dragonfly places in conversation.[26] Dragonfly's march provokes how Ona Judge is received and remembered in the public imaginary. Moreover, the ways in which Ona Judge's historical memory exists in conversation with present day mobilizations and freedom projects that work to challenge the continued disenfranchisement of Black people. In reembodying *a statue* of Judge in lieu of Judge's *human or carnal state*, Dragonfly centers collective memory and reception at the core of her rendering—particularly the way these histories are preserved and perceived. The reperformance of Judge's flight as a statue paints an imaginary of Judge's apotheosis as "founding mother" of early Black emancipatory movement. The reperformance of Judge's statue also heightens the obscurity of the Judge's act. Seemingly "un-caught," Judge's body *remains* in the American socio-political and historical imagination but not situated within capture. Judge's autonomous body is her own, and not fully possessed by Dragonfly's reembodied image.

If memorializing the everyday seems to go unaccounted, how are embodied imaginings doing the work of monumentalizing the performances of Black resilience amid continued systemic oppression. Dragonfly's reperformance invites a growing public audience. As presented in the livestream, Dragonfly takes her virtual and physical participants with her. The audience attends a tour—provided by a historically incarnated likeness of Judge--of historical landmarks that arguably shape America's own political identity. The configuration of the living history "tour guide" experience prompts affinities to ask Judge questions, but Dragonfly ensures the reembodied stature remains somewhat true to form. Silently moving, the reperformance refutes

[26] On her trek, Dragonfly stops in front of statues in bronze looking either adamantly and affectionately at the monuments put on display. Engaging with the monument of Frederick Douglas and U.S President Theodore Roosevelt on her march Dragonfly enables her audience to join in such thoughtful rumination on America's political founders. Dragonfly asks whose memory gets apotheosized and where?

transparent articulations and interpretations of the rendering.[27] The illegibility the piece promotes captures an opaque fabulations; a reperformance of antebellum/plantation relic motivated by the surreptitious acts of the enslaved–like Judge whose efforts toward freedom aren't plain in view.

In her work "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman concludes that these processes of Black survival beget an inevitable return or confrontation with the past. The "critical fabulation" inspires a desire to return to the past and reanimate the lives of the enslaved. As Dragonfly negotiates these residual effects of enslavement as a plantation relic/myth/monument I regard this tension between inanimation and reanimation as an ambivalent push and pull between fabulation and opacity. Dragonfly's murky corporeal figure, and silent reperformance of flight provides Judge with a retained agency while offering the present-day performance artist access to a tradition of insurgent mobilization. Retaining Judge's confidentiality (re)flight amid the amalgam of Dragonfly's contemporary agenda provides an entry into a study on reembodied performance that radically oscillate between the utility of opacity and fabulation.

This chapter examines reperformances of American slavery from the 19th century/ Reconstruction—such as the previously enslaved subjects: Alfred and Hannah Jackson on the Hermitage Plantation— alongside current black historically minded fabulations—in theater, performance art, film & television, such as Azie Dungey's web series "Ask A Slave" (2015) and Issa Rae's show-within-a-show, *Due North* (2017). I study Black reembodied performances as intimate methods for reveling in concealed and radical ways of knowing. Shade, redress, and transgressive tactics are employed as productive performances of the opaque to agitate the hegemonic power relations that circumscribe blackness to conditions of hypervisibility and

[27] Provocative questions to ask Judge might include: How did you do it? How did you escape slavery? Where are you going? Nevertheless, Dragonfly defiantly maintains a silent disposition giving her audience opportunity to discuss their own contemplations of freedom. Frankly, Dragonfly/Judge *refuses to spill*.

absence. Although the notion of opacity and fabulation dually evoke realized possibilities for resistance amid domination, the acknowledged impossibility of historical revival through embodied narrative emphasizes the necessity to respect a complicated history of enslaved lives that may exceed contemporary expectations for recognition.

The methodological framework of "opaque-fabulations" extends Black feminist and queer scholarship from theorists such as Daphne Brooks, Saidiya Hartman, and Tavia Nyong'o to address the opaque re-imaginings of black insurgent practice that reject desires to be *understood.* Via reembodiment, "opaque-fabulations" importantly brings into relation – the afterlives of slavery, its *affects*, and the black enslaved histories that inform them. Amid objectification and "performing objecthood," I ask what can Black historically-minded fabulations help us *object* within America's arguably violent socio-political imaginary? What can occupying the position as "plantation relic" offer in sustaining complex performances of insurgency and autonomy? What can performance access in place of historical evidence and what tea gets spilled in these treks?

Ask A Slave : On the Subject of the Lost Cause Mythology

In the wake of the ongoing protests involving the Black Lives Matter Movement [BLM] and their rallies against the police murders of victims like George Floyd, conversations revolving around abolition as method to defund or abolish the police, and put an end to further federal infrastructures that perpetuate racial violence—such as taking down historic monuments— have circulated internationally. This notion of abolition is borrowed from a practice not foreign to black radical scholars. Derived from a long tradition of abolitionist expression in whispers between the enslaved and the rhetoric of abolitionism in anti-slavery or the civil rights movements, the pursuit of liberation coincides with the motivations of black contemporary

thinkers that unpack the necessities of "fugitive planning."[28] In conversation with scholars like Fred Moten, this tradition is a "movement that works through debt,"[29] placed upon people who were consequently born with the dues of dispossession, the efforts of abolition is the labor and price of blackness.

Upon negotiation of memory as an ongoing event of contention and an inherent component of Black ontology, an article by Nashville based writer Caroline Randall Williams came into view. Williams places herself at the center of the conversation revolving the 2020 BLM protests in a reflection that not only reframes the black body as a living and material archive, but also critiques the monumentalized confederates whose horrors birthed the living product that is: Williams' "raped colored skin."[30] In her *New York Times* article Williams cries, "You want a confederate monument? My body is a confederate monument!"[31]

In lieu of the monuments' static configuration of colonial sovereignty painted as "southern pride" in memoriam, Williams positions herself as a medium through which the enslaved could communicate. Williams' body is a vessel where the memory of slavery lives; its blood flows, it breathes, it rebukes its white oppressors, and moves in residue of an unacquired emancipation. While Williams likens herself to the confederate monument, the blood that courses within her serves as the very antithesis to the monument's glorification. As she stops the ignorant rebuttals of Southern enthusiasts that lament over their white Confederate great-great-

---

[28] Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons : Fugitive Planning & Black Study / Stefano Harney & Fred Moten.* Wivenhoe [United Kingdom] ;: Minor Compositions, 2013.

[29] Ibd

[30] Williams, Caroline Randall. "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 26, 2020.https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html.

[31] Ibd

great grandfathers, Williams criticizes the desire to apotheosize such figures. Similar to black feminist thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Williams' piece questions how one represents the scene of slavery.[32] More specifically, how whiteness is established within these acts of memorialization and how whiteness is positioned in relation to the slave.

Williams sheds a light on the contentions of memorializing slavery by referencing her own body as a confederate monument, thus sparking discussion about the impossibility of fully recognizing and remembering these trans-atlantic histories when the products of its violence are still enduring. To put it plainly in the words of Christina Sharpe,

> "how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? Might we instead understand the absence of a National Slavery Museum in the United States as recognition of the ongoingness of the conditions of capture? Because how does one memorialize the everyday?"[33]

In recognition of Williams' quasi embodied performance upon reflection of the residual effects of slavery that permeate our current social condition, Williams criticizes white mythologies revolving the southern imaginary and its esteem. Despite the defeat of the confederates, the glorification of the Antebellum south in places like Nashville, Tennessee overshadows the role of slavery to benefit a romanticized depiction of the confederacy and an ultimately benevolent plantation structure. Losing the war was an act of heroism by the Confederate soldiers and the memories regarding enslaved histories were further oppressed by these rearrangements within

---

[32] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America / Saidiya V. Hartman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[33] Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake : on Blackness and Being / Christina Sharpe.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Pg 53

the Southern imaginary. The treatment of slavery post Emancipation/Civil War eventually contributed to the silencing of enslaved histories, and focused on narratives that grieved a lost Southern ascendancy. In other words, the memorials declare an optimistic imaginary for what was never achieved—an exaltation of "Southern success" where their ideologies may exist in perpetuity and remain undefeated.

The preservation of the Southern imaginary and its esteem post-Civil War can be regarded as the "Lost Cause mythology," which evokes the rhetoric of the Confederacy and its apotheosis. In an essay written by Joan Waugh in the collaborative scholarship titled, *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture,* Waugh writes that:

> The elements that define the Lost Cause are well known: the war was caused not by slavery but by states' rights; Southern armies were never defeated but instead were overwhelmed by numbers; the Southern soldier was brave and true, echoing the perfection of the patron saint of the Lost Cause, that courtly Virginia gentleman of impeccable lineage General Robert E. Lee.[34]

The fabula of the Lost Cause amplified a myth of Southern civilization, that somehow still purported a racist ideology, where the horrors of slavery weren't worth introspection or at the very least some historical remembrance. Rather the enslaved experiences that were mostly dignified, were one of southern loyalty, labored constancy, and subservience to the white southern master or the Confederate cause. With respect to the Lost Cause's arguable erection and proliferation out of Nashville, Tennessee, influential organizations like the United Daughters of

---

[34] Fahs, Alice, and Joan Waugh. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture / Edited by Alice Fahs & Joan Waugh*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Confederacy[35][36], founded in Nashville in 1894, were primarily responsible for the spearheading of such historical revisionism. Memorializing slavery was not regarded as necessary, if the proliferated imaginary only concerned itself with a deemed productive and coexistent relationship between previously enslaved peoples and white southerners.

As the removal of monuments and other problematic forms of Antebellum memorabilia are negotiated in our contemporary, one queries about the long endured vocalizations of black Americans that may have persisted since the formation of the Lost Cause mythology. Moreover, how previously enslaved black people actively navigated the re-erections and preservations of the institutions or figures that both benefited and contributed to their subjugation. In his essay on "Decoration Days" historian David Blight mutually discusses the Lost Cause and the recreations that encompassed the mythology.

> For white Southerners Memorial Day was born amid the despair of defeat and the need for collective expressions of grief. By 1866 local memorial associations, organized largely by women, took form in many Southern communities… By the 1890s hardly a city square, town green, or even some one-horse crossroads lacked a Civil War memorial

---

[35] United Daughters. "About." United Daughters of the Confederacy. Web Dreams Designs LLC. Accessed December 2, 2022. https://hqudc.org/about/.

[36] As written on the UDC informational webpage, "Out of these many local groups, which for nearly 30 years rendered untold service to the South and her people, two statewide organizations came into existence as early as 1890: the Daughters of the Confederacy in Missouri and the Ladies Auxiliary of the Confederate Soldier's Home in Tennessee. The association with these two organizations makes the UDC the oldest patriotic lineage organization in the country. When the organizing meeting was held in Nashville in 1894, the ladies chose the name National Association of the Daughters of the Confederacy." The efforts of the UDC was to preserve the memory of the south, assist in ensuring financial accommodations for fallen Confederate family members, and providing a "truthful history between of the War Between the States." In this chapter, I revel within this tension and further question the relationship between myth-making/fabula and history/truth. More specifically, how enslaved peoples reckoned with these initiatives—like the UDC, that left them within occupancy of a somewhat productive ambivalence-- between Southern glorification and non-historical visibility.

> of some kind. . . Memorialization functioned as a ritual process, a way of coping with loss on a profound scale.[37]

The insistence of preservation as a means of coping with loss puts into perspective the shift from slavery to emancipation. The affective reperformances memorializing Southern prestige in its heyday were methods enacted to grieve a Southern ideal. The sheer emphasis on a Southern collective memory via the utility of historical conservation or memorialization proves the intention to maintain a social ideology that merely contained black enslaved experiences for the sake of prioritizing white supremacist agendas.

Critically thinking about memorialization and memorabilia in the context of reperformances post Emancipation/the Civil War leads us to a consideration of 19th century black historical reperformances that grant us access to complex negotiations of enslaved traumas and mobilizations within the Lost Cause narrative. In this chapter, I particularly raise how previously enslaved black people worked against and within this social imaginary. What can black reperformance reveal about these histories, seemingly overwritten by an unrelenting and ongoing socio-historical fabula?

For instance, Saidiya Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" invites us to consider the transformative possibilities of reimagining what cannot be "verified"[38] in history. Hartman refuses to reify material epistemic practices, and her contention with these "impossible narratives" thinks through history intimately to protect the enslaved and their "right to obscurity."[39] What does fabulation offer regarding alternative epistemological practice, non-

---

[37] Ibd

[38] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14

[39] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America / Saidiya V. Hartman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

linear temporalities, and how it may help us enter into—what Daphne Brooks aims in her work *Bodies in Dissent* as— "different accounts" of an enslaved past.

Drawing in on performance and black studies analytics like fabulation, embodiment, "the wake"/ "the afterlives of slavery" enables us to also consider the ongoing embodied performances of southern pride enthusiasts that are more interested in the fabula of the Lost Cause then how the imaginary continues to oppress contemporary black subjects. In *The Atlantic* article "Confederate Lies Live On"[40] recently written by Clint Smith, Smith scrutinizes the propaganda of the Lost Cause initiative and questions why it asks us to ignore historical evidence when the Lost Cause is a "traitorous effort to extend the bondage of millions of black people."[41] Smith extends to write,

> For so many of them [current white Southern pride enthusiasts], history isn't the story of what actually happened; it is just the story they want to believe. It is not a public story we all share, but an intimate one, passed down like an heirloom, that shapes their sense of who they are. Confederate history is family history, history as eulogy, in which loyalty takes precedence over truth.[42]

If the Lost Cause is an ongoing myth/fabula since the Civil War that persistently ignores evidence/truth, how might black reperformances of American slavery help get us to a "kind of truth." Through the mutual utility of reimagination as practiced for a reinvented Southern power, the rewriting of Southern history subsequently creates new opportunities for resistance or re-empowerment enacted by previously enslaved individuals. "The loyal slave" who reveres their

---

[40] Smith, Clint. "Why Confederate Lies Live On." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, September 2, 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/confederate-lost-cause-myth/618711/.

[41] Ibd

[42] Ibd

confederate white owners even post-emancipation, displays a complex dynamic between the formerly enslaved and the white southern family. In lieu of this rhetoric, being "loyal to the very end" could also generate prospects for a similar kind of place in history for ex-slaves and their family members that their white counterparts had majority access. If an ex-slave maintains loyalty to the Lost Cause imaginary, how is that "loyalty" performed and what does that loyalty yield?

<u>Ask A Slave: On Subject of Antebellum Relics</u>

Just a few feet north of the entombed Andrew Jackson—the 7th U.S. President—lies a buried ex-slave named Alfred Jackson otherwise regarded as "Uncle Alfred". The terminology of the supposed affections for Alfred solidified by the title of "uncle" although never actually used in-person, is written on his tombstone with the words as followed: "UNCLE ALFRED DIED Sept 4, 1901 AGED 98 YEARS FAITHFUL SERVANT OF ANDREW JACKSON." Alfred's perceived faithfulness was substantiated by his continued residence and labor on the Hermitage Plantation from birth to his eventual passing. Making him the oldest person to inhabit the Hermitage for as long as he did. Living to see his freedom, the Confederate defeat, and the preservation of an Antebellum history (motivated by the Lost Cause imaginary) Alfred negotiated first-hand the tension between his memories of enslavement and a historical perspective that exploitatively controlled them as he worked as tour guide. While reliant on Alfred's experience with the beloved "people's president," the narrowing narrative of Alfred as adamantly faithful to Jackson and the Southern cause limited a view of Alfred's willing dependability as merely loyal rather than complex. Leaving one to fully accept that what was most regarded from Alfred's enslavement was his fondness for Jackson rather than the sentiments he had regarding his position.

Proposing that Alfred was aware of the utility and desire of Antebellum memorabilia given the immediate prioritization of Southern historical preservation post-Civil War reconceives his complicities on the plantation as thoughtful intentions to re-narrativize his own position. To add further contextualization, in similar echo of Stanley Horn's 1950 text *Hermitage: Home of Old Hickory,* the present-day Hermitage acknowledges in agreement that "Alfred was fully conscious of the fact that he was a living connecting link between the departed great man and his living admirers."[43] After emancipation Alfred acquired some of Andrew Jackson's personal belongings from an auction suddenly made avaible due to Andrew Jackson's Jr. death and longstanding generational debt. Purported in "Alfred's Cabin Marker"[44] reads, "Alfred Jackson purchased a bed, mirror, and water cooler and several other items in an 1867 estate sell held to settle Andrew Jackson Jr.'s debts."[45] Positing himself as a living relic as well as procuring valuable items—whether that be as an act of sentimentality, or plainly recognizing their intrinsic value—repositions Alfred as a very strategical person who very well understood the significance of memorabilia and historical heirlooms given the arising social viewpoints of the time.

As expected, the value of the furnishings that Alfred acquired led him to his eventual care and regarded esteem as facilitated by the Ladies of Hermitage Association [LHA] and company. Likened to the later regarded United Daughters of the Confederacy [UDC] (whose work extensively proliferated the Lost Cause rhetoric), the LHA was an all-women led patriotic society that was formed to ensure the Hermitage's longevity despite the lack of direction from a Jackson patriarch or the reliance of the plantation economy to sustain it. The founding member

[43] Horn, Stanley F. *The Hermitage, Home of Old Hickory / by Stanley F. Horn.* Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1938.

[44] "Alfred's Cabin A Life of Toil/ Sidebar Alfred's Question*" The Hermitage Home of the President to Andrew Jackson Interpretive Sign* Hermitage Tennesseee

[45] Ibd

Mrs. Mary C. Dorris—who was married into the Jackson family— actively led the organization as secretary and later regent.[46] It is Dorris who writes: "the first history of the plantation."[47] Dorris' extensive historical endeavor is titled, *The Preservation of the Hermitage 1889–1915: Annals, History and Stories: The Acquisition, Restoration and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Association for over a Quarter Century*, a text present archivists at the Hermitage deeply rely when considering the Hermitage's reinvention in the Reconstruction era. In echo of American historical archaeologist Whitney Battle Baptiste's article "Sweeping Spirits Power and Transformation on Plantation Landscapes" one can posit that by writing the book Dorris sought to "solidify the role of the LHA in the memory of the property as well as the importance of the founding of the organization.[48]" It is in the book that Dorris composes two chapters about Alfred's lineage and trajectory as an eventual tour guide in aid of the Hermitage's continued preservation.

It was the LHA who approached Alfred initially. Given his sustained residence at the Hermitage—apparently selling bundles of cotton and sugar he cultivated on site— the LHA actively queried him about the memory he had of the Hermitage. Aware that Alfred procured some of the General's belongings, the LHA persistently asked to repossess some of the items to display at the mansion. The LHA did this as a means to likely recultivate some "exactness" of the site during a period of renovations. In his work, *A Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory,* William Fitzhugh Brundage articulates eloquently:

---

[46] "The Centennial of Preservation of the Hermitage." The Hermitage. The Hermitage Home of President to Andrew Jackson, October 23, 2018. https://thehermitage.com/the-centennial-of-preservation-of-the-hermitage/.

[47] Baugher, Sherene, and Suzanne M Spencer-Wood. *Archaeology and Preservation of Gendered Landscapes*. Chapter Four "Sweeping Spirits Power and Transformation on Plantation Landscapes" Whitney Batlle Baptiste Aufl. New York, NY: Springer New York, 2010.

[48] Ibd

> the association mined Alfred's intimate knowledge of the house, the personalities who visited it and the possessions that filled it. His recollections informed everything from the placement of furniture to the presentation of the site's history. Indeed, Alfred became a favored guide at the site. As tasks he performed for dignitaries ranging from military heroes to ex-presidents. What meaning Alfred intended his memories to convey is unclear. We can only wonder the extent to which Alfred's position—an aged former slave who was dependent on his story telling and white audiences for his livelihood—influenced his voiced memory. Whatever his intent, the Ladies' Association heard in his yarns a soothing chronicle in which General Jackson was noble, slavery benign, and white privilege unquestioned. Alfred's 'loyalty to General Jackson, his exaltation of his fame, and his devotion to his memory approached the sublime' gushed a member of the Ladies' Hermitage Association[49]

The reliance on Alfred's memory of a "benign" enslaved experience was clearly a political, conscientious and complex performance given by Alfred. In order to reimagine the plantation in its heyday Alfred's affinity to the site and bodily epistemology was regulated extensively to achieve a kind of fabula that purported a Southern Antebellum experience underlining the munificence of plantation systems (like the Hermitage) that exemplified the Southern ideal. Unbeknownst to Dorris or us whether or not Alfred actually revered the beloved General or simply acknowledged his role as a guide in order to secure self-sustainability, the acceptance of both facts renders Alfred's reperformance of his enslaved experience as enigmatic. Either way we can surmise that reperformances such as this one allow enslaved peoples an opportunity to be recharacterized through or outside their victimization. The lack of transparency within Alfred's

---

[49] Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past : a Clash of Race and Memory / W. Fitzhugh Brundage*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

retelling of his experience enables both a personal rewriting of a painful history and an ostensible negotiation of a perceived erasure. If the notion of fabula is embedded within Alfred's reperformance, what did it lend Alfred to reimagine? What story could he tell inbetween these gaps?

While Alfred's reperformances of slavery were constrained by the rhetoric of the Lost Cause, he also had autonomy over what he was willing to share. As mutually discussed in Fitzbrugh's analysis, in the *Preservation of the Hermitage* Mary Dorris recounted the memorable moments in which Alfred would perform his duties as a tour guide. Upon receiving touchy questions from visitors, there were plenty times when Alfred performed elements of rhetorical redress such as sarcasm, humor, or pettiness to both raise the problematics of the questions and also rewrite the underlying truths of his experience. Dorris writes:

> A lady visitor, having very indistinct ideas about the old institution of slavery and very wanting in-tact, asked him: 'Uncle Alfred, did General Jackson every try to sell you?' The question irritated him, and he replied tartly, 'Did any of your folks ever try to sell you, madam?' which closed the query box. Another of the same kind asked him one day: 'Uncle Alfred, how do you like being freee?' 'What does yer call being freee?' he replied. 'Tain't nobody free as I know on. But if yo' means go whar you' please an' when yo' please, I always is done dat.'[50]

Dorris' reaction to the experiences only fed the notion of the false social imaginary purported by the Hermitage. The rhetoric relied on Andrew Jackson to be regarded as the benevolent master that never engendered any contemplation or condemnation from Alfred concerning the

---

[50] Dorris, Mary C. *Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915; Annals, History, and Stories ; The Acquisition, Restoration, and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Assoc. for over a Quarter of a Century / Mary C. Dorris.* Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1915.

difficulties of his enslaved experience. The particular regard for freedom seemingly was not Alfred's social priority even. Examining the context of the comment further, Alfred's response could be a literal reference to the labor Alfred carried out as Jackson's wagoner and horse rider, affording him the luxury to travel with Jackson significantly. However, the statement relies heavily on obscurity to not further delve into the technicalities on what freedom actually looked like during enslavement. The anonymity or mystery Alfred sustains behind the question, reconstitutes the element of influence Alfred had over his own narrative. Swaying the audience to trust or imagine the non-cruelties of his circumstance recreates a dignified Alfred, who was so favored by his master so much that he ought to be mutually respected and venerated in the same light—ie.,an intimate extension of Andrew Jackson.

The possibility of a perceived pleasure gained from Alfred's proximities to Andrew Jackson (whether that be a homoerotic affinity or the desire for prestige) or even through the reperformances that the visitors or LHA subsequently lauded, is a complicated thought. If Alfred regards himself as vessel through which Andrew Jackson was able to complete so many historical "triumphs," what is the complexity of the reperformance when Alfred re-empowers himself through recognition of his possession two-fold: First, as a (once) slave for someone who is an apotheosis. Second, as a relic for the perpetuation of the Lost Cause mythology.

The possibilities of him experiencing pleasure or displeasure on the subject of his freedom and Jackson's perceived benevolence can be mutually operating. In Roeliff Brinkerhoff's 1900 *Autobiography Recollections of a Lifetime*, Brinkerhoff ruminates over an introspective moment he had with Alfred when Alfred hired him as tutor for his kids in the 1840s. In synthesis, the Hermitage contextualizes the moment. It reads,

> In 1848, Andrew Jackson, Jr. hired Roeliff Brinkerhoff to tutor his two sons and his wife's nephews. As they walked the grounds one evening, Brinkerhoff encountered a gloomy Alfred. Alfred said to him, 'You white folks have easy times, don't you?' Brinkerhoff countered by pointing out the benefits of Alfred's situation, such as a kind master and a pleasant home. [Brinkerhoff states: 'You have the liberty to come and go as you will. You have a kind master have you not?'] He even told Alfred, 'Freedom had its burdens, as well as slavery.' At this Alfred looked at Brinkerhoff and asked, 'How would you like to be a slave' Brinkerhoff had no answer.'[51]

The similarity of Brinkerhoff's question to that of Dorris' "lady visitor"[52] reveals the distinction in audience and time periods Alfred responses were given. The sarcasm illuminated in Alfred's rhetorical redress conveys Alfred's propensity for a rhetorical reply as a tool to remain open-ended, enabling others to answer questions he couldn't make as plain. Most importantly though, the Brinkerhoff piece articulates Alfred's dissatisfaction of his position. Despite his perceived "liberties," or the thought of a benevolent master who seemingly maintained a vested interest in Alfred's livelihood, the status of his enslavement still called for rumination. Even though Alfred is afforded the same opportunities to reiterate the reply he gave to Brinkerhoff to the tourists, the efforts to incite a similar introspection amongst the visitors is a labor Alfred chooses not to take.

Maybe Alfred saw his position as a tour guide as an advantageous one, where the questions surrounding his victimhood need not be answered combatively. On the other hand, maybe Alfred did in fact acknowledge his particular experience as idiosyncratic and therefore

---

[51] Brinkerhoff, Roeliff. *Recollections of a Lifetime / by General Roeliff Brinkerhoff.* Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1900.

[52] Dorris, Mary C. *Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915; Annals, History, and Stories ; The Acquisition, Restoration, and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Assoc. for over a Quarter of a Century / Mary C. Dorris.* Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1915.

intimately cherished his closeness to Andrew Jackson. I like to think there is a space of contention somewhere in the middle, where the complexities of Alfred's experience just cannot be pinned down.

It was stated that Alfred never learned to read or write, thus was never given the chance to authenticate his own narrative. In addition, although Alfred still had his vocal autonomy, "the idea suggesting itself of preserving his voice … in a graphophone"[53] was noted as a perceived failure by the LHA even after Alfred sat before a graphophone and recounted endless stories. Dorris concluded "his voice was then too feeble and guttural to reproduce in the instrument."[54] The demands for Alfred's reaffirmations of the Hermitage imaginary, is a contentious view when thinking about the further exploitation of Alfred's most utilized agential tool.

As a very distant observer of his reperformances it is frankly not up to me to decide what Alfred feels, but maybe in regard of Alfred's intimate engagements with history it is possible to surmise the tactics, the objectives, and the affinities Alfred had to reimagine his own appreciation. To harken back to the realized value of Antebellum memorabilia Alfred obtained knowledge, the mirror that Alfred procured at the estate sale was the very resource that secured Alfred's care and recognition.[55] In a deal made by the LHA, Alfred agreed to give them the mirror as long as they obliged his request to be buried next to Andrew Jackson and have a public funeral inside the mansion. Alfred is not only the first and single slave to be buried on the estate, but he also the only slave have some of his funeral processions to be held inside the mansion.

---

[53] Ibd

[54] Ibd

[55] Woodard, Helena. *Slave Sites on Display : Reflecting Slavery's Legacy through Contemporary "Flash" Moments / Helena Woodard*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019. Pg 94

These performances of reverence were frankly unheard of for a(n) (previously) enslaved person. What is most provocative from this exchange is what Alfred's continued labored constancy on the plantation as a tour guide, and the muddled rhetoric of "loyalty" in his repeformances yielded. Alfred wasn't merely faithful servant—as regarded on his tombstone, but an intelligible, strategic, and astute human being, whose proximity to an esteemed President enabled him to understand the vitality of reverence. It not only garners you a spot in history, and a couple feet away a prominent historical figure, but access to a kind of reinvention of enslaved representation he undoubtedly acknowledged as omitted in a post-Civil War ideology, in memory and in history.

The securing of the mirror makes for a most interesting anecdote about Alfred's likeness to the relic. The mirror served as a useful tool in Alfred's re-presentation of self. Acquiring Jackson's mirror earned him proximity to the estate and facilitated Alfred's confrontation with his own imagined construction. The mirror's material value additionally aided in Alfred's procurement of self-efficacy and status tied to his enslavement. Was it at this juncture Alfred's embodied performance as a plantation relic began? If the mirror begets a particular buttressing of authority and self-sovereignty Alfred's occupancy of the object becomes representative of the need to challenge a previous subaltern status. Is Alfred's enactment of self-possession actualized by his recognition of the value of Andrew Jackson's formerly owned object? Can a likely association enable Alfred similar acquirement of importance. To use his embodied experience as a slave in his performance of "objecthood" permits Alfred strategic possibility.

Using his vocality as a tool for self-sufficiency, Alfed's reperformance complicates how fabulation is studied or regarded in contempoary black performance. Is it possible to regard Alfred's reperformance as an Afro-fabulation— "a strategy for black queer bodies to vocalize

and perform against anti-black racism in order to challenge the way hegemonic powers seek to silence and erase those bodies—"[56] where complicated homoerotic affinities for Jackson further empowered Alfred's anti-black project? Or can we regard Alfred's imagined endeavor as a "critical fabulation"—a method of reckoning with a perceived historical absence but inevitably ridden with the failures of historical rescue.[57] Thus arguably highlighting Alfred's own infamy at the Hermitage as contained within a perpetual state of exploitation, where depictions of the benign slave structure and slave owner are reified.

Both concepts undergird varying elements of Alfred's confrontation with racist political ascendancies and his own negotiations with the issue of representation and recovery. However, they both don't completely grasp Alfred's own embodied experience as a slave. Alfred did not just undergo a contemporary deliberation of slavery's afterlives but experienced actual enslavement and lived long enough to see how emancipation and the ramifications of the Civil War were contended. Therefore rendering his reperformance as also one of survival. Perhaps there is another neologism that conceptualizes reimaginings contended by the enslaved and the complexities the undergird their experience—an "opaque-fabulations."

In extension of Edouard Glissant's, proposition of "opacity,"[58] Glissant argues that dominant tendency towards transparency is a reductive epistemology. In her review of Will Rawls' *What Remains* black artist Malakai Grainer concisely describes Glissant's notion of transparency as "the reductive ways in which we classify others against existing dominant

---

[56] Murphy, Peter. "Tavia Nyong'o's Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life." The Brooklyn Rail, February 1, 2019. https://brooklynrail.org/2019/02/art_books/Tavia-Nyongos-Afro-Fabulations-The-Queer-Drama-of-Black-Life.

[57] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.

[58] Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation / Édouard Glissant ; Translated by Betsy Wing*. Ann Arbor [Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

structures of worth."[59] Noting Alfred's classification of a "faithful servant" as regarded through the persistence of his domination, the Hermitage's dependency on Alfred's perceived "candidness" elucidates the narrative of innocence transparency helps yield. Even though we know the transparency in this case is prompted by a false historical imaginary, Alfred's delicate articulation of slavery purports a kind of sensation of clarity that isn't actually all-encompassing in the narrative. Grainer goes on to summarize:

> Opacities are those hard-to-explain parts of yourself. The subtleties, the intricacies, the "irreducible singularities," the prime numbers and contradictions of yourself. Opacity is anti-spectacle, anti-revelation, anti-grasping, anti-ownership. The right to opacity is freedom from the expectation of complete coherence and comprehensibility in every aspect of your personhood.[60]

Since Alfred reperforms his enslaved experiences through the guise of ambiguity—whether that be for the perpetuation of a Lost Cause imaginary, or his own self reinvention— the opacity embedded within Alfred's reperformance enables us to regard his narrative without any underlining expectations. The imaginary keeps him from comprehensibility, where the possibilities of Alfred's permanent association as loyal and subtle actions of resistance may jointly operate. Alfred *is* multifaceted and his reperformance is subsequently rendered enigmatic.

I am brought back to a moment in the *Preservation of the Hermitage*, that recounts that time Alfred and his wife Gracie (who also remained at the estate until her death) were asked about holidays spent during enslavement. It states,

---

[59] Greiner, Malakai. "Voids of Understanding: Opacity, Black Life, and Abstraction in *What Remains*." Voids of Understanding: Opacity, Black Life, and Abstraction in *What Remains*. Fourth Wall, February 26, 2019. https://walkerart.org/magazine/opacity-black-life-abstraction-will-rawls-claudia-rankine-what-remains.

[60] Ibd

> In answer to an inquiry of how Christmas was spent at the Hermitage, Aunt Gracie [Alfred's wife] by way of impressing us with the general elegance of the things under the old regime, declared loftily that, 'It was Christmas all the year round'.' But Uncle Alfred came in with, "Den de *real* Christmas dat was a time. We would all go up to de house jes' like a troop of soldiers. Mis' Rachel she would gib de women presents, an' de General would giv de men sto' clothes, an head-handkerchers, and' terbaccer. Den we would draw rations fur de week's holiday—flour sugar an coffee and tea'[61]

These scenes that are within these regulated amusements not only depict the couple's knowledge of bestowing a particular impression of slavery, but also conveys Alfred's own affinity to the Lost Cause and the vitality of status and heroism. Comparing himself and the other slaves to be dressed like soldiers on Christmas, satisfies a particular imaginary about slavery that evokes the same sensations one might visualize of their fallen Confederates. The knowledge of the rhetoric but also a perceived likening to the Southern mythology conveys the complexities of Alfred's position.

Most importantly, Alfred's openness and further clarity about Christmas in interruption of Gracie complicates the utility of the divulgence. Alfred's evocation of the fabula of the Lost Cause incites a similar reimagining, that may render one to visualize these perceived pleasantries. On the other hand, Alfred paints a clearer and more telling picture about Christmas. The afforded liberties of the enslaved during holiday uncovered a kindness, and humanity the enslaved were not offered otherwise. The oratorical/bodily redress stimulated by his embodiment

---

[61] Dorris, Mary C. *Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915; Annals, History, and Stories ; The Acquisition, Restoration, and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Assoc. for over a Quarter of a Century / Mary C. Dorris.* Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1915.

of his enslavement revels in something much more calculated. The artful articulations of his experience furtively pass by in correction of Gracie's rather enhanced depiction of slavery. Stated with the intention to mutually impress the inquires but rectify a benevolent notion of enslavement, Alfred helps us get to kind of truth. Through the notion of an "opaque-fabulation" the complex reperformance conveys Alfred's amiable regard for his master while affording himself opportunity to navigate that very sentiment or even sometimes "slip off the yoke."[62] As Alfred ruminates on the recreational allocations of resources like "tea," one must consider how Alfred might be allotting to us or his inquirers—in shady fashion— the same thing.

<u>Ask A Slave : On the Subject of Retribution & "Modern Ignorance" in the Afterlives</u>

EMMA THE RUNAWAY:

Oh wait Lizzie Mae! Put a little hemlock in her tea for me, would you? Just enough to make her sick.

LIZZIE MAE:

But not enough to kill her.

EMMA THE RUNAWAY:

Just like old times.

LIZZIE MAE:

Nothing would bring me greater joy.[63]

---

[62] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America / Saidiya V. Hartman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[63] Dungey Azie.Ask A Slave: The Web Series "ASK A SLAVE Ep 4: New Leaf, Same Page" Youtube Video. 4:09. September 13, 2013

Upon stumbling across an internet comedy show touting itself to be a reenactment of a reenactment, I cackled in response to the entertaining one-liners between characters Lizzie Mae and Emma—"two enslaved women residing on the Mt Vernon plantation." Having received an unlikely virtual visit from what seems to be Emma "on the run", Lizzie Mae uses the fantastical opportunity to inquire with Emma about her whereabouts and whether or not she enjoys her new-found freedom. Amid the cacophony of barking dogs in the background, Emma relays her reluctance in sharing her location as Lizzie Mae is conceived as the purported gossip of the plantation. Affirming that Lizzie Mae's "mouth runs like a stream," the pair nevertheless share a moment of sentimentality for their mischievous recreations. The inconspicuous pleasures of Martha Washington's gradual contamination via a hemlock tea cocktail, is what raises a brief instance of nostalgia and enjoyment amid their enslavement.

The contemporary motif of "tea spilling/sipping" doubles as a subtext of the surreptitious performances of retribution for Emma and Lizzie Mae, as well as Lizzie Mae's own personification as an "overly loquacious" slave. Lizzie Mae's conversations not only operate as a performance of bodily redress where her vocal submissions are seemingly unfounded, but Lizzie's character on the show functions as a living relic for modern-day plantation tourists. In short, Lizzie Mae is the imaginary "go-to slave" where both fictionalized historical figures and curious-minded living subjects can ask questions. The show relies on humor to tell it like it is, while also giving Lizzie the colloquial freedoms to indulge in her "truths." Lizzie's gossips are the fabulations which the actors, questioners, and viewers rely on in the reperformance. Arguably these pleasure-ridden gossips prove to be historically invaluable as they are familiar reverberations of an ostensible slave past.

However, one must ask what is the necessity of black humor in the face of slavery? Are the amusements of satire in these reperformances a coping mechanism for a long unprocessed trauma, and the inconceivable thought of pleasure for the enslaved— or does it allow black creators to ask what Stacie McCormick states as an "impolite question?" That question being: was pleasure possible for the enslaved in whatever capacity that pleasure may manifest?

Although these fabulations are confronted with the hard task of what Hartman asserts as the impossibility of revival, the alternative approach to archival practice utilizes performance as mode of rupture for normative encounters with history. These affective registers such as pleasure and touch are facilitated by embodiment and ostensible transferences of power are given back to enslaved. Through these reperformed fabulations, the past body to present body contact affords the enslaved an imagined access to unregulated sarcasm, slips of the tongue, opportunities to delight in the absurd, outright laughter, unfettered divulgences, and self-indulgences. Not to say these sentiments or gestures were not performed by the enslaved themselves, but that is what reperformance allows us to contemplate.

What if these reimaginings deal with all these reckonings— i.e., the trauma, the yearning to retrieve quotidian enslaved sentiments that are limited in access, or to inauthentically portray history yet illuminate a robust repertoire of black experiences that may well in fact get history right. It is within these gaps in the record that performance finds possibility and the "ridiculous" makes palpable the outrageousness of what has been lost. Yet, "slavery is not funny, and no one should try to make it so."[64] The statement was eloquently asserted by living history actress, Azie Dungey. Otherwise known as "Lizzie Mae".

---

[64] Lawton, Jacqueline E. "Interview with Azie Mira Dungey, Creator and Star of 'Ask a Slave!"." Jaqueline E Lawton (Blog). Weebly, September 3, 2013. https://www.jacquelinelawton.com/blog/interview-withazie-mira-dungey-creator-and-star-of-ask-a-slave.

In extension of Hartman's thorough examination on the white amusements that derived from enslaved sentience in her work *Scenes of Subjection*, one queries in reiteration of McCormick's earlier claim "where enslaved agency over pleasure" lies. To push that point even further beyond the possibility of positing them as sexual subjects, what are the ethics of reimagining autonomous enslaved pleasures if the dead can't be revived? Who is that pleasure for? Is a reperformance of American slavery a means for reinforcing an embodied practice amid traces of Sweet Home and a remaining plantation structure?

The performances of resilience/ "claims to the self" exercised by the enslaved during regulated amusements—similar to that of Alfred's account on Christmas at the Hermitage— the issue of redress for corporeal autonomy that contemporary black subjects similarly articulate. Hartman describes enslaved pleasures and its fraught tension with the condition of domination as such:

> If these occasions were designed, as Frederick Douglass argued, to "better secure the ends of injustice and oppression," they also provided a context in which power was challenged and claims made in the name of pleasure, need, and desire. Pleasure was fraught with these contending investments in the body. As Toby Jones noted, the Saturday night dances permitted by the master were refashioned and used for their own ends by the enslaved: "The fun was on Saturday night when massa 'lowed us to dance. There was a lot of banjo pickin' and tin pan beatin and dancin' and everybody talk bout when they lived in Africa and done what they wanted." Within the confines of surveillance and nonautonomy, the resistance to subjugation proceeded by stealth: one

> acted furtively, secretly, and imperceptibly, and the enslaved seized any and every opportunity to slip off the yoke.[65]

These slips were performances of "re-membering" by the enslaved. As pleasure was articulated through the tautness of domination, the secret acts of bodily agency over the master's property, re-membered a culturally unmade body. How can we regard this conflict of "re-membering" as a habitual embodied practice rendered by black people in a long history of oppression? These performances of re-membering in our present-day may operate two-fold. First as a re-memory of the re-membering. Second as a re-materialization of the immaterial; an exhumation of the dead. Re-memory and exhumation enables us to query these reperformances of re-membering as acts of nostalgia for futures that have not happened—a hauntology—as the indeterminate conflict of emancipation continually afflicts present black subjects.

A relational subjectivity mobilized by the vessel as body or as slave ship, takes up enslaved reperformances and embodied acts of re-membering as mutually coextensive. Intimacies in experience, body-to-body proximities, and understated habitual ways of knowing, are affectively linked throughout time and space. These corporeal performances of retribution have indeed persisted, and as it relates to reperformance: the imaginings are embedded within the "play."

In resonance of Tavia Nyongo's Afro-fabulations, the reperformance may revel in the play as a means of problematizing history, and in that showing "history's undoing."[66] For instance, in Azie Dungey's episodic web series "Ask A Slave" Dungie reperforms as the

---

[65] Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America / Saidiya V. Hartman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[66] Ochieng' Nyongó, Tavia Amolo. *Afro-Fabulations : the Queer Drama of Black Life / Tavia Nyong'o.* New York: New York University Press, 2019.

fictionalized enslaved character Lizzie Mae—the personal housemaid to President George Washington on the Mount Vernon plantation. After Dungey worked as a living history actor where she played a slave, she was so in awe by the aloof questions she received by tourists she surmised that a series inspired by these everyday experiences would be just as laughable as the ignorance she endured. The heightened theatricality of the show and the distant reliance on historical accuracy emphasized that the show was not about slavery at all. The series is rather concerned with what Nyong'o articulates as the "changing same"[67]— the residual damages of colonialism and how it affects us now. Therefore Dungey's reperformance of redress employed elements of the satirical like play, farce, humor, amusement and so on to be used as a tool for expressing what Azie herself thinks about the people she converses with. Embodying "Lizzie" or the various incarnations of enslaved women in the past, enables Azie to intimately reckon with enslaved experiences, work against their historical subjugation, and the limited historical records that fail to display the humanity of every enslaved "Lizzie" before her.

In mutual conversation with Azie Dungey's episodic web series "Ask A Slave" Badia Ahad-Legardy speaks about "the affective power of the petty."[68] She writes that the power of the petty:

> is a power that is made possible through nostalgic sojourns to a slave past. This method of redress offers little toward immediate or material social change; instead the rhetoric of nostalgic retribution functions as "payback," specifically in the "form of the symbolic reordering (Nostalgic) retribution of the social and political hierarchy." Akin to Tavia Nyong'o's deployment of "critical shade," the goal of nostalgic retribution is not

[67] Ibd

[68] Ahad-Legardy, Badia. *Afro-Nostalgia Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture / Badia Ahad-Legardy.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021.

> reconciliation or forgiveness or social transformation but the (smug) satisfaction that attends the want of revenge and reparation enacted by contemporary black subjects as recompense for their own (historical) pain and for that of their ancestors.[69]

The possible satisfactions derived from Azie's nostalgic retribution or at the very least a desire for redress speaks more about a kind of poetic justice for Azie and the series serving as a useful platform for Azie's contending psychological engagement with her very proximal affinities to these enslaved histories. Legardy extends to say that the notion of nostalgic retribution allows us to critically examine the reenactment as an act of reclamation whether that be for Lizzie Mae's "voice" or Azie's "own subjectivity." Arguably reclamation here isn't about Lizzie Mae's rescue but should be regarded as an act of re-membering. After all the show "isn't about slavery." The relational subjectivity between Lizzie, Azie, and the actual enslaved women of the past are mutually inner-working. If Lizzie Mae is a fiction, and the fabulations are solidified by her gossip, is her voice really the object of rescue or access to a culmination of black expressive cultures? Rhetorical redress, "critical shade", satire, pettiness, or spilling tea being ardent articulations of blackness throughout time. The vernacular of Lizzie simultaneously reveals the complexities of the black female self while being an amalgam of all these performances rendered by black people. Lizzie Mae's voice is the primary fabulation that gets emphasized as a productive "changing same" for problematizing the very contemporary struggles that have resided since enslavement.

Not to negate the actual practices of vocal subordination via muzzling, regulations of reading and writing and other cruelties enacted by white masters onto enslaved subjects. The argument is merely in echo of Hartman's sentiment on the failures of critical fabulation and the

[69] Ibd

impossibility of rescue. It also emphasizes that the reembodiment of Lizzie Mae possibly functions as a site of refuge for Azie, where her chatty articulations of our current social relations is deployed as a means for Azie to rescue herself and her sanity. The performative and affective labors of Azie's job as an enslaved living history performer can be *too much.* If Azie struggles with letting people know how she really feels, it's not a shock if she rather let Lizzie do it for her.

Still, the point being that the relational engagement between Azie, and the enslaved reveal something about black interiority of the past and the present. The performances of redress and expressions of pleasure for black enslaved subjects, Lizzie's shady mouth, and Azie's own creative endeavor in her reperformance —i.e., "Ask A Slave" speaks to what Edouard Glissant states as a "rhizomatic thinking" where the multivocal articulations of the black diasporic experience embody a poetics of landscape. The collapsing of Azie's identity, as Lizzie but *not not* Lizzie begets a relational subjectivity as Azie relies on both an embodied repertoire of knowledge and the history of her ancestors for a sense of grounding—if ever achieved.

In conversation with these relational assemblages in informing black subjectivities, the temporal/historical collapse is ever evident in many instances throughout the series. Particularly in season one episode four: "New Leaf Same Page,"[70] Lizzie Mae is asked by one of the questioners concerning what she thinks of Harriet Tubman. Diligently working over her embroidering skills, Lizzie replies to the question ambiguously.

LIZZIE MAE

[70] Dungey Azie.Ask A Slave: The Web Series "ASK A SLAVE Ep 4: New Leaf, Same Page" Youtube Video. 4:09. September 13, 2013

> I don't know any Tubmans'. The only Harriet I know is down at the mill. She is alright as long as you keep her from the whiskey. She can throw herself on the ground and miss.[71]

Throughout the episodes there seems to be this pattern regarding misinterpretations in the time period. It puts into perspective the longevity of slavery from George Washington freeing his slave to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Or the unsettled confusion between Martha Washington actually keeping her slaves, Harriet Tubman's various mobilizations in the Underground Railroad and so forth. People have stacked the history of slavery on top of itself. Toppling over dates, figures and ideas. As if slavery was not only short, but existed in one moment in time. Where Tubman, Lizzie, the Washington's and Lincoln all interacted at once.

The task of sifting through these temporal amalgamations as it relates to the history of enslavement, is a burdensome undertaking that Azie/Lizzie Mae tactfully coordinates through her utility of sarcasm or petty-mindedness. By acting naive to Harriet's existence, Azie's reperformance of transgressive corporeal intimacies maintains a provocative retort otherwise unsaturated in the charms of "black southern shade." However, Azie/Lizzie Mae's/Harriet Tubman's relation offers an interesting provocation on embodiment and excess. In conversation with the excessive artistic representations of Harriet Tubman in visual culture, Kimberly Juanita Brown writes:

> hyperembodiment and disembodiment extend the visuality of the boundary between utility and excessive use delineating the black woman's marker of corporeal availability as continually shifting beyond and beneath the horizon of the grand spectacle that is slavery's contemporary representation.[72]

---

[71] Ibd

[72] Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating Body : Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary / Kimberly Juanita Brown.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

When considering the remark made by the questioner regarding whether or not Lizzie Mae and Harriet know each other, there is a clear reliance on Harriet's ostensible conjuring when learning about the experiences of Lizzie Mae. While Lizzie Mae has no association to Tubman, the purported hyper-embodiment of Tubman as the "impermenance of slave trauma"[73] renders it seemingly inconceivable for Lizzie to be without the existence of Tubman or vice versa. The relational subjectivity reveals something on the other end of spectrum—but in this case—for Azie, the tourists, the viewers, Lizzie Mae and the enslaved altogether. What gets revealed is that there is a kind of virtual configuration of slavery that gets purported in our imaginings, and figures like Harriet Tubman appear in excess. Whether we intended to place Tubman there or not, the fungibility of Tubman as central the enslaved experience demonstrates Lizzie-Mae's proximity to Tubman and the relational tether between the two. To be fair it *was* just a question, but a telling question, nonetheless.

The reperformance also renders a relational subjectivity that gets hyper accentuated by the platform on which it is staged. Season two- episode two titled, "Caught in the Web"[74] showcases Lizzie Mae traversing the virtual landscape that is the internet. The title of the production can both allude to Azie's own recognition of her perceived entanglement with these histories, as well as her way of recognizing her performance as mutually capable of lingering in excess. Given the saying "nothing ever leaves the internet" Azie's own remains possibly render her in excess as the traces of her performance began to supersede own body. Speaking in conversation with Harvey Young's interpretation of remains as it relates to the black body, the unregulated social boundaries of the internet bring Dungey's ostensible remains into focus where

---

[73] Ibd

[74] Dungey Azie.Ask A Slave: The Web Series "ASK A SLAVE S2EP2 : Caught in the Web" Youtube Video. 4:21. November 17, 2013

violence exists in tantamount relation to black performance. In the same way Tubman's constant reemergence is associated with a lasting escaping of slave trauma, Azie/Lizzie Mae becomes obliged to the same violence and immersed within a world of unrestricted racisms.

Although Lizzie Mae never acknowledges that the series is in fact a webisode, she is aware that audience has the ability to react to the series whether that be commenting, liking or sharing the production. While this is Azie's method of engaging with audience members and their reaction to her own performance, Lizzie Mae—the slave— clearly has never dealt with the macrocosm of the web. Some of the internet-based questions from users were recited as follows:

BALTHAZAAAAR 3820:

I like this show but can you have on some "real" black people… like *black black*. I mean like real Africa black! Not like the master got up in the mix black!

SUPTYLER92

You're so pretty you give me a big boner.

TheTruShabazz3

This is offensive. No I'm serious, slavery is not funny.

MsPam

I agree with you TheTruShabazzz3. This is nothing but pure coonery you are a shame to your ancestors.[75]

In this case, when Lizzie Mae talks into the internet void, the people within it are not just talking back but they are also conversing and answering each other! Even sometimes their own questions. Leaving little to no room for Lizzie Mae to answer, the intensity of the web is so

[75] Ibd

overwhelming it engenders her to leave her question and answer module for the day. The imitations, non-truths, and the notion of pretend enable Azie to take her reperformance anywhere the imaginary yields. While Azie herself reckons with the entanglement between a hyper awareness of her social position and enslaved histories, the 2014 virtual landscape becomes a proxy for an unrestrained colonial structure.

The racist reverberations of the antebellum era—are hyper magnified by the object of the internet and its necessity for excess. The fabulation engages with the internet as a quasi-reality, or an unfiltered model for "real life." Just as Lizzie Mae/Azie Dungey raises—"slavery isn't funny, but you people are." So what happens when you ask "a slave"/ Lizzie Mae on the subject of retribution and modern ignorance in the afterlives of slavery? You might get an answer with a little a bit of "shade," and a little bit of "tea" or they might just walk out and as these (re)performances of black corporeal redress illuminate *that's nothing new.*

<u>Ask A Slave: On the Subject of The Plantation Spectacle in the Afterlives</u>

If the utility of satire in these reperformance are further exemplified via negotiations of excess, and being "extra," pettiness or throwing shade are vital elements for rhetorical redress. What about the notion of excess can further reveal the contentious reproducibility of the plantation spectacle within these reimaginings? In season 2 of Issa Rae's *Insecure*, the writers debuted a show within a show titled: "Due North" Staged within a fabulated plantation-scape in Antebellum South, the historically based primetime "drama" showcases the power dynamics between the enslaved Ninny and her master, Turnfellow and the reimagined incidences that may have comprised plantation life. Amid the quotidian struggles of living in Los Angeles, black characters: Issa, Molly, Daniel, and Lawrence are seen unapologetically consuming the show as their individual storylines mutually develop. The show within a show thus enables the audience

members of *Insecure* to become jointly submerged in an unlikely cinematic universe where racy Antebellum dramas certainly exist, and the characters and now real-time viewers irresistibly watch them too.

So much so, "Due North" is hailed as one of the most favored cinematic moments to come out of the show, and viewers persistently demand to support Due North's ostensible renewal on a *real* primetime network. A few tweets read as followed:

> @Brandon_JThomas "So ready for S2 of Due North. #Insecure."[76]
>
> @_AUSMAD writes, "Due North > Insecure."[77]
>
> @_Marshaeeeee adds, "Just finish[ed] season 2. I need that "Due North" as [a] real show lmaoo. It's messy! #Insecure."[78]

Even though the show was praised for its satirical interpretation of plantation life, other viewers criticized it as a "gross caricature"[79] questioning exactly "why they were watching"[80] in the first place and stating that it "played the Sally Hemmings card and everything."[81] Admittedly the point of "Due North" is not incredibly explicit. At first glance, one may interpret the show to be solely about slavery (*which it is but also isn't)*. Arguably"Due North" is a meta demonstration of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as "slavery's afterlives"; its traces that get reproduced in our

---

[76] Twitter. Brandon J Thomas "So Ready for Insecure" 2017. Accessed May 10. 2024

[77] Ibd.

[78] Ibd.

[79] Ibd.

[80] Ibd.

[81] Ibd.

current tele-visual culture, and the sundry encounters or responses black people have to these scenes of enslavement.

The writers of "Due North," and their depiction of the plantation spectacle serves as a surrounding backdrop for the characters own dealings with systemic racism and the residual effects of slavery that they endure. Avery Gordon refers to this continued violence from the plantation economy as a haunting—"an unresolved social violence making itself known."[82] Conscious of this fact, the writers of "Due North" satirize the reproducibility of the haunting and how it gets purported in the mainstream. Mirroring the interracial dramas likened to Shonda Rhimes hit show *Scandal* and the entangled love affair between Olivia Pope and President Fitz Grant, the relationship exhibited in both shows rather relishes in the dangerous misuses of power rendered by white male subjugators onto black female subjects. Agreeingly, Rhimes writes within her own show that she too felt "a little Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson about all this".[83] By creating the Scandal-like drama to be set on a plantation, the writers of "Due North" simply just make obvious that which has already been made a spectacle in popular TV. To see the characters interacting with the drama is merely a reflection of Insecure's own audience and their contacts with these hauntings.

The institutional violence that are proliferated in these afterlives aren't missed in the characters daily happenings either. In the first five minutes of "Hella Shook"[84] (episode 5), the episode opens to Issa waiting in traffic while the camera pans to reveal Issa gazing concerningly

---

[82] Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters : Haunting and the Sociological Imagination / Avery F. Gordon, with a New Introduction ; Foreword by Janice Radway.* New University of Minnesota Press edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

[83] Shonda Rhimes/ILuvOlitz2 "Scandal: I Feeling A Little Sally Hemings Thomas Jefferson About All This" Youtube Video 0:47 May, 18, 2013

[84] Rae, Issa. "Hella Shook." Episode. *HBO* 2, no. 5, August 20, 2017.

at her gas meter. The scene quickly shifts to Issa filling her tank and getting precisely 9.40$ of gas; just enough to get her to Daniel's apartment and start her "Hoe-tation Phase". Soon after, the audience is taken to Molly's Chicago law firm where she is given advice from her colleague. After Molly discovered she is getting unequally paid as compared to her white male coworker back in LA, she conveys that she is disinclined to divulge to her white male boss about her grievances and is given the advice to leave. Meanwhile, the scene cuts to Daniel sitting on the bed watching an episode of "Due North" while Issa zips her pants. In the episode, the enslaved character Ninny adjures with Master Turnfellow to be honest about his indiscretions with her sister Nessa.

NINNY: "Master, why you let Nessa shave you this morning?"

MASTER TURNFELLOW: "Ninny she only trimmed the tree. I'll let you tend the bush."[85]

As Master Turnfellow is shown leaning in for a kiss, Issa commentates eagerly stating: "Oooh Nessa bout to get got taking Ninny's Man!"[86] Daniel adds that the "show is so stupid." Shortly, Daniel also leans in to kiss Issa, and the show continues to play in the background as Ninny begins to unzip Master Turnfellow's pants.

Leaving much to unpack in a span of five minutes, the plantation events between Ninny and Master Turnfellow encapsulate the reverberating effects of slavery in our current sociopolitical economy. The reliance on fungible black bodies and the affective and physical exploitation of black women's labor on the plantation renders black women vestibular to the

[85] Ibd

[86] Ibd

cultivation of U.S culture. The “cultural vestibularity”[87] of black women as coined by Hortense Spillers asserts the vestibule as the entry point through which American sociality is formed—i.e., the workability and disregard of black female flesh as continually necessary in a white dominated society. When Ninny gets disgruntled about being overlooked by her master, Ninny’s sexual and physical labor gets conflated as work while Master Turnfellow additionally omits her emotional plea as unwarranted when there is always potential for her labor to still be extracted. The reliance on Ninny’s fungibility to create excessive possibilities for Master Turnfellow’s gratification makes apparent the profitability in black corporeal disposability.

The audience sees this echoed most evidently in Molly’s exchange as she expresses her reluctance about work and contemplates working elsewhere. Molly’s treatment at her law firm exemplifies the infrastructural racism that permeates the job market which subsequently creates the very real wage disparities between black women and white men. Although Molly fought to work twice as hard in order to be valued in the same respect as her white colleague, the financial inequalities and the risk of ruining her likability and employment at the office solidified a long history of discrimination and the present wrought social relations derived from the plantation system.

The imaginary landscape of “Due North” at the site of the plantation yields the provocation about these reverberated instances as still existent within landscapes of black subjugation. Similarly invoking Katherine McKittrick’s invocation of Toni Morrison’s “Site of Memory” in her work *Demonic Grounds* one can acknowledge the imagined plantation of “Due North” as the site of memory that gets pitched as something play/un-real but it is also “trusted as

---

[87] Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture / Hortense J. Spillers.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

real."[88] It is trusted enough for the writers, the characters, and the viewers to corroborate the historical plantation environment and Molly's current professional landscape as mutually informed. McKittrick writes,

> the site of memory begins to re-imagine a different worldview, wherein black lives are validated through black intellectual stories and the physical landscape . . . The site of memory is also the sight of memory—imagination requires a return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship.[89]

In this vein, the black imaginary that is "Due North" invites a possibility to consider the interior lives of black people while also recalling geopolitical sites of domination to imagine possibilities for repossession whether that be the actors' repossession of the enslaved or in this case— the repossession of Molly's autonomy amid workplace inequality. Eventually Molly quits her job and makes the choice to work at an all-black law firm, a work environment where she is ultimately valued. Even if "Due North" does not directly catalyze the sudden epiphany for Molly to leave, the overlapping disenfranchisement of black women in the two worlds somehow connect the viewers, characters, reenactors, and the enslaved in this intimate entanglement between the past and present.

Daniel's nonchalant take on the show, mutually enables the real-time viewers of "Due North" to also observe that the show within a show does not revel in authenticity but merely the affective engagements between audience and reenactor as something nevertheless significant

[88] Morrison, Toni. *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations / Toni Morrison.* First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

[89] McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle / Katherine McKittrick.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

despite its outlandish presentation. Similar to Michelle Liu Carriger's examination on the historical reality T.V show, *Frontier House*, Carriger writes that "the past is spread unevenly across televisual time, and bodies themselves refract across the screen inviting complicated, anxious, and emotional relations between the reenactor and the past, the reenactor and the viewers, and the viewers and the past."[90] These affective networks that connect the viewers, characters, reenactors, and enslaved open the conversation beyond the mere sensational elements of the melodrama. Rather it instigates a collapsing of cultural and intimate exchanges between time and space.

Sara Ahmed regards this exchange as a "stickiness." It is characterized as "monikers of affect that signify a between bodiness and between objectness or between materialities of emotion."[91] The failures that comprise the historical reperformance reveals alternative epistemic practices or interactions with history that are rather personal and enable affect "as part of the historical enterprise." Therefore when Daniel disapproves of the reenactment's stupidity or when Issa in turn delights in its messiness, theatricality/fabulation/nonevents invites us to consider its position in our encounters with history or as Pannill Camp suggests as "constituents of a possible world."[92] In this case, the fabulated scenes of "Due North" are rendered as a part of history—an affective archive—where the retelling of the fictionalized Ninny is perceived just as emotionally complex as the real happenings on the plantation and just as impactful for the characters as they are the real viewers of the show.

---

[90] Carriger, Michelle Liu. "Histrionics: Neither Here Nor There with Historical Reality TV." *Journal of dramatic theory and criticism* 24, no. 2 (2010): 135–149.

[91]Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains : Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment / Rebecca Schneider.* Abingdon, Oxon ;: Routledge, 2011.

[92] Camp, Pannill. "The Poetics of Performance Nonevents." Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism 32, no. 2 (2018): 141–50. https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2018.0011. p.148

These affective histories invite us to consider these intimate exchanges between "the reenactor and the past, the reenactor and the viewers[/characters], and the viewers and the past" within the plantation system that consequently rendered black women culturally "unmade", "ungendered" or absented as "a different social subject."[93] If the ideology of the Western paradigmatic archive is not capable of acknowledging "flesh," then how can we otherwise perceive black history, black performance, black intimacy amid illegibility? The turn to affect or intimacy equally enables emphasis on a praxis of desire existing beyond the oppressive forces of coloniality. In her work "Black Metamorphosis," Sylvia Wynters avers that the "central strategy of the system is the colonization of desire."[94] If coloniality seemingly appears at the core of the characters' development in Insecure's second season, how might desire also unsettle these colonial underpinnings that "Due North" realizes?

Most interestingly is the contrast between Issa's radically expressed sexuality—as exemplified in her "Hoe-tation phase" to Ninny's own sexual "unfreedoms". The awkward showing of Ninny's sexual submission to Turnfellow amid Issa's sexual reclamation complicates the possibility of pleasure for enslaved women and emphasizes what Spillers notes as the difficulty in imagining "intimacy under conditions defined by violent coercion." The visual image mutually becomes paralleled as the upright Issa zipping up her pants is placed alongside with a subserviently bowed Ninny undressing Turnfellow.

Hyper regulated under conditions of colonialism—Ninny's framed sexual objectification/exploitation—as pictured in the television screen— is what Karla Holloway and

---

[93] Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture / Hortense J. Spillers.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[94] Scott, David. "Sylvia Wynter's 'Black Metamorphosis': A Discussion [Special Section]." *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 49 (2016).

Pat Hill Collins might suggest as the "distorted mirror"[95] of black women and the long history of their "public image"[96] as oversexualized. Additionally, Collins summarizes that "Holloway counsels Black women to disable the mirrored reflection of a prejudicial gaze."[97] Issa disrupts this reflection by the adjacent portrayal of her desires on the viewers' screen, where Issa's non-prejudicial point of view of Ninny's circumstance—as she talks to the screen and encourages her choices—counters the objectifying gaze of Turnfellow. Moreover, the distorted mirroring of Issa and Ninny and the scenes of Ninny at the big house on Issa and Daniel's T.V screen is the "last place one may think of"[98] to find a black female character repossessing some aspect of sexual autonomy. "'The last place they thought of'; geographies of black femininity that are not necessarily marginal, but are central to how we know and understand place"[99] enables Ninny's position on the plantation-scape to function as the central frame in which Issa could mutually express her desires without being quite literally "boxed in" by the same restrains as Ninny. Issa's articulations of desire seemingly exist beyond sex/colonization (especially given the fact that her sexual act with Daniel doesn't literally take place on screen) but are "social and cultural"[100] and

---

[95] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment / Patricia Hill Collins.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

[96] Ibd

[97] Ibd

[98] McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle / Katherine McKittrick.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

[99] Ibd

[100] Eudell, Demetrius, and Carolyn Allen. "SYLVIA WYNTER: A TRANSCULTURIST RETHINKING MODERNITY." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (2001): 1–7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019776.

differentiate from feelings of regulated desire Audre Lorde conceives as "powerlessness . . . self-effacememt, [or] self-denial'[101] that the distorted image seeks to accentuate.

Implicitly written in its iteration, the writers of *Insecure* ask questions of the enslaved or rather their imagined curation of enslaved peoples (as played by actress Regina Hall) when creating the introspective satire that is "Due North." First, what perceptions of slavery exist in our social imaginary and are they true? How does the system of slavery figure centrally into the ways current social relations are formed and propagated? What's the necessity in enslaved histories being redressed? Where does accessibility of enslaved histories lie in the archives constrains? Lastly, how does the visual and residual resonance of Transatlantic enslavement affect and locate black people now and how might coloniality be unsettled in its reframing?

While these questions are not directly asked of the enslaved, they are queried with respect to the real violence that has taken place and its continuous shaping in our present-day. The writers' satirical method of refusal to a history of colonial violence via Issa's counteraction of the prejudicial gaze or Molly's refusal of demarcated values placed on black woman's labor, suggests that reveling in refusal may be a productive space in which the characters find empowerment. The explicit refutation of marginality and the celebration of blackness alongside scenes of a plantation drama invites us to critically engage how black people figure centrally to the very social dynamics operating presently and imagine where blackness might exist beyond systems of coloniality. To summarize further, Ninny as an enslaved woman is regarded as flesh/object/disposable/unmade/non-human, and it is here where Issa appropriates this space and takes ownership. Issa is the self-acclaimed "Hoe" who mutually delights in Ninny's complexity,- enabling enslaved histories to be brought both into frame and relief.

---

[101] Eudell, Demetrius, and Carolyn Allen. "SYLVIA WYNTER: A TRANSCULTURIST RETHINKING MODERNITY." *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (2001): 1–7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019776.

As Issa (real/character) observes "the enslaved Ninny" on "television"—adjacent to the screen… intimately informed by slavery even while in California (a state not likened to the plantation economy of the south); the black women connected in this entanglement are mutually called upon via the vehicle of embodiment. So what do the writers ask of the enslaved? Without relying on sentience, they query about their experiences to redeem depictions of enslaved peoples as complex rather than as one dimensional. The writers cultivate these scenes in hopes they may inform us about our current condition. Ergo allowing those to ponder on the utility of play or fabulation as a medium through which these exchanges between past and present can be made, problematized, or disrupted. How have we previously seen depictions of slavery and do address this ambivalence: a yearning for full transparency yet a recoiling from these violent intimacies; between both desire and pain, insurgency and captivity, imaginary and truth.

In the season finale, the writers comprised all the shorts of "Due North" together so they can be viewed in one setting. In one scene a preview for the "next episode" is revealed after a turbulent exchange between Miss Turnfellow and Ninny took place, leaving Ninny to reckon with the possible "footless" consequences if she were caught reading anything other than a cookbook. In the preview, Ninny is shown dusting the table as Miss Turnfellow keeps her under a watchful eye. The scene proceeds with a few declarative words from the Mistress:

MISS TURNFELLOW

You missed a spot.

NINNY

Yes Ma'm

MISS TURNFELLOW

After this, I need you to clean up the stables.[102]

Closely, the camera pans to Ninny inconspicuously placing a brown liquid in the tea cup of the mistress. As the mistress sips, Ninny's watchful eye raises the tension of the scene. As the camera subsequently juxtaposes the subtle enactments of power that Ninny and Miss Turnfellow simultaneously perform, the motif of the tea likens to the satire of "Ask A Slave" and the mischievous recreations of Emma and Lizzie Mae. As the satire too negotiates performances of retribution it further instigates the complexities of the performance. Using performances of enslaved domestic labor as a means to convey the dichotomous navigation of enslaved reverence and retribution, the tea invites us to consider the indiscernibility of these performances that were always known and quietly unrevealed.

While we are able to get to a kind of truth via these reimaginings, the tension between fabulation and truth subscribes to the practices of the enslaved–like Alfred—and how we seek to the contend with afterlives now. If the current colloquial phrase of pouring "tea" gestures to the impartation of truth, Ninny's tampering of the cup for Miss Turnfellow's consumption serves as an allegory for a furtive and unyielding proclamation of essential concealment amid hyper-visibility. The complex reperformances as demonstrated in "Due North," highlight the present-day confrontations with these opaque-fabulations.

A Provocation on Hannah Jackson at the Hermitage Plantation

Ask A Slave: On the Subject of Intimate Histories & Wrestling w/Opaque-Fabulations in the Afterlives.

The neologism of "opaque fabulations" allows us to interrogate the complex reperformances rendered by post-slavery subjects and their utility of fabulation to work within or

[102] Rae, Issa. "Hella Shook." Episode. *HBO* 2, no. 5, August 20, 2017.

against the social restraints of the time as a means of recreating/rearranging their places in history… and the present. In the case of Alfred Jackson, we see this emerging throughout his experience as a tour guide on the Hermitage Plantation post-Emancipation. Particularly in one scene perceived by Mary Dorris in the Preservation of the Hermitage, Dorris describes Alfred's troubled disposition when people tampered with Andrew Jackson's belongings. She narrates Alfred's performance as such:

> 'Dese is General Jackson's candlesticks, an' dat lookin'-glass was carried off by one o' de servants. De ladies brought it an put it back here.' Uncle Afred would never tell that the looking-glass was bought from Hannah, also a valued and esteemed servant at the Hermitage and a rival to Uncle Alfred in longevity and reminiscences. He never mentioned Hannah, for there was a feud between them and a rivalry as to which who would live longest and tell the best story of their recollections.[103]

Given the unreliability of the narrator we do not know if Alfred's sentiment toward Hannah, Jackson's enslaved housemaid are true, though Dorris' recollection of the event may reveal Hannah's absence from the Hermitage as disruptive of the curated social imaginary at the time and Dorris' likened political viewpoints. The "competitiveness" between Hannah and Alfred as perceived by Dorris is realized by both Hannah and Alfred's regard for the Jackson family, and continued labor. Through oral tradition the Hermitage purports that Hannah Jackson was retrieved by Andrew Jackson at the tender age of three and was regarded as one of his most "adorned" slaves. Hannah's position as a housemaid meant she mostly upheld the cleanliness and operations within the house. Although Hannah eventually left the plantation, (dissimilarly to

---

[103] Dorris, Mary C. *Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915; Annals, History, and Stories ; The Acquisition, Restoration, and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Assoc. for over a Quarter of a Century / Mary C. Dorris.* Nashville: Smith & Lamar, 1915

Alfred's consistent occupancy) she too maintained inhabitance at the plantation well after Emancipation.

In the article written by a historian specializing in the Jacksonian era, Mark Cheathem's work, "Gender and Memory Among Andrew Jackson's Slaves: The Example of 'Aunt' Hannah" recounts Hannah's labored constancy. He states:

> As late as March 1860, Hannah was busy with the upkeep of the Hermitage. In June 1863, however, Sarah Jackson reported that Hannah had 'gone over to the Yankees,' having 'been very insolent for some time.' Rachel Jackson Lawrence, Jackson's granddaughter, announced that Hannah was "making 20 dollars a month" and blamed her abandonment of the Jacksons on 'the Yankees.'[104]

Since Mary Dorris had a vested interest in purporting the imaginary/success of the plantation and its inhabitants given she was married into the family, she ostensibly understood the politics in enslaved representation in *Preservation of the Hermitage*. Also, the formalities within the rhetoric quite possibly elucidates the vernacular of the age. Mary's disregard of Hannah's labor is subtle and coincides with the agenda of the LHA. If Alfred is designated as the person to define the narrative of the Hermitage, it is not a surprise to see Dorris using Alfred for the sake of political condemnation… especially for other enslaved parties. The manipulation of Alfred's own opaque fabulation –utilizing subtle indirections within his embodied experience to reimagine himself in history—was purported for both himself and the Hermitage's esteemed narrative. Alfred's reperformances figures directly into Alfred's own continued exploitation as "faithful servant" while granting him enough obscurity to retain narrative autonomy.

---

[104] Cheathem, Mark R. "'Gender and Memory among Andrew Jackson's Slaves: The Example of 'Aunt' Hannah.'" Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics, July 8, 2013. https://jacksonianamerica.com/2013/07/11/gender-and-memory-among-andrew-jacksons-slaves-the-example-of-aunt-hannah/.

In the same vein, Hannah also provided a complex performance of reverence and retribution. Negotiating her own freedom amid the rhetoric of the Confederate nation-state, Hannah's choice to leave while also maintaining a benevolent perception of Andrew Jackson was also triggered by the navigation of a southern social imaginary. If there is an alleged reciprocal relationship between ex-slaves and the white domestic, it would be complicating for Hannah to overcome the tension of a declining Southern plantation-scape and her own newly founded autonomy. In an 1880 interview written and led by John Spencer Bassett for the *Cincinatti Commerical* Hannah was queried about her devotions for Andrew Jackson.

Unlike Alfred, Hannah participated in newspaper interviews as a way to assert her narrative. Hannah's media engagement is highly political and opens up provocations on why Alfred's voice is relatively unseen in these media related forms. Mark Cheathem summarizes a moment that details the *fondness* Andrew Jackson had toward his slaves. The interview reads as follows:

> 'He was mighty good to us all,' she remarked. According to Hannah, Jackson and his wife differed on white-slave relations, however. She recalled that a white officer 'who used to stay for weeks at our house led one of the young colored girls off' When Jackson found out, he 'said nothing that I know of,' but when Rachel caught wind of the liaisons, she was 'mad, mad, MAD [with rising inflection], and she was always mad about it.'[105]

The question pertaining to Andrew Jackson's "affections" toward the enslaved is quite a contested one. While Hannah does not particularly clarify whether Jackson condemned these actions, the over embellishments of Hannah's tone directed toward Rachel Jackson explicitly evoke the tensions between white masters, enslaved women, and the mistresses within the

[105] Ibd

plantation. The violent intimacies that encompassed the enslaved women's experience, rendered her the pinnacle of both desire and repudiation. Subsequently causing one of the "young colored girls to run off." These acts of liberation and Jackson's perceived diplomatic reply of the event conveys the impossibility of refuge for the carefully guarded violence that black enslaved women were subjected.

Moreover, given the (contemporary) rumors surrounding Hannah's own intimate engagements with Jackson, we could place the interview in conversation with opaque fabulations. Embodying the memory of her enslavement, Hannah is able to sustain a particular imaginary of the Jacksons as slave owners who often regarded the humanity of their slaves all the while offering a moment of contemplation for a subtle discovery of Jackson's "opinions" on enslaved-white relations. In other words, revealing a very touchy and discreet knowledge of Jackson that was further hidden by Rachel's melodramatic disapproval. By leaving a gap in the narrative where the audience must interpret whether or not Jackson approved or disapproved of sex-slave relations Hannah leaves room for possibility. Leaving us to consider her over use of the sensational in Rachel's reply as representative of her own emotional and subjective experiences on the topic rather than writing her off as an unimpacted witness of these events.

Upon reflection on present-day negotiations of these opaque-fabulations, I am drawn to the descendants of Hannah Jackson. Specifically, Dorothy Price Haskins non-fiction/fiction book *Unholiest Patrimony*: *Great Is The Truth & It Must Prevail*.[106] Drawing from the oral histories passed down from Haskins great-grandmother, Charlotte Jackson [a daughter of Hannah Jackson] Charlotte purported herself to be the daughter of Andrew Jackson. Assuming

---

[106] Dorothy Price-Haskins, *Unholiest Patrimony*: "Great Is the Truth and It Must Prevail" (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2007)

Charlotte's history to be true, Charlotte's private diaries were regarded as family heirlooms passed down from generation to generation that detailed her experiences in enslavement and the truths of her heritage. Hannah's opaque-fabulations that facilitated a space to possibly criticize or revere the Jacksons' relations with their slaves, subsequently created an opening for subsequent opaque fabulations to take place. Likened to Alfred, Charlotte would use her memories and experiences of enslavement, and reveal a complex relationship with Jackson to her family through narrative that would reposition or solidify her place in history. As Dorothy herself reimagines the intimate moments between Hannah and Jackson or Charlotte and her esteemed father, one queries on the utility of fabulation if it grants Dorothy access to an undocumented hidden history. While Haskins and her family has not offered any access to the assumed "evidence" of Charlotte's diaries, and the Hermitage also has no plans to exhume Jackson for the sake of historical accuracy, the fictions layered in Haskins writing reveal a complex and intimate negotiation with a seemingly private and sentimental history.

Ending with the Haskins piece allows us to consider these complex reperformances as intimate engagements with history. Where Alfred, Azie, Hannah, Charlotte, Dorothy, and fictional characters of Insecure affectively engage with the imagining as a means to reveal the interiority of Black subjects. Additionally, the Haskins piece invites us to mutually consider the ethics in approaching these histories. How does the notion of kinship, empathy, and relational subjectivities (facilitated by embodied practice) enable us to participate in alternative epistemological undertakings that wrestle with the archive's violence and the "truths" that are left out within them.

Moreover, how does the equipment of opacity and "shade" further think through the complex negotiation of reverence and retribution as mobilized by the enslaved and reembodied

by contemporary black subjects in acknowledgement of their ancestors?. If Charlotte's "truths" – for the time being—will always be questioned or considered as fabricated or false why not revel in that space? These reembodied imaginaries/ the utility of narrative helps Hannah's descendants illustrate these discrepancies.

Ch. Two Virginia Play: Assembling Mythic Reconstructions of Sally "Hemings-es"

"I am always reflecting on the state of current events and the overlap of the historical and the mythic—but I realize today that explaining is not needed, as we live in a world of 24/7 explanations, of everyone talking at once."—Kara Walker

"It is not the limits placed on rationality that draw me to fabulation, in other words, but the implication that it serves as a veil of opacity drawn over the transparent subject."—Tavia Nyong'o "Opacity Narration and the 'Fathomless Word'"

Introduction: Sally the "Fathomless Word"[107]

Why do we continue to revisit the history of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson? Is Sally's history a crucible through which we can discern America's conceptualization of identity and racial politics or is our propensity to return motivated by the yearn for accessing these unresolved histories? Recovering spaces of representation that platform Sally's story, forging new historical records, and imagining new futures where her descendants are justly recognized are current steps made for correction. I ask what resolutions are rendered achievable—when there are desires *to know* a subject who is rendered existent outside of human recognition.[108] A

[107] Nyong'o, Tavia. 2022. "Opacity, Narration, and 'The Fathomless Word.'" *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)* 158 (1): 45–56. https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.158.5.45. Pg 54

[108]Ibd

subject who is, and has been subject to the "violence of blackening"[109] remains unfathomably unknowable.[110]

I also question—what "rights" are we attempting to return to Sally when she is represented in the renderings that seek to reinterpret or resurrect her Tavia Nyongo expresses:

> If we reflect on the violence of blackening as a quite literal denigration (blackening) of Black life, the right to opacity appears quite specifically as the right of the rightless—not simply the right to have rights, which are embedded (however problematically) within the procedures of civil order, but a right to remain outside of and opaque to the civil order that demands, as its price of entry, the presentation of a transparent subject. The right to opacity is a distortion and even an etiolation of the philosophy of rights, a wound that keeps reopening in the febrile heart of liberalism[111]

A nearly three-hundred year old effort to know more about Sally's position as Jefferson's enslaved mistress begets the questions if we have a right to know Sally or her story. Do her rights remain outside of this demand? It is in the excess of these assemblages and the predicament of her indebted relationality where we may acknowledge our collectively entangled wounds—one we have no wish to resolve but re-open in efforts to understand Black life outside of the context of obscurity. Therefore retrieving these histories becomes a violently nationalistic enactment of Americanism i.e., "justice" and "truth" being ideals for recovery and the notion of returning to the subject of Sally and this history of this violence as necessary forging this

---

[109] Nyong'o, Tavia. 2022. "Opacity, Narration, and 'The Fathomless Word.'" *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)* 158 (1): 45–56. https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.158.5.45. Pg 54

[110] Whether that be due to the violence of captivity or Sally's own willingness/desire to be kept from public recognition.

[111] Ibd

colonially founded poetics. Nevertheless, the multiplicities and silences Sallt occupies evades such a fervent demand; and the Black fabulist emerges to imagine her *still* radically obscure in rejection of ongoing oppression.

Following the multi-million dollar excavation of the Monticello plantation's South Wing "The Mountaintop Project"[112] distributed a statement that the excavation began due to the recovery of Thomas Jefferson Randolph's diary. In the diary Randolph alluded to an ostensible location of a "hidden room"—where Jefferson would keep Sally in close proximity. The revelation of a hidden room would make the intimate relations between Jefferson and Sally more evidentiary, showcasing the spatial dynamics that informed these connections. As stated in the New York Times article, "The newly opened space at Monticello, is presented as the living quarters of Sally Hemings. The Sally Hemings room opens to the public . . . alongside a room dedicated to the oral histories of the descendants of slaves at Monticello, and the earliest kitchen at the house, where Hemings's brother cooked."[113] An added component of the excavation project was a curated multi-media installation titled "The Life of Sally Hemings." Through digital and immersive technologies— the Monticello developed the exhibit to recultivate the site of Sally's subjugation and repurpose it into a cinematic retelling of Madison Hemings'[114] story. It features a documented account illuminating the conditions of Madison's hidden upbringing.

In consideration of the performance exhibition, the visual experience contends with the fact that all purported images of Sally Hemings exists in fabula. What the Monticello gathers as an "image of Sally," doesn't exist in evidence but merely perpetuates this overdetermined

---

[112] Archaeologists excavated what was used as a men's restroom and located a hidden windowless room with a brick oven at the center. Along with the discovery of what is believed to be "Sally's room" (according to Randolph's diary statement), was also the original Monticello kitchen.
[113] Stockman, Farah, and Gabriella Demczuk. 2018. "Monticello Is Done Avoiding Jefferson's Relationship With Sally Hemings." *New York Times (Online)*, 2018
[114] Sally Hemings son.

speculation. The varying proliferations of Sally that supersede her body are translated in the scene. Platformed and standing at the center of the room is a clothed silhouette of Sally, with no human forms of recognition attached i.e.—no face, no discernable body etc. Relying on these opaque reconfigurations of Sally, the exhibition plays with these histories of indiscernibility where the dominative imposition of transparency obscures Sally's recognition. Moreover, her erected "non-human status" could represent the overall condition of her enslaved circumstance—yet the demand for proximity to the violent event situates Sally back in her "hidden room."

Recognizing her absented presence as a means of " historical recovery" Sally is revealed and reimagined within the shadows of the silhouette. Focalizing on Sally's experiences as a mother as method to reposition her place in history, Sally is theorized both within and outside of a dominant order and is mobilized with these obscure hidden familial networks. In ongoing recognition of this Hemings related absence, the archival constraints; the gaps in Sally's story subsequently produce other forms of knowledge production. Located alongside the room of the "Sally mannequin" is an additional exhibit displaying the oral histories passed along Sally's descendants from generation to generation. These oral repertoires configured through embodied knowledge take precedence when reckoning with Hemings' story and her recovery.

These sort of Hemings-related networks represent that which is missing in the exhibit: a visualization of bodily autonomy; where oftentimes her descendants fill in, in efforts to repair that which has been left out. The marker indicating the absence of Sally's body or any form of visual recognition precipitates a tracing of these aesthetics, where these enigmatic portrayals of Sally get produced and reperformed across time and space. As Sally's "body"/"image—or lack thereof— is used to critique and rethink these sites of history, how can reperformances of Sally Hemings be used to divulge tensions between slavery and freedom, chronologies of

objecthood/subjectivity and revise otherwise possibilities for Black female agency amid instances of violence?

As the "Life of Sally Hemings" at Monticello attempts to *place* Sally in history, her Virginian status is further realized by the vessel/mannequin's assemblage. Upon viewing the exhibit, viewers immediately see the mannequin platformed next to the narrative. Viewers are intended to imagine Sally bolstered and on display, commanding attention of the room as Madison Hemings' narrative works to humanize and autonomize the lifeless figure. The weird platforming of the mannequin echoes an eerie positionality of Black enslaved women on an auction block. In Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* she invokes the use of the auction block "as a historical specific geography that exacted subordinations and. . . puts demands on our contemporary geographic arrangements."[115] These landscapes of domination along with these bodily epistemologies coincide in inferring specific sites of memory where both the body and space are mutually coextensive and informing.

Sally's attachment to the Monticello and the exhibit's reconfiguration of her, unravels the reimagined Sally in context to the Virginia plantation. While the Hemingses mobilizations were global (and as far-reaching as Paris) the affinity to place Sally in Virginia in order to facilitate the imaginary is further illuminated. The obscurity of these violent intimacies—as brought into relation via the spatial archives of the hidden room—arguably treats Sally reimaginations within a singular position—in Virginia. Does the superimposition of these multiple narratives attached to Sally enable her to take flight *elsewhere* or is the play/fabula or reenactment of Sally only realized by the perception of Sally's covert status in Monticello. In short, can the fabula only

---

[115] McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds : Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle / Katherine McKittrick.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Pg. xxx

take shape when Sally remains hidden, opaque, articulated as a "fathomless word," shaded and blackened in material representation?

Nevertheless, Sally's hypervisibility in the public imaginary heightens the spectacle, which also renders her both complicatedly and simultaneously overly-exposed and as a receptacle for either imaginary or historically documented stories to proliferate. Further attaching Sally to the Monticello in this exhibit captures Sally's multi-dimensional position and the familial, intimate, political, and socio-cultural networks that comprise her livelihood. As the exhibit platforms the newly restored Hemings-family story, I ask—what is Monticello attempting to market or offer audiences in Sally's likeness. Does Sally's indiscernibility allow her to thwart such recognition, or is her body/likeness still being platformed for an unrelenting historical undertaking? In this chapter I find that Sally is a provocative vessel for interpreting early abolitionist prospects, contemporary and historical American interracial politics or institutional hierarchies, and radical provocations on love—which is not merely implying a socio-cultural infatuation with the Thomas and Sally affair (which does exist) but the complicated existence of Black love amid devastating social and corporeal violence.

TJ Loves Sally but does Sally love? The exhibit propagates this conversation as Madison uncovers all the ways Sally indeed loved her children. An analysis of historically-minded fabulations takes up Sally to center the inconceivability of Black femme expression and desire more closely. Since affair prompts discourses on Sally's Virginian position and socio-political intimacies that composed her status at the Monticello, the reperformance of Sally Hemingses are similarly attached to the landscape. In this chapter, I take up Williams Wells Brown's articulation of "*Virginia Play*"—which is noted in the autobiography he places at the beginning of his acclaimed work *Clotel*/lle (1853-1867), the fiction-nonfiction which is loosely based on

the intimate relationship of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson and the rumors circulating around the potential auction of the president's enslaved children in 1833, 1838 and so on. Centering the analytic of Virginia Play is a method through which we can regard Brown's multi-intersectional critique of the peculiar institution in his installments of Clotelle. Amid the dawn of the "afterlives," Brown attempts to reposition Clotelle's place in history as she takes up residence at the plantation and uses her own embodied experiences to further combat racism. E/Affectively, Brown utilizes the premise of sentimentality to consider black longevity amid continuing states of violence and calamity. Averting the tragedy of Clotel's original leap (1853)— or Miralda's reluctance to return home after reuniting with her lost love (1861)— Brown acknowledges the Fletchers' dreams for prosperity without necessarily bringing them into beautifully curated relief. Can *Clotelle A Colored Heroine* (1867) still be regarded as an abolitionist text, a sentimental novel, a fiction, and a political appeal all at once; if so, why should Clotelle (1867) be considered as such during the time of its publication? *What does that do*? Brown does not abandon any of these elements because they exist in culmination of the final project, what we surmise at the completion of Brown's decade-long endeavor is that the complex and unique experiences of the enslaved cannot be told in one genre or one iteration; simply, as the effects of enslavement persisted and still persist. We can also analyze his complex negotiation of home, the imagined or romantic myths of Southern life initiated by violent institutional structures, and the rumored relationship of Sally and Thomas and how they overlap within these narrative connections.

Given its function as a framing analytic for the chapter, the notion of "play" not only alludes to fabula or the imaginative but serves "as a veil of opacity"[116] for both Brown's own ontological

[116] Nyong'o, Tavia. 2022. "Opacity, Narration, and 'The Fathomless Word.'" *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)* 158 (1): 45–56. https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.158.5.45. Pg 49

consideration and the circumstances of Sally's Virginian position which remained tightly hidden in the realm of "nonce taxonomies"[117] and facilitated by media speculation. The nefariousness of *"Virginia Play"* in Brown's autobiography provides a doorway into his narrative *Clotel*. In addition to discussing Clotelle's iterations in this chapter I also adopt the notion of Virginia Play in conversation with other contemporary works: Kara Walker's photographic installation of Clotel in "Chronology of Black Suffering," Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's creative narrative *My Monticello*, and James Ijames *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever*. By tracing the superimposition of Sally's vessel and her mythic arrangement in America's socio-political imaginary, I argue that these (Sally related) Black historically minded fabulations (by Brown, Ijames, Johnson and Walker) continue to address the problematics of Sally's hiddenness and risqué association all the while relying on her right to opacity to imagine otherwise worlds for Black communities in the present. As the "arrangements of power occlude" Sally Black artists and thinkers evaded affinities for rescue and full representation and opted for an enigmatic portrayal of Black kinship and social progress untethered the syrupy-sweet idealisms of freedom with yearning to fully deconstruct and rebuild something anew.

In lieu of reconfiguring these landscapes of violence and the attachment of Sally to the landscape of Virginia/Monticello, we might consider how the Sally's opaque position in Virginia fosters this fabulation. In the chapter I showcase this via Walker's reappropriation of Clotel's imminent capture and demise in her super-like reimagining and in Brown's mobilization of Clotelle; her return, and revitalization of Poplar Farm into a Freedmen's School. I also examine this in relation to Johnson's articulation of Da'Naisha's peculiar "homecoming," and the corrections and facilitations of truth-making she renders when reclaiming Monticello as *hers*.

[117] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2008. *Epistemology of the Closet / Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.* Updated ed. / preface by the author. Berkeley, Calif. ;: University of California Press.

Lastly, I will convey how Ijames envisions a whole new reality that was always proximal to the Black radical imaginary—causing his characters to exist in an entirely new register.

The Historical Context of Virginia Play

I observe Brown's recollection of the brutality as a preface to *Clote*l operating in four ways: The act of cruelty derived from the Freeland son's ignition of tobacco stems, [118]alludes to Brown's uncovering or understanding of the evolving racial logic of capitalism. It is a long and complex history between those enslaved, the crops they produce, and the excessive brutality that *stemmed* from the exploitation of black labor, American soil, and the eradication of indigenous groups. Brown sought to make this clear to his London audience for abolitionist causes, and his American audience (in the 1860s) when issues surrounding Reconstruction and the quality of life of emancipated black people were yet to be resolved.

1. The landscape of Virginia offers Brown's audience insight into the duality of his subjugation juxtaposed with America's "liberatory" founding and (at the time) political discourse. The figure most associated with the state around the time of *Clotel's* publication– Thomas Jefferson, conveys a contradictory representation. Jefferson was a slave-owning aristocrat who sought to "reform the conditions"[119] of slavery. He utilized scientific racism to justify its perpetuation, all the while maintaining an intimate affair with his deceased wife's enslaved half-sister, Sarah Hemings. The complexity

[118] As written in the Preface of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*: "After enduring the tyrannical and inhuman usage of this man for five or six months, William resolved to stand it no longer, and therefore ran away, like other slaves who leave their masters, owing to severe treatment; and not knowing where to flee, the young fugitive went into the forest, a few miles from St. Louis... The hounds were soon at the trunk of the tree, and remained there, howling and barking, until those in whose charge they were came up. The slave was ordered down, tied, and taken home. Immediately on his arrival there, he was, as he expected, tied up in the smokehouse, and whipped till Freeland was satisfied, and then smoked with tobacco stems. This the slaveholder called *"Virginia play."* After being well whipped and smoked, he was again set to work

[119] "The Practice of Slavery at Monticello | Monticello", n.d.)

surrounding Jefferson’s time in Virginia and rumors circulating even after his death, further illuminates America’s hypocrisy on the treatment of slavery. Brown felt the need to spotlight these contradictions for the sake of upending the unjust and nonsensical cruelties of American slavery.

2. The tragedies persistent in Brown’s own narrative gestures to the same despicable crimes exhibited in Brown’s melodrama. As literally displayed in Chapter 19–in respect to the character William, a runaway servant who is aided by Clotel and vice vera— William Wells Brown’s personal injuries sustained by “Virginia Play” are mutually paralleled in Clotel’s story. “*Virginia play*” serves as an embodied allegory for the horrors of slavery, and the rumored details of the enslaved Hemings children in Virginia. Playing with the history of the Jefferson family and Hemingses inclusion in Thomas Jefferson’s “esteemed” lineage, Brown messes around with these murky truths to divulge the connection between *his own past* and other enslaved experiences.
3. Clotel’s narrative is a form of play; yet brutally historic and political. It masterfully occupies all these positions which makes it productive for this chapter.

In the context of my examination of Brown’s narrative, I continue to connect William Wells Brown's critical implementation and amalgam of fiction and self-authenticated autobiography as a performance tool. Brown relied on different performance mediums, genres/forms to persuade his audience the faults of the American institution and the problems that undergird sustaining racial hierarchies. The evolving nature of these renderings place into relation the never-ending issue of repair, and liberation that were contested topics for Brown both pre and post-Civil War as a previously enslaved person. Brown’s final project rearing at the end of Reconstruction conceptualizes a turn to the afterlives of slavery where the intersections between his own

embodied experiences, and mobilizations within these geographies inform his complex negotiations on the "American Romance of Race"[120] and his place within it. Brown argues that enslaved experience is an intimately shared one, and could extend across bodies, in different moments in time and across multiple landscape. The multivalent incarnations of *Clotel* provide an entry into a study as I continue the task of mapping these networks, tracing the multiple reconfigurations of Sally and descendants and the imaginations that mobilize them elsewhere. Brown's fabulatory practice can be regarded as the first transgressive attempt in forming Sally's access and right to the "veil of opacity."

Clotel Taking Flight

In retrieval of her daughter Mary, a young enslaved quadroon attempts a trek to a Virginia plantation—engendering in a violent pursuit at the Long Bridge. Three captors forge a blockade on the "Virginia side" to guard the fugitive and put an end to the wild chase. With no nearing escape in sight, William Wells Brown's tragically rendered heroine, takes flight. In melancholic tone, Brown writes the ending of his acclaimed character's (1853) journey:

> She clasped her *hands* convulsively, and raised *them,* as she at the same time raised her *eyes* towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion *there,* which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk forever beneath the waves of the river! Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country."

[120] Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 26:22, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0

As captured in narrative, the illustration doubly depicts the slave catchers' pursuit. Etched in brown shading, the contrast conveyed in material reproduces the visual juxtaposition of racial difference. With her arms flung in desperate outreach, Brown's heroine is created to appeal to his domestic British readers the devastating brutalities of the peculiar institution. Utilizing the American conventions apparent in tropes like the "Tragic Mulatta", Brown platforms his piece in conversation with other abolitionist performances written in pre-Emancipation American South.[121] The tragedies that engulf the scene conveys the seeming hopelessness Brown anticipates. Brown particularly asks what is "life liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for the black enslaved person? If Jefferson's own daughters fail to grasp these freedoms, what freedoms are similarly etched into America's contradictory politics and rendered as unachievable for these doomed figures?

In unlikely turn of events, one shifts to visual iteration of Clotel by Kara Walker. In the image a bright red garment is shown anchored onto Clotel/ The cape dances upwards as the wind forces its facilitation. Clotel takes *flight.* Leaping from the Long Bridge, the heroine's seemingly imminent death exceeds the corporeal violence mapped onto her. Neither black nor white, the mulatta disrupts the very racial logic meant to demarcate her; she is a myth, and an internalized representation of that marking. As conceived in Brown's narrative interpretation, the impossibility of the enslaved person's relation to Jefferson's documented sanction of liberty, lies the unequivocal tension with possibility. Clotel: the heroine; the "mythical . . . stage prop of the

---

[121] Brown's 1853 text takes place after Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Brown sees Stowe's theatrical staging of these enslaved experience and its reception as motivation to create a narrative of his own. Brown acknowledges the productivity of fabulation, and the melodramatic form as useful in eliciting emotional responses. Brown treats his novel as something more critical, and specifically correlating to the black experience. We see this in Brown's use of implementing his autobiography before the novel begin. Authenticating himself with his own experiences enables Brown to set apart his work from those like Uncle Tom's Cabin.

literary,"[122] jumps off-page into Brown's efforts towards insurgent "*humanation*"[123]—or does the cape suggest otherwise?

What is she?

Rendered indiscernible on page Clotel's brown shading is visually misrepresented to Brown's description of her features. He writes her as, "finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long black wavy hair done up in the neatest manner; her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position."[124] Clotel's illustrated opacity is situated in a state of the unknown; teetering between sameness and otherness, and confinement and freedom, her image mutually illuminates a rupture of identity framed by a violent symbolic order. Clotel's invention is informed by Brown's own understandings of these racial delineations. Also, her inextricable linkages to white patriarchal systems of power simultaneously informs her subjection as well as the transgressive mobilizations that disassociate her relation to enslavement i.e.— as portrayed in Clotel's escape via her enactment of racial passing, and her ostensibly queer/cross-dressing performance of a flirtatious slave owning white man.[125]

---

[122] See Chapter "Notes On An Alternative Model—Neither/ Nor. Spillers, Hortense J. 2003. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. U of Chicago P.

[123] See Chapter "African American Women and the Republics" written by Hortense Spillers. JanMohamed, Abdul R. 2020. *Reconsidering Social Identification: Race, Gender, Class and Caste*. Vol. 2. Routledge. Pg 22.

[124] Brown, William Wells. 2014. *William Wells Brown: Clotel & Other Writings*. Vol. 247. Library of America.

[125] Ibd

In fictionalizing the rumored and dusky story[126][127] of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, Brown's work reads as unconcerned with Sally's role or the underlying truths regarding her situation. Brown's use of the mulatta trope in relation to a possibly conceived Hemings-Jefferson daughter rather places emphasis on the sexual commodification of black women thrown into cyclical "unrelieved crisis"[128] and the outcomes conceived through violent reproduction. In examination of Browns' and Barbara Chase Riboud's fictitious configurations of Sally Hemings Hortense Spillers writes in response:

> In the internalization of slavery's logic, here called 'love', Sally Hemings pays, in effect, in bondage to a superior will. Her character indexes one of the forms that mastery might take, that is to say, the inducement to identity with the master class and its repertoire of interests. The insurgent enslaved, putting her life at risk, makes of the 'master' precisely what he is - the 'enemy'. The successful arrival at this fundamental determination marks the red line between slavery and freedom.[129]

---

[126] Farrison, W. Edward. "CLOTEL, THOMAS JEFFERSON, AND SALLY HEMINGS." *CLA Journal* 17, no. 2 (1973): 147–74. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44328538.

[127] In his article "Clotel, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings Edward W Farrison writes, "Henry S. Randall (1811-1876) , who published the first com- prehensive biography of Jefferson in 1858, knew about the story of the Jefferson-Sally Hemings liaison, but he did not refer to it in his book. Ten years later, however, on June 1, 1868, in reply to an inquiry from James Parton, he wrote a letter of eight pages about what he called " The Dusky Sally Story." Randall's letter consists principally of what he said had been related to him by Colonel Thomas Jefferson Randolph (1792-1875) , the oldest son of Jefferson's daughter, Mrs. Martha Randolph (1772-1836)." The "Dusky Sally Story" opens up some thoughts for this work when thinking about the complexities that undergird Sally's experience but also the ways in which she was conceptualized in material culture. The determination of the South Colonnade as "Sally's Room" was conceived from these particular details, and the speculation that was not determined by evidence most likely caused Brown's treatment of her as indifferent; undistinguishable.

[128] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747. Pg 76

[129] See Chapter "African American Women and the Republics" written by Hortense Spillers. JanMohamed, Abdul R. 2020. *Reconsidering Social Identification: Race, Gender, Class and Caste*. Vol. 2. Routledge. Pg 38

Might I reference what Spillers states in determination of that "red line between slavery and freedom" in emulation of Clotel's red cape. Brown questions if "love"— or rather these sentimental conventions— can exist in the story and legacy of Sally Hemings. What does "love" *look like* in this register? Does it reinscribe a violence. In further emphasis of Spillers, what Brown attests in these narratives of "shadow families"[130] is that these duskily contrived intimacies did not produce "exceptions to the rule"[131] of the slavery enterprise. Clotel's seeming and presenting exceptionality, is rendered unexceptional as she still befalls the same circumstances to enslavement and thus is Brown's narrative focus.

All this to say, in this journey of Clotel's return to Virginia in search of her *own* child was Brown ever meant to narrativize Clotel's trajectory outside of her stagnation? Between the slave pens in Virginia and a couple of miles at a distance from the white house—even after Mary's (Clotel's daughter) subsequent four-chapter freedom arc following Clotel's demise— Brown merely imagines a cycle of emancipatory desires where Clotel gets constructed within perpetuity and her daughter subsequently encounters. If the trope of the tragic mulatta for instance continues to render black women in the position of constant exploitation and suffering, where might Clotel find relief? Is it in the rendering of her own mythological formation? Does the cape offer us something more, or does it yield Clotel visibly frozen, mid-air, arms flung in search of ostensible alleviation? Or both?

Kara Walker facilitates this critique in her placement of that "red line" which is used to as a marker between this warring friction with slavery and emancipation. Her redeployment of these

---

[130] Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 24:23, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0

[131] Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 23:13, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0Ibd

mythic configurations convey that these complicated arrivals toward political freedom, and relationships to histories of enslavement and sexual violence inform current imaginations for new modes of being. Kara Walker places black women at the center to prioritize the ways in which black women have been conscripted to positions of hyper-visibility and absence amid exploitation and dehumanization. Reveling in the space of desire and pain that these complicated images or fictionalizations evoke enables Walker to problematize these historical mythologies of race and create possibilities for a new historical record. As Spillers asserts, the captive black female body does not operate within a traditional symbolic order; instead, she may lay foundation as a radically different social subject.[132][133] As Walker grants Brown's heroine her much deserved cape, she is afforded a position of insurgent *non-humanation*.

The reconstruction of Clotel in this manner radically alters Brown's initial conceptualization of the figure. Walker's superhero configuration becomes a site of new possibility amid these visceral representations of confinement. Additionally, placing the cape on Clotel operates as an ironic critique of a problematic visual culture within the American imagination. Walker's art asserts that these social imaginaries are contingent on the proliferation of these derogatory tropes. The arrangements of power that have informed our contemporary moment remain fixed and in need of further deconstruction. . . or reconstruction. Arguably, Walker finds that the affective objectives that the original illustration and narrative perpetuated the very constraints that effect black female subjectivity. The mythology that is the "American

[132] Spillers writes, "In this play of paradox, only the female stands in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject." The project questions if Brown intends to follow in this task or do we continue to lean on the contemporary to further these critical engagements of the afterlives.

[133] Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747. Pg 76

romance of race,"[134] is consistent within Clotel's construction and motivates Walker's illustrative task. Walker flips Brown's method of restoring humanization for the unexceptionally conceived subject and plays against this shading.

Walker paints the mythic Clotel beyond and simultaneously within the parameters of violence established by a 18th-century social order, but why? In her visual essay, "Chronology of Black Suffering: Images and Notes (1992-2007)"[135] Kara Walker critiques the reproduction of black women in visual culture in her assemblages of prints from popular media, magazines, handwritten notes and drawings that comprise her intertextual polemic. Specifically engaging the history of American Romance and the power relations that establish the black women's relationship with legibility[136], Walker navigates the mythic formations of black womanhood and their perceived *stillness*. "Encoded with the trauma"[137][s] of enslavement—Walker identifies the tropes that have typified her existence and the black women who have been rendered socially stagnant; unable to free themselves from troubling states of subjection.

In echo of this deliberation Daphne Brooks' work *Bodies in Dissent* wrestles with one of Hortense Spillers' seminal texts, *Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe*. Brooks writes:

> Having little access to the culture of property, to the culture of naming, or to patriarchal wealth, the mythically rendered black body—and the black female body in particular—was scripted by dominant paradigms to have 'no movement in a field of signification.'

---

[134] Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 26:22, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0

[135] Kara Walker, "Chronology of Black Suffering: Images and Notes, 1992-2007." Detail. In Philippe Vergne, Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor ; My Love (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007)

[136] Ibd

[137] Daphne A. Brooks. 2006. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387558. Pg 5

Born out of diasporic plight and subject to pornotroping, this body has countenanced a 'powerful stillness.'[138]

Walker's use of dramatic stills depicts their negotiation with Clotel's tropical image and its illustrated "stillness." Walker demonstrates the oppositions/overlaps between subjection and desire that are complicatedly enmeshed in America's artistic/literary imagination and the black women who are misrepresented or rendered *still* in these stories.

In the article "Suicide and Survival in the Work of Kara Walker," Tiffany Johnson Bilder states that the implementation of the cape enables Walker to allude "to the 'superwoman' stereotype, a contemporary controlling image rooted in the myth that black women are "unshakable" and thus not susceptible to depression or suicidal tendencies."[139] In extension of Bilder's claim, Walker is certainly problematizing the derogatory tropes of black women that have perpetuated since enslavement. Clotel's *flight* on the other hand suggests a particular mobility otherwise painted static. The employment of the cape lends the viewer to anticipate and wonder about Clotel's possible movements while being situated within a state of "social and corporeal death."[140] The aspirations of hope that the cape produces lends us to imagine where she might go.

Suffering and Sentimentality: Black American Romance

Congruent to Brown's incitation of the mythic trope, Walker questions the romanticization of the American South and the effectiveness of maintaining sentimental

---

[138] Ibd

[139] Bidler, Tiffany Johnson. 2016. "Suicide and Survival in the Work of Kara Walker." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44 (1/2): 52–72. https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2016.0003. Pg 55.

[140] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1. Pg 12

traditions when fully representing the complex experiences of the 19th century black female subject[141]. Brown relies on sentimental conventions in plea of emancipation, rendering Clotel in a constant state of suffering. Walker recognizes Clotel's fungibility in this register.

As an object of economic and physical desire, Brown's use of the tragic mulatta in his melodrama becomes praxis for divulging the circumstances of these horrifying conditions. The melodramatic form serves as a useful tool for moral restoration and the tableau of Clotel's demise serves as emblematic of the structure. The melodramatic framing used to depict Clotel's objecthood enables Walker to ponder on the utility of *play*—whether that be in reference to theatricality as exemplified in the melodramatic form, or in reference to caricatures; "melodramatic stock figures"[142] of Black women that have proliferated in these genres. In that vacillation Walker finds rupture. The utility of play further articulates the way Brown sees Sally's opaque position as a vessel through which he can mobilize articulations of Black sustainability and political progress. Walker chooses to further Brown's superimposition of Sally & Clotel in recognition of the character's perpetual condition.

As Walker's visual piece amalgamates postmodern representations in film, TV, and popular culture Walker argues that the permeation of these 19th century narratives overlap and manifest in contemporary forms. Walker's piece:

fabulates a history of racial melodrama. . . Transforming the mise-en-scène, and indeed the entire [performing] environment, interrupts the confidence with which we might

[141] With respect to Spillers dynamic deconstruction of the flesh/body and her notes of the black female "subject" outside of this register of womanhood, I still use it here to think about contemporary formations of black womanhood that Walker is highlighting in her visual essay.

[142] NYONG'O, TAVIA. "So Far Down You Can't See the Light: Afro-Fabulation in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's An Octoroon." In *Race and Performance after Repetition*, edited by SOYICA DIGGS COLBERT, DOUGLAS A. JONES, and SHANE VOGEL, 29–45. Duke University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv153k5r4.5. Pg 30

dismiss as static or stereotypical the stock characters of melodrama. Instead, we are obliged to consider how ostensibly anachronistic modes (such as melodrama) . . . are constantly reactivated within ostensibly postmodern modes.[143]

As a "historian of fantasy"[144] Walker is less concerned with "truth" (or the "real events" much like Brown is with the "truths" of the Hemings story) but the perpetuation of cultural myths that have informed our present social systems. If the Hemings-Jefferson daughter in Brown's narrative is *not not* real[145] and if Clotel is a reflection of this fabulated procedure the site of rupture is determined by the multifaceted quality of Walkers reconstruction. Clotel and all of her multivalences as alleged in Walker's rendering of the figure yields in her *super*fluity. Walker alludes to these contradictions and the "excess of the flesh"[146] to produce Clotel outside the traditional symbolics of womanhood. In fact, it is in these multivalent configurations Walker finds the invitation to occupy the image and imagine Clotel otherwise; in a different poetics of desire, and that desire being possibly her own.

Returning to my deliberation of where Clotel might *go,* Walker teeters the line between pleasure and pain. The intention of the melodramatic form is to elicit an impactful psychological and physiological response. In playing with these sensational elements Walker changes the landscape of the scene. The cape provides hope, amusement and a diversion from the presented violence surrounding the heroine. Clotel is rerouted—*literally*—and in future-tense. Clotel is

---

[143] See critical essay by Kevin Young in Kara Walker, "Chronology of Black Suffering: Imagesand Notes, 1992-2007." Detail. In Philippe Vergne, Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor ; My Love (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007) Pg xxxi

[144] Ibd

[145] Just as Richard Schechner posits the spectator's un- interruption of Olivier's performance as "*not not"* Hamlet, there is a similar dynamic happening.

[146] Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2018. *Sensual Excess : Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance / Amber Jamilla Musser.* New York: New York University Press. Pg 17

seen with her "hands…raised and her eyes toward heaven"[147] and Clotel does not sink but *moves toward* possibility and *moves us* with her, in varying states of feeling. Just as the collapsing melodramatic and fantastical elements of the readaptation intends of its viewer.

The overwhelming layers comprised in the illustration: the disjointedness of the shading, the unyielding tensions, the intersection of forms, and histories that collapse Brown, Walker and us through time renders Clotel as *something else*. As Musser exclaims in her work *Sensual Excess*, "opacity is found in the inability to take it all in and produce coherence"[148] the different shades of meaning the work elicits forces us in a state of unknowing in estimation of Clotel's movement. Does she return to Virginia, does she retrieve Mary as she exceeds the bounds of confinement? *Will she*? Explaining is seemingly not needed in whatever course Clotel traverses—if possible.

I would argue William Wells Brown concurs with these efforts. I am struck by Brown's work due to its multiple revitalizations. Brown's installments of *Clotel* (1853-1867) are specifically written with multiple objectives in mind: Abolition, increasing African American readership, motivating and appealing to the Union cause, and imagining possibilities for social and political reclamation. Brown actively understands the "afterlives of slavery" as it unfolds. He makes virtual contact with past experiences as an enslaved person, and his "then" (as they were written) refutations of American slavery are continuously revisited to fit into the social perceptions around Black Americans and their social matriculation post-emancipation. The revisions suggest hopeful aspirations for healing, his ostensible return and mobility in the

---

[147] Brown, William Wells. 2014. *William Wells Brown: Clotel & Other Writings*. Vol. 247. Library of America.

[148] Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2018. *Sensual Excess : Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance / Amber Jamilla Musser.* New York: New York University Press Pg. 10

American South and a wishful imagining for Black American progress as imaginaries around Reconstruction continues to manifest.

The four installments following Brown's initial story (spanning from 1853-1867) enables the imaginative writer to contemplate if there's *more* to the story. As the complexities of these experiences and expectations for comprehensibility intersect with subjects such as "freedom," "return," and "home" Brown's argument continues the practice of demonstrating a personal skepticism and disenchantment for black well-being under the duress of white American society. He uses his own embodied experiences as a mixed race fugitive to speak to the objectives of abolition as well as his own aspirations for black progress post emancipation.

Where is Home; Nowhere to Go

Just as Walker *reconstructs* the scene of Clotel's escape and moves her toward otherwise possibilities Brown simultaneously appropriates the romantic tradition and imagines the ostensible mobilizations of the black population amid a post-war era, i.e.—Reconstruction. I extend to ask—when thinking of Clotel elsewhere and beyond the conditions of her confinement—how does the imaginary of Reconstruction facilitate Brown's criticism of the social fabula. How does it also offer Brown the opportunity to reflect on his negotiations of self-efficacy within southern Antebellum life?

When Clotel runs away to the Long Bridge, the inclusion of the cape allows us to consider the futures of emancipated black subjects when fleeing to destinations of "unfreedom."[149] Roberto Montero illuminates further on the subject in his essay "Love in the

[149] Montero, R. (2018). Love in the Flesh, Toni Morrison and Hortense Spillers 30 years after Beloved and Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe. *Alpenglow: Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activity, 4*(1). Retrieved from https://orb.binghamton.edu/alpenglowjournal/vol4/iss1/4 Pg 4

Flesh, Toni Morrison and Hortense Spillers 30 years after Beloved and Mama 's Baby, Papa 's Maybe." He writes,

> Yet if running away implies an origin and a destination, where is the destination where black life can be free? Even once Sethe finally escapes from Sweet Home, she can still be returned at any moment. This is the impossibility of finding a destination where black life is safe. The paradox of running away without a destination results in the animating event of the novel; when Sethe kills her daughter because schoolteacher has found her. If crossing the Ohio River did not make Sethe free, then the origin of her unfreedom must not be in the spatial operations of the plantation unless that particular form of power operates beyond the material conditions of enslavement.[150]

Brown reflects on the aftermaths of emancipation in his 1867 novel: *Clotelle or the Colored Heroine A Tale of the Southern States.* Considering the calamity of the Civil War Brown queries on the subject of "destination" and black sustainability in the post-war period. In extension of his original novel, the continued and seemingly unresolved desire for emancipation amplifies Brown's assessment of liberation. What do performances of freedom look like for the previously enslaved person? Through complex negotiations of home, how would a previously enslaved person come to determine a destination for safekeeping in a racist society?

Imagining insurgent and emancipatory mobility seems to be subject Brown takes up in similarity to Walker's visual reconstruction of the heroine. The issue of locating a "destination" amid the constraints of terror are found in the manifestation of Clotel's (1853) "cape," thus further playing into the paradox of the heroine's escape. To extend, Brown imagines Clotelle (1876) in confrontation with the issue of mobility. Paralleling Brown's own circumstance and

---

[150] Ibd

thoughts about return and home-making[151] amid a disenchanting Reconstruction, the (1867) imaginary proposes an enigmatic performance where autonomous 19th century black subjects can envision their existence and rearrange their positions in history. Brown attempts to imagine Reconstruction *actualized*.

The 1867 novel begins with an introduction to Poplar Farm where Clotel is enslaved. The site of the plantation is romanticized in careful language, setting the tone for a whimsically illustrated picture of Southern planation life. It reads:

> The Poplar Farm as it was called, was situated in a beautiful valley, nine miles from Natchez, and the Mississippi River. The once unshorn face of nature had given way, and the farm now blossomed with a splendid harvest. The neat cottage stood in a grove, where Lombardy poplars lift their tops almost to prop the skies, where the willow, locust, and horse-chestnut trees spread forth their branches, and flowers never ceased to blossom."[152]

The sentimental conventions as apparent in the beginning of the novel are described in relation to the social mythos of the time, and problematizes it as the *tale* of the southern states. The plantation operates as a magical landscape that depicts white Southern life as a treasured relic. On the other end of the spectrum, Poplar Farm is treated in an uncanny register. Brown's personal history at a St. Louis plantation,–engulfed with Poplar trees and the burning effects of tobacco–allows Brown to draw connections to Virginia and Jefferson's estate, Poplar Forest[153].

---

[151]Ibd

[152] See Chapter III. Brown, William Wells. n.d. *Clotelle : or The Colored Heroine : A Tale of the Southern States . / William Wells Brown.* Place of publication not identified: Research Publications.

[153] Poplar Forest plantation was solely created to increase revenue via slave labor and the predominant production of tobacco that wasn't generated on his larger Monticello plantation. Shortly after Jefferson's death in 1826 Poplar Forest was sold

Whether intentionally framed by Brown through narrative juxtaposition, the coincidences between his life experience and that of his fictional character Clotelle remain in effect. Brown arguably identifies the reason for his enslavement as connected to the larger Jeffersonian legacy, and the history of the colonial project and its American edifices. Arguably, one can read this as Brown pondering on the similarities between Jefferson's enslaved children and himself. The site of poplar trees elicits a particular "site of memory"[154] that is fondly curated in neat retrospection.

Enigmatic Portrayals of Return

Once Clotelle escapes captivity and flees to Europe[155] she is reunited with her husband Jerome Fletcher (who is also a fugitive). After reuniting with her sick father in France—who is no longer characterized as Jefferson in the novel, but a fictional slave-owning Virginian governor in comparison to previous versions. Clotelle convinces him to return to Virginia and free his slaves and her father subsequently endows her with a hefty inheritance. Once hearing about the rebellion, the Fletcher's mutually decided to journey back to the southern states in efforts to aid the Union cause. In a shocking turn of events, Brown's incitation of a picturesque romance turns

---

[154] As written in her essay, Toni Morrison finds that black imaginative works that recall from historical memories of enslavement are "route[s] to the reconstruction of a world; an exploration of an interior life that was written." Morrison's methodology: what she calls: "literary archaeology" is her: "journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: [Morrison's] reliance on the image - on the remains - in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth." William Wells Brown site of memory as manifested by the poplar trees, utilizes histories of enslavement in order to reconstruct the landscape. Clotel's return to poplar farm and the reconfiguration of the space conveys the potential to get to a historical truth where centering black imagination and autonomy creates more progressive worlds.

[155] Appealing to his domestic audience, Brown's use of sentimentality are amplified in his narration of Clotelle's escape. In lieu of Brown's previous portrayals of Clotel, shown cross-dressing and racially passing in pursuit of liberation the 1867 version of Clotelle wears a veil in order to pass and does so as a French men's sister, who then pledges to marry her after their arrival to France. The gentleness of the passage and the maintained suppleness of Clotelle conveys Brown's relationship to the romance genre to be viewed as especially deliberate.

sour when Jerome is forcefully drafted into the war, consequently resulting in his morbidly written death. In Chapter thirty-six "The Return to Home" Brown shares the happenings of Jerome's death day:

> '. . .who will volunteer to go for Capt. Payne's body?' shouted the officer. Four men sprang forward. . . one was Jerome Fletcher, the hero of our story. They started upon the run . . .when two of the number were cut down. Of these, one was Jerome. His head was entirely torn off by a shell. The body of the deceased officer having been rescued an end was put to the human sacrifice.[156]

Shortly thereafter Jerome's death, the exhaustive contributions of the black body during the war time period is shown two-fold: in Jerome's indistinguishable and fragmented corporeal make-up alongside the once beautifully depicted Clotelle who Brown now described as a "rodent"[157][158] as a result of war-time labor. Having laboriously aided in the recovery and fortification of white livelihood amid the war, Brown's romantic investment becomes rather dystopian in tone. Brown finds that the existence of black suffering—via the Fletcher's corporeal fungibility— has seemingly persisted even after emancipatory prospects were achieved.

The agency and mobility of Brown's characters were stunted by their complicated decision to return to the South. The portrayal of a complicated "Sweet Home" layered with romantic language and overlapping with the devastating brutalities that have burdened black life

---

[156] Ibd

[157] In the concluding chapter Clotelle was illustrated as seemingly unattractive due to her laborious contributions to the Union Army and other imprisoned captives. Brown writes, "'You is jes as wet as a drowned rat,' said the mulatto woman, who met Clotelle as she entered the negro's cabin." Brown articulates what has been lost in the conquest of freedom, and ruminates on whether or not these instances of black corporeal fungibility exist in continuum to the contrary efforts of abolition. See Pg. 114.

[158] Ibd pg 114

conveys Brown's obscure relationship to "home" and feelings regarding the romanticization of the war. In the essay "Civil War Wounds William Wells Brown, Violence and the Domestic Narrative," Jennifer James further contextualizes the rhetorical shift in Brown's fiction:

> "Brown questions whether the cultural vocabulary most dominant in 19th-century America can function within postbellum black protest fiction. He raises a similar question in abandoning the black corporeal fantasy embodied by the hero and heroine he sculpted so meticulously for the Clotel novels: Focusing on the alterations made to these bodies and the alterations to the Clotel narratives. . . Brown's unwillingness to provide Jerome and Clotelle with either a protective domestic narrative or a protective corporeal language in the Civil War section of the 1867 revision reflects the writer's disillusionment in the years following the conflict, a disillusionment that led him to create a depiction of the "Rebellion" that rejects the laws that govern sentimentality for the laws that govern the frankly unsentimental project of war."[159]

James states that Brown's "rejection of 'sentimentality'" in his fiction is realized within his larger critique of the post-bellum social fabula. Brown further problematizes the idealization of war and the Reconstruction era thereafter— as a redemptive attempt to produce white southern progress rather than an initiative to procure social equality. James goes on to write that "Brown apparently realized that neither fictive depictions of black heroism on the battlefield nor idealized representations of black matrimony would effect black equality in real, rather than imagined, worlds." Arguably, Brown critiques the imaginary initiatives that are in-fact present in *real life*. Brown plays with this imagined landscape to think critically about the white American imagination and how it actively works against black progress.

[159] James, Jennifer. 2005. "'Civil' War Wounds: William Wells Brown, Violence, and the Domestic Narrative." *African American Review* 39 (1/2): 39–54. Pg 41

Just as Toni Morrison describes the early American Romance genre as oscillatory in both capturing the "terrors"[160] and desires of human freedom—in this case—we should recognize tense contradictions as "inherent"[161] to the romantic genre. Brown still pursues the overarching desire that his previously composed narratives aimed for and achieved, which was to deconstruct these contradictions. Brown uses them to design possibilities for black livelihood both within and beyond the constraints of oppression. Arguably Brown's perceived "rejection" is directed toward these violent American literary traditions that have marginalized the contributions of black people within the American social schema pre and post war. Moreover, Brown's disillusionment acknowledges an already unfeeling white audience, which begets the question: whether the sorrowful nature of Jerome's and Clotelle's "corporeal transformations" (unidentifiable to their previous characteristics as established over a decade) evoke the collective melancholia of a grieving black community.

In lieu of constructing a Lost Cause style attempt to romanticize the war and the deceased white patriots who died within them, Brown's exposure of these contradictions toward antebellum and Lost Cause enthusiasms are rendered essential to his polemic in *Clotelle* (1867). he excluded narratives, the brutality, the shadowed presence of Black people in war tales and Clotelle's construction as both a "rodent" and "angel" of unrelenting kindness amid these scenes of violence conveys what has been made absent i.e.,--the essentiality of Black people in these histories. If Brown abandons the black corporeal fantasy embodied by "the hero and heroine" trope, the indiscernibility of their making via the horrific decapitation of Jerome, and Clotelle's unlikely figure invites us to think about the utility of opacity under this guise. Brown's imaginary

---

[160] Morrison, Toni. 1993. *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination / Toni Morrison.* First Vintage books edition. New York: Vintage Books. Pg 37

[161] Ibd 37

becomes as a method to discuss the complex feelings of mourning and longing felt by Black people during Reconstruction.

Might we use the term readaptation in lieu of rejection then? Brown *readapts* the sentimental novel (as apparent during this time) in consideration of these enigmatic performances of freedom that take place post-emancipation. Although elements of tragedy and the possibility of romance befalls Clotel(lle) in each iteration, his concluding edition insists that his audience must *feel for scenes* that are not easily comprehensible to the domestic Southern reader. The choices made by Clotelle: her affections for home and the unlikely affections for her father are not simply reduced within "Black and white" framing. Beyond the antiquated tropes and archetypes that previously comprised the genre, Brown's adaptation of nostalgia for the rebellion alongside his sentimentalized negotiations of home conveys a complicated romance of a Black Southern affinity not easily *understood*.

In the conclusion of the novel Clotelle returns to Poplar Farm. Just as Walker lends us to imagine the ostensible places the *superfluous* heroine might *go* Brown decides to envision the once doomed figure in a position of empowerment. Facilitating her return to the site radically imagines her as a new social subject. Once referred as impossible to the 19th century subject, Clotelle is rewritten/reimagined as a liberated black woman demonstrating performances of freedom in unlikely registers. What does Clotelle do with her inheritance, how does she reconstruct the space? Clotelle's reunion with the estate is written with gentle optimism. It states:

> In the summer of 1866, the Poplar Farm, on which she had once lived as a slave, was confiscated and sold by Government authority, and was purchased by Clotelle, upon

which she established a Freedmen's School, and where at this writing,—now June 1867,—resides the 'Angel of Mercy.'"[162]

The revitalization of her old home into a Freedmen's school enables us to note the similarities between Brown's own complex feelings of home and Clotelle's open-ended configuration. At the time of its publication Brown "lived in Boston because he had to live in Boston, but he dreamt of living happily on Poplar Farm where he had once lived unhappily. The 'Conclusion' of 1867 fabricates for his heroine that improbable dream."[163] What gets sentimentalized in the 1867 installment is a longing for scenes yet to come into fruition. Black futures at the sites of their subjugation is the topic of reckoning for Brown and the black community alike during Reconstruction.

The statement allows us to ponder if Brown's story is still incomplete or if there is nothing more to add as his concluding rendition exists in conversation with artistic rendering conceptualized in our contemporary moment—such as Walker's piece in her visual essay. Now that the once speculated relationship of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson has now been placed into an updated and newfound historical record, does that leave room for more imaginative writing as the relationship still deeply informs our current deliberations of these racial politics? The repetition of these histories and their imagined reconstructions conveys an embodied attachment where the intersection of corporeality and knowledge production impart habitual ways of knowing.

Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider recognizes this historical process in her example of "the African American descendants of Thomas Jefferson who didn't need [a] DNA

---

[162] See Chapter XXXIX Brown, William Wells. n.d. *Clotelle : or The Colored Heroine : A Tale of the Southern States . / William Wells Brown.* Place of publication not identified: Research Publications. Pg 114

[163] Ibd

test to tell them what they remembered through oral transmission."[164] The ways in which "the body remembers" showcases how performance, play, fabulation, or imaginative writing relay more about these relational subjectivities. Schneider extends to say,

> To read "history," then, as a set of sedimented acts that are not the historical acts themselves but the act of securing any incident backward – the repeated act of securing memory – is to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition. This is not to say that we have reached the "end of history," neither is it to say that past events didn't happen, nor that to access the past is impossible. It is rather to resituate the site of any knowing of history as body-to-body transmission.[165]

As iterated previously, the final installment of Brown's novel opens up rumination on both the repetitiveness of Brown's story i.e.—the creation of the four modified texts, and the way the unending approach to the novelist's composed model enables further rethinking. These intimate relations exist in repetition and these embodied technologies—sites of knowing—render a continued radical praxis--as Brown arguably designs. Considering enslaved histories, the notion of return, repetition, (re)-embodiment, and fabulation Brown finds productive intersection.

Yet, and as these new stories would have it, the remains (bodies, sites of memory, historical records) that revolve and reveal these intimate networks mobilize us toward new narratives and inter-temporalities where histories pass through bodies across time and space. In Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's *My Monticello* she facilitates Schneider's thinking and works in historical lineage to narratives like Brown's. By representing the unrepresentable, these mythic renderings of the Hemings-Jefferson descendant that have previously manifested in tropological

---

[164] Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Florence: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852873. Pg. 104

[165] Ibd

procedure divulges contemporary imaginations of black American experiences while using these enigmatic histories to do so.

The Body Knows; The Body Remembers

"We claimed it first, this little mountain. Me and MaViolet and a scattering of neighbors, all of us fleeing First Street after men came to set our row of tin-roofed homes on fire[166] . . .My Monticello. The words formed low and unbidden in my throat, barely parting my lips to escape."[167] The opening lines of Jocelyn Nicole Johnson's dystopian novella fiction *My Monticello* begins with a brief reflection from the UVA[168] educated protagonist, Da'Naisha Hemings Love whose narration concludes Johnson's multi-faceted afro-speculative story. Named after her ancestor Sally Hemings, Da'Naisha recalls her journey and ancestral return to the mountain-top that Thomas Jefferson's old plantation home is perched on.[169]

Following the murder of Heather Heyer during the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia protest, Johnson imagines the subsequent instigations produced by the violent white supremacist rioters in the wake of their calamitous "Unite the Right Rally"—an event that Johnson emphasizes as arguably life altering. Amid a climate disaster engendering phones to glitch, causing black outs and immobilizing day-to-day operations, the commencement of the white supremacist spearheaded purging of local black Virginians led Da'Naisha, her grandmother, MaViolet, her white boyfriend Knox and other distant neighbors to Monticello in search of a structural safe haven. The family's return to the acclaimed site—although set under tumultuous conditions—

[166] Johnson, Jocelyn Nicole. *My Monticello* Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition. Pg. 62

[167] Ibd. 11

[168] Ibd.

[169] Ibd.. 70

enabled Da'Naisha to stake claim to her heritage on the complicated soil that defined her ancestors livelihood.

Critically engaging topics of home and identity in Black America, Johnson utilizes the complexities surrounding the speculated relationship of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson to critique the lingering effects of slavery that "the body remembers."[170] Via "body-to-body-transmission,"[171] the embodied knowledge passed through each Love descendant who expressed their unrelenting *knowing* of these absent histories catalyzed their relational affinities to each other, Monticello; its relics, and the haunting Virginia landscape at large. Johnson identifies that these embodied technologies and geographies of oppression shaped Da'Naisha's—and our present-day black community's— proximity to these enslaved histories.

In the conclusion of Johnson's brief narrative, the looming overthrow of the now pregnant protagonist's encampment at Monticello was underway. Through first-person perspective Da'Naisha articulates her feelings about her imminent death and her intimate ties to the space. Da'Naisha's internal monologue reads as follows:

> "I've collected everybody's names, along with the dates of our births and MaViolet's dying day. I'm placing these pages inside Thomas Jefferson's book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, tucked between his accounting of the widths of our rivers. . . They might well overtake us, but they will not win this house—not whole. If our bodies are found here, I hope we are buried between the two graveyards, so that we can stay together at least.

---

[170] Ibd. Pg. 69

[171] Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Florence: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852873. 104

Buried or not, we'll watch over all that happens here, forever and ever, along with all the others who've lived and dreamed and died here."[172]

DaNaisha's expressed attachment to the former plantation; now sanctuary, conveys these enigmatic affections for home even though the parameters of her confinement were caused by the violent proliferations of white supremacy. Her reclamation of the space is enacted thrice fold:

1. Through the poetics and imaginings of her and her family members' non-physical longevity at Monticello.
2. Via Da'Naisha's quasi-anthologizing and readaptation of Jefferson's famously written compendium*, Notes on the State of Virginia.* Showcasing Johnson's own critical rethinking of Jefferson's influence in framing white America's socio-political identity and the perplexing contradictions that facilitated the existence of Da'Naisha and kin.
3. Lastly, via Da'Naisha's initiation of combat, and her threats to destroy the building as means to perform her both genealogical and physical claims to *her Monticello*.

These performances of reclamation also signify a belonging defined by Da'Naisha's birthright—something Jefferson's politics regarding black corporeal autonomy argued in disfavor of. The action of recultivating Jefferson's text exhibited Johnson's thoughtful critique on the black populations involvement and position within the national community. Johnson questions the utility of a rewrite, the deconstruction of American institutional structures, and whether or not the nation is already seeded within a state of disunity.

[172] Johnson, Jocelyn Nicole. *My Monticello* Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition. Pgs. 204-205

Martha Jones' examination on pre-Civil War Afro-Baltimoreans and Virginians displaying performances of national belonging and their claims to citizenship[173][174] acts as a historical precursor to Johnson's futurist novella. Johnson argues that these dystopian settings (19th century America/21st century America) don't look differently from one another. As a matter of fact, Da'Naisha's "claim" or right to accessibility of Monticello locates a long history of sentience where black people were violently denied claims to space and body.

Johnson imagines how these performances are yielded in our current state of apocalyptic unraveling and emphasizes the complex dynamics that inform our present relations to 19th century histories. Using the embodied memory of the Hemings-Jefferson children—that were passed along to the respective Love matriarchs— Da'Naisha reshapes Monticello in her image. Johnson writes, "We would not hurt anything for the sake of hurting it, but we were not tourists. I slashed each ribbon and blocking rope in that first room, feeling a mixture of relief and indignation."[175] The reconstruction of the space parallels Brown's rendering of an empowered Clotelle who returns to Poplar Farm in efforts to revitalize the landscape as a site of refuge and longevity within sites of suffering. In similar parallel of Alfred Jackson, we see this historical-

---

[173] Examining the socio—political developments of early African-Americans at the forefront of her text, Martha Jones shows how these changemakers shaped and challenged U.S. legal structures and redefined their pursuits of citizenship in the Antebellum Era. Claims for birthright citizenship did not begin with the 14th Amendment. Instead, Jones gives a pre and independent history in the local setting of Baltimore that shows how African-Americans reclaimed modes of citizenship before any legislation passed. In fact, black Americans were politically aggressive, irrefutably diligent amid the varying threats that opposed their very existence. As the subject of birthright citizenship was questioned by the Trump administration, Jones and her book served as remedy to these warring conflicts both past and present. By writing a history in troubled times, Jones adds to the ongoing questions revolving black agency and black political discourse in the 19th century. Jones informs her current readers the historical importance of asserting birthright claims within the black community. Jones proves that these claims to national belonging were accessible through performing forms of citizenship and these acts could in fact tell us about racial and relational subjectivity.

[174] Jones, Martha S. *Birthright Citizens : A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

[175] Johnson, Jocelyn Nicole. *My Monticello* Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition. Pg.90

fictional tracing emerging. The oscillatory feelings of "relief and indignation"[176] describe Johnson's mutually complex negotiations of home. Johnson similarly asks—as Da'Naisha flees in search of refuge— if a destination of safety is attainable as the expansive threat of captivity extends beyond the plantation and into our contemporary moment. In reverse, Da'Naisha's repossession of Monticello functions as both safe haven and reminder of the hegemonic structures that have fixed her predicament.

What makes Johnson's work so impactful for our current socio-political understanding of these histories, is the fact that it follows in tradition with works of African American art and literature that contend with "the afterlives of slavery" and imagine the function of remains, the black body and reembodiment. Specifically highlighting the interlinkages between black subjectivities past and present, Johnson's reperformance of the "mulatta heroine" proposes a corporeal interchangeability where both Johnson, Brown and even Walker imagine the Hemings-Jefferson descendant as a contested figure affecting and informing representations of the post-slavery subject. Using fabulation as method for the narrative fiction Johnson imagines the cataclysmic impact of historical events extending from American slavery to violent white supremacist protests that have mutually walked in tradition with political figures like Jefferson.

The lingering effects of Jeffersonian ideologies that have regulated Da'Naisha's ontological formation puts into perspective the "inbetweeness" of Clotel's (1853) position. On the Long Bridge, between the white house and Virginia slave pens, the material conditions of enslavement are realized by these institutional structures, where American politics and the peculiar institution are emphasized as mutually inner-working entities. Da'Naisha similarly occupies that terrain and through her complicated inheritance, posits the plantation as a place of

[176] Ibd

belonging, a site of brutality and possibility. Da'Naisha's entry overturns the primacy of these Western archival projects on its head. Johnson emphasizes what Lisa Woolfork describes as "bodily epistemologies"[177] as method to rethink these "sites of history."[178] Recognizing the power dynamics that have obscured the potentiality of "love" in the Hemings-Jefferson relationship, Johnson conceptualizes Da'Naisha *Love* Hemings as a representation of genealogical rupture. Da'Naisha, an inheritor of the Monticello estate, brings with her its ideological and material collapse. As the opaque fabulation of Johnson's historical fiction propose—in genealogical formation—what Sally love ostensibly looks like in our contemporary moment, one sees Johnson's reimagination of the relationship as working against the violence solely attached to Sally's circumstance. Is Sally's humanity only articulated as such.

The Remains We Inherit

Da'Naisha's internal proclamation to watch over the space "forever and ever, along with all the others who've lived and dreamed and died here"[179] in anticipation of her death recalls her body to a new period in time; whilst being attached to a landscape of violence i.e., Monticello. At the moment of her disappearance Da'Naisha longs for her body to *remain* by being buried in the same site her ancestors occupied as the invaders rush the plantation. The presumed "afterlives" of the looming event renders Da'Naisha in perpetuity where her performance of reclamation becomes materiality or "itself through disappearance." The instability of time generates new performances that collapse the past and present, thus enabling instances of

[177] Woolfork, Lisa. *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

[178] Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Florence: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852873. 104

[179] Johnson, Jocelyn Nicole. *My Monticello* Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition. Pg.90

permanency amid "disappearance." In his work *Embodying Black Experience* Harvey Young regards the black body's proximity to violence and absence and delineates this friction as an inevitable phenomenon that encompasses the black experience.

In *My Monticello* Johnson attempts to dually "re-member"[180] the Love-Hemings family through the spatial networks and bodily epistemologies that facilitated their unavoidable return. Changing and taking Monticello down with her Da'Naisha materializes the overwritten and absent histories of her ancestors, and regains autonomy within the historical gaps. The traumas and brutalities that Da'Naisha apparently inherits calls into question whether or not retrievability or rescue is possible and when attempting to rethink the sites of history and illuminate the "whole story" what kind of futures are left for us?

Johnson renders Da'Naisha's story unresolved leaving it up to the reader to imagine what happens next. Does she evade capture? Is she successful in blowing up Monticello, will the white supremacist "lynch mob" get her first? Does she remain? Coincidentally Johnson wasn't the only black imaginative thinker who began to ponder the lingering effects of enslavement as it relates to unresolved tensions surrounding "The Dusky Sally Story"[181][182] and the aftermath of Unite the Right Rally. After listening to Wesley Morris' and Jenna Wortham's podcast "Still Processing: Anguish and Anger Over Charlottesville" playwright James Ijames sought to tackle the ongoing issue of anti-black violence and similarly to Johnson's literary evocation— the pressing question of black "inheritance."

---

[180] See "Housing the Memory of Racial Violence" Young, Harvey. 2010. *Embodying Black Experience : Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body / Harvey Young.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Pg. 185

[181] A quick note that the language circulating around this era was derogatory. I only reiterate it to portray the murkiness of Sally's position always teetering the line between history and fantasy.

[182] Farrison, W. Edward. "CLOTEL, THOMAS JEFFERSON, AND SALLY HEMINGS." *CLA Journal* 17, no. 2 (1973): 147–74. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44328538.

What histories inform our legacies and how is black longevity made possible within these calamitous conditions? Journalist Cassie Owens illustrates the inspiration behind Ijames' work. She writes, "Cohost Jenna Wortham, a University of Virginia alum, reflected on their experience in Charlottesville, noting: 'On Valentine's Day, there are all these signs that go up that say, like T.J. loves Sally.' 'And I was like, ''That's a play,'' remembered Ijames."[183] Wortham further explains the harmful implications behind such an insinuation, and how it plays into the myths of the Charlottesville community and the University of Virginia's arguably romantic mode of history telling:

> . . .it's part of this larger rewriting of a historical narrative and a historical record, right, that slaves had it good, and that slavery was actually kind of benevolent. And it wasn't that bad. How bad could it have been? And that town really exists as a weird fantasy of what it was like to be part of the Confederacy. The campus is absolutely beautiful. It does have this slow, syrupy feeling of what it meant when America was great again, before, you know?
>
> 184

These fantasies purport a dangerous rhetoric that fails to include the realities of the black female captive, an instructed non-person; lacking "bodily integrity."[185] The incapability of performing as an agential subject obscures the violent power relations by which these intimacies were enacted. The transportive element that the fabula creates merges bodies across time engendering

---

183 *The Philadelphia Inquirer (1969)*. 2022. "Please Stop Twerking: James Ijames Tackles Inheritance in 'TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever'", 2022.

184 Morris, Wesley, and Jenna Wortham. 2017. "Still Processing: Anguish and Anger Over Charlottesville: Still Processing." *New York Times (Online)*, 2017.

185 Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 34:35, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0

21st century Charlottesville locals and students as complying members of the Confederacy whether knowing or unknowingly.

The institution's (UVA) overt involvement in rewriting this historical narrative showcases the systemic regularities or norms necessitated for its function. An American way of life with "creative potential"[186] relies on racial distinction, black inferiority and most importantly the black female body being the vessel through which the perpetuation of this logic can be mobilized. The syrupy phrase in UVA's "TJ loves Sally" sign echoes a sickly sweet and sticky relationality, where the white American romance relies on a continuing insentient black female body to realize itself in categorical order. If Sally is still *stuck* into a position of unfeeling subjugation, Ijames realizes that syrupy fantasy (as contextualized by Wortham) sticks to him too.

"Virginia Play" at UVA

James Ijames' *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever* negotiates the retelling of these violent intimacies in the contemporary while reckoning with the issues of sexual misconduct and what it means to deconstruct interracial power dynamics between student and administrator. What is most offered from the production, is not only the impact of enslavement and its presence in the institution, but its critique on the intersections between intimacy and racial violence. As further encapsulated by Hortense Spillers, "the act of sex doesn't belong to the human and social process . . . on the contrary it's a state of vicious and routinized entanglement,"[187] where the black female subject, is

---

[186] Morrison, Toni. 1993. *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination / Toni Morrison.* First Vintage books edition. New York: Vintage Books. 37

[187] Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 164

embedded with so much “sexual potential that she has none at all.”[188] The routinized entanglement as emphasized by Spillers captures Ijames consideration of inheritance, the traditional and syrupy notion of the benevolent master and his subservient and indifferent slave and how these non-consenting entanglements affects us past and present.

In Ijames’ production, the character Sally is the embodiment of Sally Hemmings and is shown thwarting the sexual pursuits from her Dean, “TJ” (Thomas Jefferson “a descendent of sort”[189]) at the University of Virginia. At the beginning of the production Sally tries to discern the implications of the word “inheritance,” and tries to trace its intrapersonal linkages. Having an aside with the audience Sally states:

> I’m trying to make sense of something that happened. . .Yes. Inheritance. I’m going to bring out the company now. . . Im going to have us [Sally refers to TJ, and her black girlfriends Pam and Annette] all stand in a line here. And I want you all to just look at us and consider what we have inherited from our ancestors? Now...look at your hands. Both sides. What inheritance do they carry? I was going to just put it in a status update but...I felt like I needed to tell it with my body. The inheritance is real, and ugly, and uncomfortable, insane, unsafe and unreasonable . . .[190]

[188] Ibd

[189] Ijames James *TJ Loves Sally 4* Ever Publication Unknown Pg. 95

[190] Ibd

As history would tell it, Thomas Jefferson would inherit Sally from his wife's father John Wayles.[191][192] The toll of inheritance not only weighs on Sally's deliberation of the subject historically, but the ways these ancestral histories seep into performances of gender, race or class. Reminiscent of DuBois' "theory of ugly progress:" "a looping conception of time . . .between the disappointments of the past and hopes for the future, with each formed in confrontation with the other,"[193] Ijames mutually recognizes the inheritance of these confrontations that loop and entangle us between bodies past and present. Sally's mediation on what we gather from our ancestors suggests a practice of looking back in order to discern and hope for new futures but that the process is in-fact "ugly."[194]

So what does Sally inherit? Instances of possession and exploitation determine the interactions between Sally (a black female student) and TJ (a white male dean), and innately reify the discomforting power dynamics that have existed between the two historically. However, the obscurity of the relationship, the exactness of its ramifications and the popular desire for its visibility leaves gaps. The interstitial space is where Ijames finds opportunity for rupture. One scene captures this moment of deconstructive reimagination:

---

[191] In the 1999 C-Span interview historian Annette Gordon Reed further articulates on the subject in discussion of her book, *Thomas Jefferson & Sally Hemings An American Controversy*. Gordon states: "He would have met her when she was about three years old, which would have been 1776--'75, '76. She was part of--if you can use the--you can believe these terms--the inheritance of his wife. When his wife's father died, he came into possession as the male, came into possession of upwards of 135 slaves, I believe, and one of them was Sally Hemings, so she was a little girl the first time he would have encountered her." Reed's brief hesitancy on the use of the term "inheritance" regarding Jefferson's eventual ownership of Sally exemplifies the underlying conception of property and the position of objecthood that the black enslaved person occupied. How is love obscured when the possession overwhelms the circumstance? Is Jefferson merely fond of his right to subjugation?

[192] "C-SPAN Book notes," "Annette Gordon-Reed: Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy." Program Air Date: *February 21, 1999* www.booknotes.org

[193] Davidson, J. P. L. (2021). Ugly progress: W. E. B. Du Bois' sociology of the future. The Sociological Review, 69(2), 382–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120954330

[194] Ijames James *TJ Loves Sally 4* Ever Publication Unknown Pg. 95

TJ: I feel a deep desire for you Sally. Do you feel a deep desire for me?

SALLY You're making me uncomfortable.

TJ AHHHHHH! But you didn't say no.

SALLY No. I'm saying no.

TJ: I LOVE YOU!

Inheriting and embodying the personality of Sally proceeds a confrontation with terror. The question of abscondence is demonstrated by present-day Sally's ability to say "no." Ijames' Sally is already aware of these colonial ramifications that exist in the present and the dangers that these circumstances elicit. Romantic affections are returned as a matter of indifference but a direct rejection of ownership and objectification. If these inheritances are unreasonably given to Sally, Ijames wonders what spaces are safe, and what other spaces render black subjects to these conditions.

In the context of Tavia Nyong'o's *Afro-fabulations* and Schneider's and Young's contextualization of performing remains (as discussed in the reading of *My Monticello*) I extend to ask, in what way does Ijames' narrative *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever* collapse the present, past *and future*. In so doing, how does this black-poly-temporal practice disrupt the systems of coloniality we presumably inherit. To answer, the peculiar institution—or in this case UVA— becomes the historical site in which the performances of Sally and TJ can be re-negotiated/reperformed. Moreover Sally's "need to tell it with [her] body" also places precedence on the body as a mode of knowledge production. Via "body to body transmission"[195] –from past to present-day Sally— Ijames' problematizes the legacies of enslavement that permeate from our bodies and into our

[195] Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Florence: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203852873104

current institutional structures. Ijames deconstructs the institution's very rendering and enables his characters to transport through time and space and reach the "the promised(?) land."[196] In mobilizing Sally to a place gestured in freedom songs and spirituals, Ijames argues that black people innately possess the ability to dream and render into fruition new modalities of being through previous histories.

At the end of the production Sally and her friends become immersed in that "new world," and the audience is given the choice to join Sally or simply walk out the door. Varying directors of the production all envision that world differently. Director Pascale Fiorestal for instance, considered the indiscernibility of what that world might look like through green screen effects. Nevertheless, Ijames renders Sally and her friends as facilitators of the new world and describe it in relation to feeling. Sally states,

> I bet you're curious what this dope ass future is. Honestly...I don't know. It's kinda beyond me. But that shouldn't stop me from trying to imagine it. I don't know what it is...you know how at night you look at the sky and it just looks like it keeps going up. I imagine that's what it will feel like. I don't know. I hope it's bright. I hope there is enough for you and you and you and me. I hope there is fresh air. OH. And I hope no one is afraid. Only way to find out is to choose to go. You can go out the way you came in...ooooooooor you can come with us. No shame no judgement. But know this. It is a choice. You know you wanna.[197]

What the sensational interaction explores, is the possibility of existing in an anti-black world and what that may bring. In his work *Afro-fabulations* Tavia Nyongo extends to write, "the

---

[196] Ijames James *TJ Loves Sally 4* Ever Publication Unknown Pg. 95
[197] Ibd

proposition here, against all liberal universalisms and scientific positivities is to insist that we do not yet know what a human outside of an anti-black world could be, do, or look like. The critical poetics of afro-fabulation are a means of dwelling in the shock of that reality without ever becoming fully of it."[198] As the new world emerges after Sally and her friend Harold are shown tearing down the walls of the institution the viewer finds themselves seeking to understand something seemingly incomprehensible. They do not know that feeling yet these allusions to "the promise land" render *a kind of knowing*, unmistakable to the black subject.

Additionally, the production allows the audience to contemplate on a possibility of a Thomas Jefferson redemptive arc. After requesting if he could join them in the new world Sally proposes a vote. The viewer can charge Sally to choose if TJ gains entry into the "new world" with a simple "yes or no." When I viewed the production *I chose no*, but I have no idea what that no meant for me specifically or what it yielded. Does choosing no problematize Sally's autonomous status in the varied staged incarnations of "the changing same"—*Sally's Rape* comes to mind. Does solely prioritizing Black love, and efficacy in a non-anti-Black world mean only Black people can take up residence? What does that choice (in the context of freedom) say about performances of care, empathy, or love? What *can* Black performance *do*?

Deconstruction or Reconstruction? Imagining Elsewhere

At the beginning of the production Sally reckons with the subject of inheritance. The conclusion of the production encapsulates the recurring stakes of what we inherit and what we choose *to do* with it. Sally delivers a message to TJ, that is written to provoke a response within the audience :

---

[198] Nyong'o, Tavia. "Introduction: A Race against Time?" In *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, 1-26. New York: NYU Press, 2019. http://www.jstor.or\]g/stable/j.ctvwrm507.4. 26

> I think we know what we want our future to look like. I think we been dreaming it for centuries. I think we always lean towards the imagination of the future cause the present is sooo scary and dangerous and violent and...slow. Maybe it's time for you to sit and consider...what tomorrow looks like when everybody's free. That's how you get in here. I think. I'm not totally sure. It seems to be the way.

Ijames' gives his audience a blueprint to both imagine and move us toward new realities of freedom. How we get there is by existing in relation to the dreams of the past—in this case previously enslaved subjects—and leaning toward new imaginations that we might actualize within our present.

Maybe that's the key? Afterall, Reconstruction was about envisioning a future, but being informed by the past in order to do so. If Reconstruction was a chance at establishing an imagined "utopia," what traditions have we followed since then that continue to shape our dilapidated landscape and what dreams can we look back to in order to rethink history and what we inherit from it? What radical potential do these mythic formations offer? What does radical love—in the case Ijames' ongoing question—look like for Sally and her descendants?

"Sally *loves*". . . mobilized within these wayward traces, something considered impossible for the black female captive; explaining the possibility of these feelings cannot exist in this manner. So where is the generative site of expression for black female desire? As Brown would have it, the Hemings story is multivalent and not recalled for clear resolution, the gaps overshadowed by these mythic narratives of race rather facilitate a poetics of freedom within sites of denigration i.e., "Virginia Play." Conveying the circumstances of suffering and critiquing the questionable romanticization of such yields interstitial occupancy. In this case the goal is not transparent formulation, but radical uncertainty.

Ch. Three “Slave Play”: Vessels as an Organ and Reperforming Spectral Song

Why “Slave Play”?--

In this chapter, I adapt Jeremy O’Harris’ titled Slave Play to further contextualize the relationship between contemporary and historically minded fabulations and affinities for revisiting scenes of enslavement. Similar to O’Harris’ use of word-play in efforts to reframe our associations or relationships to kink culture and BDSM, I equally invest interest in reframing the way “Slave Play” is addressed in varying discourses and interpreted in the mainstream. I also call back to the ways “slave plays” or narratives about slavery have been staged and continue to be erected, and question these “processes of identification,”[199] when cataloging these slave plays and deferring them through visual registers. A toiling of “slave play" via the sensorial might allow readers to rethink what we know about enslaved histories, how we understand reperformances of slavery, and how we make sense of Black worlds.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs discusses this turn to a sensory engagement in her work Undrowned Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals. Gumbs writes,

> My grand poetic intervention here is a move from identification, also known as that process through which we say what is what . . . to identification, that process through which we expand our empathy and the boundaries of who we are become more fluid,

[199]Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. *Undrowned : Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals / Alexis Pauline Gumbs ; Foreword by Adrienne Maree Brown.* Chico, CA ; AK Press.

> because we identify with the experience of someone different, maybe someone of a whole different so-called species.[200]

While Gumbs considers human and non-human relationships as essential to this interspecies communion-making practice, Gumbs' intervention to identify with rather than to say "what is what" lends us to an affective engagement where emotion and sensation impact our understanding of Black life/experience and expressive cultures. In the case of "slave play," and how it is used in this chapter-- *much like O'Harris' play, but we will get to that later–* "slave play" transports us into "archives of feeling,"[201] a critical framework Ann Cvetkovic hemploys for archival objects too personal for documentation, both immaterial and material, and often existing in multiple cultural genres. O'Harris draws on taboo elements of sex, and mobilizes his audience to those "intimate spaces," of the Plantationscape where these "archives of feeling" are both ideologically and systemically housed. Edouard Glissant describes the Plantation as a "source of the opaque" that might reverberate and echo these indiscernible forms of Black expression. Teetering with the way they are revealed in cultural forms, music is the underlying intervention of O'Harris' work, gesturing to the ways in which intersections between race, sex, and politics contextualize the way Black music is embodied, informed and disseminated.

Returning to Gumbs shift to the sensory in their interspecies engagement, Gumbs calls for more directives from marine mammals. She states:

> Instead of simply identifying what was what, I had to go deeper. I took my cue from the many marine mammals who echolocate. I had to focus not on what I could see and discern but instead on what I was in relation to, how the sound bouncing off me in

---

[200]Ibd. Pgs 10

[201] Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings : Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

relationship to the structures and environments that surround me locates me in a constantly shifting relationship to you.[202]

Turning to processes of echolocation, Gumbs considers her relationship to the world, and how the shift to sonic navigation might redefine anthropocenic practices, prioritizations of sight and knowledge production. I dwell on Gumbs' affinity for echolocation in the context of "slave play", as a means to further highlight contemporary Black expressive cultures and relationships to sound within/about enslaved narratives. Particularly, the reverberations that are heard from these shared histories, how they bounce off landscapes of domination i.e., slave vessels, holds plantations, to homespaces, monuments, instruments, and to Black people–all in relation, familiar and restored.

"Slave Play" and its appropriation in this chapter brings forth five converging facets of the overarching polemic:

1. Slave Play is a form of "opaque fabulations"; *it is not a freedom-seeking project.*
2. Slave Play is an audiological and visual representation of these relational Trans-Atlantic histories and their afterlives.
3. Slave Play is an exorcise/exercise of spectral haunts and a method to *teach us* something about the Black experience.
4. Slave Play is eco-critical, inciting new world-making potentials that charge us to *listen* to the e/affects of ongoing catastrophe, note: however unpleasant, unmelodic, and incomprensible.

---

[202] Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. *Undrowned : Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals / Alexis Pauline Gumbs ; Foreword by Adrienne Maree Brown.* Chico, CA ; AK Press. Pg 8.

5. Slave Play is mobilized through phenomenological/embodied practice and sensory organs serve as canals through which it moves in and outside of you. You must have an ear for it. Slave play is a performance about listening.

Drawing from Black works of visual culture, theater and performance such as August Wilson's the *Piano Lesson*, Jason Moran and Kara Walker's *Kastastwof Karavan*, and Jeremy O'Harris *Slave Play* I ask–how these reperformances of American slavery explore the sensory in shared embodied practice. As sound reflects and bounces off Berniece/Charles Family piano, Walker and Moran's reconstruction of the steam calliope, and psychic and bodily felt traumas in the auditory phenomena of Kaneisha and Phillip, "slave play" provokes new imaginaries for being in the world and the way audience/listeners make sense of Trans-Atlantic slavery and its impact.

<u>Slave Play No 1</u>

"*...It is in this moment, from somewhere old , that Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents*[203].

BERNIECE: (Singing).

I want you to help me

Mama Berniece

---

[203]Wilson, August, and Toni Morrison. *The Piano Lesson*. 1st ed., Plume, 2007 pgs 106

I want you to help me.

Mama Esther

I want you to help me

Papa Boy Charles

I want you to help me

Mama Ola

I want you to help me.[204]

In the film adaptation of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1995) Wilson's narrative flourishes from the traditional stage to screen as the Charles family home is overcome with what Avery Gordon demonstrates as "ghostly matters."[205] The visual disturbance–elusively presented as the ghost of Robert Sutter[206]– jolts the audience to the sound of howling wind, the shuffling between fabrics of whirling curtains, the clicks of flickering lights, and the auditory eruption Berniece's song. Desperately stationed at the piano Berniece performs a rendition of only what the audience could interpret as "restored behavior." Described by Richard Schechner as both "symbolic and reflexive, [and] not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances,"[207]

---

[204] Ibd. 107

[205] Gordon, Avery F, and Janice Radway. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press xxi

[206] In the Piano Lesson, Robert Sutter was the owner of the Sutter plantation in Mississippi. Having bought a piano as a gift to his wife, Sutter was said to have exchanged his slaves in order to acquire it. The piano pictures a memorialization of those slaves Sutter departed with–the ancestors of Berniece and Boy Willie. In efforts to contend with his family's previous enslavement, Boy Charles steals the piano in order to end the persistent feeling that they were still somehow enslaved if the piano remained in the Sutter's home. Consequently Boy Charles is murdered by Sutter for his thievery.

[207] Schechner, Richard, and Victor W. (Victor Witter) Turner. 1985. *Between Theater & Anthropology / Richard Schechner ; Foreword by Victor Turner.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Berniece's possessed disposition engulfs her body as an “old urge to song” is “found.” Where is that song found exactly?

In the eruption of noise, a cacophony of keys intermixed with a violent whistling encompasses the scene. The overwhelming soundwaves are rendered somewhat indiscernible to the listener but utilized by Wilson as a cathartic intervention whereby feelings of pain and pleasure are unearthed in the exercising. The mystical element of Berniece's seemingly restored “slave play” serves as an audiological representation of the Charles' family's shared embodied memories. In explanation of this restoration, Wilson depicts Berniece’s ancestral possession as the cause for the song’s formation and Berniece’s sudden ability to play it. Berniece’s reluctance to approach the piano was previously driven by her efforts to not “wake them spirits,”[208] the same ancestral spirits Berniece claimed she could hear her mother talk to everytime she played the piano as a child. The piano’s position as both facilitator of these “ghostly matters” and the perceived exorcism raises questions (*in recitation of Jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran*) about the way a “piano opens things up in the home.”[209] The piano–especially in that of the Antebellum era– is not just statically situated as a display of wealth but it calls for a musical hermeneutics. Given Wilson’s narrative I ask– does a piano decorated by/within the atrocities of enslavement score differently?[210] Does it play a different tune? Do only certain bodies have *an ear* for it?

---

[208] Wilson, August, and Toni Morrison. *The Piano Lesson*. 1st ed., Plume, 2007 pg 70

[209]Moran, Jason, and Sam Gilliam. 2022. “Kara Walker and Jason Moran on "The Katastwóf Karavan."” YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSysEq0JAX4.

[210] In a conversation between Jason Moran and Kara Walker discussing their artistic work: “Kastastwóf Karavan” Moran asks Walker, “How does one score an atrocity” in contemplation of what motivated their work. I extend this similar provocation in summarization of–what I believe to be” Wilson’s underlying question in his narrative.

In *Piano Lesson*, characters Berneice and Boy Willie grapple with the issue of cultural and familial preservation. Boy Willie stresses the importance of acquiring the Sutter's land his ancestors had once labored on during the time of their enslavement in Mississippi. Berniece–in turn– values what little family possessions have been passed down and therefore avows to keep the Charles family piano. The subject of the piano ordained with carvings of Berniece and Boy Willie's ancestors remains polemically situated at the center of the narrative where Wilson incites this *exercising* (of sorts) between his audience and characters. The piano is both rendered monumentally and ornamentally significant. The relic's commemorative qualities invokes the histories that informed the Charles family's mobilizations while its decorative elements heighten its presumed value due to its idiosyncratic nature. Boy Willie sees the economic advantages of selling the piano and Berneice refuses to part with it. Their different stances–although grappling with the same issue of material ownership and Black familial efficacy– helps them confront the piano's elicited haunting. It was the relic's material relation to both the Sutters and the Charles family which further exacerbated its multi-temporaneous evocation. The ghost of Sutter is invoked after (the Charles' family and friends purport) he might've been *supernaturally* pushed down a well. Meanwhile the piano ecompasses a generational legacy. Its upkeep was maintained by those previously enslaved and the images of familial history depicted throughout memorialize the deceased.

The ancestral spirits that dwell within the piano, and the ones that are cast out when it is played by Berniece and kin speak to an unresolved history between the Charles family and the Sutters. Avery Gordon further articulates on the traces of these ghostly matters as such:

> What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes

more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.[211]

The haunting, facilitated by the piano's significance in material culture both symbolizes status in the Antebellum South and the function of the plantation economy in early American modernization. More specifically, the expropriated labor and likened technology and ornamentation of black bodies to both display and preserve the wealthy white Southern enterprise. The trade Robert Sutter makes between the enslaved inhabitants and the piano further represents the value exchange of both instrumental properties. The evocative piano fashions an *étude*, a site in which we could study these historical traces through its very composition. Perhaps Wilson posits that the spectral song created from the ensemble of Berniece and her ancestors alludes to the immaterial legacies of colonial violence and the deprioritization of visuality when seeking projects of liberation.

The tune rendered from Berniece's plea eerily places the audience between "two continents," temporalities, and multiple affective registers. The song arguably cultivates (for Berniece and kin) an alternative way of knowing and being in the world. Thus Wilson's scene of the phenomenological experience destabilizes the way we might make *sense* of our surroundings. In Don Ihde's *Listening and Voice: The Phenomenologies of Sound* Idhe turns to "auditory dimensions… as a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition to discover what may be

[211] Gordon, Avery F, and Janice Radway. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. NED-New edition, Second. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press xxi

missing as a result of the traditional double reduction of vision…"[212]The privileging of the visual in epistemological practice decenters other sensual relations that inform our embodied experiences. In reference to the invasiveness of auditory phenomena, Idhe articulates that Western thinking—in fact has its metaphoric roots within audiological experience and the histories of music and technological innovations also determine and curate our immersion within a "sound world."[213] He further writes:

> Instruments are the 'body' that extends and transforms the perceptions of the users of the instruments. This phenomenon may be considered apart from the usual considerations of the logic of sciences, inner languages of science in mathematics, and it may be investigated in terms of experience… If one playfully turns to a speculative consideration of the role of instrumentation as a means of embodied experience in relation to the rise of modern science, a hypothesis suggests itself.[214]

In short, meaning is not only established to instrumentals by musical knowledge and interpretations but the use of instruments are methods in which the body can extend its understanding and application in the world. Merleau Ponty further discusses this body to instrument experience in reference to space. He states, "Our body is not in space like things. It inhabits or haunts things. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object."[215]Berniece's relationship to the

---

[212] Ihde, Don. 2007. *Listening and Voice : Phenomenologies of Sound / Don Ihde.* 2nd ed. Albany: State University of New York Press. Pg. 13.

[213] Ibd 21

[214] Ibd 5

[215] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and James M Edie. 1964. *The Primacy of Perception : And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics / Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edited, with an Introduction by James M. Edie.* Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press. Pg. 5

piano, music making and how she inhabits her homespace among the relic's presence is an effect of the histories that came before her. In expulsion of Sutter's ghost, the ancestral possession of Berniece highlights this turn to collectivity rather than individual ownership the piano's economic potential realizes.

The tension between immaterial and material conventions embedded in the narrative as shown through the recreation of music-making and converged with the troubling histories of slavery details the complex arrangement of Wilson's imaginary. Drawing from phenomenologies of the Black experience, Wilson wrestles with the aftermath of Reconstruction, the turn to modernization and the issue of managing self/socio-economic sustainability in early Black Pittsburgh. Wilson asks his audience and characters–what one might do with an heirloom when notions of legacy have been stifled by enduring deterritorialization. The preservation of familial relics are deemed vital to the restoration of property as access to land, language, material possessions, and cultural heritage were dislocated from black bodies amid diasporic displacement.

Traveling through song Berniece repeatedly requests ancestral aid, and Berniece's ear perhaps becomes the passage point through which these inter-TransAtlantic subjectivities are heard and collectivized. The feeling of traveling to a moment in time–whether that be the piano's stationing at the Sutter plantation, Berniece's own childhood, or simply *elsewhere* as the phantasmic notes prompt feelings of [the] *beyond*– the presumed archaeacoustics elicit a historical sequence moving us through time and space. The ancestral song and piano accompaniment becomes a transportive hermeneutical tool, expanding previous conceptions of antiquated dramatic form through Berniece's "play." The expulsion of these colonial or white

supremacist apparitions are thus performed through alternative contexts both seemingly incomprehensible to the ear and fabulatory in method.

These diasporic provocations and the alteration of the vessel (in praxis) as a sensory organ begets an exploration of sound within Transatlantic histories/imaginaries. The soundscapes aboard the slave vessel are contextualized by Edouard Glissant as a suppressed expression of captives who came in confrontation with the "nonworld, from which [they] cry out."[216] In his introduction to *Poetics of Relation* Glissant extends by stating that, "within the ship's space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day."[217] These "reverberations" signal an endless echo chamber of assembled Black expression defiantly co-opting space and comprehensibility. Generating an emergent language from these diasporic subtexts these reverberating cries proliferate from the vessel into the modern world.

The suffocation of Black expression aboard the Middle Passage –as described by Glissant–conveys the slave ship as a site of opacity. The subdued utterances of Black voices rendered hybridized and concealed languages despite colonial aspirations to erase them and make Black thoughts, experiences, and modalities discernible. Born out of silence, one questions what of Black diasporic expression–like that of Berniece's haunting "slave play" at the piano–can be determined as "easily legible" when it derives from very opaque sites or "nonworlds" so submerged you were made not to *hear* them.

---

[216] Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation / Édouard Glissant ; Translated by Betsy Wing.* Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor [Michigan: The University of Michigan Press pg 5.

[217] Ibd. 6.

Glissant furthers this point in his deliberation on radical Black musicality within scenes of enslavement. Particularly that of the plantation site, another space of enclosure from which emerged a rhizomatic and multilingual mode of speech and thinking. Glissant states:

> It is understandable that in this universe every cry was an event. Night in the cabins gave birth to this other enormous silence from which music, inescapable, a murmur at first, finally burst out into this long shout— a music of reserved spirituality through which the body suddenly expresses itself. Monotonous chants, syncopated, broken by prohibitions, set free by the entire thrust of bodies, produced their language from one end of this world to the other. These musical expressions born of silence: Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growning cities . . . assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently differed in this varied speech. This was the cry of the Plantation transfigured in the speech of the world.[218]

One might posit Berniece's plea as an unlikely spiritual as it intertwines a supernatural sentiment while she yearns for help from something ancestral, divine or incorporeal as an ostensibly liberating force. Instead, Berniece's spectral song coalesces into a network of opaque Black poetics that was once situated as a "murmur."[219] The undertone of spirituals, blues, improvisational jazz and differed speech comes forth in the blended weaving of Berniece's weird play–which should be noted as ostensibly different in each dramatic rendering and potentially given new meaning as the *Piano Lesson* continues to be reperformed in our progressing contemporary moment. Nevertheless, Glissant's use of the term "murmur"[220] gestures to

---

[218] Ibd 73

[219] Ibd.

[220] Ibd

something indistinct, unmappable and moving. To distinguish something one must determine the obscure, but the imperceptibility of the supernatural realm composes otherworldly expressions only *knowable* to Berniece's listening ear as she collects notes "piece by piece."[221] Glissant's stance further adapts a polemic on transgressive Black musicality innately opaque yet fabulatory in creation as complex imaginations for emancipation or mere survival are exuded from these landscapes.

The Charles family piano and its initiated haunting sits between notions of kinship, and individual economic prosperity. The modern formation of the machinery catalyzes scenes of togetherness, as it draws in listeners into a musical experience, while also fashioning presentations of production in the industrial era. It is placed in the home as a figure of wealth and intelligibility, both difficult to acquire and learn. The instrument has its own language, and promotes a presumed exclusivity. In consideration of anti-literacy laws, the added prevention of accessibility in the adoption of the skillset among the enslaved was much more exacerbated. Wilson harkens to these historical residues with the piano's central presentation and incites demonstrations of Black musicality with aspirations of liberation. Wilson revels in these intersections where the subject of Black liberation and the modern piano aren't usually intertwined. Although histories of its technological progression in the modern era overlap with the history of TransAtlantic slavery and the function of colonial-capitalism, could an antiquated instrument sing the expulsion of a colonial haunting?

Slave Play No 2

Kara Walker and Jason Moran provoke this question even more so in discussion of their latest artistic project of the Kastatswóf Karavan (2021). In their discussion Walker reflects on

[221] Wilson, August, and Toni Morrison. *The Piano Lesson*. 1st ed., Plume, 2007 pgs 106

herself and Moran's introduction to the steam calliope instrument, and how its palpable difficulty and oldness likened to America's own construction. Walker and Moran–who wanted to challenge the calliope's traditional musical tonality questioned, "How to teach an antiquated machine like America… how to sing its own liberation."[222] Given this historically situated line of questioning, the premiere of Walker's carnivalesque circus wagon/steam calliope took place at Algiers Point in New Orleans, a historical site where slaves were held before being auctioned off into bondage. The National Gallery of Art describes the Karavan as such:

> [it is] a sculptural work of art with a steam calliope, a musical instrument used on steamboats and in carnivals in the 19th century. Kara Walker housed this calliope in a steel-wrapped wagon featuring her signature silhouettes, a style popular in portraiture of the same era, commonly used to depict an endearing subject. Walker upends this tradition by using silhouettes to represent the violence of slavery.[223]

Walker's notably acclaimed silhouettes are creatively narrativized, showcasing a moving performance illuminated by Jason Moran's musical accompaniment and the heightened whistling emerging from the calliope's steam. As the mistiness from the steam dramatically heightens the elusiveness of the imagery, Walker's representation of the enslaved renders an opaquely fabulated memorialization of Black expression and histories aboard this unlikely vessel.

On the right hand side, a depicted coffle of slaves amid low hanging trees and a towering orchestration of men in colonial garments are on display. One man sits on top of the other with a whip-in-hand and a seeming grimacing ordinance in-action from the colonial pillar which directs

---

[222] Moran, Jason, and Sam Gilliam. 2022. "Kara Walker and Jason Moran on "The Katastwóf Karavan."" YouTube. (22:50) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSysEq0JAX4.

[223] "Kara Walker's The Katastwóf Karavan." 2022. National Gallery of Art. https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/special/kara-walkers-the-katastwof-karavan.html.

the line of the coffle. In the back-facing side of the Karavan pictures a toppled African-esque femme body in a grass skirt (exhibiting exaggerated Minstrel-like characteristics likened to the Topsy caricature) surrounded by woefully expressive cotton stems. Above the figure depicts a fusion of those decapitated plants somewhat slowly erupting into what looks to be beheaded enslaved figures. The grass skirt decorated on the Black femme corpus and its perceived blending with the un/natural environment produces a perhaps decolonial rhetoric seeped in understandings of Black queer/feminist ecologies. The connective presentation of Black fungibility with the exploitation of the natural world exhibits direct ties to histories of enslavement and excessive Black produced labors of agricultural production.

Central to the steam calliope reveals the heart of the "Karavan"; an appearance of the instrument's organs visibly positioned over Walker's silhouettes. In center framing is the image of a deceased enslaved body being carried by two others in the coffle with the organs of the steam calliope/body is masterfully exposed. The divulged organs orchestrate the body/vessel interchange that contextualize this relationship with Black bodies as machines affectively sticking them to images of the steam boat (where steam calliope's are typically founded), the turn to industry, the plantation economy, and their overarching plasticity. A similar backdrop of a natural landscape is arranged. Looking above the heart of Karavan–the literality of the heart is shown through the deceased body's dismemberment– Walker's display illustrates bodies swinging from vines and an eco-connective tissue entangling plants, and trees within a possibly continuing coffle. As bodies in the image are turned upside down the carnivalesque convention becomes fully appropriated, as the project of emancipation is never realized by colonial capitalist exploitation and the playfulness of carnival satirizes the demand for Black bodies within white supremacist imaginaries.

In a similar incitation of carnivalesque criticism or the “grotesque body”[224] made by Mikhail Bahktin, Walker revels in the utility of play in the rendering of her exaggerated silhouettes collapsing the spectacle of objectified black bodies and turning these worldly constructions upside down–Walker does this rather literally on the “Karavan.”
Mikhail Bahktin– Russian literary critic–emphasizes the destabilization of social hierarchy in carnivalesque practice, where the mockery of hegemonic structures embodies the sentiment of early modern festive performance and the questioning of “authoritarian word.”[225] In articulation of the carnivalesque and its transformed “grotesque body”[226] in literature of the Romantic Era, Michel Bakhtin states that the grotesque image comes into view when, “the object transgresses its own confines and ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other with surrounding objects.”[227] In application of the grotesque featured in Walker’s silhouettes, the black body’s object status is exemplified in Walker’s fusion of the moving vessel, the instrument, and depiction of ecological devastation. These aspects interweave the figures with their surrounding environment. Moreover, Bahktin writes:

> The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present as contradictory and double-face fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The

[224] Bakhtin, M. M. (Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich). 1984. *Rabelais and His World / by Mikhail Bakhtin ; Translated by Hélène Iswolsky.* Translated by Hélène Iswolsky. First Midland book edition. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press. 26

[225] Ibd.x

[226] Ibd.26

[227] Ibd. 310

> very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character.[228]

These shadowy subversions of Blackness allow Walker to question notions of authenticity within the white historical imaginary, and more specifically–how these intra-racial intimacies were represented and rendered necessary for the development of a white American psyche. Walker carnivalizes the sensational aspects of melodrama, reveals an enduring brutality of Black people—attributed by white supremacist patriarchy and the effects of systemic oppression today. The grotesque image of the open organs "come to life" in Walker and Moran's opaque and sonic interpretation. Dubbed from the steam calliope's instrumental components via cylindrical whistling– Walker and Moran refer to the organs central framing to memorialize the enslaved.

The moving aspect of the Karavan further precipitates these ongoing tensions, as audience immersion into the historic steam calliope is intended to transport their contemporary listeners *somewhere else.* Upon hearing the steam calliope from Riverboat Natchez's passing (which motivated Walker to render one of her own) Walker described what those reverberating whistles sounded like. For Walker, the steam calliope sounded as if they were,

> Old timey good time songs . . . that kind of wistfulness that like some White southerners would regard slavery. Like those days. . . those bygone days. It's a wistfulness not just for the control or the power but for the intimacy of what those enslaved peoples bodies meant to theirs . . . It's something like that so unsavory you can't quite speak it. That's what those songs mean to me anyway."[229]

---

[228] Ibd. 89

[229] "Kara Walker & Jason Moran: Sending Out A Signal | Art21 "Extended Play."" 2018. YouTube. (2:54) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JKVgfHfrQo.

The carnivalesque music sent out a signal to Walker that transported her to a moment in time in ways Berniece's ancestral song did the same. The nostalgic element of Riverboat Natchez initiates both a haunting and a romance. Walker's description of this wistful feeling summarizes the song's romanticization of White southern ascendancy while the haunting alludes to the lingering traces of these unresolved legacies.

The doubleness of the organ's configuration, its placement above the deceased black body and the produced music from the calliope represents a particular language birthed out of brutality and silence; the proposed stillness of the lifeless figure would likely contradict the expectation of any sort of musical emergence from a body in stasis. Perhaps it suggests a kind of critical silence, something hidden but radically expressive. Finely put by the Whitney Museum of American Art in description of the moving sculpture's title, Moran and Walker conceptualize the title, "to incorporate the Haitian Creole word that in English translates to 'catastrophe,' *Katastwóf Karavan* interrogates the way in which these dehumanizing and violent experiences have been historicized and under examined."[230] While memorializations often promote a silence or a sense of stillness, the enduring issue of anti-black violence likens this catastrophe as something in motion and demanding articulation that the Kastastwóf Karavan provokes.

The element of catastrophe is further emphasized by the deceased body put on display. Walker represents this extreme violence by conveying these scenes of displacement. Walker's thoughtful positioning of the organs exposes them to their environment mirroring the silhouettes' transgressiveness as they sprawl with the natural landscape emerging around and out of the enslaved figures. The dissemination of the steam appears to jolt out of the organs/deceased body via the steam calliope's resounding whistle. The sound of the whistles are invasive, and

[230] "Kara Walker's Katastwóf Karavan with Jason Moran." 2019. Whitney Museum of American Art. https://whitney.org/media/45991.

dissonant–avoiding the familiar "wistful" melodies of bygone days and inharmoniously disconfigured from the deceased body's orientation. Considering the ways a human subject may produce a similar tonality through expirations, the heightened feeling of "taking one last breath" is further pronounced by the death scene. By thoughtfully rendering the organs outside of the deceased body, Walker further stresses this scene of disembodiment or deterritorialization amid enslavement. While emphasizing these alternative music formations–that erect out of the Black body or the Karavan's organs– what becomes sonically apparent is an emerging radical and Black expressive culture deeply multi-dimensional intangible, and ungraspable. The steam whistle's discordant tune only instigates these themes of opacity.

In echo of Glissant, deterritorialization contributed to creolization and "creolization carries along then into the adventure of multilingualism."[231]The intersecting cultural languages generated between affinities for "bygone days" and an articulation of an emotional history is melded into a rather boisterous musical articulation informal and improvised by Moran. Moran exercises–like Berniece at the piano, taking to the calliope's keys in hopes to release something along the instrument's sonic emission. Reproducing the sounds of the slavery era, Moran becomes the bearer of the emotional endeavor. The title of the work propels the feeling of tribulation, a blended purging between hopes of deliverance amid ongoing calamity. Glissant further articulates the formation of creolization as a "complex mix–and not merely a linguistic result . . . not prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relation to everything possible as well . . . creolizations bring into Relation but not to universalize."[232]The relational affinities encapsulated by the musical demonstration speak to the reverberations propelled from

[231] Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation / Édouard Glissant ; Translated by Betsy Wing.* Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor [Michigan: The University of Michigan Press pg 34

[232] Ibd 89

the vessel's soundscapes. The steam calliope's standard whistling uncannily drives the audience to the sounds of modernization. Maybe the whistling gestures to the technologies of a moving vessel (steam boat or train) or the history of slavery altogether, and the transient soundscapes of the slave ship.

Nevertheless, Moran's fabulatory assemblage of "slave play" brings into relation these temporal overlaps as his piercing spectral evocation eventfully cries, screeches, and makes a "long shout" from the representations of colonialism's oppressive stifling. Moran further contextualizes the synonymy of the industrial to slavery in his discussion with Walker when he expressed "You are touching the industrial with how slavery works. It's an industry that they are making machines despite [the fact] that they are bodies."[233] The organs on display deconstruct a previous articulation of blackness during enslavement denoted to fleshly parts, and as an extractive resource constantly forced to be seen or forced into spectacle. The accentuation of the wagon's/steam calliope's machinery with that of dying black life and a linked dilapidated ecosystem vocalizes this palpable relationship.

The emphasis of the sensory organ in extension of the vessel analytic generated the "slave play" Walker and Moran revel in. Kastastwóf Karavan's auditory and visual experience transports listeners into new languages of Black modality. Bending the way traditional slavery era instruments have been sung or utilized, Moran and Walker create new frequencies, notes, and instrumental frameworks that prompt new experiences with an antiquated musical format. The "slave play" of the Kastastwóf Karavanc carries listeners into Black phenomenologies of sound, that gesture to modes of existence resiliently emerging but innately deconstructive of what we *know* or how we make *sense* of things. Maybe Walker and Moran's provocation on "catastrophe"

---

[233] Kara Walker & Jason Moran: Sending Out A Signal | Art21 "Extended Play."" 2018. YouTube. (3:47) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JKVgfHfrQo.

(in echo of Moran) "opens things up"[234] the same way a piano does. As the central framing of the "catastrophe" pictures a Black deceased body with its "organs" exposed to the elements the eerie whistling simultaneously memorializes the complicated tensions between Black futurity and Black detritus (via the visualization of decomposition). The "slave play" of Moran and Walker gestures its audience to alternative worldmaking possibilities where notions of decomposition fertilize new futures that enigmatically sound familiar but also like something new.

Slave Play No 3

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, the conceptualization and use of "slave play" in reference to the opaque fabulations and soundscapes of the vessel come from Jeremy O. Harris' titled play: *Slave Play* (2018). As described in the prelude of the dramatic rendering, S*lave Play* is noted by O'Harris "as a comedy of sorts, [and] it should be played as such." Harris goes on to state that he "is not sure where the music is coming from but it's there." The accompanied presence of music within the production feels tethered to the character's own psychological unraveling, very much underscoring the way O' Harris' characters are able to articulate a language about their experience. Seemingly coming from nowhere ("*but it's there*")[235] the audience mutually hears/feels the presence of this auditory phenomena becoming possibly disjointed or familiar with the sounds illuminated.

Throughout the narrative, reverberations of classical, R&B, and pop are emphasized as phenomenological and audiological representations for the mental processes of the

[234] Moran, Jason, and Sam Gilliam. 2022. "Kara Walker and Jason Moran on "The Katastwóf Karavan."" YouTube. (22:50) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSysEq0JAX4.

[235] Harris, Jeremy O. 2019. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris.* First edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group.p pg 6.

Black/biracial characters Kaneisha, Gary, and Phillip–all of whom exist in interracial relationships with their white partners. Resounding and repetitive throughout the production are songs like Rihanna and Drake's *Work*, Unknown Mortal Orchestra's: "Multi-Love," a violin/instrumental covers of Ginuwine's "Pony" and Beethoven's "Piano Sonata No 32." Navigating issues of mental health, personal and historical traumas, alongside more general relationship anxieties, O' Harris situates his audience in the "master-bedroom" and considers these violent intimacies and their both structural and *musical* arrangements within our contemporary moment.

The three couples are shown willingly participating in Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy [ASPT]. Via ostensibly remediating procedures of historical reenactment, therapists Tea and Patricia guide couples Gary & Dustin, Alana and Phillip, and Kaneisha and Jim in their reperformances of the master-slave paradigm and intimacies of plantationscape in the Antebellum South. In hopes of finally feeling "in control" of themselves O'Harris centers that "fantasy is important"[236] for Kaneisha, Gary, and Phillip as they negotiate the discordant nature of their interracial relationships and their struggles in experiencing sexual gratification with their partners. The visual and even structural effects of this discordance are accompanied by the musical deliberations tethered to the characters.

O'Harris conveys this most apparently through the pairing of Phillip and Alana. Phillipis said to be struggling with the issue of erectile dysfunction, and is directed to contemplate the origin of this problem. Suggesting that the origin is maybe "just … like racism,"[237] Phillip and the group are made to attend to these historical wounds and the way they might actively suppress

---

[236] Ibd. 66

[237] Ibd 105

the body. In turn Phillip has to reckon with his blackness through means of affective racialization. Uncovering the race-based traumas he endured, the presumed inactivity of Phillip's phallus and his abilities to enact his own sexual needs becomes weighted by histories of sexual exploitation and labor that specifically inform white subjectivities as relative to Black depersonalization. In their work *Sensational Flesh* Amber Musser discusses this out-of-body experience in relation to articulations of Blackness and becoming. Drawing from works of Fanon, Musser's intervention discusses how these processes of depersonalization are contingent when shaping white affectivities. Musser's rumination on the surfacing of these feelings/feelings that inform white personhoods amid experiences of Black disembodiment/dislocation are further contextualized in O. Harris' work as therapy provokes the management of feelings that come up in these interracial dynamics.

The therapeutic model of Antebellum Sexual Reperformance gets our main characters to "*Process*"[238] (the title of O'Harris' second act) these scenes of enslavement through the erotic i.e., pleasure, but also though the unraveling of personal traumas i.e, pain. Musser writes:

> I link the depersonalization of labor with affective processes of racialization and the sensation of stickiness. The othering of the black body and the spectacle of the black body as biological matter is the central theme. . . I argue that the specter of the biological black body, a body so marked by its embeddedness in suffering and pain, constitutes an affective framework for understanding race. This particular mode of black objectification (or enfleshment) allows for an understanding of whiteness as an affective state that requires an other to project him- or herself against and that this coproduction of white subjectivity and black objectification, which I read through this discourse of the

[238] Ibd. v.

biological, is reliant on a structure of sympathy and empathy. The resultant depersonalization, I argue, is experienced as atemporality and stickiness.[239]

By considering “whiteness" as an affective state, that requires another to project him or herself against” Phillip contemplates their sexual positionality and processes their mental and physical distress as derived from Phillip’s “enfleshment” such as the degrading characterizations he processes in therapy. Phillip retrospects on the time he was called: “donkey-dick,”[240] and how an older white man in a locker room Phillip doesn’t play soccer “like a N***.”[241] The audience and group, posit these instances as informing of Phillip’s black-sexual identity, representing the ways racism impacts Phillip’s perception of his own genitalia, but also the way its degradation is needed for white people to express themselves, desires, or grapple with their own sexual impulses. The provocation of “stickiness”[242] perhaps gestures to the resultant materiality of the fantasy play that might serve as a remedy of Phillip’s incapacity to experience sexual pleasure. As Phillip processes what Alana *needs* at the expense of his own depersonalization, the inability to “get it up,” suggests this physical discordance between their bodies.

The affective labors performed by the couples spotlight characters like Phillip as overdetermined, and the music that “sticks” to them orients them atemporally and affect the way they inhabit racialized spaces i.e., during their childhood on the soccer field or like Kaneisha’s rumination of her time spent on a school field trip to a plantation. Moreover, the presumed

---

[239] Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2014. *Sensational Flesh : Race, Power, and Masochism / Amber Jamilla Musser.* New York: New York University Press.89

[240] Harris, Jeremy O. 2019. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris.* First edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group.111

[241] Ibd

[242] Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2014. *Sensational Flesh : Race, Power, and Masochism / Amber Jamilla Musser.* New York: New York University Press.89

"palpable," socially, and historically informed discordance between Alana and Phillip is exacerbated by sonic interpretation. As O'Harris prompts his audience to engage what a "good time" in the bedroom *sounds like* he mutually considers how music is employed to possibly set the mood, and how it is often used to create intimate exchanges between people. During Phillip's and Alana's sexual reperformance the audience is made to hear instigations of "slave play" in musical articulation. In the scene:

(*Phillip inhales and begins to play a beautiful rendition of Beethoven's Op. q32. He's very good. The music does seem to dance upon the breeze as he plays and his body moves with an unencumbered freedom that exists in those who were born to play.*)

Alana

Stop! . . .

What I wanna hear is some the negro music you play

Nobody has a good time listening to Beethoven

They suffer through it

Cause it's new!. . .

Play Me some of your music!

A Negro Spiritual!

Phillip

A Negro Spiritual?. . .

Yes Mistress.

I think I can do that.

(Philip lifts his violin again. This time he looks forward and begins to expertly play a song that sounds somewhat familiar, but alien at the same time. The tune moves through the wind and up and around Alana's chest. The soothing familiarity encouraging the beginning of a dance.)

Philip

Um…

I don't know.

It's just come to me.

(*Yet, by now, the tune's familiarity should finally be syncing up with the musical ear of any person born after the 1970s in America. As Phillip tosses himself into full revelry, while playing the chorus, we start to hear in the notes: "Ride it, my pony/ My saddle's waiting, come and jump on it. . .*) [243]

Phillip's abiding of "Mistress Alana's" desire to play a Negro spiritual alludes to the songs of the Plantation– as described by Glissant– that aided Black people to articulate their experience. Phillip (existing in proximity to whiteness as a biracial subject) navigates these inner dynamics of racialization in his musical affinities. His desire to play Beethoven rather than a Negro spiritual, forces the audience to come to terms with their own expectations, or assumptions on the intersections of race and musicality.. More specifically, what a Black person playing music *sounds like.* Nevertheless, Phillip's subdued positionality to correct his musical rendering to something more pleasant to Alana's ear, gestures to Alana's necessity for Phillip's depersonalized state in order to self-soothe and further subscribe to performances of colonial domination as Mistress.

---

[243] Harris, Jeremy O. 2019. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris.* First edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group. Pgs 33-38

The provocation of *Pony* as a Negro spiritual interestingly contextualizes the echoic reverberations of Black musicality that derive from these histories. Phillip's "slave play" of *Pony* as a Negro spiritual conceptualizes his perceived knowledge of Black popular culture, and the evocation of R&B as innately sensual. Pony mutually suggests affinities for elsewhere through instances of extreme ecstasy, the same way a spiritual might suggest transport through jubilee. Also, the interplay of the classical violin evokes a similar provocation of a traditionally Western and antiquated instrument and how Phillip teaches it to play forms of Black expressive culture.

As stated in the stage directions, "*The music does seem to dance upon the breeze as he plays and his body moves with an unencumbered freedom that exists in those who were born to play.*"[244] The unexpected comingling of the traditional violin, Ginuwine's "Pony," and the histories of Negro spirituals simultaneously converge ad subsequently provoking Philip's body to dance as the music disseminates within the "Plantation's" environment. The multiple meanings of *play* that emerge here articulates the overarching scope of the chapter (and arguably the entire dissertation) which critically engages these Black affinities for play within historical landscapes. Harris establishes that "slave play" (within Black musical expressions) is particularized by a distinct lived experience, where only knowable ears can surmise a complex arrangement of Black sensuality, work songs and Western form, as "a Negro spiritual" (a style of music generated from a distinct and cultural articulation of bondage). Similar to the historical mobilizations of Fisk Jubilee Singers, these dynamics of slave play that evoke the sensual, the modern, and Black cultural aesthetics echo in composition. Being "born to play" this particular tune also suggests an inherent and critical relationship with opaque fabulations. Fabulation supplies a deconstructive way of living, or challenging modes of Western thought. Imagining

[244] Ibd 33

otherwise is not merely concerned with performing humanistic liberties, but creating new worlds unfixed and not defined by desires for transparency.

Struggling with what Tea and Patricia place as "alexithymia,"[245] "OCD"[246] and "musical obsessive disorder"[247] Gary, Kaneisha and Phillip's perceived silence verbalizing their experiences of racial trauma and their triggers within their enactments of ASPT discuss their need to anchor themselves in music. As Phillip negotiates how the "Negro Spiritual of *Pony*" just came to him, the uncanny traces of these historical residues and their contemporary formations grapple with the legacy of Black musicality as an "old urge to song" emerge from the couple's silent deliberation of these racial traumas. Both familiar but alien, the suggestive lyrics ironically incite exactly what Phillip cannot sexually succumb to. It's his perceived inability to become erect, which heightens the sonic discordance with Phillip's sexual inclination. The "slave play" performed by Phillip although alternative in formation (mixing the old and new into something else) isn't necessarily concerned with liberatory expression. Instead it is situated by O. Harris as a poetically complex and audiological representation of Phillip's depersonalization that Musser suggests is experienced as "atemporality and stickiness."[248] Just as Phillip might be able to come to terms with this positionality, the scene ironically unfolds when Alana is shown utilizing a dildo on Phillip in lieu of subscribing to traditional (male to female) forms of penetrative intercourse as *Pony* suggests.

---

[245] Ibd 106

[246] Ibd 108

[247] Ibd

[248] Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2014. *Sensational Flesh : Race, Power, and Masochism / Amber Jamilla Musser*. New York: New York University Press.89

The sounds of B*eethoven No.32*, and *Pony* silently linger between the salient noises of Phillips' moans exuding both pleasure and pain. Vocal "Ahhhh"[249]s are pronounced in the scene heightening the ambivalent tensions between Phillip's musical articulations and the disjointedness of his sexual experiences. Unsure of he is even enjoying the experience, the audience comes to terms with Harris' deliberation on performances of listening. Particularly the way we might listen to our partners, or listen to Black people articulating their experiences. Do we really hear them?

The musical anchoring fostered throughout the production helps the characters cope with their varying anxieties in ways the inhibition of speech and naming their feelings might enable healing. While therapists Tea and Patricia affirm that their clients "maneuver around [their] 'alexithymia' . . so they can hear [themselves,]"[250] one could suggest that the music actually enables them to articulate something about their experience they feel but cannot say/simply haven't arrived at the capacity to *say yet*. At the start of the play the audience is quickly immersed into the mind of Kaneisha through musical introduction. The stage directions read as followed:

> *Suddenly, from above, Rihanna's "work" begins to play. Kaneisha looks up, as though in recognition, a smile appearing then disappearing from her face– she goes back to sweeping. 'Work , work, work, work, work.' Yet soon the sounds of this faraway island girl get beneath her skin, in her spine, her legs, her bottom and she is dancing. More*

---

[249] Harris, Jeremy O. 2019. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris*. First edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group. Pg 41
[250] Ibd 108

> *specifically she is twerking and suddenly the broom is out of her hand and on the floor.*
>
> *'Work , work, work, work, work'*[251]

The resounding entry of Rihanna's *Work* prompts discourse on the creolizations or blending of African, West Indies, Western musical practices that represent the relational exchanges of musical form. O'Harris gestures the interweaving of these musical forms as an intermixing of these Trans-Atlantic poetics. *Work* ironically hints at the scenes of affective and domestic labor performed at the plantation, but also the prioritization of emotional expression when approaching/forming relationships with Black women.

The suggestion of "work" is flipped simultaneously as Kaneisha puts down the broom and enables the internal "slave play" reverberates through her body and breaks out into a performance filled with twerking. By the end of the production the audience witnesses the active stifling/disembodied connection between Kaneisha and her musical interplay. In the conclusion of "Music and Queered Temporality" of Slave Play Imogen Wilson describes Jim and Kaneisha's Antebellum Sexual Reperformance as such:

> The couple start to have sex and it escalates into a contentious, consensually ambiguous scene, "Work" stops for the last time, as 'Jim rips Kaneisha's shirt and stuffs her mouth closed' (Harris 2019, 158). In this violent act of silencing, the song is ripped away from her at the exact moment that she physically loses her hard-won ability to enunciate her pain.[252]

[251] Ibd 9.

[252] Wilson, Imogen. 2020. "Music and Queered Temporality in Slave Play." *Current Musicology* 106 (106): 9–27. https://doi.org/10.7916/cm.v106iSpring.6759. pg 25

As perfectly articulated by Wilson, the enforced stifling of Kaneisha "hard-won ability" [253]to name her feelings in conjunction with the resounding overlay of Rihanna's "Work," encapsulates the ambivalence of therapeutic endeavor as the audience questions how Kaneisha's ability to process her emotions is conveyed. As the end of play is narrativized with Kaneisha thanking Jim "for listening"[254]the result of the exorcise is made even more ambiguous. As the audience is engulfed with the auditory phenomena of Kaneisha psyche-articulating an unlikely "slave play," which syncs the historicized labors of Black flesh with the enduring legacy of racial violence– one questions what "work" Kaneisha was referring when we are all charged with listening. As Jim fulfills her request to become the enslaver during their sexual purging, I find that the audience is rather tasked with the undefinability of Kaneisha's expressive articulation in "Work." As the audience acknowledges that *they* can only hear Kaneisha's plea as transcribed in the song and echoed in her mental processing, the "slave play" and the use Rihanna's "Work" provokes the audience to listen in ways Jim was unable to completely hear.

What do we understand from Harris' utility of the exorcising—as printed and titled for the last Act of the production? In similar orientation to the perceived exorcising of Sutter in the Charles Family home, Wilson ruminates on Berniece's slave play as a lesson for his characters and audience. Harris instigates the erection of these haunts with similar purpose. As the embedded music enables Kaneisha to expel the oppressive specters of her past, the seeming hallucinations experienced by Kaneisha throughout the production (and facilitated as quasi

[253] Ibd.

[254] Harris, Jeremy O. 2019. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris.* First edition. New York: Theatre Communications Group. pg 161

“work songs”) overrides Kaneisha’s memory. Playing with the language of Rihanna’s “Work song” Harris brings Kaneisha back to her first experiences on the plantation.

As she recollects these memories of her childhood Kaneisha describes the intersections of play that these childhood field trips promoted. The monologue is read as follows:

Kaneisha

You know I used to take field trips to plantations? We never came to the MacGregor but every child who grows up in Virginia they get a plantation tour. Three, Four, Five. ‘They’re fun, aint they fun Kaneisha?’ I remember they said that to me when I was little. The only Black girl and I would wear the same uniform to every plantation field trip …And when I’d walk through whenever we were there I’d always feel the little tingle in the back of my neck that bit of electricity telling me they wanted to hold my hand and protect me from the demons in the walls and in the ground. And because I would walk with two hands out smiling and looking up at elders nobody else could see the wild-eyed greasy-haired children of the demons who were also on the class trip with me stayed away so I never had those formative moments of making out beneath the lynching tree or being fingered behind the cotton gin like the other girls did.[255][256]

The recreational aspect of the tour intermixed with Kaneisha’s developing sexuality showcases the sticky relations that comprise the landscape. The memory of child’s play, the whimsical aesthetic/nature of the plantationscape alongside early developments of pleasure seemingly informed the way Kaneisha began to come to terms and express her own sexuality. Navigating yearnings of “being fingered” but refusing to be fingered behind the cotton gin stress the complexities of these entanglements. As Rihanna’s “Work” echoes concurrently during

---

[255] Ibd 153

[256]Ibd

Kaneisha's deliberation, an asserted plea for Black female pleasure reverberates in the background—simultaneously suggesting Kaneisha's desire for Jim to "put in work" all the while amplifying an expressive space for Kaneisha's ability to finally talk about her lived experiences.

The violent act of silencing that stifles the poetics of Work, Kaneisha's dialogue and her emergent memories suggests the complicated result of this exorcise. As Kaneisha refers to the demons of the plantation in her memory—those hiding in the walls, and "greasy haired" [257]white children surrounding here—convey how Kaneisha reads/perceives these memories as a haunting and the plantation as a receptacle for these haunts to mobilize. Instead, the perceived expelling of these "demons" within Kaneisha's memory are ironically tethered to her "racy" constructions of sexual expression. The exorcise/exercise isn't founded in Kaneisha's refutation of white supremacist patriarchy/ what she conceives as her oppressors, but it's the release of *something else*. A discharge that Harris rather bawdily and suggestively constructs—an exercising of slave play.

The opaque fabulation embedded in *Slave Play* instigates the *affects* of being in an interracial relationship in our modern day. Intertwining slave play as music/Black expressive practice, as rehabilitative reperformance, and kink suggests a thoughtful consideration of these historical dynamics that are irrefutably situated within these plantationscapes. The Black contemporary musical arrangments proliferated throughout the production enables the audience hears songs like "Pony" and "Work" function as unlikely Negro spirituals. The "slave play: not only facilitates a complicated exorcising/exercising of Black sexual expression but the somewhat discordant, multi-temporal, and multi-faceted makeup of slave play amplifies a dynamic Black poetics radically undefined and rapidly mobilizing. Seemingly coming "from nowhere but it is

---

[257] Ibd

there," slave play complicatedly foregrounds Black sensuality, and intimacy at the site of its own subjugation. The emergence of songs within incitations of Sexual Antebellum Reperformance suggests an obscure conclusion (amongst audience members) on the subject of Kaneisha and Phillip's satisfaction. One is left unsure if the slave play completely fulfills the progress they are hoping for, but at the very least— it allows Harris' characters to process and expel feelings deeply repressed.

Ch. Four Reperformances of the Grapevine: Drinking Vessels and the Bubbling Situation of Emancipation

"'Well, I dunner whe'r you b'lieves in cunj'in er not, - some er de w'ite folks don't, or says dey don't, - but tie truf er de matter is dat dis yer ole vim-'d is goophered.' 'Is what?' 'I asked, not grasping the meaning of this unfamiliar word.' 'Is goophered, cunju'd, bewitch'.' 'He imparted this information with such solemn earnestness, and with such an air of confidential mystery, that I felt somewhat interested, while Annie was evidently much impressed, and drew closer to me.' 'How do you know it is bewitched? I asked.'"[258]

-Charles Chestnutt "The Goophered Grapevine" The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales

Introduction: "The Goophered Grapevine": Insurgent (Re)/Performances & Making Community

I am taken with Charles Chesnutt's "Uncle Julius" tales. Particularly that of "The Goophered Grapevine," a groundbreaking short-story that was published in the *Atlantic Quarterly i*n 1887.The story illustrates a war-torn and weathered Southern landscape during the Reconstruction era and our story teller: Uncle Julius– as a cunning ex-slave turned "quasi-entrepreneur." Uncle Julius' presumed knowledge of the ruined-plantation-scape affords him access to a supposedly mythic and "bewitched" vineyard containing large quantities of the scuppernong grape vines– a lucrative southern plant for purposes of wine production.

[258] Chesnutt, Charles W. 1887. "The Goophered Grapevine." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1887/08/the-goophered-grapevine/306656/.

In this chapter, Chestnutt's concept of the "goophered grapevine," serves as a decolonial praxis for analyzing mythic and wayward Black (re)/embodied performances of rebellions/ Assembled from slavery onwards, the chapter focuses on the relationship between Black performance/fabulation and the grapevine/community. I ask the questions– how have Black communal practices of the grapevine cultivate ways of producing knowledge? Also, how has the decolonial notion of community building position present and historical Black insurrectionists, fugitives, artists, and contemporaries beyond colonial/capitalist structures? The "goophered" properties of the grapevine points to the complicated, wayward, queer or mythic mobilizations of Black people that are inherently derelict to capitalism, and Western conceptions of identity. Moreover, the grapevine points to these enslaved networks that creep and sprawl out from obscure ground roots communications and organizing.

In analysis of historical enactments of the "goophered grapevine" such as in Chestnutt's short story, the autobiographical performance of the grapevine rendered by fugitive slaves i.e, Harriet Jacobs and accounted instances of "goophering" on the plantation system via William Wells Brow's *My Southern Home*, there is a diligent effort to trace, interconnect, and thread early performances of ex and post-slavery subjects. Through this effort, we can not only see these mobilizations as incumbent to enslaved histories, but informative of the ways in which the insurgent conceptualization of Black community and reimagined encounters with Black history are processed today.

Examined case studies on contemporary reperformances of the grapevine like playwright: Robert O'Hara's I*nsurrection or Holding History*, performance artist Dred Scott's "Slave Rebellion Reenactment" and Comedy Central's *Drunk History* episode: "Harriet Tubman Leads An Army of Bad Bitches" take up the "goophered grapevine" as praxis. The slave grapevine as

actualized by fugitives like Nat Turner, Charles Demondes and Harriet Tubman illuminate the capacities of the slave grapevine for assembling mass anti-colonial endeavors. Contemporary Black artists not only use and emulate the slave grapevine in their opaque fabulations, but mutually convey how grapevines can be manipulated for capitalist exploits. The complicated initiative to know or elucidate the hidden archives of Black history whilst retaining the slave's "right to obscurity" further enhances the function of the grapevine. The state of not knowing and being in the know enigmatically showcases the dilemma of the enslaved position. However, the manipulations of the grapevine can dually occupy oppressive and insurgent positions. "Mythic," "Temporal" and "Fermented" fabulations of the grapevine– highlighted in the contemporary reperformances– provides the potential to reimagine Black communal solidarity and initiatives from these networks.

In search of means and property to expand his business of grape cultivation outside of Ohio and into North Carolina, a Northern businessman–Chesnutt's unnamed narrator–stumbles across the old plantation and subsequently a grape-eating Uncle Julius who warns him of the folklore and material consequences of selling and eating the grapes. Having been born and raised under the ownership of Mars Dugal at that very plantation Uncle Julius stresses that the grapes had been "goophered" by a freed conjurer-woman, Aunt Peggy who was hired by his master in efforts to prevent his slaves from stealing the grapes and squandering his financial exploits in their furtive consumption of them. Aunt Peggy's goophering effects cautioned death (within a twelve month time frame) of any slave who ate the grapes. The bewitching of the grapevine encapsulated the desire to stifle the organization of rebellious slaves.To keep enslaved peoples from these sprawling plantation networks was to further subjugate them. Nevertheless, the

goophering merely enabled Black subjects on the plantation to move differently, forge new wayward movements, and draw from the goophering and its mythic potentials.

Speaking in regional Black Southern dialect–an arguably difficult reading and writing form even for the time– the "confidential mystery"[259] of Uncle Julius' tale isn't merely retold through eye-witness accounts but is apparently conceived from the enslaved "grapevine" of sorts. The audience discovers that Uncle Julius' knowledge of the tainted grapes had been accumulated through spoken hearsay among the ex-slaves and audible conversations he had heard among overseers on the plantation. After the supposed deaths of two slaves who consumed the grapes without the necessary forewarning from those on the estate word not only got around quickly, but the suppression of that word of mouth seemed a matter of life or death.

As the story continues, Uncle Julius also shares how the "new han"[260] (new hand) Henry, got into the scuppernongs without warning of its goophered properties. In attempt of tracking down a runaway slave from a nearby plantation that day Henry's informed knowledge of the grapevine[261] rendered in an act of failure. Aunt Peggy's medicinal tonic, although keeping Henry alive for a short while, did not prevent his livelihood from existing in amalgam with the seasonal growth of the grapes. As the grapes bloomed in the summer so did Henry, and as the soil depreciated in the winter so did Henry. Mars Dugal's extraction of Henry's value was organized seasonally as well. Henry would be sold in the summer, and repurchased in the winter by Mars Dugal for a "friendly price". It wasn't until a Northerner tempted the greedy Mars Dugal with the

[259] Ibd

[260] Ibd

[261] Here the grapevine is operating two-fold. The grapevine is representative of that "word-of-mouth," the inner-network of enslaved hands that are able to consolidate and proliferate information across the plantation, and the literal bewitched grapevine.

assertion that he could increase the grapevines profit did the lime soaked vineyard begin to die, and Henry with it.

Chesnutt's analogy of the exploitation of the soil in the grapevines propagation–whether that be demonstrated in Aunt-Peggy's bewitchment of the soil or the Northerner who poisoned Mars Dugal's profitable vineyard with the promise of extracting two-times its growth–coincides with Henry's fungible predicament. Not to mention, the argument can pose an environmental critique as these colonialistic or industrialist practices wreak havoc on the land itself–the violence affecting those precarious entities (bodies, organisms, and insurgent operations). Moreover, the slaves on the plantation are directly linked to the grapevine's production. Their linkages are not only exhibited through their toiling of grapevines on the estate but via the suppression of their autonomous consumption; the advantages of the plantation system their labor directly affords their white masters, overseers etc. In other words, the grapevine's profitability is of most importance and it is only assured when the grapevine remains under a state of control. It can only be touched by Black working hands, and consumed only in the context of white recreation.

Henry's fungibility likened to the grapevine equally encapsulates what Vincert Woodard coins as the "delectable Negro.[262]" The human consumption of black male flesh and labor is evident in Mars Dugal's hyper-expendability of Henry who is enchained to the cyclical rise and fall of scuppernong exports. Uncle Julius describes that Henry's appetite/hunger for these fruitful liberties were both regulated and commodified, but what draws the reader's attention is a

[262] Woodard, Vincent, Justin A. Joyce, and Dwight A. McBride. 2014. *The Delectable Negro : Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within U.S. Slave Culture / Vincent Woodard ; Edited by Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride ; Foreword by E. Patrick Johnson.* New York: New York University Press.

looming question: what story is Uncle Julius/Chesnutt (in recitation of Jennifer L. Flesiner's "Earth-Eating") *"feeding"*[263] –but in this case–to the fictional Northerner or global audience?

Chesnutt's short story without a doubt leaves the reader with a provocation on the institution of slavery, but given the event of emancipation Chesnutt transitions the status of the emancipated to the neo-slave subject. Amid the looming industrial age, Chesnutt was concerned how Black people figured into the advent of Northern profiteers seeking to re-build amid the devastation of a pre-war Southern imaginary and among free-blacks. Uncle Julius' concluding advice for the Northern gentlemen to withhold purchasing the vineyard conveys a conniving utility of the folklore or Uncle Julius' fabulation. Uncle Julius forewarns, "'I knows de old vimes fum de noo ones; but wid strangers dey ain' no tellin' w'at might happen. I would n' 'vise yer ter buy dis vimya'd.'"[264] Despite this effort, the Northerner still purchases the land and reaps a healthy harvest from the grapes.

Skeptical that Uncle Julius had garnered revenue from the sale of the neglected grapevines and not fully sure about the believability of his purported narrative, the Northerner still manages to pay Uncle Julius for his services in cultivation of the grapes. Opportunities for economic fulfillment and sustainability are gained from the imaginary lore and site of the vineyard that Julius narrativized. As echoed in Ed Piacentino's "Seeds of Rebellion in Plantation Fiction," Piacentino describes Uncle Julius as

> "a cunning con artist and economic opportunist, a simple primitive, and a subdued social critic—contradictory postures reflecting amiability and rebelliousness. . . Julius, in telling

[263] Fleissner, Jennifer L 2010. "Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt's Diasporic Regionalism." *Studies in Romanticism* 49 (2): 313–36. https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2010.0030.

[264] Chesnutt, Charles W. 1887. "The Goophered Grapevine." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1887/08/the-goophered-grapevine/306656/.

his story of imagined spaces, works within the binaries of rebellion and submission, white and black, domination and abjection. . . The outcomes of these tales exemplify Chesnutt's manipulation of frame plots, creating opportunities within imagined spaces. Julius, although gaining some material advantage, remains oppressed. "[265]

The gesture toward Uncle Julius' outward presentation of friendliness as distraction and deflection from his sly rebelliousness enables this chapter to interpret the constructions of the "goophered grapevine" in an alternative register. The lore behind the grapevine is not only obscure and rendered mythic but it allows the fictional Uncle Julius to perform instances of rebellion hidden within the mysteries of the grapevine (which can be interpreted as) i.e.,-- enslaved networks/intentionally obscure communications/furtive movements.

The obscure and mythic language surrounding the production of the grapevines enables Uncle Julius an attempt to subvert and ostensibly overcome capitalist exploits. The Northerner notes their unfamiliarity with the term "goophered." Seemingly existing in the lore and the communicative grapevines of the Black community, the goophered grapevine is only *known* by those like Uncle Julius who have connections to this knowledge. In addition, that "knowability" is heightened by Uncle Julius' assertion that he "knows the old vimes fum de noo ones."[266] It is Uncle Julius' presumed knowledge of the land, the folklore, regional production, and value of the grapes in his community, that enables him to possibly mislead the Northerner with his elaborate tale.

---

[265] Piacentino, Ed. 2007. "Seeds of Rebellion in Plantation Fiction: Victor Séjour's "The Mulatto."" Southern Spaces. https://southernspaces.org/2007/seeds-rebellion-plantation-fiction-victor-sejours-mulatto/.

[266] Chesnutt, Charles W. 1887. "The Goophered Grapevine." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1887/08/the-goophered-grapevine/306656/.

Also, since the grapes are supposedly "cursed" they are deemed unusable. Meanwhile Chesnutt uses the grapes' mythic association as a critique on the objectification of the enslaved and neo-slave subject. The curse extends to the Black subject who is equally misfortuned to the persisting conditions of racial capitalism and to a position of social and corporeal death. Chesnutt perhaps sees Black folk as rendered "goophered" in the subsequent stifling and poisoning of their grapevines–mobilizations to communicate, propagate, and live freely. (Much like Alfred Jackson's possible fabulations as complex methods of self-efficacy and performances that strive to cultivate his socio-historical repositioning at the Hermitage as exhibited in Chapter One) Uncle Julius/Chesnutt's manipulative parable creates opportunity to exist beyond these structures. In short, the fabula–in both respects (in fiction and in real life) conveys the capability of the Black community to navigate these spaces. Utilizing their embodied memory of slavery the performance defiantly reempowers Julius to produce new modes of prosperity perhaps unaltered/unaffected by racial capitalist agendas.

In this chapter, the framework of Chesnutt's "goophered grapevine" inspires a critical discussion surrounding (re)/performances of rebellion enacted by the enslaved, neo-slave or the contemporary post-slavery subject. These performances subvert the violence of transparency and utilize the method of imaginary to critique and actualize continual objectives toward emancipation (an effort that has not yet been realized even in our contemporary moment).Saidiya Hartman conceptualizes this as the "nonevent of Emancipation"[267] which finds its roots in the period Chesnutt writes in. In the short-story Chesnutt concludes with the laughable insistence that Uncle Julius gets compensation of wages for his losses. What remains with the reader is the

[267] Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. See "Meditation on Scenes" *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

lasting impression of the ex-slave still intertwined with the plantation's vineyard and somehow working under both Southern and Northern colonial binds.

Slave Grapevine Telegraph: Performing Queer Communal Networks

In spite of emancipation Chesnutt sediments Uncle Julius' continual oppression–yet, the grapevine somehow poses as a strategy to maneuver within these states of sentience. In the first encounter between the Northerner and Uncle Julius the reader wrestles with an image of an insatiable Julius sitting with a "hat-full of grapes over which he was smacking his lips with great gusto." The scene–whilst evoking derogatory tropes and imagery of a gluttonous minstrel-like personae, also conveys a history of a hungry ex-slave simply trying to survive. Both images are what Uncle Julius willfully adapts in order to elusively gain some distance between fact and fiction. Arguably the enigma surrounding the story of the grapes mutually conceals Uncle Julius from total recognition. Does Chesnutt lend us to ask more questions about the legitimacy of his tale . . . such as: was Uncle Julius actually born and raised on that plantation? Could he be Henry or the runaway who was never caught? The imaginary web and ripple effect the story precipitates captures the essence of this illusive network. If you're not in the grapevine there is no way for you to *know what really happened.* There is no way for the readers or the Northerner to distinguish what's real and what's imaginary.

The grapevine symbolizes the complexities of these sneaky acts and the performances of rebellion that have erected from them. Mobilizations within and outside the oral grapevine have always circumscribed the Black experience to a particular kind of communal practice. Complex performances of freedom were frequently enacted by Black enslaved peoples who utilized what

ex-slave Louis Davis calls "'the grapevine way.'"[268] In Sergio A Lussana's "Enslaved Men the Grapevine Telegraph & the Underground Railroad" he states that the enslaved:

> maintained a secret system of communication that linked their communities: the grapevine telegraph, which kept enslaved communities across the South informed of news and events. Enslaved men were vital to the success of this network: they were more mobile than their female counterparts and, accordingly, more familiar with local geography. . . [T]hey also utilized the network to hold conspiratorial cross-plantation meetings with other men. In some cases, they plotted active rebellion; in other instances, they harbored runaway slaves and ferried them northward to freedom from one plantation to the next. Individual everyday resistance in the antebellum South was intimately linked to collective acts of insurrection; thus, drawing a clear theoretical distinction between the two is misleading.[269]

Lussana's gendered reading makes plain the capacities of the "grapevine," placing certain parameters on who was allowed to occupy and move about the network freely. In extension of this analysis, these social limitations that encompassed those "grapevine way"(ward) movements precipitated a conventionalized performance of gender expression that relied on the exhibition of Western/hetero-normative relations yet paradoxically transcended these structures in habitation of the enslaved person's exchangeability. In echo of Hortense Spiller's praxis of "ungendered flesh,"[270] she writes that under the conditions of enslavement "the historic outline of dominance,

---

[268] Lussana, Sergio A., 'Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad', *My Brother Slaves: "Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South"* (Lexington, KY, 2016; online edn, Kentucky Scholarship Online, 22 Sept. 2016)

[269] Ibd

[270] Spillers, Hortense. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 65–81.

the respective subject-positions of 'female' and 'male' adhere to no symbolic integrity."[271] As the grapevines and their communal function depended on these performative notions of White supremacist patriarchy to remain occluded from dominant perceptibility, the disguises engendered forms of black Queer expression which masterfully enabled Black fugitives to organize.

Take for instance Lussana's reading on the male homosocial relationships that were forged amid the conspiratorial mobilizations of famous insurrectionists like Denmark Vessey, Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, or figures like William Webb who assembled large inter-plantation networks amid the backdrop of the (then) approaching Civil War.[272] Not only were women discarded from these "secret meetings" but it was through these disguised narratives that the conspirators were leaving their plantations to "visit their enslaved wives"[273] on neighboring properties did their schemes go undetected for long periods of time. Evidently the grapevine relied on fugitive performances of queer/homosocial bonds due to the overwhelming immobility of Black women in these spaces and frankly, the apparent desire to keep them from infiltration. Nevertheless, these "fronts" that necessitated a distinct form of gender performativity through heterosexual relations accelerated the notion of disguise–especially for Black fugitive women.

Consider Riley C. Snorton's analysis of Harriet Jacobs and her cross-gendered fugitive practice in *Incidents*. Snorton writes: "from the Snaky Swamp Brent moves in 'disguise,' and in these 'crossdressed' perambulations enacts a fugitive plot that stages through Brent's ungendered

---

[271] Ibd

[272] Lussana, Sergio A., 'Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad', *My Brother Slaves: "Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South"* (Lexington, KY, 2016; online edn, Kentucky Scholarship Online, 22 Sept. 2016)

[273] Ibd

body the various ways fungibility and fugitivity pass into one another."[274] Just as Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs contextualizes in her narrative, Brent's travels through the Snaky Swamp and aboard the vessel–disguised as a man and blackened up with tar– convey the inner workings of the grapevine. Brent's mobilizations in the grapevine also illuminated the ways the enslaved (in echo of Jacobs' *Incidents*) "being surrounded by mysteries, deceptions, and dangers, early learn to be suspicious and watchful, and prematurely cautious and cunning."[275] The systems of the Underground Railroad that led Brent from slavery to the loophole, and to the North relied on the furtive correspondence of her community to ensure her successful emancipation.

In addition, these mysteries and cunning performances of freedom prematurely shape the Black slave experience. Snorton also goes on to write:

> Brent/Jacobs's fugitive theater explores how blackness functioned as a site for an elaboration of gender in which the fungible interchangeability of sex for chattel persons revealed gender within blackness to be a polymorphous proposition. The ungendering of blackness, then, opens onto a way of thinking about black gender as an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured "outside" of gender's established and establishing symbolic order.[276]

The grapevine's propensity for disguise and disclosure among the enslaved as well as the fungibility of Black flesh leaves Black enslaved peoples in a "polymorphous proposition,"[277]

---

[274] Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7dz.

[275] Jacobs, Harriet A. (Harriet Ann), and Lydia Maria Child. 1861. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl / Written by Herself ... Edited by L. Maria Child.* Boston: Pub. for the author.

[276] Snorton, C. Riley. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt7dz

[277] Ibd

where their gendered unmaking provides room for surreptitious performance. Disguise becomes intrinsic to the endeavor. Also, these proliferative reiterations coincide with the multiplicities of the grapevine. The infinite possibilities that emerge from their fungible interchangeability tethers Black ontologies to a relational experience where their connections to other Black people are established to exist in a quality of life "derelict to capitalism and outside of discourses of Man."[278]

In knowledge of black male maritime workers affordance of inter-state mobility, Brent adapts to the performances of the grapevine. Gender interchangeability comprises the function of the grapevine. Everyone within the network *is in on it* whereas the aloof Mr. Sands cannot possibly surmise Brent's rebellious correspondence even when brushing up against her very performance derived from the grapevine. Such fugitive intimacies are perceptible to those in the *know* or as seen in Uncle Julius' retort: the capacity for those like him to distinguish between the vines and when it comes to outsiders– "ther aint no tellin."[279]

Like Mr. Sands' physical proximity to Linda in disguise, performances of rebellion rendered by the enslaved are less transparent. These embodied acts of freedom put us least in touch with the past and not just because they are rendered into forced obscurity (in the archives/history) but as Chesnutt fictionalized the grapevine is "goophered" which is unrecognizable to non-Black slaves, but its properties are simultaneously steeped in illusion and in magic or mythical elements.

---

[278] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

[279] Chesnutt, Charles W. 1887. "The Goophered Grapevine." The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1887/08/the-goophered-grapevine/306656/.
Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. See "Meditation on Scenes" *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Alchemic Grapevine Conversions: Spiritual & Material Practices

Inhabiting/embodying the goophered grapevine isn't predicated on its consumption, but it's regarded in the errant practices of Aunt Peggy and Uncle Julius–unruly performances of Black expression, existing on the outskirts and beyond the confines of the oppressor. Saturated with the dust of early West and Central African traditions and Hoodoo– one might fear the goopher because they are actualized by these wayward practices antithetical to White Christian ideas. One also might fear the Black insurgent who relishes in its potential. As exhibited in William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* Wells Brown recounts his interactions with a slave named Dinkie on Poplar Farm who specialized in "goophering."

The National Park Service historicizes the development of Hoodoo practices in St. Louis alongside a synthesis of Brown's critical autobiography: *My Southern Home* which details the things he heard and witnessed within the slave grapevines on the St. Louis plantation:

> Dinkie was well versed in voudooism, goophering, and fortune-telling. The practice of goophering is using goopher dust. Goopher dust is a powder used in Hoodoo for protection and sometimes 'to fix a person.' It is made of various herbal and other ingredients and ground into a powder. The practice of goopher dust comes from Central Africa among the Bakongo people, and the word goopher, according to scholars, comes from the Kongo word 'Kufwa, meaning to die.' Dinkie used goopher dust on an overseer named Grove Cook at Poplar Farm who planned to whip him because he refused to work in the field. . . According to Brown this practice worked. Dinkie rarely worked in the field, and the overseer and Mr. Gaines never assaulted Dinkie. To a certain extent this

process made Dinkie his own master, feared and respected by some whites in St. Louis. Even some enslaved people feared him.[280]

Unregulated by the systems of the plantation, the rebellious invocation of the "goophered" enables Dinkie a kind of predominance that most slaves are incapable of realizing . As "his own master", the supernatural components of the goopher dust operate as a material and immaterial property somewhat alchemic in nature. Goophering isn't merely defined by the use of the dust, but a person who specializes in goophering could be a fortune teller, a sooth-sayer, or a prophet. Their connections to time or future modes of thinking or being provides a temporal analytic where the past and future coalesce. Given the notion of Chesnutt's "goophered grapevine" it showcases the potential to reempower the disenfranchised subject upon manipulation of the mythic.

The conversion of spirits–whether that be the toiling of scuppernong grapes to wine, or the practices of goophering that few of the enslaved evoked (Aunt Peggy or Dickie) –renders this insurgent performance practice in multiple forms– as a documented history, as a repertoire, and perhaps as a mystical practice collapsing conventions of linear time and a fixed spatial logic. "Goophered" time or "cursed time" in the grapevine (one could see the notion of cursed time taking place in Aunt Peggy's twelve month death notice if a slave defiantly ate from the grapevine) posits a network of Black expression and wayward movements always in conversation with past/ the dead. What Saidiya Hartman coins as the "afterlives of slavery"[281] is

[280] U.S National Park Service. 2021. "Hoodoo in St. Louis: An African American Religious Tradition (U.S." National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/hoodoo-in-st-louis-an-african-american-religious-tradition.htm.

[281] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

intrinsic to performances derived from the grapevine. The sprawling network relies on these obscure relations to bolster itself into being.

The grapevine isn't just representative of these oral happenings that cultivate (inter-)plantation networks and are passed through a body or a repertoire/cultural history, but it's the physical connections that link Black cultural materials from Chesnutt's short story to Wells Browns' autobiography in Black American and Trans-Atlantic contexts. Outside of the supernatural undercurrents Chesnutt establishes via the "goophering" one must acknowledge the grapevine–in itself– as a powerful imaginary site that Chesnutt equally occupies. Moreover the grapevine poses opportunities for a particular mode of Black self-reinvention past and present. Historical or contemporary reperformances assembled and disassembled from these networks opaquely combat rooted Western paradigmatic structures and proliferate/mobilize intersubjective and relational practices that might sprawl out and creep from underground rather unrelentingly.

These historical performances of the "goophered grapevine" as exemplified in the parables of Reconstruction, the wayward advancements of the ungendered and fungible enslaved subject, the proliferations of the "grapevine telegraph"[282] within conspiratorial efforts and the autobiographical accounts of ex-slaves introduce a complex network of insurgent practice. I ask, in what ways do these performances get reembodied overtime and what does that yield in terms of communal upliftment? As the "nonevent of emancipation" disjoints a linear presentation of time, one could posit that this ongoing pursuit of liberation exists in its own grapevine that traces the communications of Black artists and intellectuals where Chesnutt, Jacobs, and Wells Brown, and Black thinkers of today might speak to each other.

---

[282] Lussana, Sergio A., 'Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad', *My Brother Slaves: "Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South"* (Lexington, KY, 2016; online edn, Kentucky Scholarship Online, 22 Sept. 2016)

Time Traveling Through the Grapevine & (Un)Holding History

Chesnutts' creation of the elusive story pertaining to the goophered grapevine lends us to question the authenticity of Uncle Julius' narrative. What is divulged and what becomes omitted? Is the Northerner's narration of such events equally as unreliable? Although it's simply an imaginative telling, Chesnutt's story vocalizes the grapevine as Black communal networks where the forging of community can subsequently lead to resistance. Outside the manipulation of the grapevine for purposes of insurgent ground roots organizing, the grapevine can equally become exploited by people within positions of power. The grapevine's assemblage within colonialist or capitalist structures –while established within–nevertheless encounters a stifling due to the fact the very notion of community is oppugnant to these violent socio-economic models.

The actualization of these grapevine formations were shaped by the chaotic interrelations of diasporic removal. Black culture or community is inherently connected to resilience and that resilience is most exemplary within the stifled mixing of the vessel's soundscapes. In his article "Songs of Noise and Opacity" Andrew Brooks further contextualizes Saidiya Hartman's original polemic regarding "Black Noise"[283]. He writes: "the 'Black Noise' that [Hartman] describes emerges as a response to the regulative force of white supremacy that attempts to constrain Black life, and yet, such noise always moves in excess of that which would constrain it – it is animated by a fugitivity that relentlessly searches for an outside or an opening."[284] Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* is a contemporary example of how Chesnutt's critique is taken up. Like the perceived "nonsense" of Uncle Julius and his purposefully discombobulating or *hard to*

---

[283] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

[284]Brooks, Andrew. 2020. "Songs of Noise and Opacity." The Contemporary Journal. https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/songs-of-noise-and-opacity-toward-a-sonic-politics-of-solidarity.

read tale Black noise is unconstrained and *gets in your head.* Such is the case for the gay, Black Columbia University graduate student Ron, who sought to write his graduate thesis on the subject of Nat Turner's 1831 Insurrection– a topic he perceives as a less than new or revolutionary endeavor. Ron simply got it in his "crazy head that Nat Turner was it."[285]

Ron

yeah, iii don't know where it came from but i can't git it outta my head and i have nothing new to say about him or slavery there's nothing new about the fact that he lost his mind and started slashin' folks[286]

In conversation with his 189-year-old and previously enslaved great-great-grandfather, Ron is tasked with returning his gramps, T.J home to Southampton County Virginia–the birthplace of Nat Turner's rebellion. Amid the journey the duo gradually get transported back in time due to T.J's (previously unspoken about) time traveling capabilities. Stumbling upon quarreling enslaved ghosts, ephemeral snapshots of Nat Turner hiding in the shadows and rallying troops both Ron and T.J. become immersed in the happenings of the early 19th-century Virginia plantation. The overlapping historical and contemporary brutalities of the environment nevertheless undergird Ron's experience: he is pulled over and roughhoused by local police, he experiences racial slurs and hate crimes, and falls victim to the commonplace organized whippings from "Ova-seea-Jones" who O'Hara doubly casts as "Nat Turner."

The casting choice alludes to the playwright's overall commentary–that is, the tyrannical attitudes that have shaped plantation experience can complicatedly coalesce with excessive desires towards liberality. As the time-traveling T.J allows Ron to peer into the conspiring scenes

---

[285] O'Hara, Robert. 1999. *Insurrection : Holding History / Robert O'Hara.* 1st ed. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

[286] Ibd

and mobilizations of Nat Turner and posse, Robert O'Hara employs descriptors like "crazy Nat/" among his slave ensemble to emphasize the conspirator's deemed evangelical power trip. Adopting the likeness of the tyrannical "Ova-seea-Jones" who is depicted whipping slaves on a whim or whenever he so pleases, Ron can't seem to help himself as he shockingly stops the violent scene with a declaring: "MUTHAFUCKA HAVE YOU LOST YO' FUCKIN' MIND!?!"[287] Losing one's mind and "slashing folks"[288] seems to doubly occupy the characterization of both Nat and Mister Jones. O'Hara does not attempt to condemn Turner's actions–in fact, that's besides the point. Outside of his writing, O'Hara envisions Ron with an opportunity to learn about Nat Turner within embodied or affective epistemologies. To simply put it, Ron is given the chance to hear, see and hold history within an intimate register.

In participation of the grapevine Ron enters into the spaces of the insurgents as an unlikely prophet where he dually operates as Nat's and our contemporary. The "crazy" Ron and Nat come face to face. Both figures are attempting to lead a successful rebellion and both are provided with the overwhelming knowledge that an insurrection will take place. Nat's knowledge is bestowed upon him via enlightened principles (according to O'Hara God gave him a dream of the blood soaked serpent who called him to do so) and Ron–in a similar vein– comes to know of the rebellion through white authored and authenticated history books of the event.

One could posit that O'Hara's encapsulation of Nat and the similarities portrayed to his White subjugators served as commentary for the authenticity of Nat's voice. Thomas Ruffin Gray's contentious *Confessions of Nat Turner* comes to mind. What we can surmise from the recorded admission is that much is to be left to interpretation. Maybe Ron's previous desire to

---

[287] Ibd

[288] Ibd

know Nat Turner, go back in time and undo history is not as important as what O'Hara believes we should *hold* on to when reckoning with historical recovery. Rebellion is enacted by Ron's propensity to love; defiantly and queerly and the performances of kinship reenacted with his great-great-grandfather. Those familial bonds are what T.J mutually keeps close to him, embraces and under wraps.

Nevertheless as Ron approaches Nat Turner with his own *Confessions* the slave grapevine's subsequent exploitation hangs overview. How is "Crazy Nat," able to believe in his *own* narrative when it does not sound like him? What grapevines are trustworthy and reliable? For Nat, it's the ones that sound like they were written and conceived by a slave. As written previously "the grapevine telegraph" showcases the enslaved peoples propensity to forge community amid the colonial landscape. O'Hara encapsulates this effort as well in his own story. When Ron and the audience are guided by TJ to listen in on these secret meetings Nat raises the inter-regional arguments he overhead in his travels that echo his similar sentiments on emancipation.

NAT

i been hearin' thangs readin' thangs rumblins from up no'th people up there ready to help once we start[289]

These rumors not only motivate the formation of these networks but they also inform their subsequent movements. Rumors amongst the slaves affect the proliferations of the grapevine. Meanwhile, hegemonic assemblages suppress that "Black Noise." The rumors that circulated around the legitimacy of Gray's *Confessions* also point to a present-day unraveling of the Turner ghost tales.

---

[289] Ibd

Criticisms from Black author Sharon Ewell Foster, who is famous for their fiction/non-fiction story *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part 1: The Witnesses: A Novel*, revels in the mystery surrounding the historical event and demands for more accurate portrayals of the history. After Foster decides to perform a historical investigation of their own, Foster discovers that the court transcripts from Turner's trial never listed the presence or an account given by Gray and Turner's *Confessions*. Foster states: "everything we believe about Nat Turner and what happened in the uprising [is] in question. It appears that sometimes history is fiction, and there is more truth in novels. We have been misled by a 180-year-old lie. This is an American story. It is time the truth was told."[290] As conversations continue to be had about the tumultuous uprising, one thing is clear: that a perception of Nat Turner's personality, the timeline of events according to hearsay, and suppression of Black voices/accounts of the history, have disrupted the necessary consumption of these histories by Black people. The White collective response to Turner's Rebellion relies on such entertaining imaginations to further create distinctions between the White/superior and Black inferior socio-political and historical position. Are the *Confessions* merely a ploy for theatrics– to further create a spectacle of the event and due to that notion, will that always render Nat Turner within dramatized formats? I ask–what histories lie in the archives of political theater? My question leads me to Robert O'Hara's work.

Manipulations of Grapevine, Black Body & Spectacle:

The exploitation of the grapevine network calls into question who is allowed to tell these stories and what stories of Nat Turner have we been fed (*in echo of Fleisner)*? O'Hara questions accessibility to the actual event. Perhaps all we need is our time-traveling 189-year-old great-

[290] Foster, Sharon E. 2011. "The Truth About Nat Turner." The Root. https://www.theroot.com/the-truth-about-nat-turner-1790865447.

great-grandfather to access them? Perhaps Robert O'Hara concurs that the breach within and the production of spectacle surrounding Turner's quelled slave grapevine have rendered themselves larger than life and have–in Chesnutt's critique–been exploited by the capitalist enterprise. As the Northerner recites the tale of Uncle Julius, Chesnutt assumes the narrative voice of racist Northerner. The retelling of the story possibly perpetuates the perceived and laughable antics of the cunning ex-slave–who is made a spectacle of in his own account. O'Hara reinforces this similar idea in his "Prologue." The perceived multiversal dreamscape of Ron and T.J. conclude with a scene of Nat Turner–hounded by news outlets and media. Subsequently he is approached by the reporter who identifies himself as Thomas Gray Ruffin.

REPORTER

(A live broadcast): What do you think the DNA tests on your blood samples found in the cornfields will prove Mr. Turner and is it true your semen was found in the mouth and ears of several of the white children that you murdered? What about reports that all three major networks and TURNER NETWORK TELEVISION which many feel is owned by the distant relative of your former now decapitated slave master. What about reports that they all offered you 6 figure deals for your story and film rights? Who do you think should portray you in the 8 hour mini-series that FOX TELEVISION wants to produce? Many blacks have called you their HERO Mr. Turner. Any thoughts on that? Dead. white men white women white babies amounting to 55. Dead.[291]

Robert O'Hara highlights the making of racial and political theater from the event. In the scene he argues of its proliferative effects and how it disrupts present-day discernments and representations of Black people and Black history. The slave grapevine turned TURNER

---

[291] O'Hara, Robert. 1999. *Insurrection : Holding History / Robert O'Hara.* 1st ed. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

NETWORK TELEVISION contrasts two different forms of knowledge production and the ways they disseminate and garner information. As previously discussed, the Black grapevine provides an insurgent communal network –uprooted from hegemonic systems– and antithetical to top-down approaches of capitalism. The panoptic view necessitates a precarious subject to exploit. Examples like Fox News and Turner Network Television (TNT) further sensationalize the vulnerable subject, reinforcing their position as victim under capitalist duress without solutions or reifying the very tropes white supremacy needs to sustain itself.

In Nancy Bentley's article titled: "Chesnutt and the Imperial Spectacle" Bentley analyzes Chesnutt's criticism on the denigration of Black bodies in visual culture as demonstrated in his work *Marrow*. Specifically what Bently notes as the "material instances of black stigma"[292] extends O'Hara's reading of sensationalized representations of Black subjects in contemporary multimedia. Bentley goes on to explain:

> Chesnutt points to minstrelsy and other white manipulations of black life for the truth they expose about civil society, the reality that under the rule of Jim Crow all black people who enter the public sphere must present themselves, visually and otherwise, as a racial spectacle or sign – as a human stigma."[293]

Ruffin's intention to get Turner to reduce his liberatory ideas and motivations to merely stigmatic spectacle links us to the real yet sensational Black cultural legacies that simultaneously feather White fascination and exploitation. O'Hara instills many provocations for the audience surrounding the authenticity of the Turner events. The spectacle flights of fancy and offers

[292] Bercovitch, Sacvan, ed. "Chesnutt and Imperial Spectacle." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, 3:181–223. The Cambridge History of American Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521301077.007.

[293] Ibd pg 206

complicated conclusions about Turner's personality. To extend Bentley's reading of Chesnutt– for reemphasis of the Chapter's framing–in the case of the "Goophered Grapevine" he was also very concerned about the subject of truth in the curation of racial spectacle as it relates to the character: Uncle Julius. In O'Hara's depiction of racial spectacle regarding Nat Turner, the reporter–the narrator of Nat's story– is concerned with the "truth of the events," as well as the fabrication of said truths in efforts to purport "a kind of" narrative. The reality is that the confrontation exposes a long history of forced recognition that is emboldened by white social imaginaries of Blackness. What gets revealed is the "manipulations of Black life"[294] that tell a truer story about the sustained networks of oppression that obfuscate the narrative of community. The more provocative narrative (in my view and maybe O'Hara agrees) are the networks of Black kinship, intimacy and solidarity the grapevine demands. The possible fabulations embedded within the Nat Turner narrative enable us to imagine and focus on the rebellious notion of Black togetherness and intimate congregation that are inherently fugitive.

In Soyica Colbert's work "Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History" Colbert reaffirms O'Hara's stance the Black body's historical connection to affective epistemologies. Colbert writes: "Rather than predicating black futurity on heterosexual coupling, O'Hara's play attends to the black body's materiality with intimate and caring forms of touch alongside and in the face of foreshortened (black) lifespans."[295] Colbert is concerned with the haptic and the material histories that get resumed through the body. Outside of this reading on touch, O'Hara mutually queries on the full capacity of such tangibility.

---

[294] Ibd pg 206

[295] Colbert, Soyica. 2019. "Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History." *Modern Drama* 62 (4): 502–16. https://doi.org/10.3138/MD.S1020R2.

As Ron and T.J. 's journey begins and concludes with their sentimental embrace–Ron notably exclaims "I'm holding history in my arms–" and yet, the imagined opportunity to hold onto these "living archives" still feels somewhat out-of-reach. T.J./O'Harris reminds us that forming Black affective networks within our present is much more instrumental and transgressive than reproducing dominative constructions of the past. In echo of Faedra Chartard Carpenter's "Robert O'Hara's Insurrection: Que(e)rying History," Carpenter states that O'Hara's use of a "queer theoretical paradigm"[296] subverts traditional and material interpretations of history and recognizes this room as kindling for alternative forms of historical production. If the documented history remains "out-of-touch" with reality, the emphasis toward affective epistemologies, queer or wayward mobilizations, and theories of multiplicity supports a Black expressive practice that might *move us* beyond and destabilize systems of coloniality that have a *hold* on Black bodies and histories. In *Insurrection: Holding History* O'Hara prompts the spirit of rebellion that encompasses these fugitive networks and directs us toward intimate connections that might free us from the "hold."

As O'Hara unpacks the rigidity of dominant history, the imaginative retelling of Nat Turner's story begs us to que(e)ry alternative methods for knowledge production. Most specifically how these affective networks enable us to create and (in Ron's case) "study"[297] documented and undocumented Black narratives. The allure of seeing and recording the truth of these histories, becomes an impossible endeavor as the archive or dominant forms of knowledge production render Black historical subjects in stigmatic forms. O'Hara imagines what Saidiya

---

[296] Carpenter Faedra Chatard (2003) Robert O'Hara's Insurrection: "Que(e)rying" history, Text and Performance Quarterly, 23:2, -, DOI: 10.1080/1046293032000141365

[297] O'Hara, Robert. 1999. *Insurrection : Holding History / Robert O'Hara.* 1st ed. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Hartman terms as an "impossible narrative"[298] enacting a "relational tethering"[299] between past, present and future Black subjects. Fabulation provides a tool to look back, and uncover new ways of existing in the present all the while ensuring and assembling Black livelihoods. In tracing the interconnected web of these historically-minded fabulations–or these performances of the grapevine– reperformances of American slavery are overwhelmingly sundry in form. In echo of O'Hara's speculation on the collective affinity toward these stories, reenactors are not only looking for methods to further proximate themselves to the lost histories of the enslaved, but the gaps provide room for an alternative archival practice– a reenvisioning of Black history facilitating performance historiographies. These reembodied epistemologies create opportunities to interweave these narratives as affectual in stitching our social fabric or even bridging community.

Restitching the Historical Fabric & Interwoven Black Grapevines

Thus leading this examination to the reenactment of the "Slave Rebellion Reenactment" [SRR] which irrefutably reemployed the insurgent function of the "slave grapevine" to assemble networks between the global story weavers (reenactors, coordinators, team members etc) in participation of the reimagined event. In November of 2019 *The Guardian* participated in the 24-mile,and two day trek through the River Parishes outside and eventually to the city of New Orleans. In consultation with performance artist Dread Scott[300] and the group of re-enactors,the performance began at the historic road sign memorial that marked the former occupancy of the

[298] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

[299] Ibd

[300] Who bears the same name of the fugitive slave, and abolitionist, Dred Scott who famously went to trial for his freedom in 1843.

Woodland (Andry) Plantation. As distant onlookers watch and listen to the muddled pleas of the previous plantation owner: Manuel Andry, who cries: “Why are you doing this? Why, Charles, why,”[301] it is made clear that Scott attempts to rewrite the events of that fateful day. Manuel Andry–who doesn’t survive his sustained injuries from the attack– dies in the reenacted version of events.Thus marking a temporal shift where new Louisianian Black futures are realized from the grapevine–out of oral history and into a new expressive register. The Black performers embody the enslaved figures and utilize the insurrection to dually rebel against histories of colonial suppression. By imagining other historical avenues, Scott and ensemble prophetically conjure futures of the past.

Dressed in 19th century period clothing as escaped slaves on horseback, armed with stage props such as fake muskets, machetes, and hatchets Dread Scott and the group of reenactors from across the globe set out to restage “The 1811 German Coast Uprising.” Charles Desmonde and his insurgent constituents: Gilbert, Quamana, Marie Rose alongside nearly 300 enslaved and indigenous persons from neighboring plantations marched in what is deemed the largest slave rebellion in U.S history; an event that has been made obscure from America’s cultural legacy, and reduced to a mere signpost beside the Airline highway.

In an interview about Scott’s choice to reenact the insurrection Scott explains his bafflement of the memorialization of the “largest rebellion of enslaved people in US history with a road sign.”[302] In summary, Scott claims the insurrection was so monumental that if it were successful it could have inevitably shifted the U.S and the world economy altogether. Scott notes

---

[301] PBS NEWS HOUR. 2019. “Largest slave revolt in U.S. history lives on in reenactment.” YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTc7jyceteI.(0:45:0:50)

[302] The Guardian. “America’s Largest Slave Revolt Brought Back To Life” *YouTube*, 21 Nov. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2to3S0iabE iiiIbid.

that oil refineries stand in the stead of the sugar plantations along the River parish. The transition from the ascendancy of the agricultural South to the infiltration of an industrial post-war south leaves the cultural memory of slavery in its wake. The predominantly poor and BIPOC communities that live alongside the oil and sugar refineries are deeply impacted by the effects of environmental racism. Moreover, the road sign memorial sustains the insurrection's suppression from a dominant history and only provides local residents and inquirers with little source material of its complex narrative. The quelled rebellion was rendered historically undocumented due to the knowledge of Touissant's (quasi)-success in forging the independence of Black Haitians. If word continued to get out of this rebellion it could give further momentum to the abolitionist cause or even fuel more insurrections through the "slave grapevine telegraph."[303]

Devence Hampton, a reenactor in the performance stated that being a part of the reenactment would be "the most information [he has] ever had from the other end of it cause they teach you what they want you to know in history, in schools"[304] and the road sign would be yet another form of that concealment. Scott and Hampton respectively call out the failures of the institution and the unmistakable violence it purports when failing to provide equitable access to Black histories or giving communities opportunities to celebrate these narratives.

The reperformance arguably provides liberatory possibilities for those who lost their lives in the rebellion and also present-day black folk who currently walk in tradition of black emancipatory practices. Like that of re-enactor Jordan Rome who stated, "I'm not acting, I'm

---

[303] Lussana, Sergio A., 'Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad', *My Brother Slaves: "Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South"* (Lexington, KY, 2016; online edn, Kentucky Scholarship Online, 22 Sept. 2016)

[304] The Guardian. "America's Largest Slave Revolt Brought Back To Life" *YouTube*, 21 Nov. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2to3S0iabE iiiIbid.

having an experience with a bunch of other black people... embodying the spirit of emancipation... that's really powerful."[305] Rome rallies other reenactors in a similar fashion to the Black Lives Matter Movement, and it becomes clear that the reenactment harkens to the past but also holds radical potential for contemporary participants like Rome. As the reenactors perform the chants of the historical insurrectionists such as: "Freedom or Death!" and interweave them with present-day protest slogans like: "Black Lives Matter" [BLM], with clenched Black fists raised high the temporal "stickiness"[306] of the varying mobilizations interlinks the histories of Black freedom marches from insurrections, to the Civil Rights Movement and the contemporary BLM protests. Moreover, it paves the way for people (from varying cultural, racial or socio-economic backgrounds), to network and forge community amid the contemporary backdrop of systemic racism or within the "afterlives of slavery."[307]

The assemblage of the reenactment was no small feat, but it required no marketed organization leading up to the reperformance Dred Scott says that the performance was intended to emulate the grapevine networks of the enslaved. He writes:

> A key element of slave revolts was the organizing of small groups of trusted individuals, clandestinely plotting with others in small cells. Mirroring this structure, project recruitment took the form of one on one conversations about why this history is important in contemporary society. And throughout the year leading up to the performance,

---

[305]Ibd

[306] Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains : Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment / Rebecca Schneider.* Abingdon, Oxon ;: Routledge, 2011.

[307] Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe : a Journal of Criticism* 12 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1.

> volunteers who could not participate in the walk organized sewing circles to create the vibrant visual look of the army.[308]

The idea that the ground roots initiative could garner recruitment and participation by mere conversation was a niche concept– but the reality was preeminent fundraising from "institutional stakeholders" aided in coordinating logistics and solidified economic reinforcements for the SRR more than anything. It does not necessarily mean that the recreation of the grapevine wasn't a useful tool sustaining the "authenticity" or mere essence of the insurrection. The aid of local organizations–like the "New Orleans based non-profit Antenna" maintained conversational outreach to the communities along River parish, and the reliance upon word of mouth worked in getting people to hear "whispers, and rumors" about a possible insurrection in their areas.

In Sarah Juliet Lauro's article titled, "Dred Scott's Slave Rebellion Reenactment Beholding the Gap in Commemorations of Resistance," Lauro argues that the reperformance reempowered the historical insurrectionists with autonomy otherwise stifled by the suppression of the rebellion. In recitation of Daniel Ramussen's book about the 1811 insurrection named *American Uprising,* Lauro maintains that the rebellion's organization through the grapevine telegraph generated "'news and information [that] coursed through the slave quarters.'"[309] She goes on to write:

> Scott himself acknowledges this as an aspect of the history he was hoping to reenact in an interview conducted when he was planning the event . . .The precise route the performers would take was a closely guarded secret.. . .Many read about it in local papers or heard of

[308] Scott, Dred. n.d. "Slave Rebellion Reenactment." Dread Scott. Accessed April 12, 2023. https://www.dreadscott.net/portfolio_page/slave-rebellion-reenactment/.

[309] Rasmussen, Daniel. 2011. *American Uprising : the Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt / Daniel Rasmussen.* 1st ed. New York, NY: Harper.

it through word of mouth, but in contrast the event itself dramatized access and control. . . On the one hand, the different levels of information and misinformation creates an apt historical parallel to the 1811 rebellion; but on the other, withholding access from some suggests that this history of black resistance should not belong to everyone.[310]

Lauro specifies that the control was stratified into two components: spectatorship and participation and both were denied complete visibility and knowledge about the happenings of the event. While Lauro notes these gaps as productive I would argue that the manipulation of the grapevine complicatedly enmeshes furtive efforts toward obscurity.

1. The indistinguishability of the event maintains the hidden mobilizations of the fugitives who should have this right to illegibility. 2. However, the organizers that remain "in the know" who have larger stakes in the event aren't just laboring participants, but the media outlets (like the *Guardian*), funders, and advertisers are able to maintain proximity and accessibility to the event while also disseminating and curating their own accounts about the reperformance.
2. Maybe Scott wanted to render the reperformance a spectacle, and maybe the hushed internalized organizers sought to maintain the history's integrity.

Nevertheless, the complex tensions between visibility and obscurity overlap with the rebellion's multitudinous layers.

Professor of English at Florida State University and reenactor Alisha Gaines stated she heard of the event from announcements on Twitter and other social media networks. She also noted the event's "disorganization" oftentimes leaving Black performers confused about the

---

[310] Lauro, Sarah Juliet. 2021. "Dread Scott's Slave Rebellion Reenactment: Beholding the Gap in Commemorations of Resistance." *TDR : Drama Review* 65 (3): 24–41. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204321000307.

happenings. In addition, larger organizational funding and what Melissa Smith describes as the "$1 million-plus price tag for the event [and how it more than] exceeded the annual budget."[311] The reperformed grapevine was proved to be not enough in sustaining the reenactment's production and not for lack of better effort, but the reality is Dred Scott needed to draw a mass crowd to be financed. Reducing outright accessibility to the knowledge of the events was also integral to the insurgent performance project. The coalescing of the networks–whether that be mass multi-media or word-of-mouth- showcased the tensions within contemporary Black representational forms. Who is allowed to represent the past, and who is allowed total access to these representations? One would assume Black participants and spectators would be first to know, but the grapevine of Scott's production weirdly reaffirms Black mobility as essential to the performance all the while disjointing them from it. Scott's SRR grapevine just might be goophered.

Yet Scott's effort to restitch the past with the present and aim toward future social progress still emphasizes the desire and necessity to emblematize communal organization at the core/heart of the reenactment. I am particularly taken with the organized sewing circles led by costumer Alison L. Parker who is also the founder of knicKnack: a non-profit organization that recycles and repurposes neglected costumes from film, TV and theater sets. The organization aided in the planning of the projected sewing circles for the SRR. The recruitment of the sewing circles not only took place through the proliferations of the oral grapevine, but accepted contributions from sewers across the globe. Organized clusters from Los Angeles, New Orleans, London and New York maintained communication throughout the seven-year project.

[311] Smith, Melissa, and Taylor Dafoe. 2019. "Here's How the Artist Dread Scott Pulled Off an Epic Reenactment of the Largest Slave Rebellion in American History." Artnet News. https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dread-scotts-epic-reenactment-rebellion-1700433.

The eco-friendly objectives toward sustainability and the sewing circles propensity to build bonds through local and global community convey an unlikely grapevine that has the capacity to thread insurgent, anti-capitalist coalitions throughout time and space. Similar to the mid-19th century anti-slavery sewing circles used to raise money for the support of abolitionist efforts, contemporary subjects interweave these historical legacies into their reperformance. The making and inhabitation of the recreated period garments conjure up historical memory of the enslaved. Scott's Slave Rebellion Reenactment doesn't merely imagine insurgent communal networks but creates one in its rendering. Labor–in the context of communal advocacy and sustainability– shifts the perception of the deemed "unusability" of the Black enslaved garments and their function. The reperformance also spotlights how needle work (specifically toiled by enslaved Black women) alludes to a larger painstaking issue of global capitalism–i.e., the expendability of sweatshops and modern day slavery. Do the SRR organized sewing circles say much more about the injustice within our current social fabric? What do these grapevines suggest as a decolonial project?

Building Community w/ Bad Bitches, Insurrection & Grapevine Fermentations:

Black grapevines create high fermentation. The arousing rumors and whispers of insurrection stir up violent crusades of emancipation. It's no surprise that contemporary reperformances of the slave grapevine revel in that fermentation process. In the *Drunk History* episode "Harriet Tubman Leads an Army of Bad Bitches" the contemporary reenactment–with an alcoholic twist–reimagines Harriet Tubman's led Combahee River Raid (1863) in which 150 black Union army soldiers traveled alongside Tubman in steamboats to destroy rice plantation fields and recruited newly freed Black peoples.

Most known for her efforts during the Underground Railroad, (a spatio-temporal concept for the "slave grapevine telegraph" that organized the mobilizations of the enslaved to freedom) in 1862 Tubman went on to work as a nurse for the Union army. After spending a year helping the Union cause, Tubman and Colonel James Montgomery organized the Union raid along the Combahee river. Utilizing her knowledge of the Underground Railroad Tubman frequently collected intel from slaves about Confederate movements and gathered essential information on the location "Confederate 'torpedoes'—river mines."[312] The rising "effervescence" and promise of freedom enabled other Black people to collude and become informants for Tubman. It was through Tubman's embodied experience as a slave, her labor as a spy, and mastery of the grapevine that made the raid so successful.

The spirit of wayward fermentation encapsulates the commentary and concept of Derek Water's show *Drunk History*. In each episode, comedians are invited to sit down and disseminate historical knowledge through oral retelling. The only catch is, intoxication is required of each narrator. Essentially, making "drunk history" is integral to each historical reperformance. One could consider it as Water's commentary on the rigidity of antiquated historical epistemes. Arguably Water's concept destabilizes the process of history making that has remained under (social)influence. The desired intoxication of the show's narrators implements an "informal" way of performing and making history. The informality allows slurred words, historical hiccups and oratorical exaggerations and admits error to be an integral part of the show whether it is based on comedic flair or factual delivery.

[312] Stejskal, James. n.d. "The Jayhawker and the Conductor: The Combahee Ferry Raid, 2 June 1863 – The Campaign for the National Museum of the United States Army." Army Historical Foundation. Accessed April 12, 2023. https://armyhistory.org/the-jayhawker-and-the-conductor-the-combahee-ferry-raid-2-june-1863/.

In the episodes, comedians are told to give a drunk account of the historical assignment they received. In the case of "Harriet Tubman Leads an Army of Bad Bitches" Black comedian Crissel West and Oscar award winning actress Octavia Spencer are tasked with reimagining the history of the Combahee River Raid through performance. For West, the performance is actualized through the Black grapevine:

1. Through oral dissemination of their informed knowledge.
2. Through their drunken expeditions.

In this vein, the grapevine isn't just a locus for Black networks and communications and the coalescence of past and future Black movements throughout time and space, but the grapevine is much like Chesnutt's fabulation–it's strange, weird, and rendered for purposes of recreational consumption. For Spencer, the performance is reenacted. Spencer's reperformane personifies the amalgamated expressions of West and Tubman. Not only does the actress represent the iconic expeditions of Tubman, but the incorporation of West's oral retelling, intersects West's contemporary vocalizations within the Antebellum period.

"Whose words are those?"[313] Just as Richard Schechner asks in his examination of performance as a "paradigm of liminality,"[314] when it comes to the performance of Tubman West and Spencer "the effective performances share this "not not not"[315] quality. West is *not not* Harriet, *not not* Spenser, and *not not* herself while the drunken interplay inhibits her capacity to operate in what is imagined as her "norm." West warns, "excuse me I got a good 15 seconds left in me before the liquor takes over and God only knows what I'll say." The notion of "spirits"

---

[313] Schechner, Richard, and Victor W Turner. *Between Theater & Anthropology* p.11

[314] Ibd

[315] Ibd

taking over also isn't exactly detached from the happenings of the reperformance. While Spencer's body functions through what Schechner notes as being "in-between identities,"[316] the spirits of the grapevine: the psychic Black Americans have to the knowledge of the Underground Railroad and entanglement of West's wayward expressions the reperformance is seeded in the qualities of the rebellion.

As West and Spenser both re-narrativized Tubman's story with modern-day expressions (movements and phrases) the oration and reenactment eliminated the risks and scenes of subjected violence embedded within the initial history which ultimately centers the premise of the grapevine. The reperformance highlights how things get lost or remain unsaid through these intimate exchanges. The fabula—the imagined reconstruction of the narrative positions a performative landscape through which the grapevine resumes its operations. As Spencer/West reperform Tubman's social capacity and mobility when they echo "I have connects"[317] the language rather obscurely fuses time, and leaves room for Tubman's representation to remain rebelliously illegible. The audience doesn't know who/what those connections are but are directed to believe that only "bad bitches" are at the receiving end of these insurgent networks. One could draw the conclusion these "bad bitches" are inherently insurgent, anti-colonial, and communal in nature.

The grapevine is also elucidated in the opening and conclusion of the *Drunk History* episode. In the beginning of the episode the audience sees a drunk Waters–in anticipation of the retelling, watching West mix her own drink. The table consists of a variety of half-consumed liquors and wines for West to choose from. Viewers are made to speculate that Waters and others

---

[316] Ibd

[317] Comedy Central. 2015. "Drunk History - Harriet Tubman Leads an Army of Bad Bitches (ft. Octavia Spencer)." YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpTf1GFjCd8.(1:30:1:35)

got into the mix of drinks beforehand. Mumbling the lyrics of Bobby Shmurda's "Hot Nigga" Waters mimics West singing but messes up the words. A disapproving West asserts: "No! He's saying bitch caught a body bout' a week ago. Meaning I killed somebody bout' a week ago."[318] Waters pulls back from his initial excitement and responds: "Ahhhhh no! That's where I draw the line."[319] West is in turn shocked, and confused by his retreat from such a subject. The cultural disconnect between the two is sedimented right in the beginning, and as the show segues into the topic of a Black led army, accompanied ensemble of insurrectionists and their violent pillage through plantations along the Combahee River it makes one query on the kind of Black enacted violence made permissible in the conversation.[320]

As West sang the lyrics, I found myself doing the same. Joining in on these forms of Black cultural productions, the Drunk History episode creates a distinction within the cultural repertoire it seemingly encourages. There is also a disclaimer. The interaction makes the audience aware that West could allude to Black colloquiums that White people just don't know about. Is that the humor within this contemporary mode of storytelling or does it tie into the long history of Blacks grapevine that the reperformance inevitably echoes? Or both? The complicated tension is captured at the end of the episode. West ends her narration with the statement: "man; Black people have been through so much." Water's–cracking an awkward smile says, "I don't know how to respond to that."[321] Crissle immediately laughs in what seems like an exhaustive

[318] Ibd (:30:035)

[319] Ibd

[320] I do want to add, if Bobby Shmurda is in-fact murdering people as the song suggests. I don't condone that act of violence.

[321] Ibd(5:25:5:30)

and cackling conclusion. Again, the hesitancy of Water's participation indicates a lack of sustained knowledge not familiar to Water or informed by a similar cultural repertoire. The conversation is arguably intermixed with Black cultural colloquialisms, and modes of thinking and being Black. The grapevine isn't totally accessible or legible, but the performances derived point us to a Black cultural history, always contrary to white systems of knowledge production, and inherently wayward in form.

What the audience is ultimately intended to gather is that watching drunk comedians give history lessons is not "accurate history" per se but rather a form of history telling reliant on error—which produces the humorous qualities of the reenactment. There is no evidence that Tubman gave a speech to her fugitive troops telling them she had "dope ass shit planned out" but West acknowledges that it retells the history as "dope ass shit."[322] The audience is made to acknowledge these insurgent acts in the context of West's informed grapevine. It is their reliance on the drunken "word-of-mouth" approach that the creators of *Drunk History* can create new and fermented reimaginings of Tubman. The reenactment reckons with the archival opacities of the Combahee River Raid and the displaced history of Tubman who had been decentered from the story. Tubman's "grapevine mobilizations" creates a space for past and present Black insurgents to assemble multi-varying enactments of emancipation that are muddled by the drunken dissemination of these oral tellings. That being said, one could question if the reperformance solely illuminates Tubman and her consort as the *only* subjects brought into relief and if dominant structures are consequently disassembled through these drinking vessels.

[322] Ibd (0:50)

Conclusion Or What Next?

Why we should turn to Opaque Fabulations

How have post-slavery subjects grappled with the afterlives of slavery? Why do we continue to return to periods of enslavement? At the beginning of the project I ruminated on this question in hopes that the case studies might give further clarity on Black artists, scholars, writers and historical figures' desire to create reenactments/reembodied performances about enslaved histories. My neologism of opaque fabulations shows us that our affinity to pinpoint, or make transparent complex articulations of Black liberation are not reliant on definitive resolutions. I argue these reperformances of American slavery are intimate and familial, meditative/therapeutic, they are utilized as ways to subvert dominative impositions and serve as possible survival strategies. These reperformances are created to imagine otherwise worlds and ostensibly build something new.

A study of opaque fabulations enables us to analyze scenes within Black rendered reperformances of American Slavery as a confrontation—in similar vein to Ijame's provocation *in TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever*— with the histories we inherit. Since these debts are tied to histories of enslavement Black artists, scholars, or performers refuse to neglect what is bestowed upon them; whether the acknowledgement of these debts are consensually accessed or not. These reperformances convey these confrontations with these historical remains are habitual and embodied. Since they can't always be accessed in archives they are taken up in alternative ways via these mechanics of embodied technologies. Black rendered reperformances does what whiteness refuses-in echo of O. Harris' *Slave Play*– the ability to process one's feelings about racism and ostensibly exorcise these histories within that processing. Blackness and enslavement are often conflated in harmful ways but these reperformances have illuminated ways Black

artists place themselves at the center of their research endeavors which changes the way they uncover histories or unpack static archives.

Opaque fabulations is a form of embodied practice. Opacity not only enables Black people to protect their autonomies, their bodies, and these histories, but this claim to rights or private property work against the violence of coloniality and its active reinforcement of Black depersonalization. Fabulation allows Black people to make those claims to their bodies potentially lost in history—whether that be through underrepresentation or the enduring violence of social and corporeal death—or a way to autonomously participate in the mechanisms that have dehumanized or disembodied them. I came to the notion of opaque fabulations based on this convergence between history and performance. I find that these opacities are not only situated in archival gaps but in the colonial stifling of Black expression–which Glissant might add that the enslaved have a right to. My project provides an analysis of performance to contend with Black experiences in ways archival histories cannot supply.

I would argue that opaque-fabulation does not reproduce the convention of "straight history" or linearity, but takes up the notion of fabula (as situated in works from Saidiya Hartman or Tavia Nyong'o) as the historical nexus that brings these historical and contemporary case studies all together. Opaque fabulations evolve how fabulation is used and studied by Hartman and Nyong'o. It doesn't solely attempt to reckon with the failures of archival imaginaries, or work against anti-black racism and challenge the proliferations of hegemonic power structures. Opaque fabulations is the link that centers the perceptions surrounding Black histories and performance. How we view Black history is a major site of my deliberation. The way an audience might grapple with the indiscernibility of Sally or Alfred's labored constancy highlights this critical ambivalence between the attractions and traumas of the plantation that are

exemplified in these historical situations (i.e., the inconceivability of Hemings perceived ability to love at Monticello, or Alfred's ability to do the same at the Hermitage).

The ambivalence further amplified within the audience and their perceptions of these case studies. I express this as an ostensible pull towards these histories or an expressed recoiling from them. Opaque fabulations underscores the impossibility of Black histories being both attractive *and* traumatic to reimagine. Productions like *Slave Play* situate this oscillatory feeling between attraction and trauma theory where the reperformance unearths feelings of both pain and pleasure via sexual expression and therapy. In addition, this is mutually conveyed in the likening of Issa's perceived messiness with her expressed affinities toward Ninny's hoe-tations on the Plantation in *Due North*. The reperformances of opaque fabulations destabilize impossibilities of contemporary expressions of Black/queer and femme desire and where they might find resonance within histories of enslavement.

Moreover, opaque fabulations illuminates the voices of the underrepresented. While it is a neologism based in the field of performance studies, I attempted to spotlight Black poetics and scholarship in efforts to further contextualize these intersections and foreground a study that is articulated within/by/for Black people. I wanted to create a neologism interlaced in a Black poetics, which is why I also attempt to begin with a theorization of an open boat/slave vessel as a way to further draw out this thinking. I wanted to unsettle the prioritization of Western humanisms thought (that are heavily reliant on politics of recognition and transparency). Opaque fabulations trouble these conceptions through studies/practices of radical imagination. Particularly how an opaque fabulation is formed within a vessel analytic to convey the function of its varying formations. The vessel is migratory, a socio-historical connective tissue of these embodied technologies that are mobilized throughout time and space.

The Vessel's Materiality

Throughout the project, I have provided contemporary and historical examples of these opaque fabulations and used the analytic of the vessel to conceptualize this thinking. By configuring the vessel in relation to its material components, I focused on the material cultures of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the transportive nature of the "Open Boat" that have migrated enslaved peoples—who are rendered fungible and likened as products within colonial capitalism—and their interaction with their material and natural environment around them. I identified this within the material possessions of the plantations i.e.,--the archival relics that conjure fabulas for reinvention and nostalgically situate the plantation in its heyday. We see this in Alfred's acquisition of the mirror, or within the whimsical sounds of bygone days generated from the steam calliope. These material cultures are also palpably identified in the Plantionocene, and more specifically the agricultural monocultures /ecological makeup of the Plantation (as shown in the exemplification of the personified cotton stems in *Kastastwof Karavan* or the wayward grapevines that have aided in the mobilization of Black gossips, and the fabulatory projects of self-efficacy as exhibited in Chestnut's "Goophered Grapevine." Also, this enables us to additionally trace the foodways that are assembled on the plantationscape, where tea and sugar canes, promote a Black aesthetic turn of oral embodied practices.

Moreover, these materialities of enslavement convey the operation of the plantation economy and its rapid shift to industrialization. The idealistic vision of Reconstruction purported a utopic social mythology such figures like Brown, Jackson or Chestnut found fruitful (no pun intended) for self and socio-historical repositioning. The technological advancement of industrialization created tensions between the operations of the plantationscape and the evolving

machinery that continued to satiate desires for excess production. Arguably, we see these tensions with machines in my third chapter..

For example, the ways the piano has been curated to exemplify the economic prosperity of the Sutter Family home/white Southern idealism in August Wilson's the *Piano Lesson*, or as seen in the traumatic memories of Kaneisha and the way the cotton gin juxtaposes against expressions for autonomous sexual pleasures. The vessel not only moves us toward migratory frameworks, but it encapsulates the evolving technologies of modernization and historical and contemporary Black people's relation to them. By stealing a piano exhibited on a Plantation your ancestors once occupied, or coming to terms with one's repressed sexuality; acknowledging you never got to be touched behind the cotton gin, these reperformances work against the static configuration of material cultures and convey the way they *bring* things up for Black people., i.e., feelings, affections, goosebumps, haunts and more. We see these superseding technological interactions most evolved in Azie Dungey's "Ask A Slave," as her living history reperformance of Lizzie Mae grapples with the age of the internet. What does it mean to make what Tavia Nyong'o describes as the historical potentiality of "virtual contact" between the past, present and future. The evolving nature of social networks and her confrontation with virtual worlds not only put affectivities into relation, but allow Dungey/Mae to radically connect post-slavery subjects digitally.

The Vessel as an Embodied Technology

The vessel provides a framework to access these opaque fabulations. Given the slave ship's configuration as a site of opacity, the corporeal vessels of Black people across time and space are adapted to create these imaginaries. Most importantly, the vessel functions as an embodied technology, a facilitator of this transport. It showcases the way contemporary Black

people can negotiate their history by traveling back in time, or how historical Black people can contend with their condition (pre or post emancipation.)

In “Reperforming Relics,” I was able to assemble performances of objecthood in historically-minded fabulations. When Alfred Jackson acquired the mirror from the Hermitage estate, perhaps he saw some resemblance given his own objectification. In the chapter "Virginia Play " we see Sally Hemings become a receptacle for negotiating American socio-political imaginaries, and a site to ruminate on the subject of racial politics. Acting as vessel for this deliberation I argued that the occupancy of Sally allows Black people to reinforce Black humanities otherwise unexpressed. The corporeal vessel of Sally instigates discussions on these intimacies, where Black pleasures could be conceived, and how Black kinship and familial networks exist as antitheses to productions of colonial capitalism. By becoming vessels, Black rendered repeformances proximate these histories within our contemporary moment, and negotiate how these afterlives of slavery still permeate within our everyday life.

Provocations: The Vessel & Home

The vessel mutually serves as a receptacle for alternative forms of knowledge production. In consideration of the proliferated material cultures of abolitionist narratives as seen from Brown’s *Clotel*, or the realteration of the steam calliope, these historically minded fabulations are created as a way to house new modes of living, sensing/hearing, or being in the world. I hope to evolve my project and continue to give discourse to these crucial topics on enslaved histories as well as address the intersections of performance and Black studies that may go undertheorized or mutually stress the technologies of embodiment for otherwise possibilities. Returning to our Roots: A Provocation on Home” is where I want to consider, the home as a vessel in analysis of embodied performance projects like Joseph McGill’s “The Slave Dwelling Project.”

McGill actively supports what it means to recover, care for and live in Black spaces. McGill's project also illuminates the proximity that Black livelihoods have to enslaved histories and what it means to embody the life of slaves in the present-day.

Black performance methodologies used like "opaque fabulations" will make visible a current contention with the "afterlives of slavery" while providing contemporary access to underwritten Black histories. Given Hartman's reflection on the way archival gaps may mutually tell a story at the site of the slave vessel: *The Recovery*, opaque fabulations is a query that begins at the vessel to trace Black historically minded fabulations that may erect from and lie *within* those interstices. My neologism relies on archival opacities to provoke something from unclear, and unresolved histories of Black life. The inquiry of opaque fabulation centers how Black histories enable us to extend how these concepts of fabulation are employed and the way they are engaged in Black performance studies *now*. Opaque fabulations doesn't require total transparency of these narratives but critically situates these obscure histories as mutually foregrounding in the reimagination endeavor.

Bibliography

Ahad-Legardy, Badia. *Afro-Nostalgia : Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture / Badia Ahad-Legardy.* University of Illinois Press, 2021.

"America's largest slave revolt brought back to life." *YouTube*, The Guardian, 14 November 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2to3S0iabE. Accessed 15 May 2024.

America-American Slave Cabins-Alfred's Cabin." Sankofa Archives, July 17, 2020. https://www.sankofaarchives.com/american-architecture-slave-cabins-alfreds-cabin/.

"Anneberg Center At Home/Blog." *Anneberg Center*, https://annenbergcenter.org/blog/looking-back-at-vessels. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Bakhtin, M. M. (Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich). *Rabelais and His World / by Mikhail Bakhtin ; Translated by Hélène Iswolsky.* Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, First Midland book edition., Indiana University Press, 1984.

Baugher, Sherene, and Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, editors. *Archaeology and Preservation of Gendered Landscapes* / Edited by Sherene Baugher, Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood. Springer, 2010.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *Reconstructing American Literary History / Edited by Sacvan Bercovitch.* Harvard University Press, 1986.

Brooks, Andrew. *Songs of Noise and Opacity: Toward a Sonic Politics of Solidarity*. Nottingham Contemporary, 2020.

Brooks, Daphne. Bodies in Dissent : Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 / Daphne A. Brooks. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Print.

Brown, Kimberly Juanita. *The Repeating Body : Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary / Kimberly Juanita Brown.* Duke University Press, 2015.

Bidler, Tiffany Johnson. "Suicide and Survival in the Work of Kara Walker." *Women's studies quarterly* 44.1/2 (2016): 52–72. Web.

Brinkerhoff, Roeliff. *Recollections of a Lifetime / by General Roeliff Brinkerhoff.* The Robert Clarke Company, 1900.

Brown, William Wells. *Clotel or the President's Daughter; A Narrative of Slave Life* in the United States. London Patridge & Oakley 1853 (Accessed from Rotunda) https://www.upress.virginia.edu/title/CLO/

----.*Clotel & Other Writings*. Library of America, 2014.

----. *Clotelle or the Coloured Heroine; a Tale of Southern States.* Boston Lee & Shepard 1867. (Accesed from Rotunda) https://www.upress.virginia.edu/title/CLO/

----. Miralda; Or the Beautiful Quadroon: A Romance of Slavery Founded on Fact. New York Thomas Hamilton, 1860. (Accessed from Rotunda) https://www.upress.virginia.edu/title/CLO/)

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh (William Fitzhugh). *The Southern Past : A Clash of Race and Memory / W. Fitzhugh Brundage.* Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. "Robert O'Hara's Insurrection: 'Que(e)Rying' History." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2003 https://doi.org/10.1080/1046293032000141365.

Carriger, Michelle Liu. "Histrionics: Neither Here Nor There with Historical Reality TV." *Journal of dramatic theory and criticism* 24, no. 2 (2010): 135–149.

Camp, Pannill. “The Poetics of Performance Nonevents.” Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism 32, no. 2 (2018): 141–50. https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2018.0011. p.148

Cheathem, Mark R. “‘Gender and Memory among Andrew Jackson's Slaves: The Example of 'Aunt' Hannah.’” Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics, 2013.. https://jacksonianamerica.com/2013/07/11/gender-and-memory-among-andrew-jacksons-slaves-the-example-of-aunt-hannah/.

Chesnutt, Charles W. (Charles Waddell), and Richard H. Brodhead. *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales / Charles W. Chesnutt ; Edited and with an Introduction by Richard H. Brodhead.* Duke University Press, 1993.

----.*The Goophered Grapevine.* 1899, pp. 2–35

Colbert, Soyica. “Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2019, pp. 502–16, https://doi.org/10.3138/MD.S1020R2.

C-SPAN Book Notes,” “Annette Gordon-Reed: Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy.” Program Air Date: *February 21, 1999* www.booknotes.org

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings : Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Series Q. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Davidson, J. P. L. (2021). “Ugly progress: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Sociology of the Future.” The Sociological Review, 69(2), 382-395. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120954330

“Drunk History - Harriet Tubman Leads an Army of Bad Bitches (ft. Octavia Spencer). ” Comedy Central. *YouTube*, 24 September 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpTf1GFjCd8. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Dorris, Mary C. (Mary C. Currey). *Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915; Annals, History, and Stories ; The Acquisition, Restoration, and Care of the Home of General Andrew*

Jackson by the Ladies' Hermitage Assoc. for over a Quarter of a Century / Mary C. Dorris. Smith & Lamar, 1915.

Dungey Azie. "Ask A Slave: The Web Series "ASK A SLAVE Ep 4: New Leaf, Same Page" YouTube Video. 4:09. September 13, 2013

----. "Ask A Slave: The Web Series "ASK A SLAVE S2EP2 : Caught in the Web" YouTube Video. 4:21. November 17, 2013

Early Jubilee Singers." African Stories in Hull & East Yorkshire. Accessed April 15, 2021. https://www.africansinyorkshireproject.com/early-jubilee-singers.html

Eudell, Demetrius, and Carolyn Allen. "Sylvia Wynter: Transculturist Rethinking Modernity" *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (2001): 1–7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019776.

Fahs, Alice, and Joan Waugh. *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture / Edited by Alice Fahs & Joan Waugh*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Farrison, W. Edward. "CLOTEL, THOMAS JEFFERSON, AND SALLY HEMINGS." *CLA journal* 17.2 (1973): 147–174. Print.

Fleissner, Jennifer L. "Earth-Eating, Addiction, Nostalgia: Charles Chesnutt's Diasporic Regionalism." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2010, pp. 313–36, https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2010.0030.

Foster, Sharon. "The Truth About Nat Turner." *The Root*, https://www.theroot.com/the-truth-about-nat-turner-1790865447. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Gillespie, Michael Boyce. *Film Blackness : American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 13-14

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993

Glissant, Édouard, and Betsy Wing. *Poetics of Relation : Pbk*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters : Haunting and the Sociological Imagination / Avery F. Gordon, with a New Introduction ; Foreword by Janice Radway.* New University of Minnesota Press edition., University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned : Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals / Alexis Pauline Gumbs ; Foreword by Adrienne Maree Brown.* AK Press, 2020.

-----.*Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Duke University Press, 2016, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smgx8.

Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons : Fugitive Planning & Black Study / Stefano Harney & Fred Moten.* Minor Compositions, 2013.

Harris, Jeremy O. *Slave Play / Jeremy O. Harris.* First edition., Theatre Communications Group, 2019.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection : Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America / Saidiya V. Hartman.* Oxford University Press, 1997.

----. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 12.2 (2008): 1–14. Web.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment / Patricia Hill Collins.* New York: Routledge, 1991.

Horn, Stanley F. *The Hermitage, Home of Old Hickory / by Stanley F. Horn.* Garrett & Massie, 1938.

Ihde, Don. *Listening and Voice : Phenomenologies of Sound / Don Ihde.* 2nd ed., State University of New York Press, 2007.

"Interview with Azie Mira Dungey, creator and star of "Ask a Slave!"" *Jacqueline E. Lawton*, 3 September 2013, https://www.jacquelinelawton.com/blog/interview-withazie-mira-dungey-creator-and-star-of-ask-a-slave. Accessed 15 May 2024.

JanMohamed, A.R. (Ed.). (2011). *Reconsidering Social Identification: Race, Gender, Class and Caste* (1st ed.). Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367818104

James, Ijames. *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever.* Unpublished. 2019 (Accessed on behalf of CAA THEATER for UCLA Educational Use.)

James, Jennifer. "'Civil' War Wounds: William Wells Brown, Violence, and the Domestic Narrative." *African American review* 39.1/2 (2005): 39–54. Print.

Jones, Martha S. *Birthright Citizens : A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America / Martha S. Jones.* Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Johnson, Jocelyn Nicole, et al. *My Monticello : Fiction / Jocelyn Nicole Johnson.* First edition., Henry Holt and Company, 2021.

"Kara Walker's The Katastwóf Karavan." *National Gallery of Art*, 12 May 2022, https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/special/kara-walkers-the-katastwof-karavan.html. Accessed 15 May 2024

"Kara Walker & Jason Moran: Sending Out A Signal | Art21 "Extended Play."" *YouTube*, 31 October 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JKVgfHfrQo. Accessed 15 May 2024.

"Kara Walker's Katastwóf Karavan with Jason Moran." 2019. Whitney Museum of American Art. https://whitney.org/media/45991.

“Largest slave revolt in U.S. history lives on in reenactment.” *YouTube*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTc7jyceteI.(. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Lauro, Sarah Juliet. “Dread Scott’s Slave Rebellion Reenactment: Beholding the Gap in Commemorations of Resistance.” *TDR : Drama Review*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2021, pp. 24–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204321000307.

Lussana, Sergio A. “Enslaved Men, the Grapevine Telegraph, and the Underground Railroad.” *My Brother Slaves*, The University Press of Kentucky, 2016, pp. 125-.

McMillan, Uri. *Embodied Avatars : Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance / Uri McMillan.* New York University Press, 2015.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle / Katherine McKittrick.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and James M. Edie. *The Primacy of Perception : And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics / Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edited, with an Introduction by James M. Edie.* Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Montero, Roberto. “Love in the Flesh, Toni Morrison and Hortense Spillers 30 Years after Beloved and Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” *Binghamton University Undergraduate Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, https://doi.org/10.22191/BUUJ/4/1/4.

Moran, Jason, and Sam Gilliam. “Kara Walker and Jason Moran on "The Katastwóf Karavan."” *YouTube*, 5 August 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSysEq0JAX4. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Morris, Wesley, and Jenna Wortham. “Still Processing: Anguish and Anger Over Charlottesville: Still Processing.” *New York Times (Online)*, 2017.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination / Toni Morrison.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.

----. *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations / Toni Morrison.* First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

Musser, Amber Jamilla. *Sensual Excess : Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance / Amber Jamilla Musser.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018. Web.

-----. “Toward Mythic Feminist Theorizing: Simone Leigh and the Power of the Vessel.” *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2019, pp. 63–91, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-7974002.

Nyong’o, Tavia. “Opacity, Narration, and ‘The Fathomless Word.’” *Representations (Berkeley, Calif.)* 158.1 (2022): 45–56. Web.

O’Hara, Robert. *Insurrection : Holding History / Robert O’Hara.* 1st ed., Theatre Communications Group, 1999.

Owens, Cassie. “Please Stop Twerking: James Ijames Tackles Inheritance in ‘TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever.’” *TCA Regional News*, Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2022.

Piacentino, Ed. “Seeds of Rebellion in Plantation Fiction: Victor Séjour’s ‘The Mulatto.’” *Southern Spaces*, 2007, p. np-np, https://doi.org/10.18737/M7359M.

Price-Haskins, Dororthy *Unholiest Patrimony*: “Great Is the Truth and It Must Prevail” Denver: Outskirts Press, 2007

Rae, Issa. “Hella Shook.” Episode. *HBO* 2, no. 5, August 20, 2017.

Rasmussen, Daniel. *American Uprising : The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt*. 1st ed, Harper, 2011.

Rhimes Shonda “/ILuvOlitz2 “Scandal: I’m Feeling A Little Sally Hemings Thomas Jefferson” About All This” YouTube 0:47 Accessed. May, 18, 2013

----. “So Far Down You Can’t See the Light: Afro-Fabulation in Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s An Octoroon.” *Race and Performance after Repetition*. Duke University Press, 2020. 29-. Web.

----. *Afro-Fabulations : The Queer Drama of Black Life / Tavia Nyong’o.* New York: New York University Press, 2019. Print.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology / by Richard Schechner.* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.

Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains : Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment.* Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2011. Print.

Scott, David. “Sylvia Wynter’s ‘Black Metamorphosis’: A Discussion [Special Section].” *Small axe : a journal of criticism* 49 (2016).

Scott, Dred. n.d. “Slave Rebellion Reenactment.” Dread Scott. Accessed April 12, 2023. https://www.dreadscott.net/portfolio_page/slave-rebellion-reenactment/.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet / Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Print.

Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being / Christina Sharpe.* Duke University Press, 2016.

Smith, Clint. "WHY CONFEDERATE LIES LIVE ON." *The Atlantic Monthly (1993)*, vol. 327, no. 5, Atlantic Media, Inc, 2021.

Smith, Melissa, and Taylor Dafoe. "Here's How the Artist Dread Scott Pulled Off an Epic Reenactment of the Largest Slave Rebellion in American History." *Artnet News*, 12 November 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dread-scotts-epic-reenactment-rebellion-1700433. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides : A Racial History of Trans Identity / C. Riley Snorton.* University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture / Hortense J. Spillers.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65–81. Print.

Stejskal, James. "The Jayhawker and the Conductor: The Combahee Ferry Raid, 2 June 1863." *The Army Historical Foundation*, https://armyhistory.org/the-jayhawker-and-the-conductor-the-combahee-ferry-raid-2-june-1863/. Accessed 15 May 2024.

TeleSur. "Grenada Attorney Jailed After Opposing Slave Reenactment." *teleSur English*, 19 April 2017, https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Grenada-Attorney-Jailed-After-Opposing-Slave-Reenactment-20170429-0012.html. Accessed 15 May 2024.

The National Park Service "Hoodoo in St. Louis: An African American Religious Tradition (U.S)." *National Park Service*, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/hoodoo-in-st-louis-an-african-american-religious-tradition.htm. Accessed 15 May 2024.

"The Practice of Slavery at Monticello | Monticello." *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*, https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/the-practice-of-slavery-at-monticello/. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Thomas Brandon J. "So Ready For Insecure" Twitter. Accessed 2021

"United Daughters of the Confederacy About." *United Daughters of the Confederacy HQ*, https://hqudc.org/about/. Accessed 15 May 2024.

"Voids of Understanding: Opacity, Black Life, and Abstraction in <i>What Remains</i>." *Walker Art Center*, 26 February 2019, https://walkerart.org/magazine/opacity-black-life-abstraction-will-rawls-claudia-rankine-what-remains. Accessed 15 May 2024.

Walker, Kara Elizabeth, Philippe Vergne, and Sander L Gilman. *Kara Walker : My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love / Organized by Philippe Vergne ; with Texts by Sander L. Gilman ... [et Al.].* 1st ed. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007. Print.

Weiss, Noa. "Living Through History: ABSCONDED #EjectionDay2020." *The Brooklyn Rail*, The Brooklyn Rail, Inc, 2020, pp. 95-.

Williams, Caroline Randall. "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument." *New York Times (Online)*, 2020.

Wilson, August, and Toni Morrison. *The Piano Lesson*. 1st ed., Plume, 2007

----. Et. Al *The Piano Lesson / Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, Inc. ; Producer, August Wilson ; Co-Producer, Brent Shields ; Teleplay, August Wilson ; Director, Lloyd Richards.* Hallmark Home Entertainment, 1998.

Woodard, Helena. *Slave Sites on Display : Reflecting Slavery's Legacy through Contemporary "Flash" Moments / Helena Woodard.* University Press of Mississippi, 2019.

Woodard, Vincent, et al. *The Delectable Negro : Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture / Vincent Woodard ; Edited by Justin A. Joyce and Dwight A. McBride ; Foreword by E. Patrick Johnson.* New York University Press, 2014.

Woolfork, Lisa. *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture / Lisa Woolfork.* University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Yale University "Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lectures: Hortense J. Spillers, 'Shades of Intimacy: What the Eighteenth Century Teaches Us' YouTube Video, 26:22, May 26 , 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10haBLXN1r0

Young, Harvey. *Embodying Black Experience : Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body / Harvey Young.* The University of Michigan Press, 2010.