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Black Lives Examined: Black Nonfiction and the Praxis of Survival in the Post-Civil Rights Era

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Black Lives Examined:
Black Nonfiction and the Praxis of Survival in the Post-Civil Rights Era

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	iii-xvii
Chapter 1.....	1--44
On Gardens and Graves: Identity Politics and the Black Essay in the Early Post-Civil Rights Moment	
Chapter 2.....	45-94
Wailin' and Moanin': Memoir and Black Mourning in Alice Walker's <i>In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens</i> and James Baldwin's <i>No Name in the Street</i>	
Chapter 3.....	95-140
A New Spelling of Our Names: Black Feminist Autobiography and the Praxis of Black Survival	
Conclusion.....	141

Abstract

BLACK LIVES EXAMINED:
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POST-CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

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The subject of my thesis project is black nonfiction, namely the essay, memoir, and autobiography, written by black authors about and during the Post-Civil Rights Era. The central goals of this work are to briefly investigate the role of genre analysis within the various subsets of nonfiction and also to exemplify the ways that black writers have taken key genre models and evolved them. Secondly, I aim to understand the historical, political, and cultural contributions of the Post-Civil Rights Era, which I mark as hitting its stride in 1968. It is not my desire to create a definitive historical framework for the Post-Civil Rights Era, but instead to understand it as a period of transition, revolt, and transformation which asked many important questions that have remained unanswered. I apply multiple theoretical frameworks to my research — like queer theory, Afro-pessimism, fugitivity, and more — to offer insights into the nonfiction works of writers such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Larry Neale, and Toni Cade Bambara. It is my hope to continue the work of such scholars as Hortense Spillers, Angela Ards, and Margo V. Perkins, by illustrating not only how these authors offered literary and aesthetic innovations, but also, through the archiving of their life experiences in print, create theories and practices for survival, forged in the past, which impact our current moment, and inspire us as scholars and activists to do the same.

Introduction

I woke up on the morning after the 2016 presidential election exhausted, drained, and somewhat undone. My father was the first to call me, as he often does, early in the morning. When he inquired about my despondent tone I explained to him that I had been crying for most of the night with little sleep. Before offering to take me to lunch, he offered me a small bit of casual wisdom: “We have been through worse girl. Much worse.” When I remember this exchange, I cannot help but add my own addendum his claim: “We have been through worse. Much worse. And we are still here.” My entire life as a black woman in America, I have been taught how to survive.

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Speaking of Black Feminist publications in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, activist, writer, and theorist Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminds us that the authors of the Combahee River Collective reprinted their inaugural statement in as many anthologies as they could because “they did not know how long their work would survive”; unable to be assured of their own futures, Black Feminists aimed to "document [themselves]" at the moment, using their words as an archive for their political, theoretical, and spiritual word. Gumbs was a guest on the podcast *How to Survive the End of the World*, an Octavia Butler obsessed, Black Feminist/Survivalist project which emerged in 2017 from sisters Autumn and Adrienne Marie Brown, who attempt to explore how to “[learn] from the apocalypse with grace, rigor, and curiosity." This small digital reprieve was gifted to me by a friend in December of 2017, three months into the process of writing my thesis project, during a time where, after suffering a deep emotional and physical trauma, I could not bring myself to write.

My friend, who is one of many women in my life that has offered me guidance in regards to surviving through one's own suffering, wrapped me in a blanket, held me, and cued up the episode. I listened to all three women discuss how, through poetry, fiction, and essay, they were each raised by the wisdom of women whom they would never meet. Gumbs, who espouses how her circular sense of time connects her to generations of black lives both long gone and not yet begun, asserts that: "The transformation we need in this world is not going to be linear, it's actually going to be beyond our lifetimes, and it's actually connected way before our lifetimes." Most important in this conversation was the deep agreeance which followed Gumbs's most profound observation, that Black Feminist writers and thinkers, from the days of slavery through the end of the 20th century, created their work in a "trust" that extended beyond their sight and comprehension, to a generation conceived only by an unwavering faith. "We were born in that trust," Gumbs states of herself, the Brown sisters, and even me; "We are the answer to the question...many Black Feminists asked: What do we do at the end of the world?" In reply, Adriene Marie Brown aptly says: "We give birth."

To me, this exchange is one of the best articulations of the concept of futurity, which I reference heavily in this. What Gumbs and the Brown sisters are discussing is not only a legacy but a deep generational pull, which collapses time and space, through the archival power of text, to show those suffering under the oppressive strangle of an unsympathetic system, that survival is, in fact, their birthright. I begin with this anecdote because discovering and listening to the Brown sister's broadcast project was one of three major turning points in the creation of my thesis project. First was the decision to include Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* in the first chapter, next was the podcast, and last was the choice to include Audre Lorde's *Zami* in the concluding chapter. All three of these decisions shifted both the focus, tone,

and intellectual journey of my project, and, most importantly, it helped me arrive at the notion of survival as the driving force behind my work.

While survival is at the heart of my work, it is the practice of life-writing which serves as the body. My thesis project looks at black nonfiction, specifically that of the essay, memoir writing, and autobiography, through the Post-Civil Rights Era. While the publication dates for the texts included in this project range from 1968 to 1984, the Post-Civil Rights Era is often, and somewhat problematically marked from 1965 through the 2008 election of President Barack Obama. Each chapter respectively examines the essays of Black Arts anthologies edited by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Addison Gayle Jr., and Toni Cade Bambara; collections and long form pieces by Alice Walker and James Baldwin, and, finally, formative political autobiography written by Angela Davis and Audre Lorde.

Through these three sections, I explore the Black Feminist critique of oppressive gender norms as enforced by the predominately male Black Nationalist rhetoric as presented in a series of essays. From this critique, I look at the various ways experiences of death and rage in the wake of anti-black death and violence manifest into practices of mourning within the liminal genre of memoir, mourning which I argue as a decidedly queer expression of resistance against the domination of racist and heteronormative systems of oppression. Finally, in looking, in looking at the ways black women specifically have subverted traditional tropes of autobiography, I assert my framework for nonfiction as an archive which collects the experiences of black life, thusly presenting it as a theory of survival for future generations. The central academic goal of this project is to understand how nonfiction provided a unique platform for articulating political, aesthetic, and theoretical frameworks extending from the experience of black writers.

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I began this project in the midst of a seeming failure. I had intended to write a deeply pedagogical project, one that was Freirean in nature but not necessarily bound by what I perceived as the limitation of racial identity politics which had come to define my undergraduate research. Unable to justify such a project with my limited experience in a classroom, I turned to nonfiction, to the essay, as a breeding ground for a new approach to my final project. I knew that I wanted Baldwin and Lorde, and I knew that I wanted black women to figure heavily into my writing. My decision to incorporate the historical boundary of the Post-Civil Rights Era stemmed from many conversations which I had at that time with friends and family members where I felt that the sudden surge in media visibility of police brutality, and images captured during bursts of civil unrest in cities like Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD seemed to eerily reflect photographs taken during the wave of protests that rolled across the country after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. At the start of this project, the Post-Civil Rights seemed obvious as it so closely resembles our current political atmosphere in what so many are myopically claiming as “Trump’s America.” Even a 1:1 comparison between the 1960’s and today seems quite limiting. We have circled around this dangerous curve in time more than just once before, and we will come out the other side with more wisdom on how to make it through.

Slowly, the edges of this project began to form from whispers of ideas like mourning, rage, and sorrow, each of which orbiting the notion of blackness as a critical way of seeing the world. Through close readings, genre and historical analysis, as well as frameworks of Black Feminism and Queer Theory, I aimed to illustrate how practices of mourning, rage, and resilience contribute to what I call the “Praxis of Black Survival.” This notion of praxis, borrowed from my aforementioned love for Freire’s work, exists at the intersection of both action and reflection. Praxis is something which deepens a dialogue between two parties, even

those which seem to be diametrically opposed, to move beyond mere recognition and incite actual change in the world.

Looking at black survival as praxis allows us to reorient the way we look at centuries of communal and state-sponsored anti-black violence wherein the oppressed are not viewed by a framework of lack, but instead through a historical persistence of resilience. Just as we know that freedom is about more than mere emancipation, or even legislation that only gestures towards the acquisition of basic civil rights, we can also understand survival as something which exceeds the protection of a singular body or life. The title of my project, *Black Lives Examined*, reflects the work of activists in the Black Lives Matter movement as well as those sympathetic towards its aims. More importantly, it is a clear nod to ways in which those involved in social justice work today are in fact learning about their own survival, as both a political and intellectual concept, from the works of those who came before them and left messages of hope in the documentation of their life experiences vis a vis a legacy of nonfiction texts.

This project is not an attempt to assert that black nonfiction is somehow better suited to reflect the complexities of black survival as compared to fiction, poetry, drama, or even visual art. It is, however, an attempt to illustrate how the tradition of black nonfiction has remained a steadfast expression of artistic and political agency since the days of slavery, and also to, as in the vein of Henry Louis Gates Jr., Margo V. Perkins, Johnnie M. Stover, and Angela Ards before me, assert the sheer audacity of black life whether on or off the page. Given the ambition of this project, I would like to thank all of the friends and family who supported me through my research and well as my very patient and understanding thesis board members, namely my director Dr. Bryant Mangum for taking a chance on me, and most importantly, to Dr. Shermaine

Jones whose rigorous feedback, dutiful guidance, and constant check-ins as to whether or not I had been eating, cannot be understated.

This thesis project is for me the first etchings of an intellectual and creative family tree. From many of the writers included, I have learned how to be a better writer, a more critical thinker and teacher, and also how to be empathetic and purposeful in my writing, whether academic or not. Even without the theoretical terms, this project has helped me develop my pedagogy, both in the classroom, in my research, in my creative writing, and in the world.

Project Goals

The subject of my thesis project is black nonfiction, namely the essay, memoir, and autobiography, written by black authors about and during the Post-Civil Rights Era. The central goals of this work are to briefly investigate the role of genre analysis within the various subsets of nonfiction and also to exemplify the ways that black writers have taken key genre models and evolved them. Secondly, I aim to understand the historical, political, and cultural contributions of the Post-Civil Rights Era, which I mark as hitting its stride in 1968. It is not my desire to create a definitive historical framework for the Post-Civil Rights Era, but instead to understand it as a period of transition, revolt, and transformation which asked many important questions that have remained unanswered.

I have organized my project into three sections, each of which focuses on a specific sub-genre of nonfiction including the essay, memoir, and autobiography respectively. While genre analysis is not the overall goal of this thesis, it is important to reflect on the notion of form, both within the texts themselves, and in a greater understanding of how our understanding and expectations of nonfiction have grown within recent years. In considering the capacity and capabilities of form, I argue that the essay is unique in its ability to cut through and across

temporality and geography, and, through critical analysis, the essay builds a dialogue between various authors whether contemporaries or not. To reflect Carsten Junker, the essay is dialogic, and therefore requires a sharp ear to navigate the many voices it might reflect. My analysis of memoir is unique in that I view the subgenre through a more philosophical lens. Memoir is viewed in this examination as a liminal space, somewhere between the isolation of the essay and the supposed finality of autobiography. In this liminality I view memoir as the most productive in its critique of what life-writing should and should not be able to do. Finally, in unpacking autobiography, I grapple with the gender bias which has centered black male writers as political figures, and relegated black women writers to the periphery. It is for this reason that I conclude the project examining two autobiographical projects, both from black women, to exemplify the ways in which black women have taken the subgenre and developed it into a platform of inclusive social change. This project is ordered as such so that each chapter, and each examination of form, builds from one another to create a deeper understanding not only of black nonfiction, but of the historical archival of black life in moments of political unrest.

Through many close readings I apply multiple theoretical frameworks to my research — like queer theory, Afro-pessimism, fugitivity, and more — to offer insights into the nonfiction works of writers such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Larry Neale, and Toni Cade Bambara. It is my hope to continue the work of such scholars as Hortense Spillers, Angela Ards, and Margo V. Perkins, by illustrating not only how these authors offered literary and aesthetic innovations, but also, through the archiving of their life experiences in print, create theories and practices for survival, forged in the past, which impact our current moment, and inspire us as scholars and activists to do the same.

Defining the Post-Civil Rights

Carving out the historical and temporal boundaries around any "era" is a task that is fraught with many questionable and problematic assumptions. Scholars and historians have often marked the Post-Civil Rights with the emergence of radical Black Liberation groups like The Black Panther Party for Defense, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Black Liberation Party in the 1960's. Cultural memory often cites the emergence of the Black Arts Movement in 1965, now remembered through the distant tropes of radical poet activists armed with afro-centric clothing and a violent message for *the man*, as a signal of the shifting ideological tides which pushed young black Americans away from the pacifist tactics of the Civil Rights Movement. My project begins in 1968, a year marked by mass growth in the creation of independent black presses which offered a platform to notable Black Nationalist, Black Arts, and Black Feminist thinkers. It is also the year that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the face of the Civil Rights Movement, was shot dead at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN. Both King's death and funeral repeatedly serve as a narrative marker for many of the writers included in this study.

More important than locating a definitive moment which marks the line between Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights is the investigation of why such a shift, from the perspective of theorists, needed to be named in the first place. Black Arts scholar Margo Natalie Crawford who named her 2015 book *Black Post-Blackness* critiques the way that the rhetoric of "post-black" theory eschews Black Arts aesthetics and sensibilities as an antiquated expression which society must simply move beyond. At the close of her text, she calls back to this critique writing that "every attempt to move beyond blackness should remind us that blackness has always been beyond (*Post-Blackness* 227). Her assertion here frames the notion of blackness as a constant rupture, sometimes even unto itself. Blackness and rupture are therefore seen as antithetical to

each other when a generation, community, or movement attempt to pin down a firm definition of what being black should be.

Angela Ards contextualizes her 2016 study *Words of Witness*, which focuses on black women's autobiography, under the banner of the "Post-Brown Era," and in doing so offers an insightful critique of the term "Post-Civil Rights." She argues that the recent emergence of scholarship which attempts to both define the era, and thus claims its conclusion with the 2008 election of Barak Obama, is primarily to blame for the perpetuation of a false narrative of victory, after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of 1964 and 1965 respectively, which ignores the ongoing struggle against racial inequality since the 1960s that we are still fighting today.

While her argument for a "Post -Brown" perspective is interesting, I am more drawn to her reading of the prefix "post," which she claims can be problematically equated with the word "after," thus insinuating something "over and past," or also that post could link to the idea of "beyond" thus "registering [it] as a repudiation of prior values and strategies" (Ards 7). This analysis rightfully points to the tension in naming social and historical eras and epochs as a whole. In regards to African American history specifically, the tension of naming historical periods reflects the "heroic" specter of the Civil Rights Movement, a narrative plagued with "tropes of sacrifice, suffering, and radical action" bolstered by "outdated ideas black identity and politics" that "[obscures] the complexities of today's political dilemmas" (Ards 9). Ards critique of the "post" prerogative within the process of historicization, especially viewed under the shadow of the Civil Rights Era as the peak moment of 20th century American progress, calls for "more discourses that account for the structural changes and cultural shifts" which have shaped, and are shaping, race, identity and oppression in our current political moment" (Ards 10).

Therefore, historical declarations of the post are not inherently dangerous but must be interrogated based on who or what forces benefit from the closing of one door and the opening of another.

Since I cannot definitively mark the historical and temporal boundaries of the Post-Civil Rights Era, I will offer a justification for why it serves as the anchor for this project. While the mainstream cultural memory in America might remember the 1960s and 1970s as a laughable moment filled with exaggerated caricatures of rebellious youth and comically militant protesters, the Post-Civil Rights Era, like the Civil-Rights Era before it, was a time marked with much violence, death, and loss. Waves of violence swept over the nation. Black liberation organizations became, one by one, hunted enemies of the U.S. government, its leaders unjustly imprisoned and left to rot. Furthermore, the murders of leaders like Dr. King, Black Panther Party Leader Fred Hampton, and activist George Jackson pointed towards the reality that liberation comes at a price. Often black male leaders were most visible as victims of this violence, but the rise in state-sanctioned, quotidian acts of antiblack-violence is one which echoes throughout our current moment.

Black Lives Matters leaders often cite many Post-Civil Rights activists and thinkers like Angela Davis, Amiri Baraka, and Huey P. Newton, as inspiration for contextualizing our own struggles with police violence and political neglect. The work of James Baldwin, in particular, has seen a grand renaissance in today's generation of scholars who aim to contextualize both his queer identity and complex approach to understanding the legacy of American racism. The current generation of scholars are not looking to the Post-Civil Rights Era because it is a unique past, but instead because it is a moment which speaks a language which has asserted itself as applicable in the here and now. Christina Sharpe writes that "The disaster and the writing of the

disaster are never present, are always present" (5). Once again revisiting her idea that the traumas which black Americans suffer are not limited to specific historical demarcations, I choose the Post-Civil Rights Era for this project because I am writing to it, and from it, just as I write to and from the Civil Rights Era, the transatlantic slave trade, centuries of antebellum slavery, Jim Crow, and, most importantly, a futurity of which I will never physically know.

Therefore, just as the Post-Civil Rights Era functioned as a period of transitional rupture which demanded the undoing of Civil Rights Era ideologies for an unknown and unknowable revolutionary future—a future which arguably still has not arrived—so then can we understand our moment not through the overzealous application of a the “post” in reference to the end of something, but as the revival of that rupture. As a nation and a people, the United States is in a place of *moving through* and in looking to the Post-Civil Rights Era not as a model, but as an imprint that is felt in the present, we might be able to recognize and affirm the work left unfinished some fifty years ago.

Towards a Pedagogy of Black Nonfiction

The audacity surrounding the origins of black nonfiction is somewhat inconceivable from our current perspective. For those in the U.S., the tradition is directly tied to the emancipation narratives of escaped slaves, who risked their lives for the opportunity to become literate, and then, through that knowledge, declared their life as evidence of society's inhumanity, and, in many ways, offered themselves as evidence of what this nation could become. James Olney, whose work I examine in the last chapter of this project, famously writes that "because black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories" that "black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography" (Olney 15). Centuries of black memoir, letters, speeches, essays, and autobiography have attempted to remedy, as Henry

Louis Gates articulates, the "curse" of African Diasporic studies, being the "absence of a printed, cataloged, and collective memory" (Gates 5). While this is a valuable success, it is one that is truly in service to Western notions of the canon.

In contrast, what is important to the people of the African Diaspora scattered throughout the U.S. is the archive of black lives and of black experiences which has emerged as a theory and often epistemology in its own right. In the rupture of slavery, we have forged new ways of knowing the world, new ways of existing in and through that knowledge, and also new ways of passing this knowledge onto future generations. While this project understandably has a limited focus, it is my hope that my scholarship begins to approach a distinct pedagogy of black nonfiction, one that informs aesthetic and literary analysis, as well as theories of cultural praxis based on practices of resilience, survival, and revolution. Saidiya Hartman writes that the "autobiographical example [is] not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel-gazing, it's really about trying to look at...one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (Qtd. in Sharpe 8). This project looks specifically at black nonfiction, not in opposition to black poetry, drama and/or fiction, but as an attempt to center the examination of black life as a "window" into the American zeitgeist. Most importantly, in exemplifying the tradition of black nonfiction and its importance to theories and practices of survival, I aim to center life-writing in my own work and in my work as a teacher.

Chapter Summary

This project is organized into three sections, each of which looks at black nonfiction through a genre analysis of the essay, memoir, and autobiography respectively. Chapter one examines essays written by various black authors in three Black Arts anthologies edited and published by Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Gayle Addison Jr., and Toni Cade Bambara between

1968-1972. This section exemplifies how the essay functions dialogically, setting the stage for cultural debates between thinkers even across space and time. It is in this first chapter that my framework of Black Feminist theory emerges, primarily in the form of a gender critique, which aims to refute restrictive notions of black patriarchy as was conceived and articulated by many male Black Nationalist leaders.

The second section places James Baldwin's 1972 *No Name in the Street* with Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* published in 1983. I look at these texts from the perspective of memoir, specifically applying the notion that memoir is both a liminal genre and that in that liminality there is space to approach life-writing as a continual practice instead of a single act. Placing Baldwin and Walker in conversation with one another I investigate the landscape of the American South in relation to blackness, offer a queer analysis of both texts, and, through that queered lens, examine the varied practices of anger and mourning which emerge from their writing.

In the last section of this project I examine black autobiography, a subject which arguably has gathered the most scholarship over the past century, but often presents male authors as representative of the genre. In response to this, I am looking at Angela Davis's *An Autobiography* and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* to show how each woman author further developed the concept of autobiography and also provided a theoretical framework from which we can understand survival as a complex and self-reflexive practice.

I. On Gardens and Graves:

Identity Politics and the Black Essay in the Early Post-Civil Rights Moment

What characterizes the current movement of the 60's
is a turning away from the larger society
and a turning toward each other...
What typifies the current spirit is an embrace.

-Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman* (1970)

To triangulate the specific historic moment which shifted the political tide of Civil Rights to Post-Civil Rights ideology is not an easy task. The boundaries which separate these time periods are temporally fraught and historically messy, torn around the edges; to say otherwise is ultimately revisionist. While the emergence of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements has often been judged as the first real example of Post-Civil Rights culture, even the origins of Black Power are not so easily ascertained. The epic three month rise and collapse of Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BARTS) possibly offers one possible point of origin. BARTS, which was started by black artists and activists, and spearheaded by Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) in 1965 after the assassination of Malcolm X, was the hub of artistic expression for the African American community in Harlem. The enthusiasm which inspired BARTS' creation, and its collapse due to lack of funding brought on by government intervention, sparked a serious dialogue about the future of black art and its role in liberatory politics. Another critical historical moment was Stokely Carmichael's aggressive invocation of the term *Black Power*¹ during a 1966 speech. This speech took place following his arrest for trespassing after trying to finish the "March Against Fear" in Mississippi, in memory of fallen activist James Meredith. Meredith was shot down by a sniper's bullet, his life ended before he could accomplish his goal of "[tearing]

¹ The phrase, according to both Ongiri and Junker, was first articulated as the title of Richard Wright's 1954 nonfiction work.

down the fear that [gripped] Negroes” in the South (Ongiri 1). Some two years later, in April 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the face of the nonviolent wing of the Civil Rights Movement, and the man who physically restrained Carmichael during his confrontation with police in Mississippi,² would meet a similar fate. King’s assassination, bolstered by its hyper-violence/visibility, sent a painful wave of anger and grief throughout the country, one which was felt deeply by black Americans in particular. His death split open old and familiar wounds surrounding the disregard for black life in America and brought his legacy of nonviolent protest into question.

However, even to cite Dr. King’s assassination as the point of origin for the emergence of Post-Civil Rights politics is limiting. While his death was a pivotal loss for black Americans and beyond, Black Power, as a concept and practice, lived and thrived before and through the 1960’s, where after it was developed specifically as a critique of Civil Rights Era integrationist tactics that equated black liberation with mainstream acceptance. What King’s death, and the subsequent wave of riots that flooded the American landscape, did reveal, was the particular anxiety which surrounded the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and, more specifically, its inability to fulfill its promises of a truly inclusive American body politic. In the 1960’s, Black Power, as a political and social movement, was based on a “conceptually diffuse” ideology, according to Amy Ongiri, which connected both “Black capitalists and Black communists” under the collective promise of “economic independence and cultural self-determination” (Ongiri 3). Black Power as a concept was distinctly political, interested in legislative strategies for racial uplift proliferated by communal acts of social revolution. Its artistic reflection and “kindred

² See Ongiri’s introduction in *Spectacular Blackness*.

spirit³” the Black Arts Movement, aimed not only to change the politics of the present, but also, through literature and art, to redirect the course for a new utopian black future.

The desire for both artistic and financial agency was the momentum which drove forward one of the biggest booms of independent black owned journals and presses between 1967 and 1973. This aided in the publication of dozens of new anthologies which served as a platform for notable African American literature of the past and present. *Black Fire! An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka in 1968, set the tone and exemplified how a Black Arts anthology could accomplish the goals of the movement by weaponizing textuality. This intellectual and creative surge was predicated on a shared quest for a new unifying artistic ideology: The Black Aesthetic.

In his widely regarded 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal writes that the motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the “destruction of the white thing...of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world” (Neal 64). Whiteness, through his perspective, is not simply tied to a racial identity, it is an ideology, and a way of being, both politically and spiritually, which is directly associated with death and consumption. This desire for the destruction of whiteness is expressed with the violent language of Black Nationalist rhetoric which often employed visual motifs of street violence and rampage to illustrate the invasive danger of the white world. Frequently, themes of fire/flames, death, and destruction are found across each of the essays in *Black Fire!* In contrast, Hoyt Fuller positions the Black Aesthetic in direct relation to life, black life specifically, and its continuation in the face of generational destruction: “For those of us who read and write books and plays and poetry, the Black Aesthetic has to do with love and not killing...learning to live, and survive, in a nation of killers, so that our children may

³ Margo Natalie Crawford uses this term in the introduction to her text *Black Post-Blackness* where she argues that Black Arts Movement ideologies are in direct conversation with 21st century visual art aesthetics.

breathe a purer and freer air" (*Black Aesthetic* 31). The seeming redundancy of "freer air" becomes provocative when placed in contrast with the constant state of political strangulation that black folks in America have accepted as normal. If freer air is radical, it is because black existence was viewed as a threat.

These two interpretations, the former calling for the death of the whiteness as an oppressive construct, and the latter highlighting the significance of black survival, evokes the inherent confusion of the Black Aesthetic and also the tensions and contradictions of Black Nationalist rhetoric. While each anthology, and each essay published therein, attempted to articulate the Black Aesthetic definitively and concretely, the visions they shared, or more specifically the execution of their visions, was sometimes hectic and bothered, and, furthermore, in competition with each other. The resulting power struggle over whose politics was more qualified to paint the new future of black empowerment often overshadowed the greater issue of cultural unity. The focus on conflict, whether internal or external, reminds us that a people constantly at war dismantling structures cannot also reserve the energy to build new ones.

Addison Gayle's 1971 anthology took on the *Black Aesthetic* in subject and title, attempting to construct a dialogue on what the concept was and was not. Fuller, whose essay contribution is often regarded as the definitive text on the Black Aesthetic, famously wrote that "black revolt" was "as palpable in letters as it is in the streets" (*Black Aesthetic* 3). Furthermore, he described the "revolutionary black writer" in direct relation to the "new breed of militant activist" in that they both had "decided that white racism [would] no longer exercise its insidious control over his work" (*Black Aesthetic* 3-4). Ongiri notes that "by 1968 the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement had successfully seized the cultural arena as the primary site of political action" setting the terms of debate for "virtually every artistic and

cultural format” which spoke to the new ideology surrounding the struggle for black freedom (Ongiri 90). While the Black Aesthetic is closely aligned with the Black Arts Movement, its relationship to the notion of Black Power and the call for revolution is critical to understanding and understanding the role of black art and black artistry in the Post-Civil Rights era.

This project begins by taking a look at the black essay, as published across three major anthologies from 1968-1971, in order to understand how the early Post-Civil Rights moment was defined by a rhetoric aimed at the discovery of a “new” kind of politics—new being an intellectual hope and not, of course, a historical reality—and a new brand of revolution, which could speak directly to the needs of the black community in the United States. While each of the essays and essayists attempted to set definitive parameters for producing the social and political change required to address the lingering oversights of Civil Rights Era ideologies, this process was a heavily contested one, as reflected in the constant contradictions and textual in-fighting between authors. The aim of this first section is first to understand the nuances, both positive and negative, of Black Nationalist rhetoric in order to fully understand the radical desire for black liberation, and also unpack the ways in which those desires were limiting to the cause. I will then place the voices of the Black Power and Black Arts Movement in dialogue with one another, and, in the midst of this, examine how the genre of the essay, as a subset of black nonfiction functioned to set and critique the terms of engagement for revolution in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Lastly I discuss the role of gender and sexual politics in the movement by looking at the ways Black Feminists voices used print culture to solidify their place in the dialogue surrounding black empowerment and preserve their legacy through the written word.

Black Nationalist Rhetoric and the Essay

While the many anthologies published after the initial boom in 1965 were genre specific,⁴ looking primarily at poetry and fiction, Neal and Baraka's *Black Fire!*, Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 collection *The Black Woman*, and Addison Gayle Jr.'s 1971 *The Black Aesthetic* are three collections which curate writings across multiple genres and exemplify how different modes of communication can speak to the collective call for a distinctively black art. While Bambara's text collapsed the lines of demarcation between genre – presenting poetry, nonfiction, fiction, and even academic conference papers alongside one another with no specific designation – both Gayle and Neal/Baraka's texts have clear and definitive sections, both of which begin with the “theory” of the movement, articulated by a series of black essays. Carsten Junker's *Frames of Fiction: Black Genealogies, White Hegemony, and the Essay as Critical Intervention* frames his discussion of the essay with some commentary on the function of genre. He argues that the growth of recent genre theory scholarship reflects both the “awareness of epistemic power structures and the significance of genres in reconfiguring discursive power” (Junker 16). According to Junker, genre's importance has shifted in concert with the uptick in recognition of diverse writers and readers and the rejection of exclusive institutions, like mainstream publishers and academia, as the sole authority in defining literature.

Also important about genre's shifting tide are critics and historians' heightened awareness that writing has served certain groups and hindered others, based on different modes of identity (race, sexuality, gender, nationality, etc.), and how the reading public has created knowledge constructed on that sometimes problematic process. Genre, which “questions” the “symbolic order of a given society,” also functions as a ‘frame of interpretation’ for both ‘reality’ and the ‘production of knowledge’ which informs that reality (Junker 16). To be more clear,

⁴ See Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* (1971), Ed Bullins *New Plays from the Black Theatre* (1969), and Gwendolyn Brook's *A Broadside Treasury* (1971)

marginalized voices have historically used nonfiction as a means to assert their humanity and to increase their political capital. This continues today with the proliferation of memoir as a means to bring visibility to marginalized voices.

In order to understand the ways that Black Nationalists used the essay to reshape the “frame” around the black community during the Post-Civil Rights era, it is first important to clarify the tumultuous legacy of the “black essay” overall. Cheryl Butler, whose research delves into the history and prevalence of the black essay as an extension of the autobiographical tradition, argues that “to write an essay is a subversive act for a black man or woman” (C. Butler 7) as the genre has been, since the days of Michel de Montaigne, viewed as an intellectual luxury primarily wielded by free, wealthy, white men. Within the history of African American literature the relationship between black authors and nonfiction writing has been a decidedly political one as opposed to that of aesthetics. Whether emancipation narratives, letters, or autobiography, since the days of the antebellum slavery, black nonfiction has increased visibility on issues of racial inequality. While Montaigne and those who followed in his tradition have explored cultural and social politics, the investment which black writers place in the ability of the essay to create institutional change unveils within the genre a deeper understanding of its capabilities.

While black nonfiction does have a decidedly political history, it is only since the 20th century that its aesthetic and stylistic merits have become a popular focus of study. Butler describes the black essay as both a literary process and a “psychological journey from slavery to freedom” (C. Butler 2) implicates the act of life-writing for black Americans as a reciprocal means of creating “psychic freedom” for both the black writer and the black audience to help “effect social conditions...[and] transform, replace, or diminish the power of dominant ideology” (C. Butler 8). Her analysis speaks directly to the desires of the Black Arts critics like James T.

Stewart whose contribution to *Black Fire!* demanded that the “purpose of writing is to enforce the sense we have of responsibility—the responsibility of understanding our roles in shaping the new world” (*Black Fire!* 7). For Butler and Stewart, the act of writing is not simply an empty gesture of a useless black intelligentsia, but a call to arms which positions the black writer, artist, and activist on the front line of revolutionary thought.

The essayistic rhetoric of in both Neal/Baraka and Gayle’s anthologies framed the Black Aesthetic with three interrelated but distinct questions: (1) What are the parameters and goals of black revolution?; (2) What is the role of the revolutionary artist?; and (3) What is the relationship between art, revolution, and the black community? These questions are the driving force behind these essays. Despite the enthusiasm and emphatic language with which each author attends to their examinations, Butler reminds us that “essays are not always neat, philosophical, intellectual projects” but instead “gesture” towards an unknowable future that is “often vague, elliptic, and inconclusive...[where] the reader is left standing on the verge” (C. Butler 5). To echo Houston Baker, hindsight⁵ provides the clearest lens with which to focus on this tension. Therefore, what black essayists assert in their writing is looking forward, both a possibility of what can be and, looking backward, a painful reminder of what never was.

Many essays across Neal/Baraka and Gayle’s anthologies illustrate “the need for separate cultural spaces and separate spheres of symbolic articulation” as a means to “[reject]...white culture and the West” (Ongiri 16). The desire to burn down white supremacist structure was, however, not an act of nihilism, it was instead a means to fulfill “an almost utopian longing for a discrete space of cultural expression free from the corruption...explicitly and implicitly linked to participation in U.S. commodified culture” to flourish and grow (Ongiri 16). Neal articulates this

⁵ The fifth chapter of Houston Baker’s 1980 *The Journey Back*, “The Black Spokesman as critic: Reflections of the Black Aesthetic” reminds readers that any critique of the Black Arts Movement must be acknowledged as a “privilege of hindsight.”

process as a “spiritual death” wherein the “white world” of the West is described as a “dying creature” from which all black folks must establish “some kind of psychic withdrawal from its values and assumptions” (Neal 15). Black Aesthetic theory, borrowing closely from Black Nationalist rhetoric, viewed the “white Western world” as antithetical to that of black existence, the two trapped in a violent dialectical struggle for control which demanded the death of one for the life of another. For Black Arts essayists, the desire to flourish a garden out of the graves of their oppressors pointed towards the insatiable hunger imposed by the cultural, economic, and political neglect of whiteness. Their words, like their art, meant to both spiritually and psychically feed the people.

The conversation surrounding the role of the revolutionary artist shifts the audience of some essays from the broader black community to that of the black artist specifically, offering an instructional guide for the task of establishing a revolutionary craft. While the late 1960s is identifiable through its bold looks and now seemingly antiquated aesthetics (e.g. afro hairstyles, leather coats, and dashikis), the writing of that time period reflects a strong awareness of and aversion to the reduction of political strategy to mere fashion. Julian Mayfield warns black artists that “the business of revolution” was not invested in the performance of empty choreography, or “boogaloo[s]” that are purposeless on their own (*Black Aesthetic* 26). In contrast, he asserts that the Black Aesthetic is something innate, which “cannot be stolen” precisely because it is embedded in the “racial memory” of blackness which is the “unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going” (*Black Aesthetic* 27). Mayfield’s essentialist view of blackness as an ontology, which is psychosomatically connected to the inheritance of artistic spirit articulated within the Black Aesthetic, creates for the revolutionary artist a new and old lineage to assert and find belonging. Black revolutionary

artists, in Mayfield's view, act as creative and politically minded agents of change within the community. They connect the people to the movement but also, through their work, archive the energy which powers change.

Secondary, but also valuable, in this conversation about the revolutionary black artist is the call for black critics. While artists create, critics are tasked with the job of assigning artistic value and cultural relevance. The ability for black artists to also take up the space of a critic signified a deeper agency which the Black Arts Movement leaders understood was pivotal to their cause. Fuller writes that "Black Critics have the responsibility of approaching the works of black writers" with an enthusiastic understanding of the Black Aesthetic who can combat "white critics...[who] cannot be expected to recognize and to empathize with the subtleties and significance of black style and technique" (*Black Aesthetic* 11). Similar to James Stewart, the language of responsibility pops up to remind young, emerging, and established black artists who have transcended to the realm of criticism, that their work is not, as white Western ideology would posit, their own, but instead it is in service to the black community and the cause of liberation. This mandate that black artists be in service to the community opens many possibilities for growth politically, but creatively is seen as limited in that black art is so frequently identified vis a vis conflict, positioned as an othered force against the white mainstream.

While the risk of insisting that black art be continually revolutionary and, therefore, political, may have been, from a philosophical standpoint, problematic for artists not desirous of such demands, the main concern of Black Nationalist leadership was the real world outcomes which such art could produce. It was not enough to create art that would simply be disruptive to the status quo, black revolutionary aesthetics aimed at maintaining a perpetual force of

destruction against the suffocating hold of dominant white institutions. Therefore, in response to the last rhetorical frame for the Black Nationalist essay, the relationship between art, revolution, and the black community is the connection which, if nurtured, provided the ripe fruit of social and political change which could strengthen the people to stand up, fight against, and tear down white supremacist structures. Maulana Karenga's essay (published under Ron Karenga) in Gayle's collection, aptly named "Black Cultural Nationalism," asserts that Black art "must respond positively to the reality of revolution" as a means to "[wage] battle for the minds of Black people" themselves (*Black Aesthetic* 32). Echoing in part Dubois' 1926 essay "Criteria for Negro Art,"⁶ Karenga firmly asserts that "all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution" or otherwise be considered "invalid" (*Black Aesthetic* 33). His notion of black art as "collective" argues that art which is "from the people...must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life" (*Black Aesthetic* 34). This evolved "form" in which art "from the people" returned was not just artistic merit (something which is often relegated to the limited politics of the space it inhabits, whether museums or print culture) but empowerment. Work that does not empower the people, that does not inspire future generations, is still art, but it is useless to the cause of liberation.

Furthermore, Karenga's insistence on the thoughtful consideration towards and inclusion of the black community, as a whole, is what makes the radical relationship of art and people so complicated. That art, like freedom is not an "independent" abstraction but an expression which "lives through" the constant articulation of blackness, (*Black Aesthetic* 37) reflects that the Black Aesthetic, and all that it embodies, is not a singular or fixed occurrence. The Black Aesthetic is dynamic, always shifting and evolving to fit the needs of the people, but, the needs of the people

⁶ Dubois' canonic essay, which also addresses black artists and writers in the early 20th century, argues that all "art is propaganda.

are also not monolithic. Mirroring Mayfield's concerns that the movement would be essentialized by the performance of its more fashionable aesthetics, Black Nationalist rhetoric often wrote itself into a corner by simultaneously acknowledging that the black community was in need of artists, leaders, and revolutionaries, but failing to accept that the needs of the community were limited by the focus on the black male experience. Revolutionaries needed to be artists and artists needed to be critics, but liberation was only accessible in so far as that which could be imagined by black men, a hindrance which continues to color the Black Power and Black Arts Movement as problematic, even today.

One common criticism of Black Power and the Black Power Movement respectively is that, within its critique of other cultural movements, it is guilty of revising history in order to support its own moral dominance over the soul of the black body politic by questioning the efficacy of previous eras from the Harlem Renaissance to Civil Rights Movement. Its desire for a "new" kind of politics often came at the cost of critical myopia which pushed the Black Aesthetic closer and closer towards being inherently elusive. Houston Baker, who has written extensively about the failures and successes of the Black Arts Movement, illustrates a more comprehensive application of what the Black Aesthetic was during the Post-Civil Rights era as well as how it continues to thrive today. His earlier reminder of critical "hindsight" connects also to his notion of "connotative thought." Noting the ways in which Black Aesthetic critics "[attempted] to will into being new art and criticism," Baker defines this process as "connotative utterances" (*Journey* 134). Turning to an analysis of Baraka's original foreword to *Black Fire!* (1968), Baker argues that Baraka's "lexical" rhetoric of the "rebirth" of the black man, illustrated by "words [which] strive to recreate a primordial black logos" through "lyricism and

assertiveness,” are exemplary of cognitive utterances in that they seek to create a new black utopia from the destruction of white Western models.

These utterances are not strategies or even tactics, they are unanchored gestures toward an unknowable future. More importantly still, that which is uttered is not necessarily spoken, or, more importantly, heard. Citing Gayle’s anthology, Baker writes that the Black Nationalist’s view of the Black Aesthetic “resides in an isolated context constituted by desire alone. No realistic plan of action or analysis emerges” (*Journey* 136). According to Baker’s critique, writers like Gayle and Baraka were so obsessed with competing over who was qualified to define the Black Aesthetic, that they avoided the self-criticism needed to evolve the movement from mere gesture.

In this view, the Black Aesthetic as envisioned by Black Nationalists, limited by their desire to claim the spirit of the movement as beholden to their politics as opposed to the will of the people, was only an “artistic slogan” (*Journey* 142). Baker, in contrast, acknowledging the connection between the desires of the late 1960’s to preceding moments of black upheaval, sees the Black Aesthetic as a force “not bound” by a particular name or title but instead a “complex rhetorical strategy” which “signals the black artists’ awareness of a new role...[and] mode of being;” it is a “revised assessment of the functioning of art” (*Journey* 142). To clarify, Baker’s assertion here reminds us that the language which Black Nationalist rhetoric employed to assert the Black Aesthetic as the pinnacle for revolutionary art is valuable in so much that it has socio-historical currency within the Post-Civil Rights moment, but the spirit which sparked this change is not temporally or intellectually rooted in a single leader, writer, or political faith.

The essays in *Black Fire!* and *The Black Aesthetic* aimed to create a blueprint for the role of the black artist in Black Nationalism, but fueled by hyper-masculine desires for dominance,

they were limited in their execution. These texts were also often exclusionary of perspectives that did not privilege the centering of the black man in the struggle for liberation. Take for instance Carmichael's contribution to *Black Fire!* where he writes that the "concern for black power" is based on the "necessity to reclaim [black] history and... identity from the cultural terrorism and degradation of self-justifying white guilt" (*Black Fire!* 118). While in theoretical or philosophical terms his call aims to empower all readers, the coded subtext of Carmichael's rhetoric, as well as many of his male counterparts, was that the "racial and cultural personality of the black community" which needed to be "preserved" (*Black Fire!* 128) in the face of white supremacy was one that was embodied by a black male subject.

While Baker's intention behind this critique of Gayle and Baraka is somewhat clouded by his pedagogical desire to establish an examination of African American expressive culture that can be read as high theory,⁷ his framework for deconstructing the Black Aesthetic does, in this current moment, help us today construct a new vantage with which to shape our connection to the political moment of the Post-Civil Rights. Through hindsight, that which grants temporal and psychic distance within our perception of the past, we can see the movement for what it was and, more importantly, what it could have been, the connective tissue here being Black Arts texts which have, somewhat tumultuously, recently re-emerged.

In order to unpack these Black Arts writings, readers have to also be able to accept its failures as symptomatic of miscommunication and not as a signal that the politics of the Post-Civil Rights Era is nebulous overall. James Smethurst calls for "historical framing" which he discusses in a reflection of his experiences developing *S.O.S.: Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (co-edited with Sonia Sanchez and others). Historical framing is, within

⁷ See both Baker's introduction to *The Journey Back* and Mike Sell's article on the Black Arts "Triplefront" ideology (p. 634) which offers a critique of both Baker and Henry Louis Gates' damaging analysis of the Black Arts Movement.

cultural studies pedagogy, “crucial” for helping students today connect with, and create critiques of, the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Of the many “contradictions and complexities of the movement” (homophobic, misogynistic, anti-Semitic rhetoric stand out across a number of Black Nationalist texts by both men and women), the biggest chasm between intellectual thought of then and today, according to Smethurst, is the “belief that radical social transformation was not simply possible but imminent” (“Black Poem” 179-180). While Smethurst’s argument might sound outdated (although published in 2013), especially in the age of Black Lives Matter and other current social justice movements, he does illustrate that the gap of possibility between the early and later Post-Civil Rights moment which fueled/fuels liberatory imagination, must be investigated. Therefore if, as Baker asserts, the Black Aesthetic, both here and at the height of Black Arts ideology, can be read as the signal of change, the invocation of a shifting cultural tide which then demands the development for new practices of agency and freedom through art and politics, then it is possible for scholars today to see the Black Arts Movement as not only an unfinished legacy, but a direct relation to our present moment.

Black Aesthetic Theory and the Problem of Textuality

The relationship between Black Arts writers and the written word was quite different than their predecessors in the early 20th century. While figures like Dubois and James Weldon Johnson viewed print culture as a tool for solidifying and exemplifying the cultural and political force of African American culture within the greater American body politic, Black Arts writers were, quite rightfully, distrustful of white owned presses and their intentions when dealing with black art. Returning to Junker’s text, which seeks to establish the essay as “a privileged site where...analyzing the production of knowledge about race and gender promises to be

particularly instructive” (Junker 24), we can position the black essay within a tradition of radical textuality in which African Americans have carved out a place for themselves since the days of antebellum slavery. Textuality here expresses a process, which privileges the written word (as opposed to visual, graphic, spoken or performed texts) and, within the technological frame of the 20th century, it is also a production which must thrive among the internal politics of print culture. While scholars like Junker and Butler do acknowledge the critical power of the essay in the African American literary tradition, how we examine the essay and its role in both the Black Power and Black Aesthetic Movement must speak to the tenuous relationship between the Black Aesthetic and textuality.

What distinguished Black Arts texts and their development of the elusive Black Aesthetic was their intentional effort to curate past art and create new art that spoke directly to the needs of the people. Black Arts anthologies, like the writings they contained, were not simply an amalgamation of African American work that was Eurocentrically mimetic, or simply a black copy of a mainstream (white) canon. That African American literature was, at one point, perceived as having been created for the consumption and pleasure of wealthy white patrons was a major critique of past artistic movements, namely the Harlem Renaissance. According to Neal writers of the Harlem Renaissance lived in a “fantasy era” facilitated by the talent of black authors but was in service to the sponsors who paid for their lifestyle. For Neal, the early 20th century was a “was a thing apart” (Neal 17), a moment full of lost potential which “never existed” for the black community at large in the 1920’s.

This idea of the Black Arts Movement fulfilling the failures of their literary fore parents is a narrative which has since been challenged by certain scholars like Baker and Margo Natalie Crawford. Crawford, in contrast to Neal, offers a productive framework for reorienting and

rereading the Black Arts Movement's relationship to the Harlem Renaissance through her concept of *anticipation*. Crawford defines her theory of anticipation as aesthetics which are based in "the art of not knowing what blackness will be" or, through more sonic terms, the "sustained dissonance of earlier chords being heard, simultaneously, with the sounds of that are just beginning to emerge" (*Post-Blackness* 36). This productive cacophony allows space for rereading texts and ideas from early 20th black writers which embodies a critique of whiteness which Black Arts writers aimed to achieve in their art and theory. Crawford asserts that many overlooked Harlem Renaissance texts harbor a "conceptual edge" which "approached the aesthetic theory and practice" of Black Arts sensibilities, specifically around expressions of rage. Analyzing Marita Bonner's 1926 play *The Purple Flower*, Crawford illustrates how the staging of the play echoes a militant hostility towards whiteness and prompts the audience to consider the question: "What does black rage sound like?" (*Post-Blackness* 22). While many Black Arts writers believed that relationship between black artists and white patrons during the 1920's weakened the revolutionary resolve of their literary predecessors, this assumption overlooks the reality that black artists have perpetually challenged the status of their subjugation, even if through small, everyday acts of creative and political resistance.

The desire of Black Arts leaders to establish an aesthetic that was for and by the black community was based on a experiential fear of artistic whitewashing, the process by which the radical liberatory potential of art is sterilized underneath the crippling power of the white gaze. This created a painfully ironic anxiety wherein Black Arts writers, in attempting to eradicate the consideration of a white audience from their creative process, were subsequently haunted by the persistent presence of whiteness in their everyday struggle. The heavy hand of the Hoover administration, the turned backs of the publishing houses, and the cold shoulders of academic

institutions reminded Black Arts writers that while they could ignore white people in their work, they could not, in fact, ignore them in a society where white supremacy still ran rampant.

Citing Black Arts playwright Ed Bullins' critique of the white power structure's historical co-opting of the intellectual and artistic fruits of revolutionary art, Margo Natalie Crawford writes that he directly "[connected] the taming of Black Power to the white collection of...black sources" noting that his play, *Malcolm '71, or Publishing Blackness: Based Upon a Real Experience*, showed the "control" of black art by white America "aimed to absorb the movement and the repertoire of black self-determination" ("Unbound" 198). Therefore the fear of textualization, of having black revolutionary writing stolen from the culture and removed from its context, is more than just mere economics, more than just publishing rights, it is a fear based on the threat of psychic and creative enslavement, wherein the liberatory potential of black art is drained into the endless pit of white consumption, an appetite which is, as history has shown, never satiated.

In response to the concerns and limits of textuality, Black Arts writers turned to performance as a tactic to rebel against mainstream standards of artistic expression. Mike Sell analyzes the history and importance of performance during the Black Arts Movement arguing that "performative culture is particularly important to African Diasporic cultures" because it has historically "served to preserve culture, community, and life under dire circumstances" acting individually and simultaneously as a "manifestation of ethos, cultural survival tactic, and hegemonic negotiation" (Sell 623). Sell, similar to Crawford and Smethurst, assert performance as more than a mere fashionable symptom of expression, it was valued by Black Arts writers and activists as a means of rhetorical weaponry. Performance, by nature, is ephemeral, existing primarily in the memory of the audience. Similar to jazz, the improvisation of performative texts

was also very enticing to the writers who desired their work to engage the ephemeral on stage but also reach out towards the masses in independently published journals and chap books. Black Arts writers, particularly black poets who valued the tradition of both African and African American orality, turned to performance in order to free their work from the page and feed it directly into the minds of the people.

The privileging of performance, while aligned with the desires of Black Arts writers, does have its limitations, especially with scholars who engage with such work today. According to Smethurst, the curation and publication of Black Arts texts remains somewhat difficult in part due to the inability to capture textually that which was never meant to be in a book. In truth, Black Arts texts were “extraordinarily concerned with the investigation of the text (and the presentation of the text to an audience) and its relationship to the outside world” which saw print culture and one of many “relationships of process” which could serve both “language and expressive culture” (“Black Poem” 177). The written word, through Smethurst’s analysis, was an option, one of many, which could be privileged, or rejected, based on the needs of the art and, more importantly, the desires of the audience. For Larry Neal, the turn towards performance is embodied within the power of the sonic, or more specifically, James Brown’s iconic scream. As a means to create both a “sound” and “energy” which is “meaningful to the people,” Neal demands that poets “must become [performers], the way James Brown is a performer - loud, gaudy, and racy” (Neal 20-21). Performance as a revolutionary tactic in Black Arts texts is discussed across multiple Black Nationalist essays as both an extension of African oral tradition and the blues tradition in the U.S. Therefore performativity, as engaged by Neal, Sell, and Smethurst, is more than just a choice of expression, it is the inheritance of black expression.

Recognizing the value of performance to the Black Arts Movement does reveal some hurdles current Black Arts scholars face today, for instance, as Mike Sell demonstrates when he argues that “it is difficult to comprehend the Black Arts Movement without comprehending the role of performance in the movement as an aesthetic mode, an epistemological issue, and an institutional imperative” (Sell 625). However, this does not completely dismiss the importance of textuality within the Black Aesthetic. As black art and performance are interlocked, so then is black art and textuality, which, as exemplified by the discussions of process within Black Nationalist essays, has historically offered a method of archiving and preserving the evolution of black intellectual thought.

The question for current Black Arts scholars becomes how to recognize and analyze a Black Arts text for both its limitations and possibilities. What, if possible, was the ideal form of textuality which spoke to the radical desires of the movement? Subsequently, what can we learn today from the tension between Black Arts and textuality? Crawford, in her contribution to the 2013 collection *Publishing Blackness*, describes how the Black Arts Movement wanted to create a distinctly “black book” aimed to carve out a “counterpublic,” or a space within the psyche of black readers which could “offer a privacy for the ideal black reader” and give readers the space and inspiration to “think black” (*Unbound* 189). Therefore, while textuality was valued at some level, the concept was always in conflict with, and subordinate to, the elevation of black expression. Crawford analyzes a text, literally titled *The Black Book*, published by Random House in 1974 with a preface by Toni Morrison, which, more than a mere anthology, acted as “a collection of words and images that explain the historical trauma of African Americans” (“Unbound” 192). Crawford asserts that this text essentially acts as a “surreal” archive containing “slave auction ads, folklore, music lyrics, photographs” (“Unbound” 192) and other

media which reflects back to ideal black readers an amalgamation of where they have come from.

Looking at *The Black Book* as an archive of blackness through the ages can be very empowering but also incredibly problematic. Archives are sensitive subjects in relation to African American history as systems of classification, especially those dealing with the black body, have often been in service to structures of Eurocentric dominance. Saidiya Hartman has written extensively about the complications of archival culture in relation to African American history, most specifically the archives of the transatlantic slave trade. “The archive,” she writes, “is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property” which is reduced to “an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” (Hartman 2). Her examination of the slave archive produces the painful and emotional realization that recorded lives of African bodies in the narrative history of the United States is not a process which grants any form of humanity to the millions of lives lost either at sea during the middle passage, or even to those who lived subjugated lives under the oppression of antebellum slavery.

If the “history written with and against” the archive produced by white supremacy reveals only an “unrecoverable past” and not a usable one (Hartman 12), perhaps Crawford’s assertion of the “black book” as a cultural archive can be seen as a form of agency. Stretching Crawford’s notion the black book, Black Arts performance, much like other forms of orality, creates an ideal archive of the minds and spirits of those who bear witness to momentary acts of radical liberation. What becomes problematic, however, is the preservation of that memory, the integrity of that archive, once the moment has passed. The essay, which, according to Junker is performative in its own right,⁸ preserves the rhetorical framework which values and supports

⁸ See Junker’s conclusion in *Frames of Friction* (p. 254) where he illustrates how the dialogic structure of the essay allows authors to “perform” their critical interventions on the page

black performativity as a radical embodiment of the Black Aesthetic in that it offers a platform on which a multitude of voices can assert their position on a particular struggle, whether as harmony or cacophony, and project that across space and time. While one may not be able to fully comprehend the experience of seeing Amiri Baraka, for example, perform a poem in 1968, his words are still preserved and, through his essays, like many other Black Arts writers, his intent in the moment, regardless of how it might be read today, is also presented as a lens with which to better understand his work and what he attempted to contribute to the movement. Crawford's conceptualization of a *black book*, acts as an archive but does not simply function vis-à-vis the blind collection of Black Arts texts, but also in relation to how the texts of that collection are read against one another, and read also against the progression of the writers after their words were captured onto the page.

If, as Crawford argues "black books" were "textual performance of the anti-text," that is a "performance of writing...too action-oriented to be held as a precious object of highbrow capital," ("Unbound" 193) then what then do we make of the black essay? If the fear of textuality is based, in part, on the Western detachment of art from ideology, then how do we approach the essay as a site of revolutionary agency? Butler once again offers an unpacking of the black essay which could be helpful in answering this question. She insists that as the act of writing brings "psychic freedom" to the black author, literacy also holds the "power to bring psychic freedom to the reader," positioning the black essay "as documentary evidence that reflects and proves the psychic evolution, the attained psychic freedom of its author" (C. Butler 10). It is not, according to her analysis, the final material textual product which is most important in this process, but the journey, the audacity to both assert one's life and perspective in the written word, and even more, have it received by a thriving, literate, population. The black activist and artists'

recognition of the “untapped potential [of] the black social subject” centers the role of the black essay as distinct from Western traditions which position the genre as a solipsistic act of intellectual indulgence. Just as Karenga argued for a “collective art” that thoughtfully and critically considers the needs of the black community, so then does the black essay connect people to an idea of collective freedom which can inspire others and set the process of political and cultural change in motion.

While the fear of textualization, once again meaning the anxiety surrounding the vulnerability of printed text to be usurped by institutions controlled by and in service to mainstream white dominance, was productive in that it helped spark a mass proliferation of independent journals and presses as a means for black artists to control their own narrative, intellectually, it also motivated a reexamination of how the form of black art would serve the function of black liberation. Many black nationalist critiques of previous literary movements, namely the Harlem Renaissance, focus on the economic hijacking of black art for white consumption. Crawford writes that “in order for the ‘Black Book’ to not become an object, it needed to make readers feel that it was not a monument but a *happening*, an event” (“Unbound” 197). Therefore, as a means to make the “evanescent matter” many Black Nationalist essays exemplify how the “explicit theorizing about process” was considered “the highest aesthetic value” (“Unbound” 197-198). Black writers, therefore were using the essay as an intellectual and imaginative palimpsest, to reflect on aesthetic process and also to strategize ways to center the black community within their art and their politics.

While many of the ideas which echo throughout Black Arts essays are quite seductive to readers even today, it is more productive to examine the ruptures between these ideas and their problematic application in the movement. There is a poetics in the language of fury and

destruction, in the projection of a new and decidedly black world emerging from centuries of racism and anti-black violence. The imaginative power of *what could have been* is a salve on the open psychological wounds black Americans have been bearing for centuries. Neal's observation that the Black Power movement in the 1960's was a "theory" without a "workable ideology" or "concept... which can encompass many of the diverse ideological tendencies existent in the black community" (Neal 9) resonates, somewhat ironically, in the reality that much of masculinist Black Nationalist rhetoric in both politics and the arts shut in black women activists who aimed to achieve liberation and equality in all of its forms. As stated earlier, one perspective that is notably missing from Neal/Baraka and Gayle's collection of essays is a gendered perspective that considers the lived experiences of black women specifically. Similar to white Western rhetoric, black men stood in as the normative example for discussing the plight of the black community in both the Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights Era. Therefore, to further unpack the essay's capacity to function as a site for cultural agency, we must also look at the ways black women in the 1970's used the genre to critique and dismantle the masculinist perspective which so heavily defined Black Nationalist rhetoric.

Gender Madness and Intra-racial Trauma

When Toni Cade Bambara published her groundbreaking collection *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 1970 it was broadly in response to the lack of representation of black women's perspective in the dialogue about black liberation politics. It was also, more directly, aimed as a critique of Black Nationalist rhetoric wherein black men often blamed black women for their "contribution" to the oppression of the black man and, by extension, the entire race. The preface for the collection begins with the declaration of black women's presence and existence within the

movement. Bambara asserts, “We are involved in a struggle for liberation” (*The Black Woman* 7). She offers nuance in the ideology of liberation as she distinguishes between different forms of oppression from the “exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism” to the “manipulative control of a corporate society...[and] constrictive norms of ‘mainstream’ culture” (*The Black Woman* 7). Just as African Americans throughout history used their experiences to critique white mainstream society in their lack of understanding about the ideological limitations of Western humanist liberation, black women reveal the stifling threat of gender norms within the black community.

To understand the importance of Bambara’s anthology and its legacy, we must first unpack the harmful gaps in Black Nationalist ideology which produced the need for intraracial critique. Black Power and Black Arts leaders like Neal and Baraka offered many critiques of black women in the movement, accusing them of selling out their people for the crumbs of economic security provided by a close proximity to whiteness. Embedded in that critique was also the mandate that black women learn to be subservient to black men or else risk the security and wellbeing of the black family. Neal’s essay “The Black Arts Movement” articulates a clear example of this kind of masculinist critique:

Historically, Afro-American women have had to be the economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them to have jobs while at the same time limited the economic mobility of the black man...therefore, the woman's aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man. Since he cannot provide for his family the way white men do, she despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until, very often, there is nothing left but a shell. (76)

The anger and contempt he directs towards black women and their supposed psychological destruction of the black man is palpable. Seeing black women as an extension of the white power structure, he colors them as enemies, citing the ravaged bodies of innocent black men as their prey. Neal's language reflects a common sentiment found in essays, journals, and speeches by Black Nationalist male leaders: Black women have a sin to atone for produced by their uncomfortable proximity to domestic white spaces.

Heightened paranoia of whiteness as a psychic infiltration into the movement sparked much infighting, but the consistency with which black male activists promoted narratives of distrust surrounding black women's loyalty is more clearly reflected as the insecurity surrounding black men's need to preserve their role as the heir apparent of the radical black utopia they envisioned in their art. This insecurity is front and center in Nathan Hare's 1971 essay "Will the Real Black Man Please Stand Up?" where, before claiming that the black woman should be the "helper [and] undying collaborator" of the black man, he asserts that there will be no "need for a black women's liberation movement" if black men simply "bring the women along in [their] common struggle" (Qtd. in "Family Affair" 191). Unpacking this rhetorical double speak, Hare frames the notion of support for the black women on the ultimatum that the "era of liberation" (Qtd. in "Family Affair" 191) be one based on the unquestioned leadership of black men. Black women need not what black men cannot provide, nor are they allowed to conceive of any political action that does not acquiesce to black men's expertise. While he warns black men not to turn black women away in the "struggle to assert [their] black manhood" (Qtd. in "Family Affair" 191) it is an observation aimed to reaffirm the control of the black man in the household and in the revolution itself. The irony of this is that many black women, often left in care over the lives and happiness of their children, which included both sons and daughters,

constantly created space in their activism for the life chances of black men. What Hare and other male Black Nationalists feared most was not that their women would abandon them in the fight for liberation, but that the rules of engagement would change, leaving black men to be held accountable for their own contribution to systems of misogyny.

Black women were charged with the irreprehensible crime of emasculating black men, stained with crass labels like bitch, shrew, ballbreakers, and embittered matriarchs. The frequent accusation of black male emasculation was not only linked with romantic relationships, but also familial ones, as black mothers were criticized for running off strong, black male role models within the household, armed to the teeth with their razor sharp attitudes. Returning to Neal's essay, the implication that black women's social and economic "aspirations" are tied to whiteness denies the centuries of sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse at the hands of white society. Neal's words, in trying to assert a voice for the black community, ironically silences black women by relegating their experiences as victims as secondary to his own.

Misogyny has long been a vocal, and applicable, critique of black male nationalists by black feminists in the Post-Civil Rights Era through today, especially given the great potential within that political moment which brought awareness to ways race and class intertwined to doubly oppress the African American community. The lack of understanding to the nuances of gender politics, and even more, the lack of empathy towards black women by their male counterparts in the movement reveals the collective investment black men had in systems of oppression where in their male identity granted them a rare privilege. Black feminists during the Post-Civil Rights era, while acknowledging the work of their predecessors, were unique in their desire to not only create a language surrounding their experiences, but also to document that

language for future generations. Intersectionality,⁹ a concept spearheaded by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, which has a direct lineage to the work of black feminists during the 1960's and 1970's, asserts that our experiences are governed by an intersection of multiple axes of identity constituted by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical capability, etc., which are connected to both oppression and domination. Black women's experiences of oppression, which are negatively interpellated by both race and gender, position them as particularly vulnerable to both interracial and intraracial attacks, especially during mass social justice movements.

Crawford suggests that male Black Nationalists were more than able to recognize such a concept as intersectionality as a means to defend their rhetoric based on the connection between “manhood and blackness” in the name of their own oppression. However, when it came to acknowledging the experiences of black women, there was a critical blind spot. Therefore, as Crawford writes, the “signature difference of Black Power feminism is not intersectionality but the seizure of intersectionality from the male stronghold” (“Family Affair” 186). For black women directly or indirectly involved in the art and politics of the Post-Civil Rights era, the desire for visibility, for a platform to speak about their specific experiences, and most importantly for the agency to combat the problematic narratives associated with their character, was viewed by black male nationalists not simply as problematic, but as the ultimate betrayal.

The idea that black women needed to be held accountable for their supposed role in the system of white supremacy undermines the socio-historical reality of black women's oppression after slavery, through Jim Crow and beyond. In addition, it also created tension along gender lines where, during the Post-Civil Right Era's confluence of social justice movements including

⁹ The term “intersectionality” first emerged from a legal paper written by Crenshaw in 1989 and has since taken a life of its own as an applicable theory and framework in Gender and Critical Race studies. Crenshaw, who is still active researcher and teacher, has given talks and interviews where she laments how the word has become deflated over the past two decades, used as a place marker for recognizing various notions of identity politics without calling for a firm critique of systems of oppression.

Black Power and Women's Liberation, black women were made to choose a side in their liberation. Oppression, for black women was an inevitable reality, regardless of the choice they made, whether in relation to gender, race, or class. Their suitability as mothers was questioned because they could not, on their own, lift themselves from generational cycles of poverty. As romantic and sexual partners black women were constantly criticized for destabilizing the economic viability of black men. Even single, childless, educated black women were accused by conservative politicians as a threat to the proliferation of the black family in their supposed refusal to procreate. While all of these narrow criticisms were baseless, even more they were accepted by the mainstream as an inalienable truth. In order to assert their position, Black Feminists battled internally and externally to sustain themselves politically, socially and psychologically.

The remedy for the supposed unruly and dangerous nature of the black woman was, according to male black nationalists, their submission to black men as the head of their household and, subsequently, the political movement as a whole. However, underneath the bravado which demanded black male domination resided a deep anxiety about the collective power of black feminist resistance. Kimberly Nichele Brown notes that the 1970's rise in "attacks" against the black woman from black male nationalists were not mere critique, but defensive measures, extensions from the political strategy of black patriarchy which saw black women artists, activists, and the emerging culture of black feminism as something to be feared ("Who Is" 80). The fear of black women was, in essence, not about black women themselves, but about the reality of what black feminists demanded: a future where equal rights was not simply a conversation between men, but included all facets of identity. Such equality felt like a threat to

black male nationalists, who, more often than not, armed themselves with ammunition from the 1965 Moynihan Report.

The Moynihan Report, officially named “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” was a sociological report which essentially blamed the plight of the black community, including economic instability and social alienation, on the supposed matriarchal structure of the black family which centered the black mother, instead of the black father, as the head of the household. While this report was criticized by many activists for its pathologizing of the black family structure, many contributors to *The Black Woman* were very vocal about how the report fanned the flames of masculinity, in part reifying Black Nationalist rhetoric which encouraged black men to “reclaim” the black family by disempowering black mothers. Moynihan’s insistence that the supposed “matriarchal” status of the black family, one which he painted as the natural antagonist to the white middle class family structure, was something which hindered black “progress” and “[imposed] a crushing burden on the Negro male” (Moynihan 36) resonated with male Black Nationalists. Once again reusing the hackneyed argument of black women as sexual and political castrators, black male nationalists ignored the reality of embedded economic disparity and systemic racism instead pointing to the aggressive nature of black women as the cause of the black man, and subsequently, the black family’s inability to compete with mainstream, white Americans.

Black Feminists’ critique of these accusations are peppered throughout most of the essays in Bambara’s *The Black Woman*. The black male nationalist perspective that the validity and continuation of the black family must somehow be protected from the black woman was not only a threat to black mothers, but also black women who aimed to take leadership in the movement. Furthermore, it reduced the socio-economic implications of the black family’s oppression to a

gendered power struggle which historically had been inapplicable to the African American family structure. Kay Lindsey's essay "The Black Woman as Woman" illustrates the contradiction in this perspective noting that the black family has historically been "used by the white agency to perpetuate the state" positioning them as both "extensions of the white family" and "as the prisoners of war enslaved, to do the dirty work of the state" (*The Black Woman* 87). She identifies "dirty work" as the physical and psychological labor routinely assigned to black folks, whether low wage or menial labor and/or the emotional work black caretakers, typically women, provided for white families in domestic spaces. Time and time again, black labor – too often utilized to establish and reestablish white identity as the top of the dominant power structure – confirms black identity as inferior in a system of oppression that depends on its subjugation to function.

While the Moynihan report did articulate in part the realities black Americans faced under various forms of systemic oppression, its rhetoric depended on a skewed understanding of data¹⁰ and a limited understanding of the non-white experience in America. In the introduction of Moynihan's report he does place the onus on white Americans for willfully embodying the "virus" of racism across centuries, laying the foreground for his argument that the "establishment of a stable Negro family structure" was not just the responsibility of the oppressed but a "national effort" which would provide a "new unity of purpose" (Moynihan 5) to the American people and government. The language of "stability" and "instability" resonates throughout the report, as white American families are once again seen as exemplar and black American families are, in Moynihan's view, "approaching complete breakdown" (Moynihan 15) within society due

¹⁰ The copy of the report used for this project, which is cited under Moynihan's name, was in fact a direct reprint published by *The Atlantic* which was annotated by historical Dr. Daniel Geary. Geary's annotations throughout the piece offers critiques of Moynihan's political perspective, but more importantly, it details the way in which Moynihan often disregarded class structure as a factor in his statistical analysis and also how much of the report was impacted by the racial biased U.S. census results of the 1960's.

to the imbalance of black women's power in the household. Coincidentally, Moynihan's critique of patriarchy just *worked* for white families: "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs...A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage" (Moynihan 36). Here, as in the rhetoric of Black Nationalism, patriarchy is illustrated as natural superior based only on the experience of the men who benefit from it. The report became a familiar tool for black men as it spoke the seductive language of male domination to generations of men reeling from centuries of dehumanization so much so that it made the notion of black women's equality not a goal, but a target. Moynihan subsequently centered black women as the enemy of black prosperity – ignoring centuries of evidence proving otherwise – but also ignored the external, systemic inequalities which actively produced/produces economic and social inequality within black families then and today.

Black male nationalists' adoption of the Moynihan report as a means to discredit the criticism of Black Feminists in the movement was a critical failure which Madhu Dubey argues "split the racial discourse of black nationalism along gender lines" (Dubey 18) and connected black and white men under the shared ideology of patriarchy. This shared ideology obscured the social and economic reality of black women's struggles. For example, as Moynihan highlights, the higher percentage of black women than white working at the Department of Labor in the 1960's, he unsubstantively claims that this disparity as exemplary of black women's success as a "comparative disadvantage" for black men. While black men active in the movement often called for the end of white power structures, patriarchy was one which created a space for communal investment, and the rhetoric of the Moynihan Report identified the black woman as enemy of the (black and white) state, which affected both political and interpersonal connections.

Fran Sanders, in her essay “Dear Black Man” describes of the tenuous romantic relationship between black men and black women resembles more of a “mother [and] boy” than mate[s]. The contrast between the “strong and enduring” black woman and the black man who “[flees] ghosts or some such hiding under [the black woman’s] skirts” (*The Black Woman* 74) is not a reflection of reality, but of a narrative spun by mainstream society in which blackness, despite the gender, is characterized by its domestic instability. Most importantly, the black couple’s inability to achieve the status of whiteness, despite participating in society as a mimesis of the white familial structure, reveals the painful irony of white supremacy: even if black women submit to black men as their leader, the black family will always be identified by their lack. Frances Beale’s essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Female and Black” confirms this as it addresses the absurd fear of the black woman’s participation in the societal “castration” of black men. She notes, “the Black woman has no protector and was used, and is still being used in some cases, as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on Black men” (*The Black Woman* 92). Both Sanders and Beale point to the importance of the Black Feminist perspective which views oppression not simply as a tension between two individuals, but a greater system of intersecting experiences of subjugation that creates simplistic narratives for complex problems.

What is clear from the essays in *Black Fire!* and *The Black Aesthetic* is that the narratives which black men created for their revolution offered, at best, limited agency for black women in society. Dubey observes that “Black Nationalist discourse repeatedly figured the oppressive past through the imagery of a vicious circle or cycle” (Dubey 26). This cycle could only be broken through the complete destruction of white ideologies, which points to the constant rhetorical invocation of destruction/death and rebirth. As examined earlier, the masculinist revolutionary

perspective is one which the past – clouded by a history of slavery, subjugation, and death – must be destroyed for a new future to emerge. Those who supported this supposedly new black liberation politics envisioned a future wherein “the radical newness of the black nationalist subject” (Dubey 27), a decidedly male subject, was the only hope for a productive black future.

Glaringly absent from the forward looking masculinist utopian perspective where the black man would rise up to usurp and replace the white man as the paternal heir apparent, was the critical self-awareness that would motivate male leaders to be reflexive of their present moment. In other words, looking to the future created a sense of cultural myopia for black male nationalist subjects. Black Nationalist ideology was based on a temporally disruptive rhetoric which demanded the destruction of the past, defined by white Western ideologies, as a sacrifice for a new black utopian future. Here, black women are seen as “figures of the dead, static past, tainted with white values, which the militant black writer must destroy before he can articulate a new revolutionary black sensibility” (Dubey 20). The language and rhetoric of gender critique across Black Nationalist and Black Feminist essays therefore became friendly fire, primarily fired by black men in the movement, because of an inability to understand who, and what, the real enemy was.

One tactic which Black Feminist writers used against black male nationalists was the deconstruction of their rhetoric surrounding the inaccurate legacy of black women as docile homemakers. The rejection of the cult of domesticity is argued by a simple yet radical idea: black women are not white women, and therefore will not be held to the limited standard white men hold for their respective partners. Bambara and many other contributors to *The Black Woman* discuss the use of two distinct narratives of femininity which white and black men use to limit the experiential agency of black women. First there is, most commonly, the comparison of

black women to unattainable archetype of white femininity. Beale notes that this image of the perpetually domestic white mother is essentially “parasitic” reflecting an “extremely sterile existence” where women are “reduced to only a biological function” (*The Black Woman* 91). Moreover, as Bambara notes in her preface to the text, whether the “concerns and methods” or even the “priorities” of white and black women’s experience is similar enough to overlap is seriously at question. Therefore, the narrative of white femininity is utterly inapplicable to black women’s experiences because, to echo one of the main tenants of Black Nationalist thought, blackness and whiteness are antithetically positioned in relation to conversations about power and agency.

Secondly, a narrative which was very common within masculinist rhetoric, there is the misappropriation of African culture as a means to justify black women’s subservience to black men. Brown, citing a speech from Amiri Baraka, illustrates that by “hailing back to so called “healthy African identities,” Baraka contends that the natural role for the black woman is to be a “complement” to her man (Qtd. in “Who Is” 82). He intimates that for a black woman to be self-actualized in her own right, she would be acting under European rather than African dictates; therefore, he codes feminism as “white” and, by extension, counterrevolutionary” (“Who Is” 82). The fantasy of the African woman as strong, enduring, and subdued is one in a long line of unrealistic and crippling fantasies regarding the ideal role of black women in the masculinist black utopic which undergirded the Black Power concept. It is important to note that this false identity, along with that of the castrating black matriarch, the asexual black mammy, and the lazy welfare queen, are fictions which do not reflect the lived experiences of black women historically, but the perilous desires of men, both black and white, and their dedication to patriarchal modes of control. In respect to the African woman, Bambara shreds these falsehoods,

arguing that “there is nothing to indicate that the African woman, who ran the marketplace...engaged in international commerce and diplomacy...who...[waged] battle against the European invaders and the corrupt chieftains” (*The Black Woman* 104) was in anyway comparable to the figure devised in Black Nationalist rhetoric as a means of shaming black women into a docile position which they had never occupied.

The mutual investment of black and white men in the control of black women’s bodies and participation in politics and society involved rhetoric which pathologized of the black family and, subsequently, tainted the image of black motherhood/womanhood. This is illustrated starkly and painfully in Joanna Clark’s essay “Motherhood” where she discusses how the expectations of black motherhood from the state sponsored institutions and men, both black and white, (white men often working as agents of state power) drove her to a mental breakdown. She equates being a mother with also being “everyone’s whipping boy” (*The Black Woman* 64) to underscore the impact of gendered labor. Furthermore, her essay illustrates how gendered labor, which affects women across races, is intensified when issues of class and race enter the equation. In discussing the fears black women have in regards to forced sterilization, she claims that what black women need is “a little genocide” to combat the centuries of “bravely propagating” the African American race only to be rewarded with “a lot of lumps and a bad name” (*The Black Woman* 73). This incredibly tense and biting remark reflects the anguish which the rhetoric of the Moynihan Report inflicted on black mothers. Her use of the term “genocide” is an attack, one birthed by hurt and pain, that asserts the extreme as a logical reaction to the critical failure of intraracial patriarchal domination: if broken black women and their broken black babies are the problem, then kill us.

We can also locate within the discomfort of Clark's ultimatum a queering of black motherhood by Black Feminists and in response to Black Nationalists, specifically through the investigation and even possible destruction of gender normality. Although critics like Roderick Ferguson have argued that the institution of the black family is inherently queered by its negated stance in relation to the white family structure, the dialogue between black women and black men across these essays raises the stakes by problematizing black women as a threat to black women's own existence. As black motherhood was constantly called into question publically by the American government, and privately, by black men in the movement, some Black Feminists choose not to submit or reform their image as women, but to destroy it. Abbey Lincoln articulates the condition of black womanhood most astutely in her assertion that "the Black mother, housewife, and all-around girl Thursday is called upon to suffer both physically and emotionally every humiliation a woman can suffer and still function" (*The Black Woman* 82). While some black male nationalists threatened black women in the movement by questioning the validity of their womanhood, some Black Feminists, like Bambara herself, responded by rejecting the need for a binary at all. Therefore, as the narrative of white supremacy limits the agency of black women vis a vis race, and the rhetoric of the movement limits their agency vis a vis constricted modes of gender, Black Feminists carved out a new space where black motherhood/womanhood could be exalted based on the varied experiences of black women, even if they did not fit into the heteronormative mold, calling for the death of gendered binaries so that the black woman could live.

One such prominent example of this in *The Black Woman* is Bambara's essay "On the Issues of Roles" which examines the subjugation of women vis a vis gender, ultimately arguing that its perverse role in the black community has engendered psychological trauma in both black

men and black women. Asserting herself as someone who is “neither a man nor a woman who wishes to be a man” she denounces “rigid work assignments based on sex” instead opting to investigate “pre-capitalist, non-white [lifestyles]” that might “[shed] some light on the madness of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (*The Black Woman* 102). This madness, according to Bambara, takes the form of an emotional suicide/suicide pact for and between black men and black women. Under the guise of proper Western gender dynamics men are meant to be “aggressive” and “uncompromising...producers of goods” while women are to be “self-sacrificing...background figure” (*The Black Woman* 102) always consuming the byproduct of the male emotional deficit. The demand that black men take up this mantle and therefore “reclaim his manhood” by “denying [the black woman’s] personhood” (*The Black Woman* 103) is not only detrimental to their collective liberation, it is a sickness which infects the community at large. Bambara, by highlighting the emotional labor which women do in service to men – black women being doubly taxed as they historically have also performed emotional labor for white families in domestic spaces – reveals how the black man’s fear of the black woman is based on the inept concept that emasculation, presented in the form of emotional sensitivity or intelligence, is to be seen as a “faggot.”

The homophobic black lash revealed within this fear of black women, emasculation, and emotion accountability, points us toward another prominent critique of Black Nationalist rhetoric. Masculinity was not only on the defense from black women, but from the threat of queer identity overall, and black male nationalists doubled down on this in their writing to protect the fragility of their misogynist identities. Crawford cites a clear example of a moment where Black Nationalist rhetoric intersected with homophobia as a threat against black women through Calvin Hernton. In Hernton’s 1965 text *Sex and Racism in America*, he describes the

black woman as inherently “envious” of the black man’s sexual prowess observing that “Negro females who complain about Negro men ignoring them for white women are actually unaware that they are jealous of the attention that black men arouse in white women” (Qtd in “Family Affair” 193). Not only does Hernton claim here to understand the interiority of black women’s desires, but he also claims that the black woman’s “ego,” offended at the sight of black men and white women together, is a signal of her own physical and psychological inept.

Hernton goes on to claim that any relationship that does not fit into the intraracial and heteronormative role which supports the domination of the black man, as not only counterrevolutionary but also unnatural:

Like many white women who become intimate with Negroes, many black women are latent or unconscious homosexuals—the white man’s color and unfamiliarity tend to heighten or excite their sense of themselves as females. Such women simply cannot get along with Negroes. In many instances...the white man may psychosexually represent a pseudo-female for an otherwise homo- sexual, or lesbian-inclined, Negro woman. (Qtd in *Family Affair* 193)

Once again, the notion of “competition” appears, a clear extension of Eurocentric thought which demands that a hierarchization of gender. In this quote, Hernton not only feminizes white men, playing a familiar game of hyper-masculinist tit for tat which reads feminine as lack, he also reduces women’s sexual agency -- and the agency they might assert over their body broadly, e.g. pregnancy and birth -- as something which must be seized from women lest the black family and community suffer critical perversion.

Crawford writes in response to Hernton that “black masculinist discourse not only situated black women as the castrating matriarchs but also pathologized black women’s 'sense of

themselves as females.’ If a black woman is ‘excited’ about her womanhood, she is, within this masculinist gaze, always already on the verge of becoming ‘lesbian’ or ‘white’ or self-hating” (“Family Affair” 193). The proximity between agency and whiteness is a strategy which black masculinist discourse employs to keep black women in a political and cultural bind. It is, also, paradoxical, in that the entire concept of Black Power is based on the rejection of white power structures.

When black women, plagued by both misogyny and racism, attempt to take on patriarchal control in an attempt to uphold the ideals of revolutionary social change, it is black men who arise in collusion with the very white power structure which they purport to want to dismantle. The equation of emotions and weakness, as expressed through the black men’s anxiety toward the threat of being labeled a “faggot,” is a reductive idea, but one which is still prevalent today. Instead of embracing emotional intelligence as a means to combat centuries of oppression, by engaging in the radical act of black love, and also black self-love, black men, in Bambara’s view, cling to emotional death, taking black women along with them for the ride.

Returning to Bambara’s notion of gendered madness, it is not only understood as an emotional suicide by black men, but it is also described as the pact that black women make with black men in accepting their roles as “subordinate being” who, regardless of being a “marketable virgin or a potential whore” remains “the enemy of men” (*The Black Woman* 102). Bambara centers the cycles of abuse in the black family at the heart of her argument: between black mothers and their children, between black fathers and their family, absent or barely present in the household, the tumultuous relationships under the threat of gendered warfare which haunt black children into adulthood. However, what makes this examination of the black family different from the of the Moynihan report is, firstly, that Bambara does not see the root of the problem as

singular, but a complex multitude of miscommunications from the Western world which, compounded by race and class, effects different communities in unique ways. Secondly, her examination of the black family under the threat of gender madness points to the “Struggle” as a means to “develop something saner” (*The Black Woman* 106) than earlier generations have endured. While writers like Larry Neal romanticize the painful longings of black blues singers, Bambara recognizes that their music has “chronicled...madness for generations” (*The Black Woman* 106) not as healing, but coping. The Struggle then, is not simply the movement, it is the growing pains that move it forward. The Struggle is sanity because it demands that people evolve. It is, according to Bambara and many other Black Feminist voices she presents in her collection, the introspection and humility which allows people under subjugation to see each other for who they are and who they dream of being.

Defending her critique of gender as a form of pathology, Bambara notes the fear and anxieties attached with creating new models as opposed to making patchwork of the problematic ones already at play. “The job of purging is staggering,” she writes, “It perhaps takes less heart to pick up the gun than to face the task of creating a new identity, a self, perhaps, an androgynous self, via commitment to the struggle” (*The Black Woman* 103). The invocation of the new “androgynous” self is a productive queering which is not in service, contrary to Hernton’s assertion, to a specific dedication to black lesbianism (although that is not at all a problematic notion to assert). It is instead a call towards an unknowable future that is built on the inclusive audacity of black imagination, instead of one constructed on the scraps of the exclusionary negative image of Eurocentric posturing.

Bambara’s challenge towards those in the movement who would rather adapt oppression than fight for freedom points us towards one of the most prolific critiques which *The Black*

Woman offers to Black Nationalist rhetoric, Black Aesthetic theory, and also the politics of the emerging Post-Civil Rights period vis vis the vantage of Black Feminism. Brown notes that contributors to *The Black Woman* had to aggressively critique black male angst regarding the figure of the black matriarch as the archetype of female empowerment” (“Who Is” 84). In respect to the new brand of revolutionary action which defined the early Post-Civil Rights moment, the voices which propelled the message of *The Black Woman* into the public eye sought to hold accountable the very ideology of freedom, asserting that true liberatory politics had to include a space for blackness in all of its shapes, forms, and identities. For these women, neither blackness or femininity was a monolith, which meant that any futuristic black utopia created from the aesthetic and political work of the movement must create and preserve a space for constructive cacophony of black lives at work for the cause of freedom.

In discussing the legacy of *The Black Woman*, Farah Jasmine Griffin notes the women who contributed to the anthology comprise a “chorus” which “shares a sense of political urgency, a sense of the importance of internal critique, a sense of the diversity of black women and their ties to black nationalism, feminism, and black men.” In contrast, she also notes the “conflict” of clashing of opinions, ideas, and beliefs at work in the text, but of which, in her assertion, created a “vibrancy” within the text that contributed to its productive “struggle” (Griffin 120). Bambara, in this understanding, is both curator and conductor, one who does not “avoid contest, controversy, and debate” nor does she “evade the messiness involved in laying the groundwork for social struggle” that is “essential to the integrity of the volume” (Griffin 126). Therefore, the essays of *The Black Woman* exemplify Junker’s claim of the essay as an essentially dialogic genre, comprised of many voices, which allows for both harmony and cacophony in service to the greater good of liberation. These essays work not only for black

women, but also for all of the lives that black women touch, including their sons and daughters, the black men they love and struggle with, and the white population which has benefited for centuries from their physical and emotional labor.

In this first chapter I have worked to illustrate the way in which the form of the essay functions to create dialogue across multiple perspectives, often, as is the case with issues of race, highlighting a productive tension for both authors and readers. As stated earlier, the goal of this project is twofold. On the level of the socio-historical, there is a need to define, unpack, and examine the products of the Post-Civil Rights era in contrast to previous historical moments as well as our current. In response to the mandate of literary scholarship, this project also aims to understand the various embodiments of black nonfiction in order to compare both their form and function within the greater tradition of African American literature. This first examination of the essay points towards a better understanding of the Post-Civil Rights as a historical moment, particularly in contrast to the Civil Rights Era and the Harlem Renaissance. While both Junker and Butler assert that essay has been historically “misread” based on its fraught positionality between internal and external realities, blurring the lines between objective and experiential truth, Junker goes further to define the essay as a “meta genre,” one that “shows the instabilities of...and overall arbitrary character of genre classification” (Junker 18). Therefore, the essay is treated with contempt by critics and scholars because of what it reveals about the creation of literature overall, that there is no perfect text, only inquiries that act as disruptions. Unpacking the investment in and legacy of the black essay helps illustrate the power dynamics within the act of life-writing and how they are embodied within the genre of nonfiction as an example of literature’s inequitable relationship with racial subjugation. Simply put, nonfiction’s history as

tool to give a platform to subjugated voices reveals both its greater potential and the limitations of other genres to do the same. More importantly, looking at the essay located within these emergent Post-Civil Rights anthologies helps us understand both the problems and the stakes echoed within other forms of nonfiction text which anticipate the shifting ideological tides that define our current moment.

II. Wailin' and Moanin':
Memoir and Black Mourning in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* and
James Baldwin's *No Name in the Street*

*I believe in change:
change personal, and change in society.
I have experienced revolution,
unfinished without question,
but one whose new order is everywhere on view...*
-Alice Walker

Despite Alice Walker's irrefutable awe of her own mother, who raised the Pulitzer Award winning writer and her siblings on a meager sharecropper's salary in rural Georgia, Walker firmly asserts that a successful woman artist's career is complicated by having more than one child. While one child offers the option of mobility, multiple children makes of their mother "a sitting duck" (Walker 363). In her 1979 essay "A Child of One's Own," she writes that the "truth" of giving birth is "that it is miraculous," a "genuine miracle" only rivaled by its antithesis: Death, or "the 'miracle' of nonbeing" (Walker 367). This beautiful, if not ominous, sentiment touches on the notion of women being mobile, being able to move as they please, to support themselves with their own money and protect their agency at all cost, which is a major motif in Walker's fiction and nonfiction. A sitting duck is always at risk of being in the sights of someone's weapon. Black women know, above all else, that in America there is always someone or something lying in wait as the constant threat of violence is, for oppressed groups, quotidian.

While her politics on marriage and childrearing might be up for debate, Walker's respect for motherhood and for womanhood in all of its forms is irrefutable. James Baldwin, who, as a gay man, never had children of his own, is no stranger to childcare himself. The oldest of his siblings, he served as caretaker and aid to his mother for years. It is therefore, with great familiarity, that he opens *No Name In the Street* with a meditation on the fragility of new life. "A newborn baby," Baldwin writes, "is an extraordinary event...[a] breathing miracle, who could

not live an instant without you...skull more fragile than an egg...a miracle of eyes, legs, toenails, and (especially) lungs” (Baldwin 6). It is the lungs that matter most because, in facilitating breath, they open the door to sound, to the infant cry which is, until the child can fend for itself, the only thing it has in its defense; a siren song for the adults who cannot refuse the call to coddle the tiny, soft, thing. Baldwin’s moving rumination on the power of the infant cry is only eclipsed by his stark declaration that the only way to escape its pull, is by leaving. Carther Mathes, analyzing Baldwin’s illustration of the infant figure, argues that the cry might represent “a formal tone of loss, dislocation, and the attempt to suture the historical rupture brought about through the loss of a Post-Civil rights political reality” through which Baldwin is suggesting that “the children have been abandoned” (Mathes 595). The children, in Mathes’ eyes, are the American people, both black and white, and in the 1970s were abandoned and alienated from the fervor and hope which had come to so define the 1950’s and 1960’s. What Walker’s stark maternal advice and Baldwin’s haunting allegory project is the shift in ideals and politics from the Civil Rights to the Post-Civil Rights. By the 1970’s all of the freedom songs had been sung, the roads across America had all been marched across, and the biting debates on the “race problem” were now commonplace in the media. Yet, what was supposed to be a time of celebration, became a reminder of the enemy’s power—the enemy being, among other things, the American government—and forced a reexamination on their methods of attack. Writing of the Post-Civil Rights Era served to bury the legacies of the dead and unearth the critical power of the people.

The second chapter of this project will explore and interrogate African American memoir writing in the Post-Civil Rights Era by examining Alice Walker’s 1983 *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* and James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street*, published in 1972. Both of these

writers are no strangers to controversy or criticism, whether from mainstream critics or within the black community. Unsatisfied with the mere label of “writer,” Walker and Baldwin have both described themselves in their works as “artists,” and over their careers, in their own ways, each striven to elevate the aesthetic prowess of African American Literature by eschewing the idea that their works were only applicable to a *black* audience. Walker’s *Gardens*, a self-proclaimed “Womanist” collection, examines her own literary heroes, like Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O’Connor, and investigates the pained history of black women’s oppression in America. While Walker’s memories of the Civil Rights and Post-Civil Rights respectively have to be parsed out from her long investigation of black artistry, Baldwin’s work is more focused temporally. *No Name*, which is drastically less hopeful than his often praised 1963 *The Fire Next Time*, functions as part post-mortem and part elegy of the “race problem, fueled by a retooled perspective on American Exceptionalism,”¹¹ where he reflects on the better part of his entire career as a means to find tangible proof of hope, after the conclusion of a decade which robbed the black community of its most visible leaders.

Similar to the first chapter of this project, where I investigated the parameters of the essay and how black writers used its dialogic qualities to establish authoritative subject positions within debates on racism and sexism, I begin this section with a genre analysis of memoir to articulate the ways in which this liminal category of life-writing offers an understanding of writing as a *practice* which reflects a life *evolving* on the page instead of a life completed. I will then look at the ways both Walker and Baldwin illustrate their relationship to the landscape of the American South, investigating whether it is a space of renewal or of repression. Next I will make to concurrent moves to contextualize my notion of blackness and death as a form of

¹¹ Cheryl Wall’s contribution to the collection *James Baldwin: America and Beyond* illustrates how Baldwin strategically used notions of American exceptionalism, particularly that of Western Democratic ideals, as the evidence for what America could be if it could exercise the demon of white supremacy from its soul.

queered mourning. To accomplish this connection I will first discuss the ways in which each author offers new ways of analyzing black life through the lens of queered longing, and subsequently I will articulate how this notion is connected to expressions of black mourning, a practice which challenged normative assumptions of black life as perpetually devalued.

Memoir is unfairly viewed of as the lesser step-sibling of autobiography. In the era of 20th century print culture, memoir was associated with celebrity cultural and public figures connected to salacious stories of family deceit and political drama, which in the eyes of the academy, diminishes its literary value. It is for this reason that the term memoir, even when it is applicable to certain texts, is often avoided in order to preserve the literary integrity of the writing. Julie Rak notes that despite the reality that the memoir historically preceded autobiography as a subset of life-writing, the latter is presented by scholars as a form of literature, which, “like fiction, creates an individual...and in its aesthetics [points] to higher truths” (Rak 203). Ironically, even next to fiction, and especially when compared to autobiography, memoir looked upon, with skepticism, as mere verisimilitude.

Comparing memoir and autobiography, it is clear that the largest perceived difference between the two genres is purpose and audience. The same tension could be argued between that of nonfiction writing and theory. As we will explore later, much of Walker’s text challenges the notion of what theory and criticism is, and most importantly, of who is and is not equipped to offer their paradigm as a framework to be respected within academia. Nonfiction writer and craft specialist William Zinsser outlines the structural difference between memoir and autobiography. Whereas “autobiography moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame” memoir in contrast, “narrows the lens and [focuses] on a time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid” (15).

Despite its critical status, autobiography does have its limitations. Quoting writer Russell Baker's assertion that "the autobiographer's problem is that he knows too much," Zinsser points to the "memoirist's crucial need to distill" (Zinsser 15) a single moment, a single obstacle, and a single triumph as opposed to an entire lifetime.

More than simply a smaller or compact version of autobiography, memoir is a specific practice which differs in its very approach to life-writing. It is, in many ways, a genre which is about a life becoming and evolving, than a life which has reached and exceeded its narrative peak. Julie Rak, citing German philosopher Georg Misch, illustrates memoir as a practice that, while thought of as a "rehearsal" for "more polished writing," is still in fact "part of the material process" of life writing (Rak 203). Furthermore, from this observation she asserts that "memoir writing as a practice is not merely practice: it signifies how the writer of memoir actually lives in the world" (Rak 203). A practice, compared to a theory, is not fixed. Writing as a practice signals the constant wrestling of ideas and, more importantly, validates change as a consistent form of truth within the human experience.

This idea of memoir as a writing practice is important when looking at the legacy of African American nonfiction because it challenges the question of who has the authority to create autobiography, deconstructing life writing from its position as an act of cultural supremacy, to that of everyday moments of survival and bravery. Moreover, and possibly more importantly, writing as a practice holds special value for writers like Baldwin and Walker because it concedes credence to the reality that the complex forces at play which shape systems of oppression are not something which can be dismantled with a single text or even a single life. Both writers not only shifted their opinions about how to deal with racism in America over their careers, they also shifted their belief (or even faith) in what a country so dependent on its own

turmoil could possibly accomplish. This shift in perspective, which happens across time and even through different genres, cannot be marked within a single, supposedly complete, autobiographical project. Nor could the writers be affective agents of change without this change. Writing as a practice offers a framework from which we can perceive the goal of liberation not as a fixed point in history or politics, but as a progression of hopes, desires, and ideologies which will always be in concert with the needs of the current moment.

The genre of both Walker and Baldwin's texts is quite debatable. Society's love affair with Baldwin as the quintessential American essayist, which is in part a revisionist claim, encourages scholars to label his work as extended or book-length essays. Walker's text is comprised from criticism, essays, letters, and more collected from 1966-1982, and, despite its seeming incoherence, looking at the text as a whole, like a portrait in tapestry, woven together from critical moments in her life, readers are privy to her intellectual growth without the guise of a completed life. It is for both of these texts in betweenness, the ways that they both do not fit neatly into any one category that I am applying the lens of memoir with no critical investment in whether that label sticks.

Memoir functions in a liminal space, somewhere between the singular focus of the essay and the critical breadth of autobiography. Similar to the essay, it is possible to read the academy's de-legitimization of memoir¹² as a reflection of the anxiety it produces about the stability of genres as whole. Just as the essay functions, according to Junker, as a "metagenre" which reveals the instability across the lines of demarcation between genre functions, so does memoir pull back the mask of authority from writers of autobiography. Memoir, to use Rak's words, "haunts the edges of autobiography discourse" because it has precisely been "evoked by

¹² It should be noted that the university's criticism of memoir, and life-writing genres as a whole has softened in the past 20 years. This is exemplified by the boom in Creative Nonfiction programs across the country, and the use of memoir by academics, like Michael Eric Dyson and bell hooks, as a creative extension of their theoretical work.

autobiography critics, only to be dismissed or marginalized in order to reassert autobiography's plentitude" (Rak 206). It is an othered genre, a spectre of truth that does not claim to be ultimate, and therefore places all other supposed ultimate truths into question.

The (un)Fashionable Reality of Revolutionary Politics

Walker's critique of the Black Arts Movement and its politics on the role of the revolutionary artist is in no way muted or coded. In her essay "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Writer Who Simply Works and Writes," first published in 1971, she writes: "Much lip service had been given the role of the revolutionary black writer but now the words must be turned into work" (Walker 133). Acknowledging the need for writers, and readers, to be "[aware] of what is Bull and what is Truth" (Walker 133), Walker is, in unsubtle terms, calling the movement to task for its fashionable poetics and empty politics. Speaking of the uselessness of labels, Walker identifies as black, but is reluctant to call herself a poet, for the reality of her craft is that she simply gives in to the "enduring impulse to write," subsequently, she is not a "revolutionary" because she "always changing and growing" (133). The subtext of this is, of course, that "revolutionaries," or at least the ones fashioned in the Post-Civil Rights, are antithetical to change. Although Black Nationalists boasted of burning down the old world to create a new one, what Walker expressed from her vantage on the periphery of the movement is the reality that change, real change, is about learning from the past, not vilifying and ignoring it.

The image of the masculinist Black Nationalist is embodied by one young man in Walker's memory who, as her student, refused to read Faulkner, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, or Ernest Gaines because none of the men fit into his myopic understanding of

revolutionary writers. “His problem,” she writes, “was that the revolutionary rhetoric...had convinced him of his own black perfection...but it had not taught him how to read” (Walker 135). This telling observation is in fact a warning about the septic nature of black masculinist rhetoric. Preoccupied with the imagery of his own heroism, the student, who unlike some of his ancestors had open access to education, refused to investigate the world around him and instead demanded that Walker, as the teacher, reprioritize the critical nature of her pedagogy to fit around his inflated ego.

Walker, as a writer and activist, reminds her readers that “the real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff” (Walker 135), thus changing the scope of liberatory politics from the grandiose to the quotidian. Cheryl Butler, asserts that Walker’s vision of a “true artist” is one who “sees wonder in the mundane” which “becomes beautiful when it is complicated from a new perspective” (C. Butler 92). According to Butler, Walker, whose ideas about artistry are in direct conflict with writers like Larry Neal, warns of the “destruction” that occurs when “the creative self becomes consumed with the power of [his or her] own work...blind to the gifts of tradition...[and] the living culture” (C. Butler 93). In rejecting the “glamour” of Black Nationalist tropes in favor of a life which places intellectualism and individuality before a specific set of politics, Walker not only offers a new way for writers to think about their lives in the movement, but in society as a whole.

Baldwin’s relationship to the question of revolutionary thought is not as forthright as Walker’s decidedly blunt critique of Black Nationalist ideology. As a public figure, Baldwin struggled with his very public role in the Civil Rights Movement where he spent time covering King and the SNCC in the South during the 1960’s. While many, especially eager, white liberal readers, labeled him as an integrationist, Baldwin’s politics were more complex than his critics

understood, and, more importantly, he was always conscious and aware of the limitations of American leaders. Refuting the classically problematic argument of “reverse racism,” a title he remembers was often applied to Malcolm X, Baldwin writes that the “powerless...can never be ‘racists,’ for they can never make the world pay for what they feel or fear except by the suicidal endeavor which makes them fanatics or revolutionaries, or both” (Baldwin 91). The equating of fanaticism to revolution reflects much of Baldwin’s critique of Black Nationalist posturing: Baldwin seems to suggest that, if you are black, regardless of what you call yourself, white society, those in power, will always have another name for you.

While Walker rightfully criticizes her unnamed male student for allowing the fantasy of revolution to seduce him and therefore “stunt” his growth (Walker 135), Baldwin deconstructs the very essence of revolution, the idea that one can, in some form or another, attack a system of oppression which is constantly adapting. If, in fact, the “powerless...do their own dirty work’ and “the powerful have it done for them” (Baldwin 94) then the burden of exhaustion is placed on those who are constantly asked to labor. Meditating on the assassination of Malcolm X, Baldwin clarifies his language, which was taken out of context in the British press, and asserts that the bullet which tore through X’s body and killed that “gentle” man (Baldwin 94) was orchestrated by “the most successful conspiracy theory in the world...white supremacy (Baldwin 118). The naming of “white supremacy” here is a summoning of sorts, one which begs that collective acknowledgement of racism’s coded, embedded, and systemic nature by those who bury it under the liberal fantasy of an outlier culture. Baldwin’s language surrounding conspiracy is evocative because it comes from a deeply internalized knowledge of mourning based on his experiences as a black man and public figure in the Civil Rights Movement: in what was once a search for the promised land, he has only found a wasteland. Baldwin, whose imagination “kicks like a stalled

motor” (Baldwin 120) when faced with the task of facing the death of an icon, and a friend, is not afforded the luxury of debating the nuances of revolutionary rhetoric; he is too tired from burying the dead.

Exhaustion is an important theme in both Walker and Baldwin’s texts, as the imagery and tone communicate that they are two weary souls. This theme is, especially prominent in Walker’s later writings. They both worked as activists during the Civil Rights Movement, and subsequently saw the decline of the ideology, primarily preached by the Baptist Church, which championed non-violent protest. Writing from the 1970’s and beyond, they were privy to the immense criticism which Black Nationalists and the Black Arts Movement hurled at black leaders¹³ who these writers had once deeply loved. As writers who have seen their share of racial turmoil, their texts reflect an attempt to reevaluate the investment of their labor, which they so freely gave to the cause of Civil Rights in the 1960’s, in order to preserve themselves for the changing tide of Post-Civil Rights politics. The title of Walker’s 1967 essay “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” articulates what many were thinking towards the end of the 1960’s. For Walker, Dr. King’s passion and drive inspired her to see a world outside of that framed by the “battered and overpriced tv” that projected her mother’s “stories” which constantly paraded the “beautiful white people” (Walker 123) who her mother desired, in vain, to become. It was not until the “Civil Rights Movement came into [Walker’s] life” through that same tv, with the face of Dr. Martin Luther King shining like “a good omen for the future” (Walker 124) that she decided life was worth living.

In 1967, Walker was an avid defender of King and his politics. When many were calling King’s notion of non-violent protest antiquated and ineffective, Walker was, in that moment,

¹³ Most notably, figures like Huey Newton and Eldrige Cleaver were avid critics of King’s ideology in the years preceding his assassination. Stokely Carmichael, who worked closely with King as the leader of the SNCC also publicly criticized the Civil Rights leader’s refusal to acknowledge the need for armed resistance.

claiming its survival in the lives of the children it inspired. She argued that these “blameless hostages” deserved a world where they did not have to worry about the “anxiety and dread” of a society that rejects them and does not feed their hunger for a “knowledge of living” that will save them from an “innocuous life that resembles death” (Walker 120-122). This is, of course, an early expression of her feelings about King when the transition from the Civil Rights to the Post-Civil Rights was still murky. In 1967, Walker believed that she would watch her hero grow old. An important aspect of *Gardens* as a collection is its ability to show the political arc which Walker developed through her career.

Walker’s girlish nostalgia for King in the late 1960’s is almost completely eradicated by the 1970’s, where her focus on the survival and thriving of black women forced her to confront his limitations as a man and a leader. Karen F. Stein, who analyzed Walker’s 1976 novel *Meridian*, discusses the ways in which the politics of the Civil Rights Movement haunted much of Walker’s writing, especially after the assassination of Dr. King. According to Stein, Walker wrote with “reserved approval” of King (Stein 129) in 1967 but, by the mid to late 1970’s, was very open about the patriarchal politics which plagued, and ultimately failed black women activists. Stein connects *Meridian*, which frequently uses images of women’s bodies, including the protagonist’s, lain prostrate or even dead, to the greater culture of the 1950’s and 1960’s where in “society kills the feeling self” and “activists merely turned political rhetoric to their ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality” (Stein 130). Although Walker eventually became critical of Dr. King, she was still in awe of his “revolutionary philosophy,” which she describes as so “complex...that few people are capable of understanding it full or having the patience to embody [it]” (Walker 182) This was, according to Walker, a “weakness”

of the black body politic. Walker's critique of King, especially by 1976,¹⁴ creates a comfortable distance between the very flawed man, and his very important legacy, albeit with some small acts of equivocation on her part. Regardless, if we observe that part of the central "dilemma" of the Civil Rights Era was that as "the movement which sought to break down social barriers" they also inadvertently "opened up" a society that often proved to be an ugly one" (Stein 131) then we can see how Walker, like Baldwin sought to uncover that society in their writing, underneath the veil of liberal progress, no matter how ugly it proved to be. Some of the most haunting work in Baldwin's text, and ironically the most hopeful in Walker's, takes place in the American South. Therefore, to foreground my examination of trauma and black mourning across both of their texts, I will examine how this region, which was ground zero for revolution in the 1950's and early 1960's, became, in part, the burial ground for black hope in the Post-Civil Rights Era.

The Ass-Pocket of America: Blackness and the South

For Walker, the "history" of black folks in the South is that of "dispossession" (Walker 142). Black Southerners, historically either "worked the land, but...never owned it," or constantly suffered from the fear of the land being "taken away" (Walker 142). While they were not completely desolate, they were rich, instead, with "[treasured] memories" (Walker 142) of a strong and supportive community in a distant homeland which, by the 1970's, had long since suffered a mass, black exodus. While Walker is clear to assert that she is not "nostalgic...for lost poverty," she does admit to being "nostalgic for the solidarity" produced by "a modest existence" (Walker 16). This "modest existence" for blacks in the South is sometimes

¹⁴ In her essay "Lulls," Walker finally addresses King's adultery, acknowledging that the black community had for a long time heard rumor of him having "Super-fly" sex with unknown women in bathtubs. She also states that these affairs were essentially forgiven based on the "character assassination" that the American government had tried to enact on the Civil Rights leader.

represented with nobility, as in her memories of the older, sometimes traditionally uneducated black women whom Walker held writing workshops for. It is also echoed as a muffled rage, especially in regards to memories of navigating the unjust racial and fiscal politics of sharecropping, an enterprise which preyed on the economic vulnerability of black families. Her observation that black Southern writers have a “history of love and hate” and an “enormous richness and beauty to draw from” (Walker 21) could be applicable to all the African American diaspora. However, while returning to the South for Walker was a decision based on her fulfilling a lifelong desire to return to her roots, that same landscape is described in more terrifying terms in Baldwin’s text. Baldwin and Walker’s depictions of the South function as emotional negatives of each other, displaying the same physical landscape with eerie differences. This invites the question of whether the South is in fact a homeland for African Americans, or a burial ground?

In *Gardens*, Walker offers her criticism of many writers, both black and white. In her piece entitled “Saving the Life that is Your Own” she claims that black and white writers are not in opposition, but are in fact “writing one immense story” based on a “multitude of different perspectives” (Walker 5) that extend from different literary traditions. For Walker, the South is home to her literary mentors, from William Faulkner, to Flannery O’Connor, and of course, the figure who was closest to her heart, Zora Neale Hurston. Walker returned to the South to work and to write, and in that time she was able to “[gather] up the historical and psychological threads” of her ancestors and “consult” with “ancient spirits” (Walker 13). Comparing the titular essay in *Gardens* and “Beyond the Peacock,” the two essays which both feature Walker’s mother, we are able to unpack the ways the South functioned as a space capable of cultivating

the passions of black women's labor, while also being troubled by the lingering stench of antebellum slave ideology.

In "Beyond the Peacock," Walker describes a trip with her mother to visit Flannery O'Connor's house, located in Milledgeville, Georgia, some 20 minutes away from Walker's own childhood home in Putnam County. Deciding to visit their own home first, the Walker women discover a dilapidated and condemned shack where their house had been. Regardless of this disappointment, Walker gives much praise to the landscape around the house, as the women "walk through pines rich with vines...and wild azaleas showing flashes of orange" (Walker 43). Nature attacks all the senses as she details that "sweet scent of peanut hay" surrounded by a "grove of pecans" (Walker 44) and most importantly, Mrs. Walker's daffodils. Despite having been planted decades ago, the daffodils are alive and thriving, having taken on a life of their own while the house, which was once so valued, has decayed and diminished. Walker's parents, who were both sharecroppers, invested endless time into working the land (Mrs. Walker still holds a grievance over an unpaid crop in 1952), all to earn money to rent a house they could never own. That nature takes over this space vis a vis the proliferation of Mrs. Walker's daffodils is deeply ironic. The flowers, a sign of Mrs. Walker's passion and labor, cut through the hurt and frustration her daughter; O'Connor's house, only minutes away, was empty and perfectly maintained, while their home had been long abandoned.

Walker describes her mother as a woman who balked at the supposed authority of man-made "fences," save for the ominous "religious" ones which the two women choose "not to discuss," electing instead to encounter the world seeing only the parts of the landscape that were her own (Walker 43). Laurie McMillan notes the recurring themes of houses, gardens, and motherhood across most of Walker's text. She argues that "houses also symbolize literary roots

and traditions” while “the mother points to literary precursors” and “flowers or gardens represent an idealized field of African American women’s literary heritage;” all of these work together to express a “diverse project of literary recuperation and growth” (McMillan 117). In front of this “sad” house, surrounded by “hills, green pastures, [and] a ring of bright trees” stand the two Walker women, both of them “remembering” (Walker 44). For the daughter, there is only “misery” in her memories which take her back to the former prison which served as her segregated school, where the imprint of a circular electric chair was still visible on the floor (Walker 44). As readers, we are not privy to Mrs. Walker’s thoughts. All that we have access to are the daffodils, which, after all of this time, refuse to die. The tension between the crumbling house and flourishing garden points to the conflict of the southern landscape in Walker’s writing. It is a space that holds a legacy of black survival, but also systemic repression.

Although Walker claims that she does not “romanticize” (Walker 21) the South, the writing in *Gardens* which focuses on her mother does reveal among the beautiful description of the plant life, the suffocating reality of Southern culture that black women have historically endured. McMillan highlights the performative nature of Walker’s nonfiction which “encourages readers to interpret Walker’s writing on multiple levels...effectively bringing the personal voice into criticism without falling into traps of essentialism” (McMillan 107-108). While McMillan acknowledges that personal writing can be alienating for readers who are politically and culturally different from the author, she argues that Walker’s style does not claim to make totalizing claims about the experiences of black women, but instead offers Walker’s own perspective, as a way to make readers question what they believe they already know.

Walker’s nonfiction is always playing with the lines between life-writing and criticism. The essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” begins as a critique of Jean Toomer’s early

modern, multi-genre, and highly experimental 1923 text *Cane*, aiming to deconstruct his examination of black women in the Depression Era South. Walker writes, that Toomer's "curious discovery" while researching for his novel was that of black women "whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they...stumbled through their lives [as] creatures so abused and mutilated in body...[considering] themselves unworthy even of hope" (Walker 232). Of Toomer's depiction of women in *Cane* W.E.B. Dubois and Alain Locke wrote that the author "painted" them with a "certain splendid [and] careless truth" (Qtd. in Williams 88). Jennifer D. Williams writes of *Cane* that "acts of sexual union...are marked again and again by traumatic history," played out on the black female body which acts as a peculiar "landscape" (Williams 88) which both embodies and reveals the lingering specter of slavery. That the black woman was the procreator of enslaved children, and also that she bore the brunt of the black man's oppression and her white slave master's sexual perversion, is reflected in Toomer's work as a pathology from which the only escape is mourning of and working through a terrible past.

The women of *Cane*, who were, according to Walker, as "exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey," secretly existed as artists stifled and muted in their life's purpose. In 1923, the luxury of art, of craft, of spiritual and aesthetic expression was routinely denied for black women in the impoverished south, and for this they were "driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (Walker 233). Cheryl Butler describes the "Walkerian essay" as one which "illuminates the "wakeful period," that "moment on the verge of life and death, creation and self-destruction" which in turn "reveals the sublimation of true and ugly history into art" (C. Butler 81). In truth there is much haunting in Walker's collection, especially within the painful legacy of the women of *Cane* who in many ways, function as the living dead.

Walker's illustration of the interior power of the women in *Cane* can be read as comparable to Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic. Lorde famously defines the erotic as "resource" which exists in a "deeply female and spiritual plane" which is rooted in "unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (*Sister Outsider* 53). It is from the embrace of the erotic plane, not the suppression of it, which Lorde deems as a true "strength" and "power;" the erotic, which blossoms from the depths of the "nonrational knowledge" (*Sister Outsider* 53-54) is, under the patriarchal gaze, shamed precisely because it disrupts the narratives of the masculinist phallogocentric ideology. Women are kept under systems of oppression so that their erotic power, according to Lorde, can be "psychically milked" (*Sister Outsider* 54) for the support of their male counterparts. If we accept the erotic as being derived from "the chaos of our strongest feelings" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 54) then Walker's claim that the women of *Cane* were doomed by their unexpressed creativity asserts these fictional women as exemplar of Lorde's literal warning.

Returning to the landscape, what Walker's reading of the women of *Cane* reveals in her work is an awareness of that the American South can function as an ecosystem that feeds and feeds off of black oppression. While Mrs. Walker and her beautiful flowers seem to function as a life force unto itself, they are also read as ironic given the crumbling man-made structures that connect the legacy of the South to systems of white supremacy. While Walker blesses the land and soil which has allowed her mother's creative work to flourish, she also laments the "shabby houses" which trapped her and the "greedy evil men" who took advantage of her family (Walker 21). For Walker the South is full of both imaginative potential and literal rage. As much as it hold the spirits of her ancestors, it also vibrates with the spectre of white hatred and violence.

Her ambivalent position is much softer and nourishing than Baldwin, who sees the South as a place of reckoning.

Spatiality is a strong connective thread between Walker and Baldwin's articulation of the South. Returning to the motif of gardens and houses, domestic spaces, like those of O'Connor and Walker's homes, reflect the collective investment in whiteness which is an extension of American Capitalism. The house, which acts as the material encasement of domesticity, functions differently for black and white folks in regards to their inherent right to a normative home. Black Americans have historically invested, somewhat precariously, both financially and psychologically in the idea that a properly kept house would reflect a legitimate home. The failure of this type of investment is, given the example of Walker's childhood home, one thorn among many in the majestic southern rosebush which she is pruning across her writing.

That Mrs. Walker's flowers run wild is high praise; however, the separation in Walker's essays between access to and control of inside and outside spaces within the Southern landscape. To state it more clearly, while black folks must cast seeds into the ground and pray for survival, white domestic spaces are preserved by the maintenance and care of others. Magdalena Zaborowska, who investigates Baldwin's travels to Turkey and the community he built there towards the end of his public career, illustrates a fascinating framework connecting spatiality and heterosexist systems of oppression. She argues that *No Name* "expresses...feelings of entrapment" that reveal a "spatial conundrum" which reflects how Baldwin's "larger artistic and social project on race and sexuality brings together American and international locations" (Zabrowska 201). In *No Name* the constant traversing of geographies, from American to French and even German borders, is marked by the tension of blackness in so much that, despite the freedoms of US citizenship, race always marks Baldwin as an interloper of some sort.

No Name is driven by location, from its reflections on the South, to Harlem, and even focuses on Algerian immigrants in France. The text is driven by the question of where, across the earth, can a black body find sanctuary from the constant paranoia of racism. Moreover, Baldwin's concern with the "material ways the state exerted control over urban space" (Zabrowska 205) through the ghettoization of black life in urban spaces was honed in his writing to remind his readers that "where and how we live matter" and that the "planned organization of our communities" was and is directly interpolated from a "national system of racist and heterosexist prohibitions" (Zabrowska 218). The privilege of being able to travel does not absolve Baldwin of the burden of his oppression, in contrast, the nuances of each location only highlights the varied convergence of interests different governments place in policing raced bodies. In all of Baldwin's many travels across the United States and overseas to Europe, there is a hyper-awareness of space and place which, especially in the case of *No Name*, reveals a painful irony in so much that almost all of the places black bodies has touched throughout the diaspora has in fact been shaped, brick by brick, on the oppression which they are trying to escape.

Looking back on his travels in *No Name*, Baldwin consistently hears the echoes of his past experiences with white supremacy, sometimes coded and other times explicit, across the invisible parameters of European countries, and also the public spaces which may or may not be welcoming to those of darker hues. In France, Baldwin's "green passport" asserted his identity as a "free citizen of a free country" and, momentarily, relinquished him from the status of "uncivilized [European] black possession" (Baldwin 42). However, while there, he frequented Arab cafes which mostly served Algerian immigrants. After briefly leaving and returning to France, Baldwin finds all of his old haunts abandoned, the streets filled instead with rumors of the capture, torture, and imprisonment of his former compatriots. "They were being murdered,"

Baldwin writes, “No one wished to believe any of this...but there was nothing we could do” (Baldwin 38). The cafes were now empty, the glass plate door of one, at least, if you believe the rumors, shattered by the battered body of an unnamed victim, never to be confirmed or grieved. Baldwin, upon his return to the old immigrant haunts, has no time to mourn the loss of life which surrounds him mostly by word of mouth and hearsay. This is not an unfamiliar motif in *No Name* as many different moments of loss are characterized by an inability to stop and grieve especially given the fact that black mourning is not something which is valued in the public eye. In short, Baldwin’s text becomes the only real place where he can speak the names, whether he knows them or not, of those lives lost to the grinding machinery of white supremacy.

To exist in public space is, depending on the politics of the moment, a tenuous endeavor for a body marked by oppression. In the 1950’s, the wrong doorway, however banal, was a genuine threat of violence. Segregation was not only a mere suggestion in the American South, it was a material way of interacting with both people and space. Theorist Dell Upton argues that “architecture is...a means for shaping American society...and for ‘annotating’ social actions” such as racism and homophobia (Qtd in Zabrowska 230). In Algeria, social actions were also based on citizenship and policing of immigrant bodies within the public spaces (bars and cafes) which, at one time, promised sanctuary. In the South, during Jim Crow and beyond, the split between acceptable and unacceptable places for black bodies to exist in public was also reflected in the brick and mortar designs of restaurants, courthouses, schools, neighborhoods, and more.

While Walker wrestles with a more conceptual representation of the spatial policing of blackness, representations where danger is more a psychic threat than physical, Baldwin offers consistent literal examples. Furthermore, as a gay, African-American man, his presence across so many different locations with varied perspectives on race and identity reveals an attitude which

is comparatively less hopeful than Walker, who, during her tenure as a writer in Mississippi, was protected by her heteronormative marriage.¹⁵ *No Name* looks to the South as the epicenter of racism in the American landscape, and also a more explicit microcosm of oppression worldwide, specifically by creating anxiety about the narratives of normality which center white heteronormativity as the measure of humanity.

Systems of racism are not only parallel to systems of heteronormative oppression, but entangled. Citizenship, sexuality, gender, and race are all controlled by systems and regulated by spaces which far too often are driven by Western (white), heteronormative, and patriarchal forces. Roderick Ferguson presents a sociological analysis of heteronormative constructions of sexuality which argues for a direct line between the fear of blackness and fear homosexual contamination. He asserts that “anxieties about heteropatriarchal disruption” have historically been “racialized” positioning “immigrants and U.S. born minorities as biological threats to the normative ideals that underwrote American citizenship” (*Black Queer Studies* 54). Within embedded systems which normalize white, male, and heterosexual identity, both blackness and homosexuality function as markers of difference which have historically been demonized as a means to uphold the status quo.

Therefore, in the American South, which is “spatially continent on homosexual panic” (Zabrowska 216), and racial panic I would argue, segregation functions as a physical and material separation of physical structures and a methodology of policing miscegenation and interracial contact. Subsequently this is rationalized by a “fear of blackness and the erotic” that mirrors a “fear of homosexual desire,” asserting the latter as an “unnamable and

¹⁵ To be clear, Walker was married to a white Jewish man, and often writes in her essays about the anxiety and paranoia of maintaining an interracial marriage in the 1960’s in the deep south. My point here is not to deny Walker’s own experience of non-normative relationships, but to acknowledge the privilege that her heterosexuality provided her as compared to Baldwin.

unspoken...assault on whiteness and nationhood” (Zabrowska 230). Baldwin’s outsider status is doubled, as a Northerner, hailing from Harlem, and a black man. Therefore, his perception of the landscape is one of a distant homeland, at best, if not also a space of exile. At the center of this perspective, in which space becomes a palimpsest for both public expressions of oppression and the private grieving of one’s agency, Baldwin asserts his vision of the South, from the reflections of his younger self, pen in hand, inspired by the hope to do some good for the cause.

Despite Baldwin’s struggles, he asserts his awe for black men in the South whom he described as “heroic” (Baldwin 66). Echoing Walker’s own perspective on revolutionary work being quotidian, Baldwin writes that “their heroism was to be found less in large things than in small ones, less in public than in private” (Baldwin 66). His assertion that existing within a Southern community demanded an investigation into “what a man is, should do, or become” extends from the Southern activist’s vocal desire to be “responsible for the world” by acting as a “sentient force” for social and political change (Baldwin 65). While the people were beautiful in Baldwin’s view, the landscape itself was not. It is the “Deep South” which houses a “vast brooding” constructed of “bloodstained land...beautiful enough to astonish and break the heart” (Baldwin 68). He claims, somewhat unconvincingly, that he “felt very much at home among the dark people” who resided there, despite the realization that “some of them looked on [him] with an inevitable suspicion” (Baldwin 70). While Walker freely welcomes the South as her homeland, Baldwin accepts it as such only under the confession that such a thought was as much “illusion” as “truth” (Baldwin 70). There is subtext in his meditation: the reader is aware that there is, despite his careful language, an impending doom.

In contrast to the his experiences in New York and abroad, Baldwin discovers that the South is marked by “[treacherous] racial dividing lines” (Baldwin 71) which he unknowingly

crosses, and unwittingly enters a segregated café. Upon entering through the “Whites Only” entrance, the subsequent white patrons look at Baldwin and, viewing him, this “[devastating] messenger of death,” they freeze in both shock and disgust (Baldwin 71). The white characters he interacts with in this scene are purposefully dehumanized, one woman with “a face like a rusty hatchet and eyes like two rusty nails...left over from the crucifixion” (Baldwin 72). The white man who escorts Baldwin to his “proper” place is thusly described as the “[kindest]...guide in hell” (Baldwin 72). All the biblical references and imagery here express (other than Baldwin’s love of *Dante’s Inferno*) an embracing of the irony of Christian values the South espouses in evident contradiction to their racist ideologies.

Although Baldwin was not completely ignorant¹⁶ of the spatial politics of segregation, this scene, with all of its subtlety, functions as the climax of his remembrances of the South because, in all that is not spoken, in all that is risked and not lost, he is showing how the violence of racism permeates the simplest of exchange in an atmosphere which breeds white hatred and white violence like a cash crop. To return to the central question of whether the South serves as a homeland or burial ground for blacks, both Baldwin and Walker offer different experiences which leave the reader responsible to examine that question for themselves. Walker, so deeply concerned with the preservation of heritage and the construction of a historical lineage of black artistry, welcomes the South, rattling loudly with all its ghosts, with wide open arms. For her, it is as equally nebulous to think that one can take the South without accepting the good and bad, as it is to think that you can ever really deny where you come from.

What is most important to Baldwin, especially writing from the Post-Civil Rights Era, and reflecting on the past, is that readers understand the legacy of the South in the struggle for

¹⁶ See the cafe scene after Baldwin’s father’s death in *Notes of a Native Son* where the author describes a much more violent reaction to being refused serviced by a white server.

freedom. Twice he frames the past in terms of his present moment. Once early in the text when he remarks that “everything that New York has become, in 1971, was visibly and swiftly happening in 1952” (Baldwin 34). Later on, moving from the North to the South, he writes what had begun in Montgomery was beginning to happen all over the South” (Baldwin 78). The idea of a happening, a movement which crosses space, time and memory, bridges the gap between the end of one era and the beginning of another.

Paying the “Price:” Queering Silence and Testimony

Critics like Dwight A. McBride have claimed that Baldwin’s transparency towards his own sexuality became more common towards the end of his public career. While some early, lesser-read essays did deal with homosexual relationships, most scholars point to Baldwin’s fiction, like *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) or *Another Country* (1962) as the basis for a queer reading of his work. Baldwin himself was not, especially by today’s terms, an “out” gay writer.¹⁷ While he never denied his identity as a man who loved men, he also pushed against labels such as “gay” and homosexual, defending his right to privacy in a prying world.

During Baldwin’s travels in the South, a place whose problematic Christian values depend on both the fear and demonization of homosexuality, he is sexually accosted by a closeted white man. The most explicit scene in the text, Baldwin describes the “unbelieving shock” of being “groped by one of the most powerful men” in the South: “He had gotten himself sweating drunk in order to arrive at his despairing titillation. With his wet eyes staring up at my face, and his wet hands groping for my cock, we were both, abruptly, in history’s ass-pocket” (Baldwin 61). Zabrowska reads this exchange as a direct reflection of the master/slave ideology

¹⁷ Walker is also viewed by many as a queer black writer, having most notably maintained a brief romance with singer Tracy Chapman in the 1990’s. Despite dedicating an entire section of *Gardens* in defense of black lesbian women writers, she only explicitly claims her heterosexual marriage in that specific text.

perpetuated during antebellum slavery wherein the unnamed man attempts a “private white attempt at sexual violation of Baldwin’s public black male body” which reveals the “psychosexual secret behind whiteness and patriarchal masculinity” (Zabrowska 225-226). Baldwin’s own observation confirms this reading as he argues that the unnamed “powerful” man’s “frightening...gesture” was based on the unwavering assumption that Baldwin’s “[black] identity was defined by the man’s [white] power” reducing Baldwin’s “humanity to be placed at the service of [the man’s] fantasies” (Baldwin 61). Despite his education, his talents, and relative privilege as compared to other black folks in the South, Baldwin realizes that under the gaze of white patriarchy, he is nothing more than a walking phallus.

Returning to Lorde, the antithesis of the erotic is the “pornographic,” or that which emphasizes “sensation without feeling” as the antagonistic force which often shapes the proclivities of male connection to the female, or in this case male, body. The misogynistic perspective would confuse the erotic with the pornographic, once again inciting shame as a measure to police the body. What is not accounted for in this equation is the ways in which men are robbed of a genuine connection to their own desires, especially those outside of the borders of normalcy. Pornographic is quite useful in describing Baldwin’s encounter with the nameless white man who groped him. This is not just because of Baldwin’s explicit description of the incident, but because, in the nameless white man, we can see the embodiment of Lorde’s assertion that “the fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful” (*Sister Outsider* 56). While this in no way absolves the man’s violation of Baldwin’s body, it does show repressive notional or normativity are harmful even for those with power and privilege.

While literary critics currently enjoy reading Walker and Baldwin as decidedly “queer” black writers, this is primarily based on the subject matter of their writing as opposed to their

own, explicit biographical experiences in the public eye. The rise in identity politics, like sexuality, as a lens for analyzing artists is among the leading reason for this. More important than the legitimacy of the author's queer identity is the way in which *Gardens* and *No Name* both highlight the ways in which homonormative oppression harms not only black queer folk, but black folks altogether. While in the first section of this thesis, I engaged Toni Cade-Bambara's imaginative call for a black androgynous vision of the future in which all could be empowered, Walker and Baldwin offer a frightening vision of their present moment, where those who labor in vain to oppress homosexuality are constantly at odds with their own desire. Moreover, in unabashedly acknowledging the active presence of queer desires across America, both writers also reveal a new way of understanding vulnerability as a source of power in the black community.

For queer folk unable to live their lives out in the open, silence is both a weapon and perpetual status. Whether closeted or not, society's investment in homonormative oppression creates a tension where things spoken out loud are viewed as threat, even if they are the truth. Zabrowska articulates the palpable silence which paints much of *No Name*, asserting that the text "targets the unspoken and unspeakable sexual experiences" (Zabrowska 224) that a gay black man might encounter across the United States or even overseas. Therefore, to use Baldwin's language, "things that are not being said" become the embodiment and reflection of many different interconnecting traumas.

Suppression, another form of silencing, is one trauma that Walker points to in her essay "Breaking Chains and Encouraging Life" wherein she discusses huge backlash against black lesbian writers by male critics, both black and white. "This bullshit must not be encouraged" (Qtd in Walker 281), one unnamed critic aggressively asserted in response to Ann Allen

Shockley's 1975 novel *Loving Her*. Walker argues that the critic's "disrespectful" language is based on the misinformed notion that black lesbian writing is "bullshit" and that "[black] lesbianism will disappear if black people refuse to 'encourage' it" (Walker 282). The anger of the unnamed black male critic is not simply about black queer women, but about black women queered by both their collective distance from white heteronormativity, and, more importantly, black women's refusal to submit to masculinity. At the center of both of these critiques, the tension between things unspoken in the world, and unspeakable things which emerge through the text, assert silence as a rhetorical device which offers a false lure of protection for the black queer subject that comes at a psychological and political cost.

That blackness and queerness are bedfellows is not a coincidence. It is a design of mainstream society's collective investment in heteronormative patriarchy. Ferguson outlines how, in response to the ways that "racial difference operated as a sign of non-heteronormativity and exclusion," sexuality was then "rendered a social construction" and also a "technology of race," which "[imagined] African American culture as the antithesis of compliance, discipline, and normativity" (*Black Queer Studies* 59). The policing of bodies through racial and sexual oppression is nothing new, or radical. What is new, and possibly radical, is the revelation that those most vocal figures who railed against black queer identity in the past, did so precisely because of their own uncomfortable proximity to queerness.

Returning to the unnamed Southern "groper" in Baldwin's text, it is surprising that despite being able to articulate an aggressive defense against the system which produced the exchange, Baldwin is quite empathetic towards the man himself. Baldwin sees the same man who could "prevent or provoke a lynching" with one phone call (Baldwin 61) with "great sorrow" (Baldwin 63). He writes, "the despair among the loveless is that they must narcotize

themselves before they can touch any human being at all...because they no longer have any way of knowing that any loveless touch is a violation” (Baldwin 63). Once again returning to Zabrowska’s articulation of the “psychosexual secret of white patriarchy,” what Baldwin sees, for the reasonable “price of [his] cock” is the revelation that despite this man’s power, he cannot have what he longs for the most, precisely because the systems in which he is invested requires the death of his supposedly problematic desires. E. Patrick Johnson offers us a framework for understanding this longing in his invocation of Judith Butler’s concept of heteronormative melancholia. Melancholia is of course a Freudian concept where in, as opposed to a healthy expression of mourning, “the unconscious and unacknowledged loss of a love-object” causes a “refusal to grieve this loss” which “becomes a part of the formation of the ego through a complex process of loss, denial, and identification” (Johnson 49). Butler asserts that homosexuality, as the “site of identification and repudiation for the heterosexual” thus becomes the “ungrieved love-object of heterosexuality” (Johnson 49). In the unnamed man’s violation of Baldwin’s body, a violation which cannot be excused on any level, what the man hopes for, even in the flexing of his white power, is an embrace he cannot speak into the world. Once again, things not said speak loudly through the text.

Baldwin’s assertion that “the unexamined life is not worth living” is quite possibly the most enduring lesson he leaves with his readers. It connects to the fear of the erotic as embodied by both blackness and queerness. It is a line that reminds readers that false narratives of normativity will not save them, or fulfill them. Congruent with this idea is also his argument for the “[American] failure of private life,” he observes:

I have always been struck...by an emotional poverty [in America] so bottomless, and a terror of... human touch, so deep, that virtually no American appears able to achieve any

viable, organic connection between his public stance and his private life...The failure of the private life in America has always had the most devastating effect on American public conduct, and on black-white relations. If Americans were not so terrified of their private selves, they would have never needed to invent...‘the negro problem.’ [That] which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, had made them criminals and monsters. (54)

Baldwin’s language here is both cunning and biting. The description of human connection as synthetic as opposed to “organic” points to the fabrication of whiteness, which is an identity forged out of negation. The “terror” that white American fear is, similarly synthetic, of their own making; what they fear most is not just the “monsters” that they have become, but ostensibly, have always been. Unpacking this argument, Baldwin is asserting towards white Americans what black Americans have known for centuries: the death they have designed for others will, in fact, be the end of them. The same argument could be made with “negro problem” exchanged for “queer,” “gender,” or “immigrant” problem. The private life is not only about domestic or private spaces, but also a psycho-spiritual interiority. Therefore, the failure of the “unexamined life” and the “private life” reflects the stagnant decay which takes place among a people, both black and white, who refute their true selves for the false “protection” of the status quo.

The failure of the unexamined life also allows to view memoir writing or writing as a continual practice, as an answer to the anxiety and self-deprecation of sexual repression. Baldwin, while writing from a vantage of some 30 years, is not offering his observation as a totalizing framework, but instead as a way of questioning the world around him so that he can learn from it and learn how to navigate it. While the autobiographical subject has supposedly eclipsed their best days, writing instead from the deepest moment or reflection, the liminality of

memoir allows us to read Baldwin, and his investigation of the darkest spaces of the American mind, with the understanding that he is still searching for answers which he knows he might never find.

Moving from Baldwin's text to his life, the tenuous exchange which he shared with Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver places the argument against the unexamined life in literal context. While Baldwin was both criticized by and critical of the Black Panther Party politics, he respected them for what they inspired in the imagination of black people. "The Black Panthers," Baldwin writes, "made themselves visible, made themselves targets" and set themselves "in opposition to that force which uses people as things and grinds down...[the oppressed] into an unrecognizable powder" (Baldwin 170). Similar to Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement, Baldwin did not always agree with the methods, but he was never one to diminish the results.

Baldwin was "impressed" by the Cleaver even while confessing that he was "not happy" with Cleaver's writings which, in Baldwin's opinion, "used [his] public [him] both naively and unjustly" and furthermore "confused [Baldwin]...with the unutterable debasement of the male" (Baldwin 171). The tension between Cleaver's accusations and Baldwin's lack of public response in the years that followed, reveals the "conflicting investments in debates on Black masculinities" (Junker 177) which were so prevalent at the time. Cleaver's attack on Baldwin, which is based on the notion black queerness is a form of racial "self-loathing" in so much as "homosexuality" is positioned as a "white disease" for black men, (Junker 173-174) not only limits the expression of black homosocial bonds, but also point to the internalization of patriarchy as a means to falsely empower heteronormativity within the movement.

In truth, despite Cleaver's homophobic attack in *Soul On Ice*, Baldwin does not offer him much space for consideration in *No Name*. The safest and most common analysis of their relationship reflects two men who simply fail to understand each other despite their communal investment in the black liberation. Johnson, however, asserts that Cleaver's antagonism towards Baldwin was, in fact based on his own suffering from repressed homosexual desires, citing a 1973 *Playboy* interview with fellow Black Panther Leader Huey P. Newton, wherein Newton states that Cleaver's attack on Baldwin was based on Cleaver's own "shaky sexual identity" (Qtd in Johnson 56). Newton, who criticized Cleaver and even claimed that he only sought out the Black Panthers as a means to engage in a "masculine kind of demonstration," revealed a story in which Baldwin and Cleaver met at a party, shortly after the publishing of Cleaver's essay "Notes of the Native Son," where Baldwin walked up to him, placed his hands around his body, and the two men engaged in a "long, passionate, French kiss" (Qtd in Johnson 56). In the interview, Newton analyzes the exchange as a "nonverbal communication" which "dramatically exposed Cleaver's internal ambivalence" (Qtd in Johnson 56). The inclusion of this anecdote, while absolutely salacious given its implications, also debunks the idea that black queer identity was a pathological disease embodied by the black, intellectual, middle class. Here, Johnson, whose text also implicates Amiri Baraka for his own possibly closeted past, points to the ways in which the attacks against black queer identity are more often than not based not on the moral fixity of heteronormativity, but the anxieties which stem from the suppression queer desire.

To be clear, I do not reference Johnson's discussion of Newton's interview to state that all male Black Nationalists were closeted homosexuals. Such a claim would be reductive. What Johnson's reading of the tension between Cleaver and Baldwin offers is the opportunity to question and assert the real problem of black homophobia: the inability for black men (and

women) to carve out a space to love one another, and themselves. Walker's "Womanist" theory offers a vision wherein the "survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female" (Walker xi) is a high priority. We are able to see through her work, and the work of Black Feminists as a whole, a radical approach to love, of the same gender, other genders, and even the self, that engenders the possibility of embrace.

For Walker, the idea of women loving women is at the heart of Womanism. Her text pays homage to the unnamed and forgotten mothers and grandmothers who have "handed down the creative spark" to generations after them, planting "the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (Walker 240). The women she looks to for guidance in her writing, including Zora Neale Hurston, Coretta Scott King, and her own mother, are all a part of a spiritual, historical, and artistic lineage she draws for herself, offering it to her readers through her words. Early on in her career, Walker admits that she did not intend to "explore the words of black women" because she "had no desire to teach them" however, in looking through the "abandoned, discredited, and maligned" prints, the restoration of which would become her life's work, she realized that she "was in need of something only [they] could provide" (Walker 9). Walker's endorsement of female centric relationships reveal the importance of black women (audaciously) loving one another as a means to heal the damage of living under systems of oppression.

Connected to this black woman centric love is also the act of self-love, specifically, black femme self-love, which Jennifer Nash sees as an inherently political act. She writes that "love is a politics of claiming...and restoring the wounded black female self" (Nash 3). The black female body is one that is typically under some form of duress and in need of care that the world cannot, or more clearly, will not, provide. This has been a reality which the world has for centuries tried

to deny and which black women have carried with them generationally as a way of knowing and moving in the world. What has combated this toxic disregard for black women has been, if anything, the ability for black women to care for one another, and at times for themselves, in the face of a society which would deem such acts as inappropriate. Inappropriate because the historical expectation of black feminine love is that it be dispersed outward and invested in the white families black women care for professionally or the black men who ask for them to take on the lion's share of emotional labor. Nash asserts that "black feminism's pleas for love" requires a "ordering of the self and transcending of the self...for remaking the self and moving beyond the limitations of self-hood" (Nash 3). In this vein, Black Feminist self-love requires both an understanding of the corporeal reality of the physical body, and also a candid belief in the limitations of the material world and the type of balm it can produce.

Walker's humorous but also problematic claim in *Gardens* that "we are all lesbians," reflects a Spartacus-like attitude that black women, regardless of their sexuality, should take up a lesbian identity as a means of protecting black queer women writers from the homophobic attacks of men. This notion is riddled with issues of privilege, especially given the fact that straight women of any race can, if stripped of all other shields, fall on their connection to patriarchy as a means of protection even if it is to their own detriment. That the black lesbian identity is a mask which straight women could put on and take off at will is also an uncomfortable sub argument in Walker's claim. Womanism is, however, not necessarily exclusive to black lesbianism; in contrast men of color are welcomed as equals, as they have always been. Nor does Womanism try to suppress it; the ability for black women to love as they please, whether emotionally, sexually, or politically contributes to asserting black women's agency. As stated earlier, while the nonfiction in *Gardens* only discusses Walker's romantic life as tied to her

heterosexual and interracial marriage, which lasted from 1967-1976, Walker's fiction reflects a clear investment in black lesbian love as a means of healing. Christopher Lewis uses Walker's fiction as the basis for his concept of "black lesbian shamelessness" which is defined as the "celebration of the fact that same-sex relationships sustain and nurture the lives of countless black women, as well as by its acceptance of vulnerability and mutual dependence as a fundamental condition of human relationships" (Lewis 159). Pointing to the wave of black lesbian writers which emerged in print culture and within the movement in the 1970, Lewis highlights how these women revealed the hypocrisy of a politics that praised the "vision of selfhood and self-love" as long as it was facilitated through "men's use of 'prone' women's bodies" (Lewis 163). Black lesbian shamelessness responds to the falsehood that being both black and queer, or even being a black woman in support of other black women outside of the need or desire of men, was simply "not a viable path to triumph" (Lewis 168) for the black community overall.

Looking briefly to Walker's fiction as a clear illustration of her literal politics within a fictional space, Lewis discusses Celie, the protagonist from *The Color Purple*, who, after years of enduring sexual, emotional, and physical abuse at the hands of black men, including her father and husband Albert, finally gains the means to leave (with the support of another black woman). She says to him "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook...but I'm here" (Qtd in Lewis 164). In this exchange, Celie, who has been physically assaulted by the hands of her husband, and psychologically wounded by the insults which the world has hurled at her, takes on the language which was meant to diminish her, and weaponizes it for her own rhetorical devices. Words like "poor," "black," and "ugly" are not just insults, they are accusations, projections of male insecurity cast onto Celie who is ultimately empowered not because she denies them, but

because she has survived them. Lewis's framework also points to the celebration of vulnerability, both emotion and physical, as a mean of strength not weakness. More importantly, it calls for a system wherein "blackness" is conceived as an "experience through which the vulnerable, inter-subjective qualities of gender, racial, and sexual identification are clearly seen" (Lewis 159). Although Celie "[speaks] from an abject and violated position... [she] models the politics of black shamelessness by embracing and valuing a social experience regarded by most facets of society as worthless" (Lewis 164). Connecting this to Nash's concept of Black Feminist Self-Love, through Celie, the women of Toomer's *Cane*, Mrs. Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and more, Walker exemplifies the audacity of black women's continued survival in the wake of racist and misogynistic violence. "I am still here" is not only a testimony, it is a critical argument against narratives which define blackness by means of sorrow and death. Most importantly it makes revolutionary the reality that what black people have and continue to do in the United States is survive.

While Baldwin and Walker, approach the question of black queer love in very different ways, both of them point to understanding vulnerability as strength, instead of a weakness, which signifies the survivability of the black body. Although Baldwin suffers a violation, his vantage on the periphery as both queer and black offers him more insight into the limitations of white patriarchy than the man who violated him. Subsequently, although Walker illustrates the pain, suffering, and loss that black women have suffered throughout American history, she also offers a lineage of a distinct black female knowledge and power which has kept black folks, male and female, for centuries. Furthermore, in highlighting the way that Walker and Baldwin's writing creates a space for the flourishing of black queer identity, we are able to understand new

capacities for love across and between racial lines which can offer a healing which the outside world has never offered.

Funeral Songs: The Post-Civil Rights Politics of Black Mourning

The assassination of Dr. King serves as a clear point of convergence for both *No Name* and *Gardens*. Baldwin and Walker both offer their own experiences of the fallen leader's funeral, and subsequently express a similar sentiment: the same bullet that tore through Dr. King's body and took his life, also shattered any remaining faith in his legacy of non-violent protest. Walker, who followed King's casket crying in both "anger and despair," was so plagued by stress that she suffered a miscarriage some four days later (Walker 148). Her loss in 1968, when she said "goodbye...in her heart" to Dr. King and was forced to say goodbye again to her unborn child, is expressed through a grief that rings in accordance with Baldwin's. At the funeral, where "the atmosphere was black with a tension indescribable" so great that it threatened to "crack" open the "heavens" itself (Baldwin 155), Baldwin declares that "something" in him which he could not articulate simply "[had] gone away" (Baldwin 9). Most of *No Name* is borne out of Baldwin's grief as his mind, that "strange and terrible vehicle," moves upon the page and through his memories, driven by both "sorrow" and "bewilderment" (Baldwin 9-10) at a loss which, despite his immense skill with words, cannot be articulated.

The last thread of this section will focus on the subject of black mourning as expressed by Baldwin and Walker over the era defining murders of black leaders which came to haunt the Post-Civil Rights Era. This discussion falls last because the elements of black mourning presented in the text permeate each author's vision of the South, and discussions of living a revolutionary life. Subsequently, this discussion directly follows my discussion of black queer

identity because I am arguing for an understanding of black mourning as a queered expression of grief against the American landscape of the Post-Civil Rights. I am not, however, asserting that mourning, which extends from the experience of queer black folks, is inherently alien or othered, in truth, black American have centuries of practice in regards to weeping for the dead. Rather I contend that, under systems of racism and heteronormative patriarchy which fail to recognize black people as *grievable subjects*, to borrow from Judith Butler. Therefore, expressions of black mourning and black grief, which are a reflection of black love (including intra-gendered, self, and same sex love), are not inclusive or natural to those systems which feed from racialized subjection. In short, if black love is abnormal under systems of oppression, so then, is black mourning.

The connection between blackness and queer identity has been explored by such scholars as Kathryn Boyd Stockton, Roderick Ferguson, and E. Patrick Johnson. Derek Scott's 2010 study *Extravagant Abjection* offers us a clear pathway to understanding black mourning as a queered expression as he unpacks the complicated history of black culture and through the lens of "abjection" which positions blackness as a perpetual cultural deviance and socio-political lack. Scott claims that the examination of "queer blackness" offers insight into how the "history that produces blackness is a sexual history" that functions by "state-sanctioned, population-level manipulation" (8). As both Ferguson and Johnson would agree, it is the fear of this sexuality, which is directly linked to the fear of blackness, which aims to suppress a "certain kind of queer freedom," through both "physical and psychic domination," that is exemplified by the black body (Scott 8). Scott argues that the "abjection" of blackness in fact "endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive power...found at the point of apparent erasure of ego-protections" like heteronormative gender norms—a power which he, coincidentally, asserts is a new way to

conceive of “black power” (Scott 9). Similarly, in my articulation of queer mourning, I am arguing that there is a key form of agency in explicit and unapologetic expressions of grief surrounding the loss of black life within a system which deems such loss as insignificant.

As discussed earlier, Walker’s aesthetic throughout *Gardens* is dependent on a psycho-spiritual language which aligns her writing craft with both her familial and literary ancestors. Much of this is framed by the landscape of the South, where she explored the “antebellum homes...with their spacious rooms...grand staircases...shaded back windows” and “thickly planted trees that [looked] out onto the...vanished slave quarters” where, as she so poignantly states, “History is caught” (Walker 47). The presence of black death and suffering is scattered across her meditations of the South, often focused on the specific experiences of black women like that of the Toomer’s *Cane*. “They forced their minds to desert their bodies,” she writes, “their striving spirits sought to rise, like frail whirlwinds from the hard red clay...when those frail whirlwinds fell...no one mourned...men lit candles to celebrate the emptiness that remained” (Walker 232). This makeshift vigil points to the silence which entombs the lives of black women throughout history. The women of *Cane* represent the generations of black women creatives and artists who remained undocumented, unstudied, and buried in obscurity. While it is the lack of mourning that drives Walker’s literary scholarship, it is in this absence that Walker also expresses her own inner turmoil in the early 1970’s.

Walker’s essay “Recording the Seasons,” which directly precedes the titular essay that pays homage to the suffering women of *Cane* and their legacy, details her struggle living in Mississippi while trying to write during the 1960’s. When she arrived there in 1966 it was pushed by the desire to “kill the fear” she carried that the deep South was a place where “black

life was terrifyingly hard [and] pitifully cheap” (Walker 224). Cheap black life, like cheap black labor, reflects a problematic rate of exchange under the economy of racism. Despite her intelligence, her affluence, and even her empathy for southern whites, Walker cannot romanticize the reality which earlier, at the sight of her childhood home, spawned memories of repression and anger: the South is a place where black dreams of empowerment and liberation, too, are costly. Further plagued by her own struggle to adapt and her deep paranoia about the safety of her white husband, Walker describes her slow descent into depression which pushed her to the depths of suicidal thoughts.

At the center of this depression was the fear that she was not doing enough, and had not sacrificed enough, for the cause of black freedom. In an annotation to the article, she clearly states that she “[cringes]” at the “inappropriateness” of people calling her an “activist” or a “veteran of the Civil Rights Movement” (Walker 225) because she knows that she has not given as much of herself as other, more prominent, leaders in the movement. This refutation is not modesty, but pure guilt, which eats at her soul and her mind while she remains isolated in Mississippi, where she is also trying to learn from a place which has only recently become “less attached to the humiliation of others” (Walker 225). Similar to the *Cane* women, Walker is left to circle the depths of her own burgeoning insanity as she is unable to find a viable outlet for her emotional undoing.

Walker’s emotional undoing was due in part to her unexpressed rage. Assigning part of her depression to the “anguish” derived from her lack of violence, Walker writes that she “fantasized [about] sneaking into various oppressors’ houses...disguised as a maid” to attack them by “dropping unplugged grenades in their laps” (Walker 225). The notion of Walker, dressed like a house servant, shrouded in the costume of her own oppression, attacking her

enemies by dropping bombs on top of their genitalia signals a desire to not only destroy their bodies, but the future generations of “oppressors.” Once again Lorde offers some insight into Walker’s invocation of anger. “Your fear of anger will teach you nothing,” Lorde warns her readers in her essay “Uses of Anger.” The bold assertion of this essay is Lorde’s declaration that she in fact embraces anger as both an *affective* and *effective* response to racism (*Sister Outsider* 124). Located somewhere between the blind pacifism of Civil Rights ideologies and the constant rhetoric of destruction which defined Black Nationalism, Lorde’s articulation is not necessarily liminal, but, I would argue, ascendant.

While Lorde suggests that fear teaches us little about ourselves, she suggests that anger may offer important insights and lessons. An investigation into the function of anger and by extension rage is necessary to understand Lorde’s arguments about the uses of anger as well as Walker’s own experience in 1960s Mississippi. The 1999 *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion* editors Tim Dalgleish and Michael Power assert that rage is simply a heightened form of anger as the latter of the two “ranges along a dimension of intensity from frustration and annoyance to rage” (Qtd. in Kim 16). This “wide tent” approach claims anger as an umbrella term which categorizes many depths of complicated affective expressions. This is one reason why terms like anger and rage are viewed as interchangeable, and also why, in multiple texts in this project, rage, despite its insinuation of emotionality unhinged, is referred to time and time again as unexpressed, muffled, or silenced. Rage can be explosive, as in the case of Baldwin’s interaction with his childhood friend in *No Name*, which we will soon examine, but rage can also slowly boil over. However, whether subtle or explicit, anger is consistently viewed by psychologists as a “negative (aversive) emotion,” but also as one that consistently “involves an active approach” as opposed to negative emotions like “sadness and fear which involve inhibition and withdrawal”

(Qtd. in Kim 16-17). In this understanding, rage in its truest form, as compared to anger, is an expression of emotion that demands both recognition of the negative stimulus which spurred it, and in many cases, a physical and bodily response.

In her 2013 book *On Anger* Sue Kim reads Lorde's work on accepting one's anger in the face of oppression, alongside the work of Black Feminist theorist bell hooks. Kim claims that the "reclamation of political anger occurred, somewhat ironically, alongside the challenges to the pathologizing of brown bodies as irrationally, pathologically angry" (Kim 49). These "challenges" are embodied by legislation such as the aforementioned Moynihan Report as well as the invasive practices engaged by state sponsored social workers as described by Joanna Clark in *The Black Woman*. Noting that the "fear and dismissal of black rage...is ubiquitous and longstanding" and furthermore that black rage not only exists "despite class and privilege" but also "because of it," we are able to view the emotional register of rage experienced by black Americans under systems of oppression is one that is simultaneously pervasive and productive, especially, as is the case with Walker and Baldwin, when it is weaponized on the page.

Kim's articulation of the dismissal of black rage is applicable to Walker's own experiences of psychic repression during her breakdown. Walker's interior rage towards the unnamed and vague people in her mind, the "Hitlers of [her] time" who "attack and murder [black] children" remains unexpressed physically only because of Walker and other black folk's refusal to "live out the desire" of their own self-sacrifice (Walker 225). Walker refuses to sacrifice her own wellbeing as society already works so hard to devalue and consume black lives. "Burdened" by the task of trying to uphold "nonviolent, pacifist philosophy in a violent, non-pacifist society," Walker suffered under the "absurdity" of trying to find life in a landscape which constantly fed itself on her (self)destruction. It is possible to read Walker's refusal of her

murderous desires as a defeat through the continual suppression of her rage. However, in looking at rage as the affective expression of anger as tied to an action, we can also view her desire to seek help as an act of self-preservation. This is act of self-care, Walker's words therefore unleash the aesthetic bullet in the direction of those forces which caused her mental torment, once again weaponizing textuality to fight her systemic demons across space and time.

Walker is not saved by the brash rhetoric of the revolutionaries who visit her during this time, but instead the care, comfort, and guidance of the black woman who served as her therapist and offered her "salvation" by helping her recognize that she was "holding [herself] responsible" (Walker 226) for the condition of black suffering. Walker's confession of her struggles with depression and her acknowledgement that is was in part based on her guilt reflects the unique status of black women's relationship to black suffering and black mourning. Since the days of slavery, black women in America have always had a precarious relationship to their children, unable to protect them from the weapons of white supremacy. Black women understand too deeply the assertion that Judith Butler makes when she says "lives are supported and maintained differently...Certain lives will be highly protected...other lives will not...even qualify as 'grievable'" (32). The ability for black women to grieve their children, as Walker had to do after she lost her unborn child following the funeral of Dr. King, or even themselves has always historically been cast as an afterthought in society.

The passion which Walker reserves for the women of *Cane*, the rage which fuels her fantasies of white destruction, and the guilt which shapes her depression about the state of black life in the 1970's, all reflect the nuances of black mourning in the Post-Civil Rights. Her time in Mississippi reflects the less attractive side of her spiritual exploration, the haunting of black death which suffocates her life. It is not just death which haunts the experience of black folks

under systems of oppression, but also but also the perpetual living with loss, the constant expectation of loss, which permeates the realm of the everyday.

Whereas Walker peppers themes of mourning throughout *Gardens*, Baldwin's text is an elegy, as was much of Baldwin's writing in the 1970's and beyond. Citing the text's opening, where Baldwin reflects on his tenuous relationship with his deceased father, as well as his meditations on the murders of Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers, Erica Edwards asserts black mourning as an "orientation" between Baldwin and his writing that focuses on his "abiding attention the fragility of black life threatened by black death" (Qtd. in Elam 152). Edwards also asserts that *No Name* aims to "tie the intimate experience of loss to the public denouncement of white supremacy" (Qtd. in Elam 156). Strong themes of "vulnerability," "grief," highlight the text's ultimate goal, which is how to "reimagine the possibilities of black living" (Qtd. in Elam 152) in the midst of so much emotional, spiritual, and physical violence against the black body.

The scenes involving Baldwin's discovery of Dr. King and Malcolm X's assassinations seem to mirror each other across the two sections of the text. Both scenes describe Baldwin in a state of relaxation and in the company of people who brought him joy. In 1965, Baldwin was out to a "really fancy [and] friendly" dinner in London with his sister and long-time assistant Gloria. In 1968, he was at a vacation house in Palm Springs, lounging by the pool with Billy Dee Williams. Each time there is a phone call that is answered, first by Baldwin's sister, and then by Baldwin himself, and in each scene there is tragedy; however what is absent in each scene is Baldwin's immediate reaction. While he remembers what he said to the British press about Malcolm, and what he *most likely* said to his guests after he got the call about Martin, there is no reflection of sorrow in his memories of these losses.

More clear and palpable for the reader are the reactions that Baldwin has for his briefly mentioned friend Gene and, more notably, for Medgar Evers. Baldwin's discovery of both of these men's deaths is paired respectively to the murders of King and X, and furthermore, they seem to hold more value as a means of expression for Baldwin in the text. This value is not, despite Evers high profile status in the Civil Rights Movement, not about his and Gene's importance to the American public, but to Baldwin himself. The way that Baldwin about these two men, it seems that the writer's ability to mourn was shaped by the fact that he was isolated in when finding out about their deaths, not physically but psychologically. While King and X's deaths were mourned publically, Baldwin's private mourning of Gene and Evers reveals the pervasiveness of his helplessness in the moment, which he attempts to rectify on the page.

Gene, one of the many "black friends" that emerge throughout *No Name*, has not been murdered, but instead took his own life "because of what he had been forced to endure at the hands of his countrymen because he was in love with a white girl" (Baldwin 118). The memory plays out quickly as Baldwin finds out from an unnamed acquaintance in a New York subway:

Did you hear what happened to Gene?

No, I cried, what happened?

He's dead. (Baldwin 118)

This brief exchange is all that takes place before the doors close and the train rolls away. Baldwin's ability to take in this information is interrupted by both the urgency of the "hurrying man" who shares the news, as well as the impending threat of the trains' schedule. Neither the arrival or departures of the subways grant empathy to this moment because they, as most systems are a part of a greater system which is not beholden to one shocked and grieving writer. Gene and Malcolm X are, in the scope of this text, two halves of a single memory of death. Gene's

death, while technically a suicide, is, according to Baldwin, the fault of a society that would not accept him, that forced the standards of white supremacy and then tortured him when he was seduced by them. There is also double meaning in Baldwin's use of the verb "cried" which, given the lack of detail offered by the acquaintance on the subway platform, is most likely synonymous with a raised voice. However, with no time to process Malcolm or Gene's death in the moment, his silenced "cry" from the train is all that Baldwin offers the readers.

The insertion of Baldwin's meditation on the death of his friend Gene reveals how Baldwin's text offer a key intervention in regards to the importance of black mourning as both a public and private act. While black death under systems of white supremacy is seen as quotidian, open and explicit expressions of grief over the loss of black life has been historically reserved for unthinkable acts of racial brutality like the public assassinations of Dr. King and Malcolm X. Outside of political leadership moments of public mourning are also reserved for the murders of black youth such as Emmett Till or Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair—the four young women who lost their lives in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. Baldwin, like many other writers, locate personal memories within these mass public expressions of grief, however in *No Name* Gene represents a private moment of overt longing and mourning for a man unknown in the public eye. In him, and Baldwin's careful consideration of how he paints the tragic death of his friend, we are able to see private loss of a loved one recognized and remembered by a small few and not only the more public and spectacular moments of mourning public figures.

Even Baldwin does not remember much of the evening in Palm Springs, he notes that did in fact shed real tears for King. In fact it was a "weeping," provoked by the "helpless rage and

sorrow” that none of his house guests could comfort. Once again, the remembrance of one death is directly followed by another, this time Medgar Evers who Baldwin discovers has been killed from a radio broadcast while in working and playing in Puerto Rico with friends. This time Baldwin musters the declaration “That’s a friend of mine!” but all of it falls on deaf ears of the other passengers in the car who do not know “who [Evers] was or what he meant” to the silently grieving artist. The stakes of his death are untranslatable, just like the faces of his wife and young children flashing through Baldwin’s mind; just like the image of Evers “bright, blunt, [and] handsome” face draped in “weariness which he wore like his skin;” and finally, like the sound of the slain man’s distant voice, cutting through time and memory, telling Baldwin that “the tatters of clothes from lynched bodies [can hang], flapping in the tree for days” (Baldwin 154). While Evers has been at rest for some time, the emotionally exhausted Baldwin is still working through deaths that have haunted him since the 1950’s. Some seven years after his death Evers still hangs above Baldwin, tattered and torn, just out of reach. “Medgar. Gone.” Two words are all the writer has to lament his friend, the first of three heroes to die, and the last to be unearthed on the page.

The image and description of Evers face is one of many illustrations of the black body which Baldwin uses to shape the emotional register of his more painful memories. Baldwin’s memories are presented, as Carter Mathes writes, as “photographic negatives” that reveal “ghostly, haunting traces, and vestiges of meaning a presence in the faintest, yet most compelling outlines” (Mathes 593). These vignettes of black mourning across *No Name* flash frames of Ever’s face, of King’s voice, and even X’s cunning personality, are curated and hung on the walls of the text like an exhibition wherein the spectators are looking at both Baldwin’s fragmented memories and themselves. This notion of looking is vital to unpacking Baldwin’s

expressions of black mourning as it highlights the constant state of rhetorical doubletake he engages within in his writing: Baldwin, the writer and tired activist looking backwards at himself, while, the readers, hungry for answers to questions still lingering, look directly at him.

Early in the *No Name*, Baldwin offers another memory, an exchange between him and another old unnamed friend, who calls asking for the suit which Baldwin wore to Dr. King's funeral. The writer, having declared in an interview "somewhat melodramatically" that he could not wear it anymore because it was "drenched in the blood of all the crimes of [his] country" (Baldwin 14). Baldwin agrees to give it away, justifying that in truth, the suit, like Dr. King, belonged more to his friend than him. "Martin was dead," Baldwin writes, "but he was living, [and] he need a suit," nor could his friend afford the "elegant despair" which the then comparative wealthy writer had bragged about so freely in the press. Here, sharing a similar guilt as was articulated by Walker, Baldwin feels responsible for his old friend because he feels responsible for all of black suffering which is also feels, but does not think he is entitled to express.

After a long dinner where, and a few whiskeys, a small debate over international politics becomes a full blown argument where Baldwin calls his childhood friend a "motherfucker" and threatens to "kick [him] in the ass" (Baldwin 20). The paragraph ends and the next sentence which breaks the tension of Baldwin's threat is simply: "He looked at me" (Baldwin 20). In this looking, of Baldwin towards his friend, and of his friend (and his friend's hurt wife) back onto Baldwin, there is a moment when the writer understands completely what he feared by coming to drop off the suit in person. While Baldwin's fear was that they would see him as an "aging, lonely, unspeakably erratic freak" (Baldwin 18) the more painful reality is that they see him as

some worse: a stranger and interloper no longer welcome in the community which shaped his formative life.

While Baldwin understands that the “bloody suit was their suit,” their inheritance, as “they had created Martin” (Baldwin 21) in the image of their American aspiration instead of the reality of his beliefs. He sees that the “distance” that separates him from his friend, and, by the 1970’s, from greater black body politic that either loved or despised him, was that he understood that the prayers they had sent out into the world for a better home, a new car, and a clean, dark, suit would not be enough to save inevitable pain of knowing that money does not quell the pain of suffering under the systemic bootheel of oppression.

The process of looking engaged between Baldwin and his friend was both tense and complicated. Courtney R. Baker, who investigates in her work the visual processes which historically surround the black body, offers her concept of “humane insight” which values looking as an empowering process and argues for a visual analysis imbued with the necessary “flexibility” to develop “more ethical human interactions” (Baker 1-2). Therefore under the call of human insight, “the onlooker’s ethics are addressed by the spectacle of others embodies suffering;” it is a “benevolent eye” which “recognizes violations of human dignity” and more importantly “articulates the desire for actual protection” (Baker 15). Baker’s framework is an alternative to the gaze, which, that “dangerous look” that too often “immobilizes its human objects in webs of racism [and] sexism” (Baker 1-2) leaving both subject and spectator without agency. It echoes Judith Butler’s claim that “when we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are... Instead in the asking, in the petition, we have become something new” (J. Butler 44). Therefore in looking at Baldwin looking at himself, in observing the ways in which he was unable to wail and moan at the

immense loss he has suffered since accepting the fight for black liberation some almost 20 years before writing this book, the reader is able to engage with a process in which his mourning is no longer subdued or coded in silence. We are able to see in him not what he was, but what he had become in the Post-Civil Rights, a moirologist for black life.

Mourning is a peculiar task that African Americans have historically been burdened with since our entrance into this country. While all people mourn, the constant threat of death which has characterized black American life during slavery and Jim Crow still shapes the experience of blackness in America today. Black mourning, then, is a unique process wherein grief, which is a natural expression of the human experience, is always set against rhetoric and attitudes aimed to disavow black life (of all genders and sexualities) through community driven or state-sanctioned violence and duress. Plainly stated, black mourning is a strange affair when black life is not valued. To echo the words of Claudia Rankine, “the condition of black life is one of mourning”¹⁸ which is not just a reality when we have to bury our own. Black folks across the country have been mourning the failures of the United States for centuries, offering practices of silences and of wailing, of suffering and fighting back. Walker and Baldwin are unique in their place within the literary canon. They are two black writers whose works, fiction and non, have permeated syllabi across the country which often have little to do with African American History or Literature. In their lifetimes they have been caught up in many battles, with contemporaries and critics, and called to task for their unbending will to create art as they deemed fit.

Looking to them in an investigation of the Post-Civil Rights is important because they are two writers who simultaneously continued to be deeply invested in the cause of black liberation

¹⁸ This is the title of an essay she wrote for *The New York Times* in 2015 after the white domestic terrorist attack against nine black church members in Charleston, SC.

during the 1970's and beyond, while also not fetishizing the past. They reflect the intellectual goal of memoir, to approach writing as a practice of a life in progress, as opposed to one (falsely) fully lived. In looking at the ways Walker's politics changed from 1962 through the 1970's and early 1980's, and also to comparing *No Name* to Baldwin's earlier nonfiction, we are able to, through their eyes, the change in attitudes which signal the death of the old, the birth of the new.

III. A New Spelling of Our Names:
Black Feminist Autobiography and the Praxis of Black Survival

To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?
-Audre Lorde, *Zami*

In *No Name*, Baldwin writes that he carries in his wallet a photo of Angela Davis, who is in prison and awaiting trial during the time he was writing. Davis, as an activist in the Black Liberation Movement, along with Black Panther Party Leaders Eldridge Cleaver and Huey P. Newton, hold a special place in the Baldwin's heart as they represent to him the new generation of revolutionaries. In 1971, one-year shy of the publication of *No Name*, Baldwin wrote an open letter to his dear "sister" Angela for *If They Come in the Morning*, an anthology of political writings and statements from the self-proclaimed "political prisoners" of the movement like Newton, George Jackson, and Bobby Seale. Much of the language in Baldwin's letter is very reminiscent of his 1972 text, specifically his somewhat despondent language surrounding the impossible task of responding to systems of racism so deeply embedded into the American landscape. In Baldwin's eyes, Davis's imprisonment was not only a reflection of a specific moment of injustice, but also of a greater legacy of black subjugation to which she was the latest victim.

In the introduction of *If They Come in the Morning*, Baldwin acknowledges the tenuous nature of placing his voice at the forefront of such a "revolutionary" text, especially given that the perception Black Liberation leaders had of him, and other activists raised under Civil Rights Era ideologies who were, according to George Jackson, not "healthy" for the cause (*Morning* 14). Yet, he still writes openly and publically to "sister" Angela, keeping her photo as a reminder of her imprisonment, this woman who is the face of an "enormous revolution in Black

consciousness” that had the power to either be the “beginning or the end of America” (*Morning* 17). He not only writes to her, he writes for her. He writes to free her so that she might finish the task that he and his generation could not. Furthermore, Baldwin implicates the reader, writing that “we know...we must fight for [her] life as though it were our own” (*Morning* 18). Baldwin advocates for Davis so strongly because, in living in a prison that masquerades as a Democratic nation, he believes that protecting her life is the responsibility of us all.

Baldwin’s vigorous belief in Davis and his demand that readers connect their struggle to hers reflects the impact that she had as a public figure and activist in the 1970’s, a legacy which continues over 40 years later. The third and final chapter of this project looks at Davis’s canonical 1972 text *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* alongside Audre Lorde’s 1982 *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, in order to examine the role of black women’s autobiography across varying points of the Post-Civil Rights Era. While these women come from radically different geographies and their autobiographies are set in different decades, the two autobiographies still offer rich sites of convergence for a dialogue about activism, political consciousness, and the generational lessons which black women have and continue to offer society about surviving oppression.

Angela Davis grew up in a middle-class black suburbs of Alabama and established her political career largely on the West coast in the 1970’s. Audre Lorde, a child of immigrant parents, grew up in the hustle of Harlem and developed her identity as a queer woman among the whispers of McCarthyism in the 1950’s. A nuanced perspective is necessary for facilitating a dialogue between these two women’s texts. While categorized as having oppositional narratives and rhetorical purposes—Davis often read on the side of the political, and Lorde similarly heralded as a queer writer—they both reveal a great deal about the shifts in autobiography that

emerged from the Post-Civil Rights. More importantly, they both show how black women's voices reshape the ideology of black liberation as one which envisioned a future for multiple types of black love.

In considering the history of black autobiography since the days of slavery, and how these women challenged and evolved the genre, I will examine both Davis and Lorde's texts as unique expressions of life-writing that bring to light multiple points of convergence where the experiences of black women become the impetus for new theories of resistance and practices of survival that continues to be critically relevant in our current moment. As the title alludes, I will use the Freirean concept *praxis*, that which sits at the center of both reflection and action, to contextualize the knowledge gleaned and critiques developed from Davis's and Lorde's texts. In this notion, the final chapter of my project aims to continue the traditions set in place by scholars like Margo V. Perkins and Angela Ards asserting the intellectual history and legacy of black women whose autobiographies have "[deconstructed] male-centered notions of black-identity, progress, and freedom" (Ards 5-6). My interest in this last chapter is to take the subject of black autobiography, a subject whose space in the classroom continues to be dominated by male figures like Fredrick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, and Richard Wright, and illustrate the ways that these two women pushed the genre forward, breaking tradition, to show the ways that black women could use their lives as a model for political, aesthetic, and spiritual uplift.

In this final chapter I will examine autobiography through the lens of genre, particularly through Davis's application of her own concept of "political autobiography," of which Margo V. Perkins offers a stellar analysis, and also Lorde's own construction of the "biomythography," which blended biography and mythology as a means to create a more comprehensive space for her queer identity on the page. I will also expand on the concept of the "political prisoner," an

identity more readily applicable to Davis, but is also challenged and expanded through Lorde's experiences as a black lesbian woman in New York's queer underground. To accomplish this I offer an analysis of spatiality through the concepts of entrapment and containment, to demonstrate that Lorde's childhood and teen years in New York are also characteristic of the figure of the "political prisoner," this questioning the differentiation between material imprisonment, and being a prisoner within systems of oppression. In relation to my analysis of spatiality, I will utilize the theoretic framework both of captivity and fugitivity, which looks at the ways in which black bodies are trapped by material and psychological forces of oppression respectively, and how subsequently black bodies remain *on the run* from those forces even in the most mundane of spaces. Examining captivity and fugitivity, I aim to unpack different types of violation which have been historically enacted on black women's bodies.

Returning to the notion of trauma and mourning established the second chapter of this project, I will examine Davis's tumultuous political and personal relationship with activist George Jackson during their respective incarcerations — wherein Jackson was murdered before Davis's release — alongside Lorde's own experiences of sexual violation and emotional loss. In placing these moments of loss and mourning in conversation with one another I will show the ways in which the two women translate their anger and sorrow into an effective force for psychological and political change. Finally, I will discuss the legacy of Black Feminist intellectualism and theory, which owes a great deal to these two women as their writings continue to be an inspiration to social justice activists and Black Feminist scholars some 30 years after its publication.

Political Prisoners: Entrapment and Containment as Expressions of Violence

Although African American literature is rooted in multiple genres of life-writing including, slave narratives, epistolary, and speech writing, it is the autobiography that remains most important as means of gaining a seat at the proverbial table. Autobiography has been central to the development of the African American literary tradition, although most noted or canonized texts within the genre, such as Olaudah Equiano and Malcolm X, employ a masculinist perspective. While recent scholarship has brought about a long overdue validation of black women voices, like Harriett Jacobs, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Assata Shakur, black women's autobiography is still too often overlooked in comparison to its male counterpart.

The reason for this not too subtle gendered oversight of disregarding black women's autobiography might be attributed to the notion that historically, black women's writing was not viewed as valid enough to carry a distinctly political purpose, (although writers like Ida B. Wells shatter this type of intellectual myopia), what is clear from an analysis of black male autobiography is its direct mimesis of Western notions of the genre, wherein the autobiographical subject is viewed as singular, exceptional, and decidedly male. In her work, Perkins refutes French philosopher's Georges Gusdorf's claim that autobiography should function as a "genre that...exposes the ethos implicit" in Western traditions of life-writing (Perkins 9-10). Instead she writes that Gusdorf's perspective "implicitly [links] autobiography to an imperialist project" which "leaves no space for cultural difference" or "ways of knowing" not rooted in white privilege (9-10). Since the days of slavery, black life-writing has carved out a space for cultural and political agency. However, while black women often wrote their lives on behalf of their community and their families, black male subjects engaged the black body-politic in so much as they could be seen as singularly heroic.

Before unpacking my critique of autobiography, I will first illustrate the stakes and the driving force behind black life-writing and its significant cost not only to the writers themselves, but to the greater public of black Americans. Critic James Olney writes that “black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography” as “Black Studies courses and programs have been organized around...[and] preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories” (15). Black autobiography and the legitimacy it granted to African Americans during the 19th and 20th century is uniquely remarkable. As Henry Louis Gates writes, it offered the opportunity to “shape a public ‘self’ in language,” a language systematically denied to the enslaved, which would act as the “ultimate form of protest” (3). In his groundbreaking anthology *Bearing Witness*, Gates articulates the audacity of black life-writing as an “impulse to testify” and declare that “if the black self could not exist before the law, it could, and would, be forged in language” (4). Gates’s observations underscore the black autobiographical subject as one who often illustrates in their text the worst experiences of American racism, one who understands the precarious nature of their own subjectivity and aims to take it head on. It is because of the genre’s relative esteem which autobiography has granted the African American experience in letters, that this project concludes with an examination of that specific genre. Moreover, looking specifically at black women activists and thinkers like Davis and Lorde, I aim to show the ways in which black women have been particularly positioned to continue and evolve the radical tradition of black autobiography by revealing both intraracial and interracial critiques of embedded systems of patriarchy.

As stated earlier, black women, just as black men, have a history of using memoir and autobiography as a means of political protest which dates back to slavery, too often these projects are eclipsed by their male counterparts and relegated to the periphery. Ards asserts that

autobiography differs in part from fiction in that it “rejects notions of universal and absolute truth,” revealing the “inconvenient complexity” of our world and therefore “facilitates the deliberative space necessary for creating politics, as both theory and practice” (Ards 16). Here, Ards’ scholarship, like Perkins’, makes a space at the table for the examination of black women’s autobiography but also shows how such texts emerged ahead of a critical theory based around the experiences of black women. Life-writing of figures like DuBois or Douglass are often heralded as legitimate political and historical tools, applicable inside and outside African American/Black Studies departments, while too often Black Feminist scholarship is examined as a *specialized* theoretical framework that is read as only applicable to the experiences of black women.

Davis and Lorde, as activists and writers, cast both of their projects against the deep disparity of the masculinist tradition in black autobiography, choosing first to delineate their texts as an expansion, in Davis’s case, or a re-forging, in regards to Lorde, of the entire tradition. While many critics have analyzed both Davis’s and Lorde’s texts in regards their social and political implications for Black Feminist perspectives in the 20th century, these texts are often separated by what some perceive to be a critical difference in rhetorical purpose. To say it plainly, *An Autobiography* is utilitarian in its political nature while Lorde’s *Zami* is praised for its poetic and literary merit. Perkins categorizes all three women¹⁹ in her study under the banner of “political autobiography” based on Davis’s coining of the term in her text. Davis “envisioned” that a true “political autobiography” would “[emphasize] the people, the events, and the forces” which led her to a life of activism and further more would inspire readers to “understand why so many...have no alternative but to offer [their] lives...to the cause of oppressed people” (*An*

¹⁹ Perkin’s study *Autobiography as Activism* looks at Davis’s *An Autobiography* alongside autobiographical projects from Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown. It has been influential on this project. Ards’s *Words of Witness* has also been key to my engagement with contextualizing the legacy of black women’s experiences as an intellectual tradition.

Autobiography xvi). Perkins's text offers an outline of how "political autobiography" functions differently from other iterations of the genre, most pointing towards an autobiographical project that it elevates "the struggle" above all. (Perkins 7). In her definitive framework for understanding "political autobiography" she offers six points wherein the text prioritizes the political over the personal, documents the struggle above personal experiences, gives a platform to the oppressed, protects all political organizations with "strategic silences," and finally reveals various tactics of government and state sponsored oppression and used the text as a means to educate those unaware of those coded actions (Perkins 7). The "struggle," often used as a rhetorical stand in for the somewhat ubiquitous driving force which called various Black Liberation organization to arms, is referenced repeatedly in Perkin's analysis. The use of this term edges close to that of an abstraction, exceeding that of a specific political mandate as it insinuates an almost faith-based rhetoric. The struggle is bigger than the activist. The struggle is bigger than the oppressed. Even more ironically, in a genre that supposedly is aimed at the creation and assertion of a strategically constructed narrative self, the struggle is, in Perkins' eyes, and no doubt Davis's eyes in 1972, bigger than the text.

Davis's insistence on constructing her autobiography as distinctly political is also likely in response to the types of autobiographical projects which preceded it. This is not to say that she wanted to assert her project as superior to any others, but instead, she desired to highlight the nature of her work, to inspire her readers in 1972 to dedicate their bodies and their lives to revolutionary political action. In her introduction to the 1988 reprint of *An Autobiography*, Davis writes that she wants to "utilize the autobiographical genre to evaluate [her] life in accordance with...the political significance of [her] experiences" (viii). Therefore, her text emerges, not just out of a need for self-aggrandizement but more specifically a refusal to "personalize and

individualize history” (*An Autobiography* viii). Despite the audacity of writing an autobiography at the age of twenty-eight, the notion of the personal as political²⁰ was completely antithetical to Davis’s intention when crafting her text. However, despite her hesitation to present her personal life, the most moving parts of *An Autobiography* are those which, like much writing from black woman activists and Black Feminist Scholars, are anchored in the experiential instead of the theoretical. Davis asserts in the introduction and throughout *An Autobiography* that her politics were more important than her personal battles. However, it is precisely these personal battles, whether they be against the male leaders of Black Liberation organizations, the university structure at UCLA, or the U.S. government itself, which contextualizes her fervor for social justice. This seeming rhetorical contradiction makes the dialogue between *An Autobiography* and *Zami* even more tense and fruitful, especially as so much of Lorde’s creative and theoretical perspective values the interiority of her experience as a black queer woman.

For Lorde, the task was not just to add an addendum to the notion of autobiography, but to completely redefine it. Lorde creates a new hybrid genre for *Zami*, described as a “biomythography” definitively combining the biography with mythology therefore creating a space for her text to seamlessly embody narrative, philosophy, and poetry as one cohesive communicative style. Both women’s invocations are not simply challenges to accepted notions of autobiography (although the critique should not be overlooked) but are, more complexly, ways of freeing the genre to allow for new perspectives on what autobiographical writing can be. Returning to Perkins, the “political autobiography” functions differently than a personal or literary autobiography because figures like Davis, as opposed to Lorde (who Perkins’s cites

²⁰ In the introduction to the 1988 reprint Davis also notes that the “naive” notion of the “personal as political,” was something deeply associated with the Women’s Liberation Movement which, in her opinion, unfairly equated deeply personal and domestic disputes, like the “sexist inspired verbal abuse of white women by their husbands” (*An Autobiography* viii) with the systemic and state sanctioned violence enacted against communities of color.

specifically alongside Baldwin), bind their narrative selves to a “struggle” which is linked to a formal political organization (22). Perkins’ argument that political autobiographies, in contrast to personal autobiography, “are meant to bear witness to a reality beyond their own personal circumstances” (22), is somewhat limiting, especially considering what *Zami* offers in regards to illustrating the systems of oppression which affect black women.

Both Davis and Lorde continue a tradition for black women autobiographers where their works offer a greater service to the community. While this is an observation that critics like Olney and Gates have made about black autobiography as a whole, black women writers, so often bearing the role of mother or caregiver in one way or another, are particularly situated, and expected in many cases, to take this notion of writing for the community, or family, to a deeper and more meaningful place than black men. Perkins’ claim that for authors of political autobiography, the goal is, assumptively, less about the “glorification” of the individual and more about the “[examination of] those experiences that connect them to their communities” (10) is more than applicable to Lorde’s more poetic project. Furthermore, the ambiguity which surrounds the “struggle” definitively, a concept which seems to be based on Davis’s and Perkins’s perception something that must be connected to a specific organized political affiliation, can be evolved from this limited view to encompass Lorde’s perspective as a queer woman of color. To be clear, if the struggle is bigger than the writer, then, ostensibly, it is also bigger than the party. While Lorde searches, in the text, for a community that is accepting of her black, lesbian identity, she is most concerned with black women, learning to love themselves and trust in their power.

I question whether an official affiliation with an organization is a requirement for political engagement and advocacy or, in response to Wahneema Lubiano assertion that Black

Nationalism is “simply black common sense” (Qtd. in *Post-Blackness* 21), whether any and all acts of active resistance against the culturally or state-sanctioned tactics of oppression can be considered equally valid in the eyes of history. In this, I trouble Perkin’s assertion that the political autobiography is one where the personal must be secondary to the struggle, especially as, as if often the case or black women, whose were ground zero for the propagation of chattel slavery, the *personal* is directly tied to the *struggle*. To be clear, I am not invested in evaluating the requirements for an autobiography to be considered political, but rather I am invested in questioning what makes a life, or more specifically, a life’s struggle, political? To explore this, I will examine each author’s formative years and examine the ways their radically different experiences demonstrates the ways in which their experiences in Alabama and New York City exposed them early in life to various forms of covert and overt tactics of racial and gendered oppression which expands the definitive boundaries of the prison space from the physical and material to the psychological and spiritual.

Unpacking the criteria for a political life requires an examination of what is at stake for the autobiographical subject, namely the risks, whether, physical or not, they endure for the cause of their liberation. In relation to different forms of violence and trauma, Perkins asserts that many “Black Power autobiographers share with their enslaved/escaped ancestors” the “experience of violence” (Perkins 31). She categorizes this violence as either “literal,” meaning “material deprivation...physical assault, murder, rape... [and torture],” or “figurative” meaning “[experiences] of erasure” or “learned self-hatred” (Perkins 31). This delineation between “literal” and “figurative” does not, however, do justice to the forms of abuse Davis describes in her text as the latter seemingly insinuates that the endurance of social erasure would leave wounds of the imagination as opposed to psychological woundd. A better configuration might be

between that of *material* and *psychological* violence, or, respectively that which affects the corporeal form as opposed to the interior space of the mind. Within this spatial analysis, Perkin's differentiation between forms of violence also becomes an applicable framework to understand the difference between entrapment and containment within this project.

Similar to the semantic confusion of anger and rage as discussed on chapter 2, the terms "entrapment" and "containment" exist on a congruent plain while also functioned somewhat differently from one another. In looking at the spatial tension of both Lorde's and Davis's text, I mean to assert *entrapment* in relation to the experience of being trapped within a specific geography, like that of Harlem of Alabama, or a material space, as in the House of D in Davis's case. Entrapment here is linked to visible and tangible forces of suppression, spaces controlled by white Americans as corporeal agents of oppression.

Varying slightly, containment takes on a different relationship to the notion of being trapped, referring more to the unseen and unknown forces which inflict wounds located within the interior space of the mind as opposed to the physical body. Containment, then, refers to trauma's which are perpetuated within the interiority of the mind. Both entrapment and containment are in fact forms of captivity, which are related but ultimately have different stakes and demands different costs. Given that both Davis and Lorde describe how they suffered physically and psychologically within their texts, the delineation between these two concepts is not meant to segregate various forms of trauma, but to show how both women thrive, intermingled and emboldened, under racist and heteronormative suppression.

Diving deeper into the tension of entrapment and containment through the concept of the political prisoner, Davis herself does the work of illustrating to readers the ways in which prisons

are not just created with brick and mortar. In Baldwin's open letter to Davis he writes that "the very sight of chains on Black flesh...[should] be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory...But, no, they appear to glory in their chains...they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses" (Qtd. in *Morning* 13). His summoning of "chains on black flash" as both bitter memory and iconography connects not only Davis's body to those enslaved in the past, but also, in 1971, to those chained and subjugated within the American penal system. The connection is not lost either on the reader nor on Davis herself.

In the section²¹ which directly follows Baldwin's letter, Davis details the role of political prisoners as well as the role that the penitentiary system plays in the constant attack against social revolution. A political prisoner is, in the most literal sense, one who has been "captured" by the states for breaking laws which "[violate]...the interests of a class or people whose oppression is expressed" through unjust legislation (*Morning* 21-22). This specific definition of a political prisoner is one which is based on the status of a revolutionary who has been caught and physically confined in a material institution controlled by the state. The text continues to assert that black "survival," which has historically depended on "effective channels of resistance" (*Morning* 20) often works against the law, especially during the period of antebellum slavery. In truth, blackness has historically been tied to notions of criminality since the days of slavery, Jim Crow, and even today as policing of black bodies in public spaces is justified in legislation and communal organizations like neighborhood watch.²² Here we are able to understand how the legacy of fugitive acts is embedded within the enslaved painful journey towards emancipation and beyond.

²¹ This section lists no specific author but, being the editor, Davis is likely to have contributed a great deal, especially as the language and writing closely resembles the rhetorical style she uses in *An Autobiography*.

²² Simone Browne's 2015 text *Dark Matters* offers a strong analysis of the ways that criminality has historically been tied to the black body since the days of slavery through fugitive slave legislation and the 1713 lantern laws.

In the eyes of Davis and her contributors, political prisoners are persecuted not for their litigious literal infractions, but because of the “unwritten law which prohibits disturbances and upheavals of the status quo” (*Morning* 22). In a provocative move, however, the text acknowledges a more conceptual understanding of the term, one that includes persons of color inside and outside of the prison, regardless of their political affiliation, in so much that they are “victims of an oppressive politico-economic order” which functions as the “[cause] underlying their victimization” (*Morning* 29). If then, to borrow from the band War, “the world is a ghetto,” then the United States is the providential prison watchtower at its center.

Here Davis argues that a political prisoner is not necessarily one who physically incarcerated, but can also be someone whose state of oppression is so deeply felt, that they are essentially immobilized as a free citizen, even outside the confines of prison walls. From this observation we can read Davis and Lorde through an investigation of spatiality and the notion of captivity. While most of Davis’s texts are about her imprisonment in the House of Detention in New York and the Marin County Jail in California, there are other examples of her text, especially in her childhood and formative years when she endures different types of prisons. Similarly, Lorde’s early life in deeply segregated 1940’s Harlem, and the subsequent struggle to fully articulate her queer desires during the 1950’s echoes another congruent form of captivity and imprisonment which links their autobiographical projects.

One of the most explicit purposes of *An Autobiography*, outside of Davis’s own political narrative, is her critique of the American incarceration system as an extension of race and class-based oppression. She reflects on the condition of the House of “D” where she is first imprisoned before her transfer to California: “Inhumanity seethed from all the cracks and crevices of that place” (*An Autobiography* 41). The most complicated notion which drove the penal ecosystem

was that of control, meaning the control the state exerted over prisoners and guards that was in “accordance with pragmatic principles of the worst order” (*An Autobiography* 50). Davis argues that the prison landscape is “designed to break human beings, to convert the populations into specimens in a zoo — obedient to [the] keepers, but dangerous to each other” (*An Autobiography* 52). In both *An Autobiography* and *If They Come In the Morning*, Davis claims the space of American prisons as ground zero for the role of black revolution because of its potential to inspire liberatory action from those on the inside and outside.

Davis’s reflection on the prison system also illustrates the ways in which jails and prisons aim to limit inmates’ perception of themselves and others through suppressive psychological tactics from solitary confinement, to refusal of medical assistance, and even the suppression of emotional consciousness through psychiatric medicine. Examining Davis’s perception of her time in the House of D, what is more clear than her observations of psychological abuse, is her clear recognition that these are not mere accidents or oversights, but clear tools for the control and domination of the human spirit.

Davis’s recognition of the psychological abuse on display in the prisons could be credited to her incredibly violent childhood in Alabama. In the second section of *An Autobiography*, aptly named “Rocks,” the reader is offered a glimpse into her childhood years which is portrayed, quite strategically, as formative to her political identity as an adult. She describes her entrance into white society through her childhood home, a “haunted” house with “steeple, gables, and peeling paint” at the entrance and “wild woods” at the rear surrounded by “fig trees, blackberry patches and great wild cherry trees” (*An Autobiography* 77). This space which would become Davis’s childhood home was a far cry both aesthetically and psychologically from her family’s first house in the impoverished projects of Alabama where cement smothered the earth

but “friends...and friendliness” grew loud and luscious from the ecosystem of a supportive black community (*An Autobiography* 77). In 1948, the Davis family was the first black family to cross the residential color line and enter into a domestic haven of whiteness and their the transition to a middle-class suburban life was one fraught with racial anxiety and violence.

Like a pistol, the presence of the Davis family signaled the starter shot of white flight. Frustrated white families moved out, hopeful black families moved in, and as the violence escalated the neighborhood which gained the name of “Dynamite Hill.” The first home bombed belonged to a black minister and his wife, who purchased a home next to the Montees, a white family with “hateful eyes” (*An Autobiography* 79). While Davis’s childhood is, comparatively, more idyllic than other authors included in this project, there is a deep irony in that her sleepy suburban childhood was constantly interrupted by the sound and fury of firebombing, always directed towards black homes which were destroyed as punishment for the crime of existing in a space which white residents had laid claim to.

Davis’s first experience of the dangers of black bodies crossing into white space, is the first of many forms of spatial entrapment which she endures and subsequently escapes, first through education, and later through activism. However, in her childhood, she bears witness to the crippling effect that racism has on communities of color, even relatively affluent ones. Violence becomes quotidian as “the bombings on Dynamite Hill” became so “common” that “the horror of them diminished (*An Autobiography* 95). More importantly, this violence was turned inward for the black folks in the community. While Davis’s parents, who were activists in their own right, used the rhetoric of Christian love in the privacy of their home to try and deter their children from anger or resentment towards white Americans, the streets served as a platform for a much more sinister production of catharsis. Young Davis observes that “the

children fought over nothing...over being called a name, over being the target of real or imagined gossip. They fought over everything...[punching] Black faces because they could not reach white ones” (*An Autobiography* 94). In this moment, the reader is prompted, through Davis’s personal memories, to examine similar moments in their own life. To recall where black bodies thrust themselves against other black bodies, seeking the numbing of pain where no healing salve could be found. This type of anger echoes Lorde’s own articulation of “unexpressed rage” as an “undetoned device” (*Sister Outsider* 127) buried deep in the hearts of the oppressed, waiting to go off at random with no clear sense of direction or purpose. In this sentiment young Davis asserts her observation of the black social decay symptomatic of white supremacy.

The external threat of constant violence by embittered white terrorists masquerading as neighbors, and the internal “whirlpool of violence and blood” which approached “fratricide” by black residents of Dynamite Hill create in young Davis’s mind both physical and psychological danger. She writes in the opening section of *If They Come in the Morning* that “black ghettos are occupied...massive deployments of police” who function as “caretakers of violence” that entrap people of color within the boundaries of oppression” and “[encircle] the community with a shield of violence” (*Morning* 31-32). These observations are also applicable to the white residents of Davis’s childhood community. However, Davis’s experiences in Dynamite Hill do not demand pity, but as a signal of courage and, more importantly, taking into consideration her brief mention that her parents still inhabit that house over 20 years later, an example of how her family survived in a space which fed off of black fear and torture. The constant disregard for black life which her white neighbors so blatantly displayed actually emboldened Davis to seek out new ideologies of black liberation.

Davis's time in the House and D, and her childhood in Dynamite Hill reflect the ways that she endured racialized entrapment in various spaces encased by walls both material and psychological. As an aspect of autobiographical writing, this section can be read as the common use of childhood to exemplify formative experiences which embolden the narrative subject against a specific struggle, specifically one that is an exterior threat of white supremacy. Audre Lorde similarly wrestles with notions of spatiality and containment in *Zami*. In Lorde's text, entrapment is primarily exemplified by her descriptions of various American landscapes, like Harlem or Washington D.C., which serve as an unwelcome home for Lorde and her family during their generational exile from the mystical landscape of Grenada, the home of Lorde's West Indian parents. In concert with that, containment becomes a way of unpacking how the interiority of Lorde's body served to imprison her burgeoning queer desires.

The opening chapters of Lorde's text are not beholden to the unraveling of a narrative which centers a specific political struggle. Lorde's childhood memories instead deal with, alongside fleeting moments of joy, pivotal experiences of spatial entrapment, most specifically living with her family in segregated 1940's Harlem. In truth, the notion of crossing boundaries and geographies is incredibly important to Lorde's project as the youngest daughter of Grenadian parents who describe the cartographically hidden hills of Carriacou — with its “heavy smells of lime” and “[healing] plants” and trees that sprung up right outside of her mother, Linda's, childhood home — with such esteem that the young Audrey (the original spelling of Lorde's name) thinks of it as a utopian fantasy. This island paradise, as much as it fascinated Lorde, was also a source of longing for her parents who, belabored by three daughters and little income, never realized their dream of returning home.

This is an aspect of entrapment and exile within the American landscape that is not exclusive to New York City. An even more disheartening episode takes place in Washington D.C. as Lorde's family is refused service at a white-only establishment. Early on in *Zami*, Lorde describes the way in which she also feels caught in the snares of her parents' constant denial of their racial oppression. Similar to the ways in which the prison officials attempted to control the narrative of Davis's isolation in the House of D as a means to obscuring her reality, so did Lorde's family obscure their children's perception of the world by denying that acts of racism were, in fact, a constant threat. Unable to face the trauma of being so consistently disregarded in America, Lorde's mother, Linda, often lies, claiming, for example, that those white residents who spat on her children "had no better sense nor manners than to spit in the wind" (*Zami* 17). In this comfortable untruth, Linda quietly absolves white residents of their racist violations and unwittingly causes Lorde to think that it is her fault, the fault of her blackness. This unwillingness to name and confront the reality of white antagonism smothers them both mother and child/daughter.

The practice of Lorde's mother denying the constant threat of racism which surrounds her children eventually comes to a head in Lorde's pre-teen years on a family trip to Washington D.C. where they were to celebrate the graduation of Lorde's sister. On the train ride down from New York City Lorde is denied chance to eat in the dining cart, a decision which her mother claims is because such a purchase would be too expensive and not on the reality that the dining cart was reserved for white people only. After describing this exchange, Lorde laments, "Whatever my mother did not believe and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention" (*Zami* 69). The family heads to the nation's capital because Lorde's sister, Phyllis, is denied the chance to go on the trip with her mostly white high school

classmates due to the fact there would be no establishment which would allow her black body to rest. Twice in the opening of this chapter Lorde faces the reality that her black body bars her entrance from multiple iterations of public space. An disheartening trifecta occurs when, after stopping at a soda fountain for ice cream, the Lorde family is denied service, and leave the establishment “quiet and outraged” (*Zami* 100). Lorde’s parents are unresponsive to her cries of injustice. While Lorde articulates that “American racism was a new and crushing reality” for her parents which they handled as a “private woe” (*Zami* 69), on this one occasion in the text, they are not able to deny to their young daughter the reality of American racism which she witnesses with her own eyes.

Filled with an insatiable anger that echoed the sickening “white heat” of the D.C. summer day, young Audrey transforms from curious and misguided child to embittered young adult. This moment of rejection from the seemingly innocuous soda fountain, like Davis’s years on Dynamite Hill, serves as an awakening for Lorde to her political consciousness which shapes the path of her future. While Davis is intentional about discussing the physical violence she endured as a child, all of Lorde’s wounds are comparatively muted: physical reprimands from teachers, racist and ablest bullying, unwanted touching from adult men, all of which go unspoken to her parents. For Lorde, psychological wounds are consistent quiet and precise punctures, aimed at breaking her psyche down slowly. In contrast, Davis’s experiences witnessing the fire bombings on Dynamite Hill are more like the thread of a gun wound to the head resulting from a reluctant game of Russian roulette: violence is imminent, but residents gamble in spite of it. In both texts, spatiality, specifically in regard to public spaces, whether close or far from home, acts as a stage on which each woman observes and plays out the policing of their black bodies by forces of racial oppression.

In regards to the policing of bodies, Lorde's personal experiences as a teenager exemplify how the body, specifically her own body, acts as a space of containment. This concept is first illustrated by Lorde's discussion of her childhood body as physically deficient, as she is both mute and legally blind at the age of 5. This is the earliest reason for Lorde's constant anxiety and shame about her body and its limitations. This anxiety surrounding these early physical limitations can be used as a frame to understand Lorde's blossoming queer sexuality during her teenage years. While *Zami* is decidedly read as a lesbian text, Lorde's progression in her sexuality is a slow process wherein the recognition of her own growing sexuality evolves before a definitive expression of same-sex attraction. This awakening is best exemplified in an often read passage of the text wherein, having finally started menstruation after years of worry, teenage Lorde is tasked with preparing the macerated spice and garlic for her mother to cook a classic West Indian meal.

The scene revolves around the description of her mother's mortar and pestle, which is "long and tapering, fashioned from the...mysterious rose-deep wood" that fit into her hand both "casually" and "familiarily" (*Zami* 72). It is difficult not to notice the irony in the pestle's phallic aesthetic as Lorde, who describes it as a "crook-necked squash," takes slow, delicate care to illustrate the details of her mashing it into the "worn," "hollow," and "softened" center of the wooden bowl which had been, over time, stripped of its hard exterior, revealing a "thin layer of split fibers" that coated the pestle like "velvet" (*Zami* 72). Somewhere between a sensual touching and the promise of penetration, Lorde becomes enthralled in the slow grinding of her mother's mortar and pestle and, encased in the smells of her now menstruating body, starts to feel an almost spiritual connection between her interior and exterior shape: "I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my back and forth like lunar winds across the moon's face...I smelled

the delicate breadfruit smell rising up...my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious” (*Zami* 76). This sexual awakening here is unique in that it is not between Lorde and a man or woman, but between herself and the space she shares with her mother.²³ Here, what Lorde is enticed by in her own body is something that, while incredibly tempting is also “shameful.”

Teenage Lorde’s fear of exposing the interiority of her body is abruptly confirmed when her mother returns and, upset that the task of preparing the spice is not complete, rips the mortar and pestle away from her daughter and begins to roughly and carelessly pound the two pieces together. This act translates into a violation which teenage Lorde feels deeply, causing her to cry, helplessly, at a sense of loss which she cannot name. These tears signal a painful realization, that Lorde would never again know the “old enjoyment” which she gained from mimicking her mother’s forceful use of the mortar and pestle because she could no longer ignore the desires of her own body. More than mere kitchen talk, this realization is the tipping point in the text for Lorde’s growing sexuality and the realization that, despite her overwhelming desire to please her mother, her desires would ultimately exile her from her own home.

In this scene we are privy to what I believe is the closet articulation of Lorde’s political identity in *Zami*. This is not to say that that text does not offer some reflections on her socio-political understandings of society during the 1950’s, but instead to claim that much of Lorde’s main concerns in *Zami*, as well as her nonfiction work in other texts like the groundbreaking 1984 collection *Sister Outsider*, centers the body in her analysis. In this she allows the political, whether in connection to race, gender, or sexuality, to be framed by the interior guidance of the

²³ This particular scene also involves a line in which Lorde insinuates that she fantasizes about a suggested act of incest with her mother. Many theorists have written about this assertion in regards to both a queer and psychological analysis of the book, including Bethany Jacobs, who asserts that the exchange should not be read as a direct sexual desire for Lorde’s mother.

erotic, that which connects the body to the “deepest and nonrational knowledge” (*Sister Outsider* 53). What is exemplified in this scene is Lorde first tapping into this force and, being met with shame and fear by her mother, Lorde is unable to fully embrace the audacity of her emerging power. While it is productive to read this exchange through a lens of queer desire –Lorde certainly does not shy away from discussing the importance of her lesbian identity in the text– it is equally vital to read this scene in conversation with suppression of all kinds. Lorde writes of in her deepest connection with the erotic she “becomes less willing to accept powerlessness...resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, [and] self-denial” (*Sister Outsider* 58). Although not as explicit as Davis’s articulations of why she fights as a political figure, Lorde’s gesturing towards the emergence of the erotic in this scene with the mortar and pestle, and then also its swift condemnation, claims her stake in the fight for liberation.

The early experiences of these two women confirm Davis’s own troubling of political prisoners as one who endures in prisons of all shapes produced by white supremacy. In the case of Lorde specifically, we are able to understand the ways in which black women’s experiences, in connection to their bodies, which are particularly vulnerable in how they are policed racially and sexually, offer nuanced understanding of where true power emerges from. During their childhood and young adult years, both Davis and Lorde suffer as prisoners both inside of material spaces — like that of the House of D or a tiny Harlem tenement — and also suffer interior wounds unseen and inflicted by the psychological scars of racial violence and sexual repression. In understanding how they connect to each woman’s political perspective, is how these wounds do not settle, but in fact push each woman forward on their respective paths toward liberation. Most important in this understanding of how their wounds serve as a source of power

is the reality that both of their autobiographical projects are forged from spaces of survival, written in moments of reflection which paint not only the struggle, but how to live through.

Living through the struggle is, however, not something that can be achieved from a fixed or static position. Revolutionary action is just that, an action, something that is constantly in flux. This action also often, especially for black Americans, takes place on periphery of some state-sanctioned force, whether that force be the government, or those in smaller communities who police others based on restricted notions of respectability. Another vital experience which Davis and Lorde share is the ways in which they lived their lives on the edge to achieve their political ideals. For Davis, this is exemplified by her time on the run from the police. For Lorde, this is embodied by her adult years as an out queer, black woman living New York City and beyond. These are two times in which both women, for very different reasons, were forced to hide part of themselves, once again as a means to survive. To understand this notion of hiding as a means of survival, the lens of fugitivity, illustrated by theorist Tina Campt, provides a useful method to interrogate the ways that helps Davis and Lorde attempt to escape the repressive expectations of masculinity by hiding in plain sight.

Fugitive Bodies: Gender and Sexuality on the Run

As examined in the first chapter of this project, the vulnerability black women faced during the Post Civil Rights Era is unique in that the role of the black women within the fight for liberation was evolving not only because of the problematic debate about their seemingly tumultuous relationship to black men, but also due to an seemingly new examination of what black women's bodies were worth — politically, intellectually, and fiscally — to the emerging cause of black uplift after the rise and fall of Civil Rights Era ideologies. Despite having worked

side by side with black men for the cause of racial uplift, black women still needed to establish a working theory which justified their inherent desire to see themselves as in control of their own political and historical destinies, and both *Zami* and *An Autobiography* archives the struggle for black women to assert their own path to liberation without being seen as the enemy by black men.

Zami reads as a decidedly queer or lesbian text, however, the dimensions of identity politics at place in Lorde's narrative cannot be so easily separated. Queer readings of Lorde's autobiography that elide the significance of the social and political dimension of her experience as a black woman navigating the queer scene in 1950's New York City fail to account how her sexuality intersects with her racial identity. In other words, parsing out the ways in which her queerness is informed, influenced, and articulated by her blackness is limited. Therefore, the dialogue that Lorde's and Davis's text creates is important in examining the role of autobiographical projects of the Post-Civil Rights era because each woman, even writing with two distinct rhetorical purposes, embodies in their writing a collective experience of systemic oppression which feeds off the physical and psychological vulnerability of women specifically.

Black women in particular, whether queer or not, face oppressions both intraracially and interracially under the systems which elevate whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity as a political ideal. This varied and complex trauma black women faced during the Post-Civil Rights era, which echoes in the experiences of women of color even today, shapes a particular praxis, or more plainly, a way of knowing the world. Black women's vulnerability, physically, psychologically, and politically, has developed an epistemology based on a need to evolve specific defense mechanisms based on the constant attack from mainstream notions of normativity which deems both feminine and black as antithetical to progress. This is a theory

which, in many ways, positions the black woman as a fugitive subject, one who is always on the run, more often than not fighting or evading forces of oppression both inside and outside of their community. Therefore, having analyzed the ways that Davis's and Lorde's texts evoke complex scenarios of captivity, it is important to understand the ways in which both authors position themselves as fugitive bodies in their texts, on the run from the limitations placed on their gendered and racial identities. Moreover, given that black autobiography is rooted in a history which dates back to the emancipation narratives of runaway slaves, we are able to locate multiple instances where the black body, namely that of Davis and Lorde, is best understood through this lens of fugitivity.

Davis's story does not begin with her formative years in Dynamite Hill, but with a narrative of her brief experience being on the run from police. As an autobiographical project born out of her experiences as a political martyr for the cause of black liberation, the sense of narrative suspense which shapes the opening section of the text underscores the ethical and political stakes of her precarious situation as an enemy of the state. In order to maintain her freedom and her agency as an activist, she must evade capture from men who represent a system of racial domination that functions both inside and outside of the implications which provoke her own incarceration. When her story begins, she is a woman on the "lam," pushed to the edge by the threat of capture. Her body, shrouded in false disguises and paranoia, is not her own, but an echo of herself, in search of sanctuary in a country which has historically only offered subjugation. In Davis's summation, fugitive life is one where the body and mind are "caressed every hour by paranoia;" it is a life where one must constantly "resist hysteria, distinguishing between the creations of a frightened imagination and the real signs that the enemy is near" (*An*

Autobiography 5). Davis asserts a close psychic connection to her enslaved ancestors, who also prayed for “nightfall to cover their steps” as the “teeth of the dogs” (*An Autobiography* 5-6) snapped ferociously at their heels. She is, like her ancestors before her, a fugitive of the law predetermined as guilty for the crime of holding America accountable for racial sins which, h still remain uncleansed.

Fugitivity, as a theoretical lens, offers a great deal of insight into both the historical and psychological aesthetic with which Davis frames her narrative opening. Fugitivity, according to Tina Campt, is the “quotidian practice of refusal” which takes form in “creative practices” that rejects “premise that historically [negates] the lived experience of blackness as either pathological or exceptional to white supremacy” (Qtd. in von Gleich 7-8). Paula von Gleich’s 2015 article examines *An Autobiography* through a “post-slavery” lens. Von Gleich argues — despite her use of Afro-Pessimist theorists like Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers — that the *An Autobiography* reflects an optimistic idea of “freedom” reduced to a “concept” or “mere idea” relegated to a futurity located in “another time and space” (von Gleich 2). Building on Campt’s insights, Von Gleich, uses the idea of “fugitivity” to contextualize Davis’s rhetorical connection to slave narratives and emancipation tales. In conjunction with Davis’s own earlier articulation of political prisoners, the notion of fugitivity helps to contextualize her time on the run, and even in prison, as a greater experience of oppression in so much that under systems of white supremacy, blackness and criminality are uniquely tied.

The woman on the run is decidedly different from the Angela which Davis’s friends and family have come to know over the course of her life and career. The wig which she uses to try and hide her appearance is alien to her. Her hands, “like broken wings...[floundering] about [her] head” (*An Autobiography* 4), try to secure a wig that will cover her natural hair. When she

looks in the mirror she sees not her own countenance, but “a face filled with anguish, tension, and uncertainty” which she “did not recognize as [her] own” (*An Autobiography* 4). Her face, covered with “false black curls falling over a wrinkled forehead into red swollen eyes” is not a reflection of either the woman Davis is, or the revolutionary she aims to be in her text, but instead an “absurd and grotesque” (*An Autobiography* 4) facsimile of black femininity that could obscure her identity as a criminal threat. Davis changes her appearance to hide in plain sight. Her disguises change the very “shape” of her face, which is even more shrouded with makeup, false eyelashes, and a faux beauty mark that made her feel “awkward and over-painted” to the point of being unrecognizable to her own mother” (*An Autobiography* 10). The details that Davis spends on describing her physical features while on the run is not narrative vanity, but an attempt to show what techniques the fugitive must take, vis a vis augmentation to the exterior, to protect the interior self from capture. As a fugitive, Davis relies heavily on the expectations of what a non-threatening black woman should look like.

Despite her antagonism to the wig, Davis is aware of its purpose to protect her from recognition by police and other state-sanctioned authorities who deemed her a criminal. She illustrates her fear of the state as equitable to her childhood fear of the dark. The American government is not a fictive or imaginative foe, but a real antagonist, a “monstrous thing” which would “always be at [her] back, never quite touching...but always there [and] ready to attack” (*An Autobiography* 5). The state takes on not a human form, but one of machinery, more specifically an automatic weapon which “[breaks] out of the darkness...unleashing fire” (*An Autobiography* 5) on Davis and those who aim to protect her. The coded oppression which she fought against as an activist here takes its most violent and direct form as a weapon of the mind,

a paranoia shaped as a gunfire which rains down on every calculated move Davis attempts to make.

Davis's distancing from her public image is ironic looking back on the text from this current moment wherein pictures of her from the 1970's are, to say the least, iconic. Kimberly Nichele Brown, who previously offered a stellar analysis of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman* in the first section of this project, discusses Davis as she is often remembered: the still image of a revolutionary. Davis's afro marked her as both "African" and "radical" in a way that reflected blackness as an "act of militancy" ("Diva Citizenship" 113). Brown argues that Davis, aware of her role in the movement, understood her "public personal as a performative stance" which she tried to control as a means to "model" social revolution for other women ("Diva Citizenship" 117), especially in the face of the mainstream media which did everything in its power to discredit her message. Davis's many ruminations on the media coverage of her attempted escape, eventual capture, and incarceration reflects her critical awareness that who she was as a person, as an activist, and as a public figure was not, before the publication of her text, something she could always control.

While her sense of anxiety over who to trust reflects the everyday experiences of the oppressed, the heightened sense of "paranoia" she endures reflects her more vulnerable position as a public figure in the movement. Capture is always imminent for the black subject as their fugitive state places them in danger from state-sanctioned authorities and also from a greater system of white supremacy which deems any act of social justice as abnegation of the status quo and therefore, criminal. Davis's description of life "on the run" evokes a connective tissue to the history of escaped slaves as well as to other political prisoners both inside and outside of the prison system. What is more important, however, is how in illustrating her fugitive state she

represents black femininity as something hostilely policed by authorities invested in controlling the political revolutionary threat that blackness represents. Subsequently, both *An Autobiography* and *Zami* articulate at different points in the text how racial violence, imprisonment, false notions of criminality, heteronormativity, and gendered exclusion all function as tools of subjugation and violation. Examining Lorde underneath the lens of fugitivity, we can read how the evolution of her queer identity forces her to also go on the run, across multiple geographies, in an exhaustive attempt to find solid ground between the two worlds of her race and sexuality.

Lorde's evolution as a black lesbian woman in New York, also echoes Camp's articulation of "quotidian refusal" especially in her early adult years, after she moves out of her parent's home. Attempting to find herself inside through a series of tiny apartments, close friendships, and romantic trysts, Lorde's fugitivity places her body and her desires on the run from two different communities that are seemingly at war. As an adult, Lorde seeks a new community in which to root herself which will bear more "fruitful" experiences from the American landscape than the "[bitter]...exile" her family experienced in Harlem (*Zami* 104). Lorde finds many different women, as lovers and friends, who help her redefine and expand the prototype of her mother's love into something that can be sustained on her own terms.

This process of queer discovery in her adult years is not a seamless one. In New York Lorde equates her experiences being "young and black and gay and lonely" as its own form of "hell" (*Zami* 176). Lorde attempts to fashion a life and support system for herself from her mostly white lesbian friends. However she is very critical of her life as the "exotic sister-outsider" (*Zami* 177) in the New York gay bar scene where she was either a "closet student and invisible black" or a "closet dyke and a general intruder" (*Zami* 179). Even as an outcast from

her family and the greater black community for being a lesbian, Lorde is still not fully welcomed within the queer spaces to which she is relegated. Here, the black body is once again placed in exile from the *norm* even within subcultures that claim to refute notions of normalcy.

It is fitting then, that Lorde's first lesbian encounter in the text occurs, not in New York, but while on the run. Seeking employment and relief from her crippling poverty in the city, Lorde travels to Stamford, Connecticut, where she discovers the "dirty work" (*Zami* 125) of factory life, and her first female lover, Ginger. A divorced woman living with her mother, Ginger, is a woman who has defied the norms of respectable mother/womanhood by eschewing the need for a husband (and father for her child) by depending on her mother's lodging to supplement her own independence. In her friendship and eventual flirtation with Lorde, Ginger imposes her own ideas about Lorde as an openly gay woman, the "slick kitty from the city" (*Zami* 137) who is fully confident as a lover. Despite Lorde's insecurity about whether or not she can fulfill Ginger's expectation that the then eighteen-year-old could perform as a "real live New York City Greenwich Village Bulldagger" (*Zami* 138), she still lavishes in the experience of taking Ginger to bed.

Just as the scene with the mortar and pestle reveals the awakening of Lorde's early sexual erotic, her time in Stamford solidifies her decision to consummate her queer desires with another woman. She reflects, "I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I wondered, silently, how I had not always known that it would be so" (*Zami* 139). Ginger's body is, here, representative of what Lorde looks for while on the run, a space which grounds both her desires as a black woman and a woman who loves women. Ginger's body represents a sense of home, of being grounded in the fullest expressions of Lorde's sexual desires, but, more importantly, it is a

safe harbor for the wandering Lorde who is alienated by her family and unable to find stable identity within her queer community in New York. This home, however enticing, is not a permanent one. Ginger's body, while pleasurable, is not able to truly fulfill Lorde's sense of longing because their affair has to remain hidden from the policing of the greater community which deems their love abnormal. Ginger and Lorde's affair demands that the two women uphold a fugitive status, hiding in plain sight, shrouding their sexual liaison under the guise of a close friendship, which ultimately comes undone as the other workers in the factory soon turn on Lorde. Upon returning to New York to attend her father's funeral, Lorde is prompted to leave again, this time for Mexico, with the hope that traversing a new border might bring her closer to a place she can call home.

While her sexual experience with Ginger signifies consummation of her identity as a lesbian, Lorde struggles to reconcile her queer identity with that of her blackness. Monica B. Peal writes that in 1984, the year *Zami* was published, "black lesbian literature was a phenomenon without much of a heritage" (Pearl 309). While many scholars now read Lorde as a foremother of this tradition, her ability to articulate her love for women after her encounter with Ginger does not instantly quell her anxieties about navigating the world as both queer and black. In fact, the only space wherein Lorde's blackness is specifically seen as something uplifting is Mexico. Lorde "[swims]" into Mexico City through a "sea of strange sounds and smells" that "delight" her senses and also, for a brief moment, offers her a space where she is seen as beautiful and exotic (*Zami* 154). Lorde observes that "Being noticed and accepted without being known, gave me a social contour and surety...I felt bold and adventurous and special" (*Zami* 154). This narrative confidence is a far cry from the timid teenage Lorde who was terrified of her body and its limitations. Stepping into her identity as "la Señorita Moreña" Lorde steps into her

own skin, into her own beauty, and subsequently attempts to find a new home in her lover Eudora.

Fugitivity, as applied to Lorde's queer sexuality, helps to also contextualize Cuernavaca, the oasis-like political refuge some 45 miles from Mexico City where "middle-class nonconformists" (*Zami* 158) escaping the reaches of McCarthyism could lead a comfortable life. It is in this community that Lorde meets Eudora, a former journalist living with the interior scars of her past life and the external scars of her mastectomy. It is Eudora who first calls Lorde beautiful and, just as Ginger, their passion is palpable. The bodies of Ginger and Eudora can be read under the scope of fugitivity as varied landscapes wherein Lorde attempts to discover a space where her interior desires, and her evolving sense of self, can flourish. Similar to her childhood fantasies of Grenada, Lorde looks for a paradise lost which will provide a space for the fullest capacity of her queer and racial identity. However, the failure in this is Lorde's repeated attempt to try to locate her strength in other people, and not from her own interiority. While Mexico is seductive as the "land of color and dark people who said negro and meant something beautiful" (*Zami* 173), it is also a space controlled and policed by the same forces of repression that haunted her in the U.S. Despite being on the run, Lorde is still held captive by oppressive forces, unable to find a landscape that will ultimately grant her the agency to freely exist as an empowered, black, queer woman.

Lorde herself is also not someone who asserts that her life as an out gay woman was one of complete freedom. Even in the uptown New York, where femmes and butches ran free, Lorde was still fully aware of how her experience as a working- poor black woman limited her agency as compared to some of her white friends. Lorde's slow acceptance of her queer desires and transition out of the closet does not negate her fugitive status. She is on the run for most of the

text because she is constantly challenged by racial and gendered expectations of how black women should live and love under systems of oppression. Living and writing through the 1970's and 1980's, Lorde's other nonfiction work also reflects a clear understanding of how queer black women face harsh critiques from other black folks involved in the fight for liberation. Davis's text offers an example of such a critique, where she observes, questions, and ultimately, devalues queer and gender fluid relationships she encounters while in jail.

During her time in the House of D, Davis discovers an entire familial network comprised of imprisoned women. Female inmates ignored gender norms in their same-sex categorizations where the title of mother, father, daughter, aunt, or even uncle were delineated based on seniority and interpersonal relationships which were essentially gender fluid, Davis observes "the family system served as a defense" against the prison system and actually "humanized the environment and allowed identification with others within a familiar framework" (*An Autobiography* 53). Despite seeing the value in these networks of support, Davis "struck" by the "homosexuality at its core" (*An Autobiography* 54). Davis is most surprised by heterosexual women who were, in her opinion, attempting to "counteract some of the pain of jail life" by engaging in the "all-consuming...[escapism]" provided by lesbian encounters (*An Autobiography* 55). Davis ultimately devalues queer relationships as a distraction which stopped women from "developing their personal dissatisfaction" with society into a "political one" (*An Autobiography* 55). In short, Davis acknowledges the need for women to support each other while imprisoned, but only so far as it promotes the cause of the movement, a cause somehow hindered by the threat of queer connection.

Davis's characterization of queer relationships in *An Autobiography* reflects the ways in which even women involved in black liberatory politics, women who were critical of their male

counterparts for their limited perceptions of gender, at times reinscribed heteronormative oppression based on the fear that notions of queer love somehow endangered the cause. In his seminal text *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer Color of Critique*, Roderick Ferguson illustrates the sociological history of the American state's investment in the queering of black identity. Ferguson he observes the ways in which the "social order achieves normativity by suppressing intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality" for the purpose of promoting a form of "rationality" which is invested in "normative assumptions about citizenship and humanity" (Ferguson 83). In other words, the state's investment in heteronormativity, which trickles down to its citizens, is circular, both informed by, and also informing anxieties around deviation from power structures which value straight, white, men above all. This entire process presents a unique problem for black people who have been, since the days of slavery,²⁴ "located outside the idealized normative properties of rationality" (Ferguson 85). Davis's desire to equate lesbian relationships with escapism echoes this notion of "rationalizing" black sexuality in decidedly heteronormative terms, as the relationships between black men and black women were at the center of her understanding of black liberation.

Davis's observations of queer relationships is, like that of some of her male counterparts like George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver, a limiting illustration of black culture which seems antiquated in today's view. Given how much of *An Autobiography* centers on her relationship both professionally and personally with Jackson, who Davis all but deifies after his death, it is clear that her brand of politics in 1972 is one that is concerned with a future that supports black women and black men in revolutionary harmony. While there might be some tension between

²⁴ As an example, Ferguson offers the American Freedman Inquiry Commission, a governing board of white men whose job in 1863 was to inquire about, investigate, and target "non-monogamous and fluid intimate arrangements" within the communities of former slaves as a means of determining their eligibility for citizenship. Protected by the classic rhetoric of Christian values, these men "imposed heterosexual marriage," a privilege which ironically was long banned for slaves, as a means of unearthing non-normative black domestic spaces, therefore positioning "blacks as pathologically non-normative" (Ferguson 86).

Davis's and Lorde's texts regarding Davis's homophobic assertions, both women do offer key examples of how romantic and interpersonal relationships become the inspiration for liberatory practices aimed at creating a more inclusive future. To understand the ways in which both Davis and Lorde best articulate the potential black love as an inspiration for black liberation, I return to a consideration of political efficacy within practices of black mourning.

Friends, Lovers, and Comrades: A Return to Black Mourning

While the latter half of *An Autobiography* reads as both a love letter and eulogy for George Jackson, Davis does not frame her emotions during that time as an expression of mourning. "One of the things that we didn't do then was mourn," Davis says in an interview, "our strength was often defined by our ability to not allow the death of someone we loved to set us back" (Qtd. in Perkins 14). The tone of this assertion is one of nobility and pride. Revolutionaries, in her eyes, do not have time to stop and bereave the dead when the living are still under the boot heel of oppression. Davis's claim is also in alliance with Perkin's analysis of the political autobiographer as one who eschews the personal for the greater good of the struggle, although Davis's close focus on her fallen comrade and love interest in her text reflects a more complex expression of emotion than Davis herself might admit to.

Lorde challenges Davis's perspective, writing that the supposed line between the personal and the political, or to use her language the "spiritual" and the political, is reflective of a false dichotomy that "[results] from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge" (*Sister Outsider* 56). In this light, that which is deeply felt, like the loss of lover and friend, is intricately tied to other emotions embedded in the furthest reaches of our interiority, like sorrow, anger, and rage. Furthermore, while these emotions are often regarded as irrational, Davis and Lorde offer

examples of how death, loss, mourning, and rage, can be translated into an effective cultural and political action.

Lorde and Davis, who endure much loss throughout their lives, focus specifically on two people who represent in the text the deepest articulation of lost love. For Davis, as stated earlier, this figure is Jackson, another political prisoner, and activist whose nationwide campaign for freedom sets in motion the events that lead Davis to her own imprisonment,²⁵ separating them at the time of his death. Lorde, in turn, despite the long list of lovers she acknowledges in her story, focuses her deepest articulations of loss on her childhood friend, Gennie, the first girl with which she shares a homoerotic bond, who eventually takes her own life. Both of these figures represent not only loss and mourning, but the imaginative potential for love. Furthermore, in analyzing the ways in which both women mourn, we are able to understand the potential ways that black women's experiences shape and have shaped our understanding of black folks capacity for survival in the face of insurmountable odds.

Lorde's path to her sexuality was one tainted by recurring moments of confusion, sexual trauma, and physical violation. Overall, she does not give much time on the page to flesh out the personalities of her male lovers, especially when compared to that of the women whose bed she shared. Furthermore, while Lorde describes multiple accounts of sexual assault in her text, she does not, to borrow from Ana Hua, spend a great deal of time reflecting on the "impossible history...of sexual violence and violation" which she, like many women, face (Hua 120). There are many examples of violation, ranging from childhood, where Lorde endured the inappropriate groping of an adult man during her trips to the comic book store with her sister, through teen and adult years where, most notably, she is assaulted by a classmate of hers on a rooftop and made to

²⁵ It should be noted that Davis's arrest, which was justified by the fact that a gun registered in her name was used in a hostile takeover of a courthouse lead by George Jackson's brother Jonathan Jackson, was also maligned illegal and inappropriate abuses enacted by the federal and state government.

think that the damage caused in that moment is the reason for the late arrival of her menstruation. According to Hua, the omission of the details surrounding these events is not a refusal or silencing of trauma as “Lorde makes possible intrapsychic and intersubjective witnessing by reconstructing and telling the traumatic events, however briefly” (Hua 120) for her readers across generations. What we can read into this refusal to meditate on her sexual violation, is Lorde’s prioritization of other forms of trauma such as the emotional abuses of her mother, or the loss of a beloved, which, in turn, beget different modes of mourning.

While Lorde experiences many different forms of loss in the text — the heartbreak of lovers Eudora and Muriel and even the sudden death of her father — there is little time dedicated to a specific state of mourning. Despite the possibility, as Hua articulates, that “suffering exists in part beyond language” (Hua 120), Lorde does attempt to capture her mourning on the page. This occurs when Gennie, her childhood friend, commits suicide after enduring emotional and possible sexual abuse from her father. Gennie’s burial invokes in young Lorde a strange mix of both “melancholia and hopefulness” which demands that “life must continue on with a new sense of knowledge of loss and pain” (Hua 121). Gennie and Lorde’s relationship blossoms during and after the summer of 1948, shortly after Lorde’s political awakening during her trip to Washington D.C. Their friendship evolves, edging closer and closer towards the boundaries that separate intense but platonic closeness from actual sexual desire. Lorde reflects, “We sat and talked and drank coffee at the kitchen table, or lay naked on her mother’s sofa bed in the living room and listened to the radio and drank Champale” (*Zami* 91). Gennie, for Lorde, represented a freedom of the body and of emotion which was not available in her strict home.

Gennie and Lorde’s bond is forcibly broken when Gennie’s father emerges and seduces his estranged daughter to live with him. It is in this space where, behind closed doors, Gennie

suffers the emotional and possibly sexual abuse which leads to her death. Gennie, even after death, is a recurring figure which haunts Lorde in Stamford, Mexico, and during her adult years in the gay scene in New York City. It is only in reflection, by listing all of the things that she did not get to see and do with Gennie — the last thing listed being “make love” (*Zami* 97) — that Lorde reveals her as the first of many emerging queer desires during her childhood. To say that it was a crush is reductive, for years, Gennie’s presence in Lorde’s psyche is the embodiment of the type of love she searches for but cannot not find in the world.

Gennie is a specter of loss and mourning, popping up sporadically throughout of *Zami*. At the conclusion Lorde reflects that she “lost [her] sister, Gennie, to [her] silence and [Gennie’s own] despair, to both of [their] angers and to a world’s cruelty” to which the writers has never been able to “blind” herself to, making her, based on the world’s perspective, “mentally unhealthy” (*Zami* 252). However, given Lorde’s own articulation of the erotic as a chaotic power, her inability to blind herself to the cruel neglect which claimed Gennie’s life does not represent a lack, but represents the ultimate strength to see the world for what it is and not “settle” for the false hopes of a “convenient” or “merely safe” life. It is through Lorde and Gennie’s relationship that we can read one of the most important aspects of Lorde’s text, and her greater perspective on the black experience: that black suffering, black mourning, and black pain have, in spite of it all, planted seeds of intimate knowledge from which readers can see and learn how to survive in the face of insurmountable loss.

Returning to the notion of black women’s autobiography as a praxis for survival, while generations have looked to Lorde’s and Davis’s work as a means of inspiration in their own personal and political journeys, Lorde reminds readers that her first understanding of how to survive in the world came not from a book, but from her mother. Although estranged from her

mother for most of her adult life, and still reeling from the emotional abuse she endured as a child, Lorde remarks that she learned to survive the world based on the lessons her mother passed down to her. “Survival is the greatest gift of love,” Lorde writes (*Sister Outsider* 150). Historically, generations of black Americans have passed down similar knowledge on how to survive as an oppressed people in America.

In truth, living for centuries as an “endangered species” has made black Americans “fast learners” in regards to survival (*Sister Outsider* 135). Furthermore, it is this constant exposure to psychological and physical trauma which bonds black women and men, not, as it is for white Americans, false notions of gender dichotomy. Hortense Spillers canonical article “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” is central to illustrating this idea, as it asserts a new framework of understanding the generational trauma sparked by the transatlantic slave trade which “dislodges gender as the originary space defining difference” claiming instead that it is “racialized violence” (*Watcha* 305) which acts as the central point of divergence for black Americans. Spillers argues that what brings the descendants of enslaved Africans together is the rupture of slavery and the irreparable damage it enacted on the generations born in North America and beyond. It was this “New-World diasporic plight” which “marked a theft of the [black] body” and in turn “[severed] the captive body from its motive will and active desire” (Spillers 67). This black body, a “private and particular space” constantly preyed upon by a “convergence” of varied “fortunes” (Spillers 67) is one that was not offered the privilege of gendered difference as a means of protection. Spillers argues against gender difference precisely because the protections it offers were never afforded or envisioned for black folks in America.

Spillers text in particular is important to analyzing Lorde and Davis’s work because, emerging in 1987, it was one of the first articles that aimed to create a theoretical “vocabulary”

that could produce a “discourse” about slavery and its effect on the African Diaspora (*Watcha* 300) which centered the black woman and her experiences at its core. What Spiller’s article aimed to do was not only challenge preceding notions of gender normality and respectability politics for the African subject scattered throughout the Diaspora, but to definitively state that “black men can’t afford to appropriate the gender prerogatives of white men” because their historical experience has afforded them the more fruitful “opportunity to understand something about the female which no other community had the opportunity to understand” (*Watcha* 304). This speaks to a concurrent theme in both Davis’s and Lorde’s work, the dismantling of black patriarchy under the justification that black women have been, and continue to be, on the front lines against racial injustice. Black women and men have historically shared the burden of anti-black violence and thus black women are not offered the “protection” of femininity as white women are. Black women, cast as the “African female subject” endure both “internalized [violations] of the body and mind” but also “externalized acts of torture and prostration” at the hands of “male brutality” (Spillers 68). Therefore, the experience of black women, informed by their experience as the “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh” are subsequently “ungendered” in their oppression and subsequently offer society their bodies as a “text for living and dying” and a living “praxis and theory” for living under the constant threat of white supremacy (Spillers 68). Davis’s text echoes this notion of black women’s experiences as a new theory of revolution, specifically in the scene where the prosecuting lawyer in her trial reads a letter she wrote George Jackson, an act which anchors the central message of her autobiographical text.

Much of *An Autobiography* is a communication of love and respect for the plight of political prisoners, especially George Jackson and the other-other Soledad Brothers whom she describes as having “beautiful” and “virile” faces (*An Autobiography* 251). It is, however, too reductive to call it a love letter; it is more like a manifesto of political and personal admiration for Jackson’s role in the movement. Much of Davis’s depiction of Jackson is a means to show how he had, since his imprisonment, softened his views, especially on women’s role in the movement. In fact, Davis works hard in most of her text to depict male political prisoners as intellectual leaders with a beauty and grace that was not often discussed in accordance with black men in the mainstream media.

It is Jackson’s brother, Jonathan, who sets the events in motion which lead to Davis’s own imprisonment. Jonathan Jackson and other men, looking to stand a stand against the unjust imprisonment of his brother, led an armed, hostile takeover of the Marin County Courthouse where he was killed. One of the guns used in the takeover was traced back to Davis and charges were brought against her for, among other things, conspiracy to commit murder. Despite this, Davis saw Jon, as well as the entire Jackson family, as a victim of a system which fed off of the lives and energy of wayward black men. While his death at the courthouse takeover created in Davis a desire to develop a “constructive anger,” the murder of his brother George elevated those sentiments into a “properly placed rage” which would motivate her for the entirety of her trial (279, 319)

It is possible that Davis’s mourning of the Jackson brothers answers Lorde’s question in her essay “Uses of Anger:” “How do you use your rage?” (*Sister Outsider* 125). Anger, according to Lorde, is deeply tied to her survival as a black woman. Like the erotic, black women’s anger has historically been a driving force for change within the black community.

Anger, intentional and productive anger, especially in the face of oppression, is not the same as the internally immobilizing force of guilt, or the externally destructive power of hatred. Her assertion that black women have “learned to use anger as we have learned to use the dead flesh of animals” (*Sister Outsider* 133) reorients how we understand the relationship between anger and survival, one that values *living through* as opposed to living in spite of our deepest emotions. In the most traditional sense, Davis’s only description of grief in regards to Jackson’s is a brief burst of tears in the darkness of her cell. A deeper and more nuanced understanding of her expression of mourning requires that we understand her rage as an effective anger which is “expressed and translated into action” (*Sister Outsider* 127) for the cause of her own liberation and those others held immobile by the oppressive and systemic American stronghold. Through this understanding, the relationship between black death and black survival is also seen from a new position of hope based not on constructed fantasies of black domination, but generational memories of black growth.

The culmination of her rage as translated into action is articulated through Davis’s words, but ironically, via the voice of her opposition. In a letter written from Davis to Jackson, which was used in the state’s defense to try and discredit Davis’s political defense, she directly responds to Jackson’s criticisms of black women and subsequently makes an argument for black survival as an extension of unity. “To choose between various paths of survival,” the letter begins, “means the objective availability of alternatives” (*An Autobiography* 371). The “alternatives” Davis speaks reflect the perspective of black women—black mothers and sisters and black women who serve as both lovers and friends—who understand that the most effective path for survival must be inclusive. She then asserts that “no individual act or response can seize the scepter of the enemy” a poetic jab at the ego of masculinist black rhetoric which claims that

the rise of the black man will someone trickle-down freedom to the black women; this is not a reality, but an “evasion of the real problem” (*An Autobiography* 371-372). The “real problem” as Davis illustrates across her text is too complex and far-reaching to be won by the advancement of one group, or even subgroup over another. This is the “truth about survival,” Davis claims, that it must be a “collective enterprise” that does not “order” itself around “annihilation” and death, but life (*An Autobiography* 371). This letter, which serves as the narrative peak of the courtroom scene, echoes much of what other black feminists have illustrated throughout this project, a need to embrace, rather than divide. However, more than any other text, Davis’s explicitly articulates in her letter that “survival” and revolution as a “dialectical movement” demands not a gendered conclusion, but collective investment in new visions of freedom.

Reading Davis’s autobiography alongside Lorde’s reveals a specific tension in how black women and black men settle for oppressive notions of gender and sexuality which offer no real protection from the constant negation of blackness and disregard for black life. I chose specifically to place two women in conversation with one another as a means to reveal those complex systems of oppression can and do reproduce itself, coded as they may be, in the embedded perspectives of one’s allies. As an autobiographical project, both Davis and Lorde offer their lives and their texts as lessons from which black readers can learn from in the Post-Civil Rights era and even today. Spillers writes that in looking at the legacy of the African Diaspora, black women’s experiences and perspectives often “break in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an ‘illegitimacy’” (Spillers 80) within the masculinist order. Her assertion that it is the “heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood” (Spillers 80) highlights the need for

diverse perspectives of blackness within nonfiction generationally as a means to produce new theoretical lenses that shape a nuanced vision of what freedom means to the oppressed.

Autobiography has historically been, through the Western perspective, a means to fashion an identity against one's cultural backdrop. For African Americans, the use of autobiography is made even more important in the ways it was used to establish black personhood as a political force that could engender real, tangible change. Furthermore, the complex identity politics embodied in black women's experiences requires that autobiographical projects evolve from the prioritization of a heroic individual to that of a brave and courageous community. Lorde and Davis specifically help us understand the ways in which black women's experiences have helped reshape the way we understand survival under systems of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. Black lives under these systems are always politicized even if the writing they produce is not political in nature.

While there has still been no answer, and probably never will be, to whether the political movements of the Post-Civil Rights era were as effective as people imagined, looking back at these texts, just as looking back at slave narratives of capture and escape, at least offers evidence of how black folks have survived, and also, in many ways, thrived, in spite of assassinations, government crackdowns, COINTELPRO, Reaganomics, police brutality, generational trauma, and more. Too often missing in the lineage of black trauma and black mourning is a understanding of the survivability of the black body and the black community. To evade the "condition of forgetting" which often robs revolutionary movements of their "historical memory" (*Watcha* 306) our definition of survival must be self-reflexive, constantly looking back at itself and also looking beyond the limited and restrictive notions of identity politics. Countless activists and scholars look to both Davis and Lorde as symbols of black radicalism, intellect,

artistry, and political leadership. Davis, who is still actively touring, lecturing, and speaking on emerging social justice movements in Chicago, Ferguson, and Baltimore, serves as a model for public service and anti-racist work. Even after her death in 1992, Lorde's poetry, essays, and scholarship continues to flourish from generation to generation filled with those unraveling the mysteries of the erotic. In that effort, looking at how generations of black folks have lived, through the life-writing of those who endured in the past, will help us understand and develop a new theory and praxis which can reshape our current moment so that new tactics of survival can be planted for futurity of freedom still unknown.

Conclusion

This project is one that is unapologetic about two distinct things, first is its dedication to the investigation and examination of black life/lives, the second is its determination that resilience, resistance, and hope are still viable frameworks for understanding the world and for establishing one's identity even in the midst of turmoil. While one cannot discuss black life without also unpacking centuries of violence, suppression, and death, this project is one where the question and concern regarding the survivability of the black body are always central.

Christina Sharpe, in her 2016 text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* centers her scholarship on the notion of "wake work" which she describes as the "plotting, mapping, and collecting [of] archives of the everyday of black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt" such death (Sharpe 13). For centuries black Americans have made a home in the rupture that is/was transatlantic slavery. It is, the "disaster" that both "was and is," planned yet "deeply atemporal" (Sharpe 5); trauma which is historical and still, somehow remains unbound by time and space.

Despite her deep theory and rich poetic prose, I am most interested in Sharpe's illustration of her mother, whom she describes as a woman who "worked at joy" and "made livable moments" (Sharpe 4) for herself and her children because she believed that they were, in fact, deserving of such. This so much of reminds me of my own mother, and all of the other women in my life who "experienced, recognized, and lived subjection" but did not necessarily only live in subjection as the subjected" (Sharpe 4). Survival is more than just the will to live; it is also beyond the inspiration to thrive socially or politically. Survival is also not always achieved through large acts of resistance, but through small acts of kindness and bravery that seem, to the

untrained eye, too mundane. I chose the writers examined in this project because, in one way or another, they too taught and inspired in me brief lessons of black resilience even when I was unaware of the gift they were offering. As a writer and as a scholar, I have constructed this thesis as a brief mapping of my own intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic family tree, of which there are many more branches to etch.

In this project, I have attempted to examine black nonfiction through various frameworks that speak to the importance of genre, identity, gender, sexuality, nationhood, and politics during the Post-Civil Rights Era. While this project was first envisioned as a strict examination of black writers' contribution to nonfiction from the perspective of genre and print culture, the lives of each writer inspired many shifts and changes, all of which were welcome. In unpacking the impact of the Post-Civil Rights Era, one question on which scholars, specifically Black Arts scholars, tend to focus their work is whether or not the period can be seen as useful or detrimental to our current cultural and political moment?

To answer this I turn once again to Lorde, who early on taught me how to look inward for the knowledge necessary to navigate an oppressive society. She writes, "there are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish new breath and power in our own living" (*Sister Outsider*, 134). Looking back at the 1960's in particular, a time which bore many transitions for this nation, some good and others less so, Lorde's calls us to "[examine] the combination of [both] triumphs and errors" and through a critique of the past, reveal the agency we have in our current moment to battle against the "dangers of an incomplete vision" (*Sister Outsider*, 134). This project is one attempt at that critique, one of many that will continue to do the work of locating and practicing theories which center blackness, womaness, queerness, and the erotic as an epistemological framework both inside and outside of the university structure.

Echoing Lorde's sentiment at the end of *Zami* I want to declare that everything I know about survival I learned from those who love me and have struggled for it. This includes family, friends, teachers, strangers, and loved ones no longer living, each of which who have contributed to and invested in my work. I am thankful for their faith and their sometimes harsh truths. Although there are many more distractions in the form of visual and digital communication, we still have not escaped the violence which so defined the Post-Civil Rights landscape. There is no escaping one's biology. Racist and oppressive violence is the legacy of the U.S. Looking at the rise in police brutality, neoliberal political regimes, the rise of the far right and neo-Naziism, it is clear that the specter of American racism is going nowhere anytime soon. Fortunately, neither are the people who are dedicated to creating a more inclusive, reflexive, and critical future.

Crawford's notion of anticipatory aesthetics, which I reference in the first chapter of this project, is applicable not only to this project but also to the ongoing project of defining the legacy of this current moment. Crawford differentiates anticipation from waiting as anticipation offers a sense of temporality which is "deeply tied to the future" (*Post-Blackness* 31). While many in the Post-Civil Rights Era, namely men, established their rhetoric under the guise that their ideas were the fulfillment of the unique and radical newness, the period is best seen, like the Civil Rights Era before it, as a moment of "pregnant anticipation," (*Post-Blackness* 33) built within a body of believers which perpetually gestures towards a birthing of the next generation. This is a project that is anchored by notions of futurity.

Futurity is not escapism, nor is it time travel, it is a gesture towards an unknowable space and time that is birthed from the rupture of the unknown and spoken into existence through the experiences of our "known, lived, and un/imaginable lives" (Sharpe 18). Within the legacy of black nonfiction, we discover a small part of something larger which can be pulled apart,

examined, critiqued, and placed back together as something new. For those who have learned how to live, love, mourn and survive in America from this legacy, it is imperative that we offer new and emerging ways to continue this practice.

The texts studied in this project are just a few works of the legacy of black nonfiction which has established the academic, political, literary, and intellectual merit of black Americans across history. The impact of these contributions to black life writing, among many others, have paved the way for new expressions of black nonfiction which continue the tradition of archiving black lives in the midst of racial turmoil. Recent publications like Jesmyn Ward's *The Men We Reap*, *Eloquent Rage* by Brittany Cooper, and *When They Call You a Terrorist* by Black Lives Matter founders Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele are just some of the many emerging political and theoretical nonfiction works that continue the tradition of figures like Davis, Baldwin, Lorde, and Walker. These women represent the new and emerging traditions of black nonfiction, offering stories of their lives that will one day inspire new generations to refute the systems which demand their oppression. Most importantly, they will offer new examples of survival which respond to our current relationship to those systems which so rapidly adapt from era to era.

Ward is a particularly strong figure within the current movement of black nonfiction as her anthology *The Fire This Time*, inspired by Baldwin's own 1963 *The Fire Next Time*, features essays by some of today's most prominent thinkers, activists, and artists on the current state of the black experience in America. In her introduction to the collection, she reflects that the project emerged from her fear and anxiety following the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin and her subsequent need to hear the voices of other black folks dealing with such a shocking yet familiar loss. "We're tired of feeling futile in the face of this ever-present danger," Ward writes, "this

omnipresent history, predicated as this country is, founded as this country was, on our subjugation” (9). Futurity is once more important in understanding her words of distress. No one knew that a project started in 2012 over the death of one young man would also speak to and speak for the loss of countless other black lives at the hands of police brutality, acts then seemingly justified by strategic government negligence. However tragic this may be, the essays which Ward chose to include offer her “hope” that there is “power in words” and also in “asserting our existence, our experience, our lives, through words” (Ward 9-10). In beginning this project, my hope, a hope that is articulated through the notion of survival, recognizes the power in weaponizing text and using print culture to send waves of disruption which are felt decades after a book or article or poem is published.

In articulating my hopes, the hope which drives this project, it is imperative to offer in this conclusion a clarification of what I mean by survival. While I view resilience as something tied directly to a physical body, and also thriving as connected to socio-economic advancement, survival is for me, and in this project, a word which embodies parts of these things while also transcending them. Echoing Davis’s assertion in her letter to Jackson, survival is about more than just the preservation of a single life or even the uplift of a single community. It is a notion which connects the spiritual and interior intelligence of a single person to a greater community, that allows for various groups to recognize forces for destruction as a threat which reaches beyond their life experience. Survival from this perspective is pervasive, it is, self-reflexive, and most importantly, it is not attainable without all of our deepest dedication.

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