Imagine Another World: A Philosophical Approach to Black Speculative Arts and Literature

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Abstract

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Imagine Another World responds to the surge in horror and science fiction in contemporary Black cultural and theoretical projects. This work reads into the expressed conditions of Blackness that yearns for and that builds other material or immaterial realities. Worldbuilding is a way for collective Black imaginations to experience another world that is at the very least different from the anti-Black world order. Throughout each of the four chapters, this interdisciplinary work engages speculative literature, visual arts, and films of the 21st century, including Tananarive Due's "The Rider" (2023), Wangechi Mutu's *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012), and Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019). Some of the questions that run throughout the chapters are: Why would Black cultural producers need to explore and build other worlds? How are these other worlds built? What do they look like? How can they be accessed or known, or how do they deliberately prevent access? These questions provide a philosophical exploration of the otherworldly representations in contemporary Black arts.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

A Wonderous and Terrifying World: Blackness in Contemporary Science Fiction and Horror

What does Blackness look like in another world? This question would serve as an impetus for a project that explores contemporary Black American science fiction and horror cultural productions— such as novels, films, and visual arts.[1] When approaching this robust archive with philosophical questions of alternative ways of being, relating, and knowing, I develop arguments, analyses, and theories that engage Black methods of worldbuilding as imaginative and communal means of creating spaces that hold otherworldly desires. I pull from Black philosophical, feminist, and queer theories of alterity, affect, ecstasy, and survival despite being in a "real world" that tries its damndest to prevent such survival. This project responds to the surge in horror and science fiction modes of speculation in contemporary Black cultural and theoretical projects and reads into the expressed conditions of Blackness that yearns for and that builds other material (or immaterial) realities. As Robin DG Kelley makes clear, Black methods of freedom dreams are "born *against*…nightmares" of white supremacist methods of making Black being and knowing inferior.[2]

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[1] There are a few incidents throughout the project where I explore Black science fiction and horror in other Black diasporic and transnational regions, such as artists and writers from Caribbean, Nigerian, and Kenyan origins. Additionally, there are moments throughout the project where I examine works that may not have historically been named horror or science fiction; however, I still read into their otherworldly and gruesome representations.

[2] Kelley labels these nightmares "fascist," and continues by calling attention to global wars, state violence, neoliberalism and exploitative world markets, corrupt and empowered political leaders, and genocides. Kelley sees freedom dreams in the 2020 protests against police, in decolonialization studies, in P-Funkadelics music, and in Noname's book club, among other examples. See Robin D. G, Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Beacon Press, 2022), xviii, emphasis original.

During the summer of 2020, I started to feel hopeless about the insufficiency of the present world.[3] There was a large display of activism against the killing of Black lives at the hands of police. George Floyd's life was taken away by a police officer filled with a sense of power. Although one of the last words that Floyd spoke, "I can't breathe," became a rallying chant that sparked the protests, the protests were a response to a long legacy of anti-Black violence in law enforcement and criminalization against Black people, including Black women's lives— Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and Natasha McKenna— and Black queer lives— Mya Hall and Kayla Moore.[4] The 2020 protests fall in line with numerous uprisings and rebellions, some peaceful, some destructive, throughout the decades and centuries of Black people fighting against the persistent and systemic anti-Black racism, murder, and violence that travels across countless social tributaries and throughout the American history of Black civil and human rights.[5] That is, the 2020 uprisings looked similar to Los Angeles uprisings in 1992, where

[3] The present world could be described using José Muñoz's language, "here and now," because Muñoz uses the phrase to point towards ideologies that assume that there isn't a version of reality that lies outside of colonial, logical ways of thinking about time, materiality, and relationship. His work is to resist stagnant concepts of "here and now" to think about queer futurity that is both within realities and outside of reality's bounds. Other scholars, such as Nadia Ellis's *Territories of the Soul* (2015) and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's "The Black Ecstatic" (2018), use "here and now" to discuss the insufficiencies of a world that is built through anti-Black logics of policing, separation, and government control. See José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (1st ed. New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1; Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 2-3; Aliyyah I Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic." *GLQ* 24, no. 2–3 (2018): 343-345.

[4] The evocation of names is nowhere near the expansive and long list of Black people killed at the hands of police who have no regard for the life within Black bodies. In an interview with Amna Nawaz, Professor Eddie S Glaude Jr. discusses the legacies of police violence against Black lives— friends, family, children. Glaude compounds this with Black life taken away by the lack of support during the pandemic, along with indecent housing and unlivable wages. See Eddie S. Glaude, "How Response to George Floyd's Death Reflects "Accumulated Grievance" of Black America," filmed May 2020 at PBS NewsHour Interview by Amna Nawaz, Arlington, VA, video, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/may-29-2020-pbs-newshour-full-episode.

[5] Angela Jones, ed, *African American Activism and Political Engagement: An Encyclopedia of Empowerment*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), xv, 57.

people were rebelling against police physical violence use publicly on Rodney King. [6] Images from that time show sites of large clouds of smoke and hellish fires surrounding local business and restaurants.[7] Similar large and destructive uprisings happened during the 1960's, like the Watts uprising in 1965, Detroit rebellion in 1967, and Chicago uprising in 1968, which had the purpose of fighting against murders by police and hazardous working conditions.[8] Large violent uprising and collective rebellions make sense when a race continues to experience tortuous and generational death, harm, and neglect.

In 2020, police cars were burned. Corporations were looted. City streets were taken over. Interstates were blocked. Dark clouds of smoke filled the air from the protest destruction and from the police institutions being fully enflamed.[9] The visuals and imagery of the 2020 uprising looked like chaos and destruction to that which consistently forecloses on Black life. This explosive anger was a demand for a better life because caring about human life and how we relate to each other was up for heated political debate.[10] Collective and communal organizing not only imagined what could make this world feel more sufficient, they also brought forth practices and strategies that showed a commitment to changing the world. One of the reasons why Kelley calls widespread protests during the summer of 2020 "Black Spring" is because the rebellions ushered blooming community methods to attend to the loss brought forth by systems of power.[11]

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[6] Ibid, 320.
[7] Anjuli Sastry Krbechek and Karen Grigsby Bates, "When LA Erupted in Anger: A Look Back at the Rodney King Riots," *NPR*, April 26, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots.
[8] Angela Jones, *African American Activism and Political Engagement*, xv; Daniel Hautzinger, "Chicago's 1966 Division Street Riot," *WTTW*, September 2, 2020. https://interactive.wttw.com/playlist/2020/09/02/division-street-riot
[9] Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," *New York Times*, Nov 5, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html
[10] R.C Helfers et al., "Guest editorial: Policing in the aftermath of the 2020 protests: Lessons learned and evolving strategies for reform," *Policing: An International Journal*, Vol. 45 No. 4 (2022): 541. https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-08-2022-200
[11] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xvi.

Through highlighting the central aims for Queer and Trans Liberation, Mutual Aids, Disability Justice, Decolonization, and other paths of collective dreams and action for liberation, Kelley makes clear that Black radical imaginations that desire for the end of oppressive systems not only critically examine the ways the world is not enough, but they invent practices and strategies that desire to build a world that could be enough.[12] Furthermore, Kelley notices how the practices developed from "Black Spring" rebellion has its roots in late 20th century organizing as a response to " Clinton-era neo-liberalism …when new movements had emerged to resist the war on drugs, the war on terror, anti-Black and anti-immigrant racism" among other oppressive modes that have operated and created a world that harms Black, Brown, and Indigenous life at many intersections.[13] Kelley insists that these collective and communal organizing "represent a convergence of movements that had spent years resisting state violence and neoliberalism, while cultivating abolitionist dreams of a world without oppression and exploitation."[14] In a similar vein, Joy Brooke Fairfield's "Performance and Protest as Creative World-Building for Black Liberation" looks at the activism and artistic work of Jordan Occasionally and their leadership in the Memphis protest that contributed to "Black Spring."[15] Employing "worldbuilding," Fairfield sees how Occasionally's work is influenced by the "1960s civil rights movement and the world-building work of the Black Panther Party."[16] Fairfield sees how creative arts, especially music, and activism work together to invent new practices that not only challenge the normative "death-

[12] Ibid, xxxii-xl.
[13] Ibid, xx.
[14] Ibid, xxi.
[15] Joy Brooke Fairfield, "Performance and Protest as Creative World-Building for Black Liberation," *Performance Research* 27, no. 3–4 (2022): 92.; Kelly, *Freedom Dreams,* xvi
[16] Fairfield, "Performance and Protest," 92.

dealing" world order but also imaginatively represents another way that we can be, feel, think, and relate to each other in this world.[17]

I begin with a discussion of Black activism, rebellions, and riots as indicative of Black communities desiring and building another world because I argue that Black fictive and imaginative worldbuilding seen in Black cultural production helps feed the desire for another world, and through engaging with the works, we experience another world. In *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies,* abolition lawyer Andrea Ritchie gathers police and carceral abolitionist to critically examine the dynamic between imagining and changing the world.[18] That is, to move our world into a world that is more righteous, we need to begin with imagination to envision this world. Walidah Imarisha is a part of the conversation and offers the term, "visionary fiction."[19] Visionary fiction sees the way speculative fiction is inherently connected to social change. Thus, the genre can be a guide for collective worldbuilding. Imarisha writes:

> Visionary fiction is fundamentally concerned with how we reshape this world: it's an all-encompassing term for any fantastical art (speculative fiction, horror, magical realism, fantasy, etc.) that might aid in creating social change and a way to differentiate between more mainstream science fiction that most often reproduces reactionary or society's dominant politics.[20]

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[17] Kelly, *Freedom Dreams,* xix.
[18] Andrea Ritchie, *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies*. (Emergent Strategy Series. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2023), 7. https://search-ebscohost-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=3391710&site=ehost-live.
[19] Walidah Imarisha, "Visionary PRACTICE: To Build a Future Without Police and Prisons, We Have to Imagine It First," in *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies,* ed. Andrea Ritchie (Chico: AK Press, 2023), 30.
[20] Ibid.

I am interested in engaging in visionary fictions to see how such reading analysis sees speculative works as informing social movements that seem to change the world. As well as vice versa, social movements inspired world changing fiction. Throughout this project I argue that speculative fictive art, literature, and film, especially the work of horror and science fiction, are didactic and give us strategies to build another world violently and drastically. This violence it's not necessarily just for the sake of violence but is connected to a deep, rich, collective feeling of rage and anger that science fiction and horror aesthetics and genre expectations speak to. Furthermore, this project pays attention to the impossibilities within speculative fiction. Although I see visionary fiction as being very crucial to a study of speculative works, attending to impossibilities allows more time for imaginative play. And the space for imaginative play allows for experiences of those impossibilities. I see Black cultural producers engaging in impossibilities through elusive yet firm world building strategies, like singer and songwriter Aliah Sheffield's "Earth is Ghetto" (2020).

Sheffield was recently signed to Def Jam Recording in 2023 but has created independent songs since the 2010's. Her melodic and soulful voice is powerful yet soft with hints of whispers. Her lyrics talk about introverted concerns of loving solitude and despising cruel social treatments. Her new EP is entitled *This Is for Anyone Who Is Sick of Earth* and one of the hits on the record is "Earth is Ghetto." The song was released as an independent single on YouTube in Fall of 2020, right after the summer of destructive protests. The song accompanies a modest video of her playing the piano and singing into the microphone while making expressive eyes to the camera. Right after the release, the video went viral across social media platforms.[21] How can

[21] Aliah Sheffield (@AliahSheffield), "Earth is Ghetto (This is for anyone who is sick of earth)," YouTube Video, December 16, 2020, https://youtu.be/vr2xMRSObto.

we live in a world where our lives are up for debate? Sheffield suggests that we leave Earth. Sheffield writes:

> Earth is ghetto I wanna leave
>
> Can you beam me up
>
> I'm out on the street
>
> By the corner store, you know the one on 15th?
>
> Got a bright shirt on, so I'm easy to see
>
> I've been down here, stranded indefinitely
>
> I can't reach my planet, but I need to leave
>
> You should see these people it's hard to believe
>
> How they treat each other it's hard to conceive[22]

"Earth is Ghetto" is a call to members of another planet to come pick her up. She laments being stranded on Earth for an overextended amount of time. At first the song seems to be a satirical critique of global suffering caused by capitalist gain, brutal punishment inherent in criminalization and law enforcement, and the paradoxical and violent ways in which systems of power produce relationality. For example, further in the song, Sheffield points to homelessness and hunger that many people must experience even though there are billionaires hoarding wealth.[23] In the same stanza, she points to politicians who get elected to office based on false promises.[24] Outside of Sheffield's song, we can continue to list reasons why Earth might be considered "ghetto," especially if we invoke Amanda Seales's use of "ghetto"—"raggedy, works

[22] Ibid, 0:35
[23] Ibid, 1:02.
[24] Ibid, 1:04.

improperly, and acts a mf fool."[25] That is, we continue to see disenfranchised lives being taken into the prison system to increase economic production on the backs of their stolen labor, and we continue to see families removed from their homes to build gentrifying neighborhoods.[26] However, Sheffield's "Earth is Ghetto" affirms pessimistic beliefs by not calling for a reform or potentiality that one can hope for on Earth. Thus, many sentiments from Black disenfranchised communities make clear that the only solution is the destruction and abandonment of these systems.[27] Sheffield metaphorically and elusively points to alternative ways of being and embodying life in our expansive galaxies.

What is particularly interesting is the virality of the song, which speaks to a common understanding of this hidden, elusive other world. Black people shared this hidden knowing of another world with her— creating the world and affirming it. Black people shared their collaborations with Sheffield's song on their platforms: Vocalist created videos harmonizing with Sheffield and each other (@Rahbiraw, January 12, 2021.); Podcast producers discussed the song and shared their thoughts (@earthisghettopodcast); musicians overlaid their instruments with Sheffield's vocals and remixed them (@Forrest Del, February 4, 2021); Comedians, actors, and writers performed parodies and skits inspired by the songs longing to go back to another planet (@chriscarlotv958, Jan 10, 2021). The virality of the song– the chorus– adds to the

[25] The full tweet reads, "Instead of saying something is 'ghetto' say it's 'government' bcuz our govt personifies what we actually mean when we say ghetto. It's raggedy, works improperly, and acts an mf fool." See Amanda Seales (@amandaseales), "Instead of saying…," *X* Tweet, February 6, 2021.
[26] Helfers , "Policing in the aftermath of the 2020 protests," 541.
[27] These sentiment of destruction as opposed to reform can be heard in activist and abolitionist communities. In discussing abolition of police systems, Andrea Ritchie, adrienne maree brown and Alexis Pauline Gumbs insists that with abolition comes new and alternative systems that speaks to individual community needs for safety and protection. Additionally, in discussing the anti-Black violences of welcome systems, Dorothy Roberts asserts, "You can't fix a system that isn't broken." Meaning, the systems of power that govern and destroy Black life was intentional at the birth of modernity and enslavement and continues to be intentional present-day. See Andrea Ritchie, *Practicing New World*, 260.

sincerity and creation of this knowing of a hidden, elusive place that exists elsewhere. Although all the skits and lyrics are imagined scenarios, what is very real is the collective sentiment of a firm longing for a place where Black people can live, play, breathe, and be with each other and a knowing that this place is not in the current rendition of the world.

I am curious about the world that Sheffield and others never fully reveal, name, or describe. More so, I am interested in the knowing, expressed sincerely and genuinely, that she and others are not of this Earth. I am curious about how the knowing challenges and affirms various approaches to living. I am also curious about why speculative and otherworldly invocations are necessary to express such pessimistic views on Earthly (or what is signified by the term) ways of life. Can we look to Black speculative projects, like Sheffield's, to get a greater sense of other elusive knowing about alternative Black life? What is it about Black gendered and racialized sensibilities that is formed by experiencing and seeing continued, seemingly never-ending, racial, heteronormative, and gendered violence against Black people with immunity—that creates such knowledge about other ways of life?[28] How is such hidden knowledge communally shared? How does this knowing speak to communities' desire to build alternative ways of life by radically reimagining ideologies, relationalities, and ways of being in the world that do not make sense to the logics brought to us by colonization and modernity?

In short, this dissertation, *Imagine Another World: A Philosophical Approach to Black Speculative Arts and Literature*, engages Black collective and communal desires to destroy or leave the world that runs off of Black death and precarity to death, as seen here in modes of grand uprising and angry, disappointed, and pessimistic expressions . Although I look at

[28] To the point of oppression ushering in new alterity, Kelley calls the 2020 rebellion "Black Spring" because amid the chaos and destructions are new modes in activism, studies, and cultural production that offer another ways to approach life. See Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, xvi.

speculative cultural productions more largely, I place emphasis on horror and science fiction because of the genres' abilities to build worlds that are quite literally out of this world and time– – in space, in future, in past, or in some sort of hybrid-present— and build worlds that hold Black desires that are taboo, violent, and dreadful, which emphasizes the chaos and destruction of the world.

To move through the introduction, I start with four theoretical strains. I make a case for necessity of imaginative worldbuilding for the sake of Black experiences that are impossible or vexed in the world as it stands. I situate my understanding of worldbuilding in Black science fiction and horror criticism. I then move into philosophical concerns of being and knowing alterity. I join Black philosophers, or those who employ such inquiries, in not only expressing why such alterity is necessary but how such alterity ushers in new reading practices to take toward cultural productions of Black life. To continue methods of reading Black texts, I look towards the methodologies in Black queer and feminist studies. I see how horizon and ecstasy offers lenses through which I can read horror and sci-fi for the ways the productions build impossible worlds that can be experienced in the body and out of the body. I, then, end with how I move my arguments through each of the chapters.

Methods of Worldbuilding in Black Studies

Worldbuilding is the imaginative process of Black communities, artists, and writers making sense out of new and inventive ways of relating, knowing, and being with each other. Such inventions move away from the normative world order built by the 17th century dehumanizing mission to bring forth a "New World" that was to be realized on the Indigenous lands of America, South America, and Caribbean islands at the use and disposal of Black life,

bodies, and souls.[29] A close reading of the methods and practices of worldbuilding reveals why Black imaginations build worlds that experiment with what is considered normal, as well as highlights Black values, concerns, and needs that cannot be obtained, or is difficult to obtain, in our current material reality. Worldbuilding is a way to vicariously experience another way of life because it confronts the possibility that the material world will never be a sufficient world for Black life.[30] Therefore, imagining other (im)possibilities— other possible communication patterns, other ways of relating, of being and embodying life, of making art, and of loving that are not possible in the current world— allows for alternative experiences.[31] In this section, I examine how scholars define, see, and engage worldbuilding in speculative practices. I argue that worldbuilding is a collective endeavor where imaginations come together and co-imagine and co-build a world that provides experiences of desires that are impossible or forbidden. Then, I consider how Black science fiction and horror genres employ worldbuilding to offer the visuals,

[29] In regard to colonial new world, I'm taking inspiration from: Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Jennifer L. Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproductions and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Brion David's *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[30] The expression in the former part of the sentence has roots in afropessimism and Black pessimism, or adjacent theories who express the inherent Black death and inferiority that is needed in the reproduction of the most power world social, political, religious, and economic systems. I pull inspiration from: Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation*. (1st ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Huey Copeland, "Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics: An Open Question," *ASAP Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020); Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions*, 2011; and Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[31] The use of "(im)possible" is an acknowledgement that Black studies is what John Murillo III call imaginative project of impossibilities. Being influenced by the alterity of Black pessimistic projects, Murillo writes, "The work of black studies is imaginative work, the product and the process of working imaginations of black folk who imagine from their own 'unthought' position— who routinely *do* the unthinkable while also *being* unthinkable. This is the imaginative of work of black creation." See John Murillo, *Impossible Stories: On the Space and Time of Black Destructive Creation*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021), 79.

metaphors, and stories that make the collective imagining more real because the imagined world continues to be built in Black audience's imaginations.[32]

By close reading and analyzing artifacts, literature, and art for their worldbuilding aesthetics, literary and cultural theorists and critics demonstrate how to engage in Black representations to offer new and alternative ways to understand Black life in the past, present, and future.[33] Kevin Quashie's *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* reads the world-making aesthetics in Black poetry and explores how these works of literature imagine, create, and call attention to Black worlds that go against the logic of coloniality. I am influenced by Quashie's methodology and reading practice. He looks at the aesthetics of Black poetry— the diction, the structure, and the flow— and allows for an imagining and embodying of a Black world that the poems allude to.[34] Scholars of worldbuilding seek out the ways Black alterity is a power resistance tool to the legacies of anti-Blackness. They see how worldbuilding is a collective communal tool that might be alluded to in the text but also takes place in the communities outside of the texts.

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[32] In imagining a Black world, Kevin Quashie speaks on the notion of Black cultural production creating for Black audiences. Quashie writes, "What I want is the freeness of a black world where blackness can be of being, where there is no argument to be made, where there is no speaking to or against an audience because we are all the audience there is . . . and, as such, the text's work can manifest an invitation to study and to becoming for the black one." See Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 10.

[33] Although I will call attention to a couple of literary and cultural critics in the paragraph and section, here are some influential critics who inform my otherworldly reading practice who aren't closely read in the introduction: Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81; Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[34] Quashie uses aesthetics to explore the animation of aliveness that poetic works can accomplish. He writes: "In attending to the aesthetics of the created things: its shape and form, its poetics, its effects and affects rendered via language." See Quashie, *Black Aliveness,* 57.

Worldbuilding is connected to world-imagining.[35] Because Black worldbuilding is done in community, it requires intimate connections of co-imagining. Such intimacy is not in the open and further reinforces what is impossible about the imagined worlds. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, literary and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman demonstrates such intimacy.[36] In order to practice a counter-historical account that considers the life of Black women more robustly, Hartman's prose doesn't seek to place the women again in the position of under-seen, under-thought, under-recognized, yet tries to understand what isn't recorded in white supremacist artifacts— their desires, wishes for a life in the city, their sisterhoods, and their everyday experience. Although Hartman's work is situated in archival methodologies and challenging historical accounts, I resonate with Hartman's readings because she sees the ways Black communities build worlds while they were within a larger world that saw them as nothing. In one scene, Hartman discusses the burden of visuality in early 20th century Philadelphia's Black Belt because photographing Black people in inadequate housing was an anti-Black way of representing Black life as a "race or class…[that had] evidence [of] failure or improvements."[37] She notes that the photographs don't capture everything.[38] In shifting to a second person narration, she imagines the techniques of Black people to use the uncaptured space as one to plan freedom dreams unsurveilled. Hartman writes:

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[35] In *Impossible Stories*, Murillo studies Black worldbuilding and differentiates between working and imagining. "Work and works do not merely emerge from the imagination. Instead, 'imagining' and 'working' overlap: To work is, at least in part, to imagine." See Murillo, *Impossible Stories*, 79.
[36] Hartman engages archival materials, such as photographs, ledgers, notes, and letters, that are meant to reflect the lives of Black women who lived in urban areas of New York City and Philadelphia. Yet, the ways the Black women are recorded are in alignment the social and economic precarity. See Saidiya V Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. (First edition. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 21.
[37] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 22.
[38] Ibid.

> In the hallway, you wonder will the world always be as narrow as this, two walls threatening to squeeze and crush you into nothingness. So you imagine other worlds, sometimes not even better, but at least different from this. You and your friends hatch plots of escape and dereliction. This Black interior is a space of thought and action, for study and vandalism, for love and trouble.[39]

Hartman's "Black interior" is off-limits to the cameras that seek to capture and label Black life. This space is the very generative place for Black dreams of imagining another world that is a "at least different."[40] It is not just a small enclosed physical space, but also a space in the mind/imagination. Black speculative practices, such as Hartman's second person prose that imagines what could be possible for people recorded in archives, acknowledges that when the imagination speaks to others, influencing their imagination, we can engage in what Hartman calls "plots of escape."[41] Hartman provides an analysis of how these spaces have moments of intimate imagining of alternative worlds. Hartman shows us the legacies of Black desires for worldbuilding, which is also a contemporary desire as seen through the reason for Hartman's counter-historical methods.

Worldbuilding manifest in the aesthetic modes and literary devices of a work. Quashie notes that world-making "requires perceiving differently what the world is or looks like or can be."[42] The power behind another world that is at least different is the ability to explore a world through Black sensibilities.[43] In the same vein as Quashie, I look at the otherworldly

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[39] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 23.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] This point is in defense of Black pessimism insistence of the world built with antiblack logics will require alternative logics to witness Black being. See Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, 8.
[43] On sensibilities, Collins suggest that Black feminist sensibility is experience gained from living as black women because such experience offers a unique angle. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist*

representation in works of speculation—the disruption to linear time, the experimentation of bodies, and the play with communications-- to make arguments for how the imaginative and elusive other worlds are vicariously experienced through engagement with the works. The representation of the elusive knowing of a Black world requires a reading practice that allows Black audiences to imagine, alongside the cultural creators, a Black world.

Elements of worldbuilding can be seen all throughout Black arts in the US: The American South folklores as seen in the early 20th century work of Zora Neale Hurston and Charles Chestnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899), as they engage in mythology shared in oral storytelling and spiritual practices like rootwork, hoodoo, and conjuring; The 1960's and 70's psychedelic productions in Alice Coltrane's astral projections and Parliament Funkadelic's spaceship that accompanied their rock music; and now wide spread science fiction and horror prose from writers like NK Jemisin and Victor LaValle. Black speculative practices are rooted in and explores Black collective worlds through visuals, sounds, and literature. The worlds built into these genres invent a place and space that responds to the conditions of a familiar world by creating a world that has not been known or experienced before.

Methods of Reading and Analyzing Black Speculative Works

I join critics of Black speculative fiction to emphasize the didactic nature of science fiction and horror that represents Blackness in expansive ways and to invent new reading practices to take towards speculative works. In *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction,* literary scholar André Carrington discusses the abilities of science fiction as an

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Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. (New York: Routledge, 1990). 22.

avenue for social critique in their participation in Black discourses.[44] Similar modes of criticism is found in Black horror discourses. Foundational horror film critic and scholar, Robin Coleman wrote *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* to articulate the complexities of Black representation in horror films and the implications of such historical legacies. Historically, Black people have vexed relationships with horror cinema. Horror producers often use Black features to create fearful monsters or have their Black characters experience unjustified deaths.[45] In "Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction," a team of Black horror critics and, Kinitra Brooks, Alexis McGee and Stephanie Schoelman, argue that Black women have long engaged horror themes though they often don't get recognized for doing so. By "supplementing the perceived 'lack' of Black women's horror discourse and simultaneously displacing its perceived 'absence,' they expanded the historical legacies of Black women's horror literary production."[46] Together Black science fiction and horror critics offer ways to make sense of what seem nonsensical, impossible, and fantastical, and demonstrate that this imaginative yet dire play has existed since late 19th century.

Black science fiction builds worlds that challenge linear temporality. One such way is through building future worlds. Lothian states that in "queer tradition of critical speculation," futurity is a place where "narratives of possible futures…give us language to understand the present" as well as "imagining the consequences of the present as we seek to change it."[47] Lothian sees this with Du Bois's "The Comet" (1920). In this short story, Du Bois imagines a

[44] André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7
[45] Robin R Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*. (Routledge, 2013), 7.
[46] Kinitra D Brooks et al., "SPECULATIVE SANKOFARRATION: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction," *Obsidian* 42, 1/2 (2006), 238.
[47] Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility*. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1.

New York City destroyed by a comet. The main character, Jim, who could be seen as a metaphor for Jim Crow laws, is saved along with another white woman, Julia. Jim and Julia are ready to get it on and reproduce a future until they realize that they are not the only ones to survive. Julia's fiancé comes back and aims to lynch Jim. Jim escapes and "returns to [his] marginal position" in the future new world. In this position, Jim sees a nameless Black woman holding a dead baby; they are Jim's wife and child.[48] Lothian reads this as not only a perpetuation of anti-Black logic even after the world has ended, but Black people, especially Black women, in this narrative are so closely associated with death as future and death as life. Even after the world is destroyed in Du Bois's imagination, racism and sexism become inescapable. I argue that such a reading of futurity in science fiction can highlight quotidian anti-Black violences that have been normalized during the reconstruction era in the North by suggesting that nothing will prevent whiteness from bringing death to Black life. Reading sci-fi in this way not only highlights futurity as a key queer analytic in speculative practices, but also demonstrates science fiction's response to modernity and neoliberal logic.

Although the world that Du Bois's imagines is one of failure to Black survival, to see science fiction (and horror) as didactic, we must resist reading practices that focused too heavily on the impossibilities and failures within the worldbuilding. Along with expanding notions of genre analysis, Carrington cautions of the sorts of readings of Black science fiction that continues the legacy of Black pathology and nonbelonging. Influence by Eve Sedgwick's paranoid reading and reparative reading strategies, Carrington indicates that paranoid readings are reactionary readings that "reinforce precepts that we already believe."[49] Such reading practices should be avoided because "it is not particularly curious about possibilities that it

[48] Ibid, 112.
[49] Carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 18.

cannot anticipate."[50] Rather, Carrington leans to Sedgwick's reparative reading which understands the social conditions of harm and validates the sensibilities of paranoia; however, reparative readings also seek "to maintain the ability to keep itself intact in the face of the likelihood that some threats may indeed manifest."[51] In responding to our material realities, science fiction seems to recreate familiar violences. However, using this characteristic to foreclose worldly alterity is in line with paranoid reading. Reparative reading is seeing alternative possibility admis failure.

Seeing the didactic nature in horror worldbuilding, and thus using reparative reading practices, is complicated because Black representation in horror has historically been violently racist. Coleman articulates that the relationship Black viewers have to horror reveals a desire for Black people to see themselves represented as "whole, full, and realized subjects rather than simply window dressing on the set."[52] Historically, the worlds built in horror and their racist representation can be criticized through the horror films lexicons that Coleman offers: Blacks in Horror Films, to indicate the racist treatment of Blackness in cinema horrors, and Black Horror Films, or productions that center on Black worlds, stories, and knowledge.[53] These frameworks allow us to see how anti-blackness surfaces in media. In particular, the Black horror film lexicon sees Black imaginations challenging and/or going beyond such restrictions. Therefore, by looking at the worldbuilding in Black horror, reparative reading becomes easier, exciting, and interesting.

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[50] Ibid, 20.
[51] Although Carrington takes this reading dynamic towards Black producers within the white spaces of science fiction, I find that these sentiments can cross over to how Black science fiction worlds are read. See Ibid.
[52] Robin R Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present.* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 2.
[53] Ibid, 17.

By expanding horror stories, we challenge a prominent thesis in Black horror: "Black life *as horror*."[54] That is, many of the Black horror cultural productions, per the lexicon provided by Coleman but extended beyond film, use the history of anti-Black trauma to fuel their horror stories—slavery, Jim Crow, middle passages, and so on.[55] The work of Brooks et al is to offer "a Black women's horror discourse grounded in sankofarration [to] effectively liberate Black horror from necessitating its need to derive mainly from the trauma of enslavement, allowing the concept of horror to move toward a more creative and artistic construction."[56] There is pleasure that can be found in Black horror, which does not rely on exposing anti-Blackness as the true horror. Black horror offers dark fantasies and communions with otherworldly figures that evoke tense and curious feelings in the body.

I see the experience and enjoyment of dark fantasy through the feedback of Black contemporary audience that enjoy Black horror. For example, Dani Bethea and Monika Negra discuss the value of narratives that incorporate Black vengeance on a panel entitled "Black Horror Beyond the White Gaze."[57] Negra says:

> I think that *Candyman* definitely upped the ante on what is possible in the realm of imagination for Black vengeance. And those are the narratives that I like... I was just obsessed with it just because I feel like [Black vengeance] is still a very touchy subject. As far as Black people being like the victors in a micro-aggressive, passive-aggressive

[54] Brandon S Callender, "The Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do The Exorcist," *Qui Parle* 31, no. 1 (2022): 71. Emphasis original.
[55] Coleman, *Horror Noire,* 8.
[56] Brooks, "Speculative Sankofarration," 240.
[57] Dani Bethea et al., "Black Horror Beyond the White Gaze: A Conversation." *Studies in the Fantastic* 12, no. 1 (2021), 77.

> White supremacist society. And there's …so much animosity towards any hint… or desire for a Black person to actively destroy what slowly destroys them.[58]

Black vengeance concerns power dynamics, and a chance to build a world wherein power dynamics are reversed is enticing. When horror utilizes methods of seeking supernatural revenge, they confront the power and control over Black life. Such methods prompt questions about Black audiences' receptivity and emotional states. What sort of catharsis can be felt remotely after seeing and experiencing vengeful violence through film viewing or reading? As Bethea and Negra discuss, it's a sensitive subject morally and ethically to desire violence against violence. However, revenge narratives offer a feeling of power in a world that persistently disempowers. This can bring some pleasure to the horror experience, a genre that has historically been a source of Black pain with its racist depictions.

I join other scholars and critics of Black speculative cultural productions in investigating a wide range of Black expressions of the other worlds— through novels, poetry, sculptures, collage, and cinema. This speaks to cultural studies interest in interdisciplinarity.[59] I find the need to work across media because I have prioritized a particular concern and aesthetics—that is, the representations of other worlds—and it benefits my arguments around heterogeneous, collective worldbuilding to pursue various modes of representation. For example, both Cauleen Smith's *Sojourner* (2018) and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* imagine a distinct community where Black feminist ideals and practices are learned and maintained, and thus flourish. However, these two texts represent these worlds differently. As a film, Smith's *Sojourner* uses

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Stuart Hall discusses cultural studies as being formed because of the crisis in disciplines. See Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities." *October*. Vol. 53. (1990), 11.

movements, scenes, and visuals to build and explore her world.[60] As a novel, Gomez uses descriptive language and metaphors to offer viewers a world to experience.[61] Therefore, interdisciplinarity not only helps with speaking against sameness but also helps to investigate aesthetics across media. Scholars of interdisciplinarity make arguments for fluidity and cross-references in scholarship and how such weaving across disciplines not only transforms the disciplines but also allows researchers to arrive at something new.[62] Although defining interdisciplinarity is not the main goal of my work, I am tied to Black studies as an inherently interdisciplinary field. I am committed to the continued exploration of the expansiveness of Black thought and expression.

Black Alterity in Epistemological and Ontological Concerns

Questions of worldbuilding also invite questions of alternative ways of being and knowing. Colonial and anti-Black ways of being and knowing have been imposed onto Black life and can be seen through an investigation of Blackness in America as the social positioning that began with the middle passages. Black bodies from the west coast and east coast of Africa were violently coerced onto ships like chattels by European colonizers on a mission to bring into a world that labels Blackness as beings to own, objects, non-thinking, non-beings, and most certainly non-human.[63] This social process informs the ways Black people are perceived in the

[60] Cauleen Smith, dir, *Sojourner*, filmed in California, Philadelphia, 2018, film.
[61] Jewelle Gomez, *The Gilda Stories: A Novel*. (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 1991).
[62] In Kara Keeling's *Queer Times and Black Futures*, she is also committed to reclaiming interdisciplinarity from corporate spaces. To define and engage interdisciplinarity, Keeling pulls from Hall and Lawrence Grossberg to argue that it is a form of knowledge production that "transforms the disciplines while creating other forms of knowledge." See, Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. (Vol. 30. New York: NYU Press, 2019), 13.
[63] Regarding the middle passages, Mbembe writes: "There are three critical moments in the biography of the vertiginous assemblage that is Blackness and race…The first arrived with the organized despoliation of the Atlantic slave trade (from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century), through which men

colonized world that started in the 17th century and continues present-day.[64] In response, Black cultural producers create new ways of knowing and being and/or representing alternative knowledge systems and ontologies developed from Black sensibilities. Throughout my chapters, I'm primarily interested in explaining what these alternative epistemologies and ontologies reference, implicate, and what they make possible.

The theorists of Black philosophical alterity consider the imposed epistemology and ontologies brought on by chattel enslavement and assert the need to challenge these logics. In the conversation of alternative knowing and being, Sylvia Wynter is a key thinker. Wynter's "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism" exposes that "the normative order of knowledge" is based in a theological separation between spirit and flesh, and this separation allowed Black diasporic communities' epistemological practices to be placed in categories that are "marginal, secondary and partaking of the inferiority of all things terrestrial."[65] Not only is Wynter's assertions helpful for ways of knowing, she is also of utmost influence with the challenges of the normative notion of what constitutes being human by asserting that the logic of Black thought as inferior was also a dehumanizing mission. That is, Black epistemology is inferior because Black beings are consider non-human, non-intellectual beings. In a similar vein, Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" makes clear through archival research the long history of Black being in a white supremacist world where Blackness has been made to not be. Hartman's work with archives is important because it houses historical information and artifacts that can tell us about the lives of Black people. She writes that the archive is a death sentence because of "the violence, excess,

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and women from Africa were transformed into human-objects, human-commodities, human-money." See Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. (London: Duke University Press. 2017), 2.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found," 26.

mendacity... the rituals of torture, the beatings, hangings, and amputations enshrined as law."[66] However, as Hartman indicates, the archives are insufficient in their commitment for the colonial desire to label Blackness as nothingness. In the conversation of Black being that challenges the white supremacist labeling and treatment of being, Black philosophy scholar, Calvin Warren poses a question in *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, that produces terrifying affect but is necessary to consider amid persistence Black erasure and subjugation: "How is it going with black ~~being~~?"[67] Warren's input to the Black ontologies conversation is in a similar vein to Wynter, and he pushes Wynter's suggestion forward. Warren suggests that Black liberations, and thus Black being, cannot be obtained without a destruction of the world's anti-Black infrastructures, and as long as such infrastructures are maintained, as they have always been, the question of being in Blackness cannot be approached with any resolvable answers. To retort the idea of ontological objects, Warren uses Franz Fanon to stage the opposition of ontology and existence— "Blacks have an existence in an anti-Black world, but ontology does not explain this existence."[68] Whereas ontology is rooted in Western European ideals of free-thinking subjects, Black existence reflects how such embodiments of free subjectivity, free-thinking, and liberty are compromised if not outright unattainable. Black ontology then, perhaps one could speculate as my project does, can only be seen or experienced through the destruction of the worldly logics that place Black being in marginal positions.

The Western colonizing subject is the overrepresentation of who is known and read as a human and knowledge-bearer; the work of Black studies then is to challenge these

[66] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
[67] Calvin L Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.
[68] Ibid, 12.

overrepresentations by validating and highlighting alternatives.[69] Christina Sharpe takes up alternative Black ontological investigation *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*, where she thinks about Black non-being as a long-lasting colonial planned disaster of Black subjection:

> I argue that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness…My project looks instead to current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival.[70]

Sharpe calls attention to vitality within Black existence that is outside of Western thoughts of what constitutes human, man, and subject; therefore, such vitality brings forth readings for alternative ontologies and epistemologies for life within economic precarity, unfair circumstances, and deadly situations. Black speculative productions offer and affirm ways of knowing and being that challenge the marginal position of Blackness due to colonization. Sci-fi and horror utilizes Black epistemology to provide logic and reasoning that are not in line with colonial thought.[71] I approach Black ontologies represented in science fiction and horror not only for their alterity, but also for how they represent the conditions that make them read as non-human, dead, and monstrous, as well as the condition that makes them alive, undead, and powerful.

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[69] In *Dub*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs's thinks with Wynter to argue the dire need to imagine and know in non-normative ways, and the questions the stories, law, rules, and standards that limit what we can know about the world and ourselves. See, Alexis Pauline Gumbs. *Dub: Finding Ceremony*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), xi.

[70] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

[71] Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found," 40.

Reading for alterity is also reading for impossibility. In a search for an alternative writing practice to challenge the representation of non-being in archives that house Black life, Hartman's critical fabulation is a way to engage with life that has been label nothing: "It is a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives—and intent on achieving an impossible goal."[72] Speculative practices engage Hartman's impossibility even outside of archival reading and writing practices. In that, the otherworldly ways of being and knowing may seem imaginative and thus impossible (like Oankali sharing knowledge through tentacles); attentive close reading of their possibilities engages Black ontological longing and desires (such as Oankali abilities speak towards embodying knowledge).[73]

The impossibilities within stories act as portals to experience the other worlds. As an example of how I approach ontologies in Black speculative work, I turn to NK Jemisin's "Walking Awake" (2014). In this story, Jemisin presents an alternative life and community in darkness where parasites— a combination of "bugs, fungi, microbes, and more"– infect and take over the human body.[74] The way humans are no longer living in their body after parasite transfer and their bodies belong to the parasite to go have a "humanly" existence is reminiscent of how neoliberal capitalism with primacy over economic wealth only wants people's bodies and their labor power but the soul, the inner being, is neglected. In the story, the souls are in darkness or the realm of nothingness. When the main character, Sadie, visits darkness, she has a conversation with someone whose body has just been used by the parasite. He says to Sadie, "We're dead, but we're still here."[75] When a takeover occurs, people do not simply die when their body is in use,

[72] Ibid, 4.
[73] Octavia Butler, *Lilith's Brood*, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2000).
[74] NK Jemisin, "Walking Awake," in *How Long Til Black Futures Month*, (New York: Orbit, 2014): 224
[75] Ibid, 220.

but they cannot simply be in the world. There is an alternative life within a world of disembodied souls. Within the darkness, if I listen to the whispers of the dead-not-dead, I can experience alternative ways of being in Jemisin's darkness.

Worldbuilding in Black Queer and Feminist Sensibilities

The "horizon" term that has been taken up in queer and feminist studies signals the ways the world, as it is, is not enough. In thinking about the fruitfulness of futurity for Queer agenda, Jose Muñoz theorizes the horizon as a place of queer magic and possibilities. Queerness "allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."[76] Muñoz urges us, with queer sensibilities and desires, to "gain a greater conceptual and theoretical leverage if we see queerness as something that is not yet here."[77] The horizon challenges time, and more so feeling time, because the horizon can be felt in the excess of everyday in the way we feel more than the constraints of the world. My relationship to Black queer and feminist theories involves seeing the prominent and overpowering ways of the world that denies the validity of such affective excess that is at one in the present and not. The acknowledgement of queerness as something that is not quite here emphasizes the insufficiency of the "here and now." In both queer and feminist studies, "ecstasy" is evoked as way to work with and engage the affective excess. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography,* Jennifer C. Nash is interested in the ways Black women's pleasures can be witnessed in pornography, despite the ways the genre historically abuses or ignores Black women's pleasure.[78] Such pleasure can be seen through the reading

[76] Ibid.
[77] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 22.
[78] In this work, Nash makes a significant intervention when it comes to engaging with racist pornographic media. Black women's performance of pleasures can be witnessed in pornography. Indeed, pornography would seem to hinder Black pleasure because it could be hard to see pleasure in the scenes and settings that are strategically meant use racist imagery to uplift white imaginations of Black women's sexuality.

technique she calls racial iconography, which "shifts from a preoccupation with the injuries that racialized pornography engenders to an investigation of the ecstasy that racialized pornography can unleash…[Nash is] reading for ecstasy rather than injury."[79] Through an ecstatic reading practice, Nash sees what exceeds the constraints of the texts that was created with racist intentions. She demonstrates that ecstasy is seeing what exceeds the body and materiality of the present, here and now.

Following the work of queer and feminist thinkers who challenge temporality, question the constraints of materiality and present time, and insist on affective excess, I ask, how can my reading of speculative arts acknowledge the ecstatic worldbuilding taking place that speaks to Black communities longing for a world where one's full being is felt? I incorporate theories of ecstasy as a sensorial and experiential disruption to normative knowing and being. Ecstasy acknowledges sensations that super-exceed those of the body. This is akin to an outer-body experience. It challenges the presumed completeness of material reality, flesh, and body and insists that felt experiences exists outside the containment. It relies on what is unseen but felt. These theories give space to the embodied experience of speculative arts that comes when creating and witnessing a world that is represented. That is, to be able to experience a world that is not "real" through embodied engagement with the arts is an ecstatic practice.

Affective excess that horror and sci-fi, and other mode of speculation, illicit is felt deep in the body and out of the body. Because of such, the genre plays with pleasure that is deeply embodied. I spent time with Nash thinking about ecstatic pleasure and affective excess, and now I'm interested in going the opposite way. Whereas, ecstasy is out of the body, the erotic is felt

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See Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. (Duke University Press, 2014).

[79] Ibid, 5.

deep within. Audre Lorde is known for offering us the analytic "erotic," and this sensorial term has influenced my inquiry into reading and understanding somatic sensations. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde writes:

> The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. To perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.[80]

Because the erotic engages in a deep sense of self-empowerment, which is suppressed by structural oppression, the imaginative worlds in horror and science fiction takes feelings rooted in orgasmic connections with the self and others, connections that produce joy and truth. Because of the way the genre impacts and affects bodily sensation, seeing the sensation that gets triggered through viewing horror and science fiction can get viewers and readers to see and engage their deep-seated "unexpressed or unrecognized feelings."[81] The erotic reveals how such sensations have been oppressed, so that we might engage and empower those sensations. In my reading, speculative arts engage the erotic by offering tools to experience what feels impossible, but is connected to deep-seated desires, longing, and power.

Ecstasy is communal; therefore, the reading of how horror and science fiction offers experiences felt deep in the body and out must be considered a communal and social endeavor. It enhances the collaboration that is inherent in worldbuilding. Aliyyah Abdur- Rahman's "The Black Ecstatic" is influential in the ways ecstasy is treated as a communal practice and an aesthetic.[82] Abdur-Rahman writes, "Black ecstatic is an affective disposition and relational ethic,

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[80] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 53.
[81] Ibid.
[82] To employ an example, Abdur-Rahman's "black ecstatic" reads into the experimental aesthetics and sensational feelings of Moonlight (2016), a film that represents late 1980's War on Drugs and conveys the

and aesthetic mode… Ecstasy resists the logics of teleological progression by opening an immediate space for relational joy for black and brown people, for whom the future is both yet to come and already past."[83] The reading practice I take towards modes of speculation is seeing the ways the stories and imagery call attention to a common "affective disposition and relational ethic" that can be seen in the virality of Sheffield's song, for example, as everyone involved shares the disposition of being disappointed and fed-up with the world as it is and the relational ethic is working together to imagine another world and how we can get there. The impossibility of such dreaming is ecstasy and the deep desire as seen through the multifaceted virality is the erotic, and the imagining together in the present, past, and future is the work of speculation.

The ecstatic and erotic reading practice also emphasizes the transcendence that ecstasy provides. Transcendence becomes a fugitive modality of stepping outside of normative ways of thinking about Black communities in historical moments. Muñoz's conception of ecstasy is "an invitation, a call, to a then and there, a not yet here… a collective potentiality" where we can take parts of ourselves out of the material reality into a collective space that lies far off into the horizon.[84] In speculative arts, the otherworldly representations—with their validated knowing and powerful ways of being—represents a queer longing and desire that is not possible in the "quagmire of the present;" however, ecstasy is feeling "queerness's pull, knowing it as something else that we can feel, that we must feel."[85] In Muñoz's writing of ecstasy, there is never an exact location where the alternative life is, but there is certainty that we can travel towards a horizon to

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trauma and mass imprisonment that Black people and families experienced. Abdur-Rahman looks at experimental and surreal moments within the text that disrupts those common visuals of Black trauma – like how the "rich blues, purples, yellows, and greens insinuate a vitality that is belied by the film's predominant representation of black life, framed always by the grim specter of sudden or slow demise." See Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic." *GLQ* 24 no.2 (2018).

[83] Ibid, 345.

[84] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 187,1.

[85] Ibid, 187.

get there. The thing about horizons, they are always moving. Other worlds are unreachable and materially speaking. Therefore, the travel to the horizon is not a set destination, but a journey of the spirit and imagination. Being able to experience other worlds through aesthetics is the point, not necessarily if the worlds are (im)possible.

To exemplify how ecstasy and erotics can inform the reading practice of horror, I turn to Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country.* The development of Ruby's responds to quagmire of colorism and fatphobia that have constructed her character. Ruby, played by Wunmi Mosaku, is a dark skin, fat-bodied woman and is often presented in the position of afterthought, as is a common occurrence in media productions. However, looking for ecstatic representation— the ways Ruby, the character, and Wunmi Mosaku transcend, toy with, and perform the stereotype— I see the ways she makes her character larger than the mold the production places her in. In episode 4 "A History of Violence," there is a fiery, dark, and queer love scene between her and William/Christina.[86] Ruby allows herself to be consumed and spellbound. I see this moment (one of many), where both the character and actress transcend the role dictated by racism, colorism, and fatphobia. I see her complexities despite the show's reduction of her character and the potentiality of viewers' reduction. Although Ruby's character might be subjected to another reduction– making a deal with the devil to support her respectability politics– the agency, the full being that she is, and the sex appeal can be seen through an ecstatic reading.

The Chapters

In the first chapter, I consider an area of philosophy that explores ways of knowing and sharing and disseminating that knowing. Black feminist ways of knowing intersect with

[86] Misha Green et al., "A History of Violence," *Lovecraft Country, The Complete First Season*, Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, 2021, 38:40.

embodied knowing, unknowability, and illegibility.[87] I am interested in seeing how Black feminist epistemology shows up in horror using suspicion— a way of knowing that plays with and challenges unknowability, opacity, and illegibility. Suspicion is sensing something to be true without having concrete knowledge. Prioritizing colonial knowledge makes it so that white ways of knowing are seen as concrete, whereas other ways of knowing lack logic. However, something that lacks logic to the white, Western imaginary, does not prevent its actuality, truth, reasoning, and logic.[88] Suspicion is that confrontation with normalized ways of knowing that have been unjustly prioritized. We see this show up in horror via suspicion (a horror staple). I analyze Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) and Tananarive Due's "The Rider." (2023)[89] Both texts present a mythical figure that brings about alternative modes of knowledge and communication. The characters know something is occurring, but do not have the logics to convince others that this occurrence is actually happening. Or rather, the characters that need convincing do not value the logics that is necessary to believe in the occurrence. That is, a character can sense the mythical figure and its powers and try to convince other characters that a figure with powers is present, but the other characters will not believe them because of the illogicalness of an unreal presence according to normalized ways of knowing. However, as these horror stories will tell, the unreal presence still exists, even though it is unbelievable. How does one grapple with unknowability that has hints of being known? Perhaps, take hints as clues to

[87] The scholars I work with to discuss unknowability, illegibility, and opacity: Ashon Crawley's "That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3." (*CR: East Lansing, Mich.* 16, no. 2 (2016); Kristie Dotson's "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." (*Social Epistemology* 31, no. 5, 2017); Gaile Pohlhaus's "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance.'" (*Hypatia*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2012).
[88] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," 26.
[89] Nia DaCosta, et al. *Candyman*. Universal City, CA: Universal, 2021; Tananarive Due, "The Rider," in *Out There Screaming: an Anthology of New Black Horro*r, ed. Jordan Peele (New York: Random House, 2023), 97.

alternative logics that are needed to gain access to what is unknown. In horror, characters take on an obsession to convince others. This obsession appears like strategizing ways to express and make real this knowing and make it concrete. That's the challenge. The playful part comes in experimental and creative ways in which the fusion of knowing takes place. Through art, thoughts, mirrors, these are tools that characters use to make sense of their suspicion and make it real. It adds to the ways in which we can make sense of what first appears unknowable.

In the second chapter, I consider how Black imaginations demonstrate alternative relationality and ontology in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), a horror film, and Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987), a science-fiction novel.[90] These works reference catastrophic events of the 1980's, with Regan politics and nuclear threats, and demonstrate a response to those events with apocalyptic scenarios.[91] They offer imaginative wondering of the world ending and another world beginning. The catastrophes of our material reality that they reference are tied to legacy of colonial, anti-Black systems that foreclosed Black survival. Therefore, they create a world order where Blackness operates by different logics and frameworks. In my exploration, I engage the destructive, chaotic ending that is organized by the other worlds coming in— Oankali and Tethered. Accepting destruction allows for a surrendering and understanding of why Black imaginations need to experience and explore alternative relationality in the creation of apocalyptic scenarios.

The third chapter looks at how Black art and literature that engages in a temporal travel to represent slavery do so in experimental ways. Influenced by Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear:*

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[90] Butler, *Lilith's Brood*; Jordan Peele, et al *Us*. Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2019.

[91] Mann discuss the Regan politics and nuclear treats is being crucial to *Dawn's* impetus. See Justin Louis Mann, "Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's Dawn," *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2018), 62.

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Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America (2013), I focus on how many well-known, highly celebrated Black artists and writers of the 20th and 21st centuries created works that demonstrate the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and other canonical events in Black studies that represent struggle and pain.[92] However, Black art and literature is often experimental, rule-breaking, and offers otherworldly imaginative representation of Black life. Although I briefly examine multiple Black women writers and artists, like Carrie Mae Weems, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, I focus on Alison Saar's *Cotton Eater (head)* (2013) and *Cotton Eater II* (2014) and Evie Shockley's *the new black* (2011). I argue that a reading practice that reads for the experimental qualities in Black women's art will require an engagement with collective imaginative possibilities. This reading practice pays attention to and plays with the sensations that are evoked, the knowledges that are off-limits, and otherworldly possibilities.

In the fourth chapter, I examine how contemporary horror shows up in three mediums—visual art, short stories, and cinema. I argue that through horror worldbuilding, the genre allows for Black bodies to experience feelings of fear, uncertainty, and anxieties that are generative and informative to the aims of Black culture and Black study.[93] Black horror also provides outlets for cathartic revenge for violence committed against Black people, queer people, and women.[94] The experiences of these transgresses can be purged by the vicarious experiences of horror production. In a twist of irony, horror aids in Black pleasure, enticing audiences with playful

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[92] Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America.* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[93] Scholars that influence my worldbuilding and sensations: Tyrone S. Palmer 's "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation." (*Qui Parle* 29, no. 2, 2020); Alex Zamalin's *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019)

[94] Jordan Peele, editor. *Out There Screaming: An Anthology of New Black Horror*. Random House, 2023.

dark imaginations.[95] I examine how the themes of Black horror are expressed in Bree Newsome's short film, *Wake* (2010); in Wangechi Mutu's *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012) and *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah*," (2012); and Nnedi Okorafor's "Dark Home" (2023).[96] Together these texts are representative of the power of horror in collective Black imaginations. These texts also show how Black women and queer cultural producers contribute to horror, which is crucial in a disciplinary conversation that historically excludes these subject positions from the canon.

Throughout this project, my foundational contention is thus: Black speculative works create worlds that respond to the creation of a world where Black people, cultures, and traditions are placed in the social positions of nothingness. I observe how Black horror and science fiction distort and experiment with reality to offer worlds for and by Black imaginations to play with our own worldly creations. I hope to expand the body of knowledge of Black studies and Black horror and science fiction cultural productions through a philosophical perspective.

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[95] Bethea, "Black Horror Beyond the White Gaze: A Conversation," 77.

[96] Newsome, Bree. "Wake." Independent. 2010.; Okorafor, Nnedi. "Dark Home" *Out There Screaming: An Anthology of New Black Horror*. Random House, 2023; Mutu, Wangechi (Kenya, born 1972), *The Storm,* 2012. Collage on linoleum, framed. 75.75 x 116 x 3 in. ; Mutu, Wangechi (Kenya, born 1972), *All The Way Up, All The Way Out,* 2012. Collage on linoleum, framed. 76 ½ x 52 7/8 x 3 in.;

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Chapter One

Suspicion: Black Epistemic Alterity in Black Speculative Productions

Black feminist philosopher, Donna-Dale Marcano argues the importance of considering Black feminist philosophies because of the tendency of academia excluding Black women's subjectivities from accounts that build the subfield of Black philosophy.[1] In Marcano's critique of such exclusions, she considers "philosophy [as] always engaged from the positions of …historicity and thus situated perspectives."[2] Proliferating and diversifying Black experiences in philosophical inquiries involves investigating what is perceived and perpetuated as "norms" in particular communities and subject positions.[3] Critically interrogating communal norms is a way to keep up with the transformative nature of human development and community growth across ethic, racial, and gendered differences. Through the lens of Black feminist philosophy, we can ask questions such as: How do Black feminists view aesthetics in art practices?[4] What forms of logic undergird social grammars in communities that center Black feminist constitutions of being and existence? Philosophical questions allow for critical explorations that inform how Black women and Black feminist communities understand what it means to embody life.

In philosophy, epistemology emphasizes the importance of knowledge production.[5] Scholars are critical about what counts as knowledge, meaning what is considered valuable

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[1] Although Marcano discusses exclusion of Black women in philosophy more generally, she points to *Philosophy Forum*'s "Philosophy and the Black Experience," a 1977 volume of essays that advocates for the inclusion of Black experiences in the field of philosophy but did not adequately include Black feminist perspectives. See Donna-Dale Marcano. "Particularity and Situated Universality: Problems for a Black Feminist Philosophy." in *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (2013): 139.
[2] Donna-Dale Marcano. "Particularity and Situated Universality: Problems for a Black Feminist Philosophy," in *The Black Scholar* 43, no. 4 (2013): 143.
[3] Ibid, 139.
[4] This is a question bell hooks explores. See bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional." *Lenox Avenue* 1, no. 1 (1995): 65.
[5] Fiona Hughes, *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology: Form and World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3.

information to memorize, develop an understanding around, and interrogate. Philosophers in epistemology expose how knowledge is shared, or what is considered the best pedagogical methods of teaching these knowledges to others.[6] There is a consideration for who becomes a knowledge-bearer. That is, who is the knowledge holder (i.e., a teacher or parent) and who is the knowledge receiver (i.e., a student or child). Epistemology scholars must interrogate all practices attributed to knowledge to understand how practices continue, end, and adapt in accordance to how communities decide to interact with each other.

Upon interrogating epistemology, it is obvious that many epistemological questions and reasonings are based on European-centered thoughts about knowledge productions. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* Patricia Collins states, "dominant groups suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups."[7] This point is also articulated in Sylvia Wynter's "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," wherein Wynter exposes the foundation of epistemology through the lens of theology and colonization. She discusses "the normative order of knowledge" is based in a theological separation that allowed Black diasporic communities' epistemological practices to be placed in categories that are "marginal, secondary and partaking of the inferiority of all things terrestrial."[8] As Wynter makes clear, many philosophers credited with building the significance of epistemology to human life are in alignment with colonialization, which prioritizes

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[6] For knowledge production and sharing, see Jason R Ambroise and Sabine Broeck, *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*. (1st ed. Vol. 2. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul' - Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology," *Agenda (Durban)* 28, no. 1 (2014): 18–28; Kristie Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 5 (2017): 417–30.

[7] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

[8] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism." *Boundary 2*, vol. 12/13, no. 3–1, (1984), 26.

white/European ways of knowing and belittles and invalidates Black knowledge productions.[9] The dominant influence of European knowledges impact academic practices, on which Sarajoni Nadar writes, "the master narrative claims to construct facts—ostensibly the 'what' of human behaviors, narrative."[10] Epistemological violence occurs when normative epistemology is not challenged, because others inside and outside of Black communities will come to see colonial ways of knowing as the most valuable. By challenging normative epistemology, the limits of canonical bodies of knowledge are revealed; thus, gaps emerge in epistemology.

Black epistemology scholars have looked towards Black communities' values and practices to contribute to the gaps in epistemology. According to Dotson, "'customs and arrangements' are not seen to be epistemically relevant. Though a little interrogation would show that they are both relevant to knowledge production."[11] To understand Black epistemology, attention needs to be paid to how Black values and practices are communicated, which will not align with colonial modes of research and knowledge acquisition.[12] We can look towards Black cultural expressions in public scholarship, literatures, and the arts for Black knowledges that convey Black subjectivity.[13] Black scholars, especially with philosophical sensibilities, critique

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[9] Furthermore, Wynter explores Christianity theological concerns in the Industrial Age. In this mode of reasoning, spirit is renewed through baptism and the flesh is "unregenerated man," or person before baptism. Knowledge was associated with the Divine and only through baptism could one receive and share the knowledge of Divine. Wynter indicate that pre-baptism was also a position of death. Situating knowledge into the realm of the Divide via indoctrination into Christianity allowed for reasoning of situating those not indoctrinated as nonhuman, nonbeing, animalistic, and dead. See Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism," 22-26.

[10] Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul' - Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology." *Agenda (Durban)* 28, no. 1 (2014): 24.

[11] Kristie Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." Social Epistemology 31, no. 5 (2017): 420. doi:10.1080/02691728.2017.1346721.

[12] Nadar explores the use of storytelling in social science research as way of expanding epistemological practices. Ambroise and Broeck look at Black social movements with liberatory aims to see their counter-epistemological offerings. See Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul'," 18; Ambroise, *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles*, 1-3.

[13] Patricia Hill Collins sees Black women's knowing in public scholarship, activism, and visual/literary arts. Melissa Vaughn's sees the liminal epistemology that is express is Blues music and its relation to

hegemonic knowledge productions and its relationship to anti-Black methods of disavowing Black ways of knowing and being in the world.[14] These scholars explore the epistemic alterity of Black literature, social movements, and communities, thereby reinforcing Black being and knowing.

In this chapter, I consider why some Black knowledge production may be presented as elusive, obscure, and opaque. As it relates to knowledge productions, I develop a theory of suspicion as an epistemological methodology that engages with Black and Black feminist ways of knowing that is present yet elusive. I analyze suspicion as it relates to Black studies' interest in knowability and unknowability. Black feminist philosopher, Kristie Dotson calls unknowability an "epistemological quandary" because the loss attached to unknowability is not easily reconciled.[15] As I discuss the limitations of knowing, I employ the definition of suspicion as referring to information that can be known (and needs to be known) with alternative and experimental ways of sense-making. Suspicion alludes to there being a longing and urge to know, especially when the knowing feels crucial. Elusive beliefs and suspicion are knowledge productions that are treated as nonsense because of a lack of confirmed facts; however, collective beliefs and theories shared among people and communities show that suspicion is a knowledge production that has weight, validity, and truth. Suspicion unlocks non-hegemonic ways of

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Black epistemology. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Melissa Speight Vaughn, "Black Epistemologies and Blues Methodology: Engaging Liminal Ontological Space in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 8–9 (2020): 1090–1101.

[14] The main argument that runs throughout Ambroise and Broeck's *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles* (2015) is Black social activism works against impose colonial subjugation and in this opposition arises knowledge productions that also work against perpetuated knowledge systems. See Jason R Ambroise and Sabine Broeck. *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*. (1st ed. Vol. 2. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[15] Kristie Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability," *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 5 (2017): 418.

knowing. By observing the ways scholars and cultural producers discuss and understand their suspicions, they offer insights into the ways we can grapple with what seems unknowable.

To make a case for suspicion as an analytic tool to understand Black alternative knowledge productions that grapple with perceived unknowns, I move through my arguments in four parts. In the first section, I consider what constitutes Black knowledge productions, especially Black feminist ways of knowing, as demonstrated in Black theories, philosophies, and research practices. In the second section, I explore unknowability in more depth and explain its connection to suspicion. Suspicion senses something as true without concrete evidence of that truth. Prioritizing colonial knowledge makes it so that white ways of knowing are seen as concrete, whereas other ways of knowing lack logic. Suspicion is a confrontation with normalized ways of knowing that have been unjustly prioritized. In the third section, I ask how does one grapple with unknowability that has hints of being known? The hints of knowability give clues to alternative logics or ways of making sense that are needed to access what is unknown. These scholars, artists, and writers strategize ways to express and make real this knowing and make it concrete. I intend to make the case that suspicion is a generative analytic to understand Black epistemological alterity, which is obscure in its ability to make itself known.

I end with close reading analyses of Black and Black feminist cultural productions—primarily, Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) and Tananarive Due's "The Rider" (2023). As a contemporary horror film and short story (respectively), they utilize suspicion with urgency and demonstrate ways to grapple with it. Their use of knowledge production works with Black epistemological scholars. Black horror demonstrates a subtle way of evoking Black knowledge productions that reveal itself through visuals that are on the edge of perception and yet sensed as destructive or frightening. These stories imagine a sense of destruction and the end of safety that

makes the beginning of a new yet unknown reality. This impending end provokes a sense of dread, which sparks suspicion that normalcy is no longer guaranteed. The dread of suspicion plays with human senses and leads to an alternative way of making sense of reality.

Black Epistemological Alterity

To build worlds that center Blackness, it is important to interrogate what knowledge is and how it is disseminated. As Dotson suggests, we can do this through looking at the "customs" and "arrangements" that communities develop to define and delineate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and traditions.[16] As Dotson notes, "custom [the term] is taken as the lens through which shifting landscapes and populations revise and reconstruct their worlds and rituals."[17] Black worlds and the rituals within them continue to construct their distance from the normative order of knowing. Therefore, we can see Black knowledge productions when we prioritize Black traditions and ways of interpreting the world based on concerns circulated through Black communities. In addition to knowledge production as a means of developing customs and arrangements, epistemology is also a critical thinking activity, with the aim of making sense. Feminist epistemology scholar, Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. makes the case that "we need epistemic resources for making sense of and evaluating our experiences."[18] This is the stake

[16] In "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." Dotson argues that "customs" need to be critically examined because they are tools that communities use to build their worlds. Dotson writes, "there are some ways of pursuing knowledge that are parasitic on customs and there are some ways of idealizing knowledge production that eschew custom. What both accounts have in common is the realization that when it comes to knowledge production, custom is epistemically relevant. Of course, the same could be said for 'arrangements' that can be said of customs. What makes a custom epistemically relevant is the impact it has on knowledge production by virtue of how it encourages or discourages producing knowledge." Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability," (420).
[17] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 420.
[18] Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance,' *Hypatia* 27, No 4 (Fall 2012): 718.

behind scholars calling for the recognition of alternative ways of making sense and knowing that are based in Black experiences, and that validate Black methods and resources that are used in Black worlds.[19]

The necessity for alternative knowledge productions comes from the need to resist dominant ways of knowing that reinforce narratives of Blackness as nothingness, and thus reproduce material realities wherein Blackness is known as nothingness.[20] In "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," Dotson writes, "an epistemic side of colonialism is the devastating effect of the 'disappearing' of knowledge, where local or provincial knowledge is dismissed due to privileging alternative, often Western, epistemic practices."[21] The gaps within archives and their manipulative information bring up challenges to Black worlds that work to build ways to make sense of Black experiences, historical and contemporary. The lack of collecting information in terms of Black life demonstrates the colonial methodology of determining Black life as irrelevant. This value is associated with the social system that needs Black life to be in a position of nothingness to continue. In addition to noting the social arrangements and customs in Black communities, Dotson also recognizes the social arrangements of social systems of power that hinder and encroach upon Black life– enslavement,

[19] Pohlhaus Jr. continues to explain shared epistemic resources as resources of the mind. She writes: "Knowing requires…language to formulate propositions, concepts to make sense of experience, procedures to approach the world, and standards to judge particular accounts of experience … we need epistemic resources for making sense of and evaluating our experiences." See Pohlhaus Jr. "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice," 718.

[20] Blackness being deemed nothingness by white supremacy is an observation shared in the following: Frank B Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, (First edition. New York, N.Y: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020); Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism (Detroit)* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177–218; Ashon Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3." *CR (East Lansing, Mich.)* 16, no. 2 (2016): 123–50.

[21] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236.

Jim Crow, and Jane Crow.[22] We can continue to add stifling arrangements and customs of academia, gentrification, and policing that prevent what can fully be known of Black life.[23]

In contributing to epistemological concerns, Sylvia Wynter critiques modernity's humanism and colonialism and insists that the work of contemporary thinkers is to reflect upon alternatives. In "Ceremony Must Be Found," Wynter calls attention to the "fundamental antagonisms" when cultures have been positioned to marginal and subordinate statuses by dominant cultures.[24] In Wynter's normative view of knowing, there is a link between being and knowing.[25] Another way to discredit Black ways of knowing that do not abide by the logic of Western (or another system of power) epistemology, and thus dehumanize Black people, is to deem Black thought nonsense. Religion and sonic scholar, Ashon Crawley also confronts the way Black people have been delegated to the position of non-being, non-thinking, and not rational. With a love letter "written to [those] who have been and are today still said to have nothing," he asks, "what emerges from the zone of nothingness, from the calculus of the discarded?"[26] Being in a social position called nothing is a ripe place to advocate for alternative ways of knowing. Black people are in a social position to demonstrate knowledge productions "outside of the prescriptions of the status quo."[27] It's a place to assert Black cultures, traditions,

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[22] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 417.
[23] Dotson continues to discuss the social arrangements of white supremacy: "Social 'arrangements,' like the law and traditionally conceived social categories, can promote or hinder what can be known due to how they construct our institutions and discursive landscapes that illuminate some aspects of our social existence while obscuring other aspects…The complex bind of Jane Crow subordination is constituted by occupying simultaneous hyper-visibility, i.e. membership in social categories policed and suppressed for the maintenance of some form of supremacy, and invisibility, i.e. the limited nature of using those social categories to understand the specific nature of the subordination in question." See Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 421, 417.
[24] Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found," 21.
[25] Ibid, 26
[26] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought," 123-124.
[27] Melissa Speight Vaughn, "Black Epistemologies and Blues Methodology: Engaging Liminal Ontological Space in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 8–9 (2020): 1091.

and experiences that will offer a humanist project with epistemological and ontological aims for "self-actualization, self- definition, and self-determination."[28] These critiques of Western ways of knowing and considering possibilities make the "zone of nothingness" a fertile ground for Black thought.[29]

Black thought is about becoming, constantly theorizing, and expanding. Similarly, art curator, Cedric Fauq, once described "the age of Blackness" as "ungraspable time and space, always fleeting."[30] Scholars describe Blackness in a continuous tense. This continuity speaks to the proactive and developmental nature of Black thought, as Black thought never settles, does not assume a linear passage of time, and engages the past, future, and present at once. This makes Black thought "excavatory, it is about deepening and making room, space, and temporality otherwise than modern notions" of sensemaking.[31] The epistemological alterity that Black thought offers engages in a sense of growth, metamorphosis, and adaptation. We see the methodologies in ways of knowing when thought is seen as, Obioma Nnaemeke says, "being but as becoming, not only as a construct but as a construction, not only as a product but as a process."[32] These contributions thereby reveal the expansive values of Black life and knowing, and the depth that is shown when we engage in the cultural expression of Black thought that is at once present and transient.

Black feminist epistemological alterity is building logic and sharing ways of knowing that are centered around self-empowerment in the face of adversity, erotic knowing, and intuitive

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[28] Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 224.
[29] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought," 128.
[30] Cedric Fauq, "Curating for the Age of Blackness," *Mousse 66,* Mousse Magazine and Publishing, Milano, Italy, (2019): 226.
[31] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought," 145.
[32] Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs* 29, no. 2 (2004): 363. https://doi.org/10.1086/378553.

knowing that spans across time and generation.[33] Feminist scholar, Barbara Christian provides insights on Black women knowledge productions that are "in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic."[34] When exploring thoughts and ways of knowing from feminist vantage points, scholars point to Collins because she connects how Black women's lived experiences develop their sensibilities, which goes on to develop their knowledge productions.[35] The self-empowerment aspect of Black feminist thought develops against controlling images, which are "mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel" seen in popular culture entertainment, print culture, arts, and literature that impact the ways Black women are viewed in anti-Black spaces.[36] Asserting alternative ways of seeing Black women is not only key to challenging racist and gendered oppression, but it also seeks to provide a truer knowledge of the self.

Black feminist thought prioritizes pleasure. In *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought,* poet and scholar, Bettina Judd's proposal for a "creative knowledge production," Black feminist knowing is inherently and expansively creative as Black women artists "explore the possibilities of being that are one's own pleasures and needs."[37] Pleasure interacts with Audre Lorde's use of the erotic to describe powerful sensations felt deep within the body.[38] Scholars discussed in this chapter show epistemological alignment with Black feminist thought and demonstrate how Black feminist thought is about challenging racist

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[33] Collins argues that Black Feminist Thought is mode of thought that reclaims tradition— discovering, reinterpreting, and analyzing works of Black women intellectuals. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 13.
[34] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 68. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177999.
[35] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 20.
[36] Ibid, 67.
[37] Bettina Judd, *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2023): 9.
[38] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984): 54.

perceptions to move towards self-actualization. Black feminist thought continues to challenge colonial epistemology as well as challenging Black thought that ignores Black feminist ways of knowing.

Ultimately, we need to acknowledge that there are limits to normative epistemology and that Western/colonial ways of knowing are not universal. Black epistemology, especially Black feminist knowing, means to honor and value Black traditions, and this will bring in an alternative mode of knowing. According to literary and cultural critic, Saidiya Hartman, "loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them."[39] By recognizing the limitations of the normative order of knowledge, we can open space for the validity of other Black knowledge productions. Furthermore, since Black thought is moving, becoming, and fleeting, gaps in normative epistemology may never be filled with Black thought. To discuss unknowability of Black feminist thought impacted by Jane Crow, Dotson brings up "negative, socio-epistemic space[, which] refers to varying nodes within our social landscapes that are obscured for the functioning of shared epistemic resources."[40] Although Black thought is in the position of normative order of knowledge deemed nothingness (a position that fosters alterity), there are areas of Black thought that are unknowable with Western/colonial knowledge production. However, the aim of this chapter is to explore the Black methodology of making sense of what is perceived as unknowable or illogical.

Suspicion: The Body Knows, the Mind Needs to Catch Up

Suspicion is commonly known as the feeling of knowing something to be true without concrete evidence or methods of explaining that knowing in a way that will convince others.

[39] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8.
[40] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 422.

Suspicion is similar to Judd's theorizing of "feelin'" as "sacred knowledge" that "engages emotion and sensation" and a practice to empathically engage Black women's creative practices.[41] I'm interested in the way, "feelin," as Judd notes is "a term [she uses] to describe holistic sensory experiences as knowledge."[42] Where I diverge and add: in Black ways of speaking, "feelin'" also indicates what some may call "a gut" knowing— "I got a feelin'." This is related to suspicion because this form of knowledge production is in a liminal space. Suspicion is a feeling that is suspended in liminality because there is acknowledgement that there is information that is unknown, but there seem to be ways to understand that information with alternative modes of sense-making, especially modes that turn into the emotional body experience. To describe epistemological liminal space and Blues music representing Black ways of knowing and their alterity, Melissa Vaughn uses "threshold concepts," a term that demonstrates the problems that knowledge seekers encounter when there is a gap between known information.[43] That is, a learner might have understood the subject matter in a discipline but gets in a course where new information is given that the learner cannot readily understand.[44] The knowledge seeker then needs to develop resources and tools to understand the new information. However, while those tools are being developed, "they are suspended in unknowing... an unsettling space... [and an] in-between space of uncertainty."[45] The feeling that

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[41] Judd, *Feelin*, 7.
[42] Ibid, 9.
[43] Vaugh, "Black Epistemologies and Blues Methodology," 1091.
[44] To dig into this example of "threshold concepts" further: A student has completed years of high school writing, and they understand grammar rules, sentence structures, and thesis (all the elements of "good" writing). This student then gets a first-year writing course, and the instructor tells them about rhetorical awareness. This is new for the student, and they cannot understand. There are two points of knowing here: the elements of good writing that the students understand and the acknowledgement of rhetoric that the student knows they need to understand but doesn't know how yet. In between the two points of knowing is the liminal space. The student needs new tools for understanding to move across the threshold.
[45] Ibid, 1090.

suspicion brings to the body is new information that the knowledge holder needs resources to make sense of. Suspicion is an elusive way of knowing that is not static. Suspicion is knowing rather than knowledge to emphasize the embodied nature of this knowledge, and to show that this elusive knowing is knowledge that is in process and in action.[46]

Suspicion can show up as a sense of dread and unease that overcomes human senses, begging for an alternative way of making sense of reality. Suspicion also calls for curiosity to resolve or make sense of the dread direly. Crawley writes, "If something makes itself felt, known, from the zone those of us said to be and have nothing, then the interrogation of that nothingness is our urgent task."[47] In relation to suspicion, I interpret the request for interrogation as something making itself know through felt, dreadful sensations from the zone of unknowability, then "interrogation... [is an] urgent task."[48] Such an urgency sees suspicion as imaginative and elusive speculative knowing, but given value and weight. Validating suspicion, as an opportunity to develop alternative knowing, turns the knowing circulated in Black imaginations— knowledge doesn't make sense with dominant, white, and normative knowledge productions— into valid forms of knowing that purposefully works against (or just does not acknowledge) normative and dominant ways of (re)producing knowledge. However, if such knowing can only make sense in the imagination, then it conflicts with knowing that is real. This conflict manifests suspicion: knowing that does not have the logic to explain its realness; knowing that relies on trust over logic. Suspicion makes clear the inadequacies of normative knowledge productions and challenges what is called "real."

[46] Nadar, "'Stories are data with Soul'," 22.
[47] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought," 124.
[48] Ibid.

Grappling with suspicion requires strategic imagination. Suspicion as a knowledge production is often seen in cultural productions and scholarship that employ speculation. Suspicion is related to speculation, in that they both deal with logical but not concrete conclusions. Black arts, literature, and critical theories have been invested in expressing speculative and alternative knowing. Christian notes that Black methods of "theorizing (and [she] intentionally use[s] the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with languages, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking."[49] Since the late 20th century and increasing in the present, there has been a lot of attention paid to speculative productions.[50] Speculation relies on imagination and alterity to produce innovative insights, as well as unusual experiential plots, characters, and settings. The arts allow for imaginative believability, which is necessary to grapple with suspicion. Pulling from Kara Keeling, "critical theory, poetry, dance, literature, philosophy, music, and other creative sonic phenomena can each continue to feed thought (and the capacity for thinking) in ways that touch and inform" the ways the world understands alternative epistemology.[51] The increase in representing alternative modes of knowing and being in the world prompts the integration of the possibilities and limitations of the widespread expression of speculative knowing. Suspicion is a feeling that indicates that alternative means of sense-making are required. In this section, I explain how Black arts and theory create tools that are used to confront, work with, and learn from suspicion.

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[49] Christian, "The Race for Theory," 68.
[50] On the point of increase in speculative works, Kara Keeling remarks on Afrofuturism: "Over the past ten years, an explosion of interest in Afrofuturism has transformed the category itself, pushing its cultural logics and political investments into the twenty-first century." See Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. (1st ed. Vol. 30. New York: NYU Press, 2019): 3.
[51] Ibid, 15.

Suspicions face challenges in knowledge-sharing. Those who are suspicious want to convince others, yet are unable to do so. Non-believability has its roots in anti-Blackness and sexism. In referring to aspects of Black women's lives that are unknowable, or are in "negative socio-epistemic space," Dotson discusses the consequences of such space is that "Black women and Black girls fail to invoke epistemic confidence, i.e. we are not 'believed in'."[52] This failed epistemic confidence refers to the lack of "affective investment" and empathy, which are resources needed for suspicion.[53] In works that use suspicion, we can see how theories, characters, and narration attempt to challenge normative epistemology logic. They may hunt and search for what has provoke their suspicion to try to make it more visible; Perhaps they beg and plead for others to believe their elusive knowing; Some even give up the attempts to express realizing that making their knowing more concrete is impossible. In all these instances of reconciling suspicion, we are faced with the realization that, due to the gaps in normative epistemology, sharing is challenging and seems impossible.

Those who attend to these gaps in knowing offer strategies to share their knowing. Black speculative practices are didactic in problem solving and in their predictive capabilities. They offer a methodology to make sense of what remains unclear. Dotson's methodology is "abductive reasoning to 'piece together' what kinds of conceptual happenings might 'make sense' of what is revealed in the targeted conceptual artifacts."[54] Suspicion has clues of what could be known, which are similar to the "conceptual nuggets."[55] Such reflectiveness requires thinking in line with plausibility over possibility. Dotson writes:

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[52] Dotson, "Theorizing Unknowability," 424.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 427.
[55] Ibid.

> Plausibility is historically situated, and geopolitically specific. It is spatial and often subject to aspects of our material existence. When epistemic confidence in some person, group, happening, or phenomena has been reduced in a significant degree, then knowledge from/of that person, group, happening, or phenomena becomes impossible. That is to say, epistemic confidence, a degree of afforded plausibility, is a requirement for contributing to the social production of knowledge. [56]

Plausibility is a line of reasoning and believing (i.e., knowledge sharing) that acknowledges that different communities and ethnic, racial, and social groups will maintain different methods of knowing and hold different criteria for what is considered valuable information. These epistemological modes and values develop from their histories, places in the world, and legacies of social positioning. This acknowledgment leads one to gain epistemic confidence and is open to empathizing in order to gain access to alternative ways of knowing that suspicion needs. Plausibility is a crucial alternative term to possibility when it comes to validating suspicion because of the critical thinking and feeling that suspicion requires. With suspicion, those who carry it find a way to express and share this (un)knowing, and we must be open to sharing.

I see the validity of suspicion in Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020), a phenomenal work filled with rhythmic and disruptive poetry that imagines Black life through oceanic means by looking to the knowing of beings that challenge the Western notion of humanity; Gumbs offers us poetics that open up to new epistemology. In the opening pages, Gumbs writes, "if the ways of thinking, being, and understanding that made colonialism and slavery imaginable were constructed over time, and heretical to the ways of thinking, being, and understanding that came before them, it *must be* possible to understand life, being, and place

[56] Ibid, 423.

differently *by now*."[57] The "must be" in this line points to suspicion that beckons for a different way of knowing and producing knowledge or understanding life; the "must be" points to a firm knowing that isn't made concrete in traditional epistemology.[58] The "by now" indicates the alterity is already happening and communicates urgency.[59] I point to *Dub* because Gumbs answers Wynter's called to reflect upon what is imaginable in our lifetimes.[60] Gumbs takes in the call to know differently by paying attention to the knowledges of ancestors who were not allowed the privileges of humanity on colonial terms and knowledges shared by the land, the oceans, and the marine mammals that live within. Influenced by Wynter, Gumbs distinguishes the difference between Homo sapiens, as "the ones who know," and Homo narrans, as "the ones who tell ourselves that we know."[61] Being Homo narrans gives way to plausibility and embodied knowing by allowing us to consider knowing as a collective endeavor that is based on what is believed to be true by collectives and how the members in the collective share this truth. To understand *Dub,* the reader contemplates an unthinkable reality as actually existing. A reality that can only make sense outside of coloniality, capitalism, and anti-Black common senses.

N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Series*, which includes *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017) follows a nonlinear life of Syenite/Essun/Damaya/You in her different self-inventions as an Orogene— a genre of the human that can feel into the Earth, communicate with it, and share in its knowing. They call this process "sessing." Sessing, like suspicion, is an elusive knowing where it's not possible to accurately communicate this knowing to and with other genres of humans in the story. Although

[57] Alexis Pauline Gumbs. *Dub: Finding Ceremony*. (Duke University Press, 2020): ix, my emphasis.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.

the other genres of humans understand Orogenes' ability to sess— other humans understand that it is possible for the Orogenes to communicate with the Earth— they don't understand the methods of Orogene's sessing or how it works. Therefore, Orogenes often have a conflict in expressing what they know to be true. Urgency sets in when they can sess, thus know, when the world is ending or a disaster is coming. In an interlude, the narrator talks with the reader, telling them to pay attention to certain aspects of the story that may be unclear. This message speaks towards suspicion because the narrator suggests: "Who misses what they have never, ever even imagined? That would not be human nature. How fortunate, then, that there are more people in this world than just humankind."[62] This point is related to Gumbs's methodology to listen to marine life to imagine other ways of being and knowing. We need other concepts of beings'— even beings that can feel and know the Earth— ways of producing and sharing knowledge because such relationships connect us to other ways of knowing, otherwise such knowings would be missed.

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2019) is a novel that shows familial legacies and how magical abilities are passed down through generation. Haunting is a major theme in the story, and such a theme will undoubtedly speak towards suspicion. However, some of the characters' magical abilities to communicate with beings that humans wouldn't usually communicate with leads to a demonstration on how to interact and engage with unknown information— the unknowns of the world and what we can't make sense of inside ourselves. The ways the characters interact with this alternative communication is like invisible knowing, or suspicion. Two of the younger siblings, Jojo and Kayla, can interact with animals and ghosts. When Jojo is outside with the animals, he can *hear* them say "Scratch here, boy."[63] And the

[62] N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*. (First edition. New York: Orbit, 2015): 151.
[63] Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing: A Novel*. (1st ed. New York: Scribner, 2017): 19.

narration notes: “When the horse Pop keeps bowed his head and shimmied and bucked so that his sides gleamed like wet red Mississippi mud, I understood: *I could leap over your head, boy, and oh I would run and run and you would never see anything more than that. I could make you shake.*”[64] Presented as a magical and telepathic ability, Jojo and Kayla can only understand the animals because something within them is communicating and relating. That is, Jojo can understand the horse because he pays attention to the ways the horse communicates with its body. The narration doesn’t downplay or invalidate their communication with animals and ghosts as child-like imaginative play. Rather, the narration trusts there are comprehensible dialogues between humans and nonhumans. The narration validates knowing and communicating differently, and more so, insist on a need for such.

Reading speculative works that explore the elusive and alternative knowing provides visuals, metaphors, and stories that present itself with epistemic confidence that is expressed by characters and performers, but the way that they express this knowing is challenging to the ways of knowing expressed in the normative contemporary moment. For the Orogene, it’s not normative to know the secrets of the Earth by feeling, sessing, into the Earth. Through these observations, the whereabouts of information, that seems to be off-limits to some—to the audience, to those who don’t have the special abilities of knowing, to those who have not been in community with such knowing, to those who are unable to imagine what this knowing alludes to— is elusive and it’s not very clear why it is not possible to express this information through the forms of expression already present. It's a knowing that requires problem solving, deep bodily feelings, and trusting in the knowledge. Seeing the ways characters manage and grapple

[64] Ibid.

with their suspicion and the strategic ways they attempt to share the knowledge, offers metaphoric tools to make sense of suspicion.

Suspicion in Horror: Generative to Alternative Epistemology

In this section, I focus more specifically on the use of suspicion in Black horror productions. The blaxploitation classic, William Crane's *Blacula* (1972), begins its story in the mid-19th century, when Black aristocrats, Mamuwalde and Luva, visit Count Dracula to request aid in ending transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. [65] The bloodthirsty and infamous Count Dracula, who is metaphoric of white supremacy in the film, insists that there is no need to end the slave trafficking because white people are benefiting from it. A fight breaks out between Mamuwalde and Count Dracula. He and his team of vampires bite Mamuwalde and curse him to live a life as a vampire: Blacula, the Black version of Dracula. Throughout the film, Blacula is presented as a villain because he's a menace to the police state. Not only is he seen as a threat for turning the city into vampires, but he is impossible to capture. Undercover police confront Mamuwalde about his curious ways, asking if he's "into the occult?... witchcraft, voodoo, devil worshiping."[66] To which, Mamuwalde elusively responds, "Well, we can't ignore what the world characterizes as the 'Black Arts,' now can we?... I think that there's some truth in all of it."[67] He goes on to say that so too does the Devil exist because people have believed in this figure for thousands of years. The crowd concludes that Mamuwalde is well-informed and knowledgeable. Mamuwalde treats spiritual and elusive knowing within occult arts, labeled as "black arts," as truth, giving it "epistemic confidence."[68] This scene is an example of how horror productions

[65] *Blacula*, directed by Willian Crane (1981; Thorn EMI/HBO Video) 1:32:00, cassette.
[66] Ibid, 59:00
[67] Ibid, 1:03:00.
[68] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 424.

play with ways of knowing. Elusive beliefs and suspicion are treated as necessary knowledge productions that don't abide by normative ways of knowing; however, collective beliefs and theories shared amongst people and communities show that suspicion is a knowledge production that has weight, validity, and truth to it.

In cultural productions that utilizes suspicion— like mysteries, suspense, thrillers, and horror (as discussed in this section) — when Black cultural producers offer aesthetics that have characteristics that cannot be placed in our current material reality or cannot be explained/ made knowable with logics that govern our current material reality, I see this as an invitation into another possible way of knowing. The knowing has a choral effect; the collective imagination makes the experience of the knowing more real than just in the imagination. The elusive knowing becomes real via collective Black methods of sense-making and agreed upon "customs and arrangements" on what is considered valued knowing.[69]

These offerings of alternative knowing in horror have an interruptive, and sometimes disruptive, quality to them because of how they go against the normative material reality in the text. In works of horror, suspicion is often a precursor to the horrible event. An example of this is Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* where Black people in Harlem were suspicious of an obscure rich white man who pays Charles Thomas Tester, or Tommy, to play guitar at the man's party.[70] This suspicion is informed by the shared knowledge among Black communities of Harlem of the tricky ways white people dupe and lure Black people. The suspicion made others warn Tommy about the rich white man, Robert Suydam, but he doesn't listen and becomes a victim. Black horror often uses suspicion as valuable knowing that is rooted in the history of

[69] Ibid 420.
[70] Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*. (First edition. New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book, 2016).

Black people's relationship to white and anti-Black violence and manipulation. In the first part of the story, suspicion provoked sharing knowledge as a means of community protection. Although no one in the community had concrete information about the dangers of Suynam, the community "piece[d] together" clues about his presence— the way he was in places white people aren't usually, the way he wanted Tommy to perform even though he's a terrible musician, the way police are always nearby when Suydam is around— to conclude knowing that Suydam is dangerous.[71]

Suspicion in horror can speak to Black pessimism. There's a generative openness that Black pessimism conversations give way to, which helps with understanding the abilities of Black horror. In *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, Kevin Quashie states that "an overemphasis on death simplifies the nuanced insights of black pessimism and its related discourses."[72] Quashie also insists that the "terms of life are legible in the field's critical explorations."[73] Horror at once reckons with the death metaphor and still searches for and embodies terms of life within death. Horror imagines a reality that breaks through and destroys such fallacies and brings forth life that, in some ways, fulfills ideas of Black authentic living. I'm interested in the epistemological alterity in horror that embodies this intersection: "Black pessimism's construction of Black ontology both as an impossibility in the logic of the antiblack world and as a possibility that requires perceiving differently what the world is or looks like or can be."[74] Suspicion is an entry another way of knowing and perceiving the world that Black pessimism opens up to. Black pessimism allows us to question the ideas of normative

[71] Dotson, "Theorizing Unknowability," 427; LaValle, *Ballad of Black Tom,* 29-36.
[72] Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021): 9.
[73] Ibid, 8.
[74] Ibid.

epistemology that will get closer to the destruction of the world that holds Blackness and nothingness in the same instance. In horror, sharing suspicion is supposed to increase communal protection, but traditional ways of knowing often prevent the protection because suspicion isn't seen as real knowledge. Therefore, the characters experiment with multiple knowledge sharing strategies to convince others and build relationships with others that can utilize such epistemological alterity.

Candyman

Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) is a contemporary film that effectively uses the horror genre to explore alternative Black knowledge productions.[75] In this film (like many other horror films), knowing about horrific destruction appears as suspicion because the presence of something dangerous is elusive. Those who call this figure, Candyman, to existence don't just share the knowing of his existence, but they are in the process of creating it— each rendition and response adding to the knowing. Candyman started as a Clive Barker's short story, "The Forbidden" (1986) that was based in English government housing. *Candyman'*s film renditions deal with the larger concepts of capitalist violence, gentrification, institutions, police violence, and Black communal life. The 1992 film continues the short story's thoughts about knowledge productions in higher education and its pattern of going into communities to treat people as objects of analyses.[76] It touches on gentrification in references to Chicago's Cabrini Green, which is related to the new *Candyman* (2021) where we see the aftermath of the early stages of gentrification at play in the 90's and ongoing violence of institutions and police.[77] In the 2021

[75] *Candyman*, directed by Nia DaCosta (2021; Universal City, CA: Universal), Digital Stream.
[76] *Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose, (1992; Burbank, Calif: Columbia TriStar Home Video), Digital Stream.
[77] DaCosta, *Candyman.*

film version the back story of Candyman details a man, named Daniel Robitaille, during the reconstruction era who wanted to make a living as an artist.[78] The reconstruction era was built on false promises (one of many) to offer Black people a life of economic, political, and social liberties that resembled that of their white counterparts.[79] However, struggling to make it as an artist, Candyman gets murder by a white mob because they accused him of loving a white woman. Dying by white supremacist lynching, the man resurfaces as a mythological Candyman, and each time a Black person dies at the hands of white supremacy, they get reincarnated as Candyman— a figure with vengeance.[80] In these very moments of continued anti-Black subjugation, we see an enticement of Candyman emerge from the curiosity of the people. Both versions of this horror classic portray a communal knowing about an elusive Black figure that lures people so that he can possess their body, and other people evoke his spirit, as a dare, to see if he is real and will kill them.

DaCosta's *Candyman* shows knowing about Candyman disruptively comes through by a felt presence that something is real by the main character Anthony McCoy, played by Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, but is at once not real to the rest of the world (or to other characters who believe Candyman to be a myth). This film portrays suspicion, with the main character enticed by a sort of can't-be-made-to-make-sense knowing of Candyman. Suspicion then turns to obsession as the main character endlessly attempts to make this figure known in the way he knows this figure. Confirming his suspicion and gaining "epistemic confidence" within himself is seen in Anthony's eyes when Candyman is called upon, seen in his paintings, seen in his

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[78] Ibid, 51:49.
[79] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. (1st ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935), 6.
[80] DaCosta, *Candyman*, 52:40.

travels to collect Helen's old journals about her dance with Candyman.[81] He works to reckon with what has been considered myth and making a case for its reality. In the film, this grappling meets its gory, destructive end with this elusive figure coming fully into the material reality, slashing the police, and warning to let everyone know that he has arrived.[82] The final evocation of Candyman comes from Brianna Cartwright, played by Teyonah Parris, Antony's partner who did not believe in Antony's suspicion; however, she joins in the knowing of Candyman by evoking Candyman to save herself from the police who just murdered Anthony. To her and Anthony, Candyman is able to become real outside the imagination.[83] Throughout this section, I consider what is significant with Black imaginations creating horrific figures to represent Black alternative knowing. Because Candyman doesn't come through to destroy Black life but the people who destroy Black life (art critics of high institutions, police, gentrifiers, high school bullies), could Candyman, in its evilness and vengeful qualities, come from a world that seeks to protect Black people? And could Black people within the film be suspicious about this ability? That is to say, could they deep down believe stories about Candyman's ability to be summoned for protection and/or murder? Candyman honors Black worlds when Blackness and Black worlds can be seen as demonic and evil.

In the 1992 *Candyman* film, Black communities share the knowledge of this frightening, elusive figure. Some test their fate in the mirror for they believe that Candyman is only a horrific myth, but others suspiciously know this figure to be true and very real and dare not to say his name even once. Thus, the figure of Candyman emerged and his story was shared by collective imaginations into future generations. In DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021), the social commentary of

[81] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 424; Dacosta, *Candyman*, 32:05; 45:31; 53:58; 38:31.
[82] DaCosta, *Candyman*, 1:23:29.
[83] DaCosta, *Candyman*, 1:39:03

this figure's story is highlighted, no longer just an evil figure that possesses and summons to just kill "innocent" people. What Anthony, and Black viewers, come to know about Candyman is the collective embodied feelings of anger and the behaviors of vindictiveness that understandably come with such deep generational feelings. Characters in the film reflect Black imaginations, or more like consciousness in many regards, outside of the film. I'm sure I'm not the only one who grew up in family household, and friend groups where one was to not, by any means, say Candyman. A few times, I've been almost kicked out of friends' homes because I told them about the films and inadvertently said his name in front of a reflective glass one too many times. Although Candyman should be considered a mythological figure in normative epistemology, Black imaginations challenge such normative ways of knowing reality.

In DaCosta's *Candyman*, suspicion is an embodied knowing. I see the beginnings of suspicion in Antony's eyes and facial expression when hearing the story of Helen's battle with Candyman told by Troy Cartwright, Brianna's little brother played by Nathan Stewart-Jarrett. Brianna, Anthony, Troy, and Troy's boyfriend sit in a dimly lit room as Troy begins to tell a campfire ghost story.[84] At the start of Troy's storytelling, Anthony calls bullshit. When Troy goes deeper into the story, the camera moves in on Anthony's face, slightly blurring what is around him—the background and Brianna's face who's sitting next to him. In the slow close-up move, the subtle expressions on Anthony's face were clearly unlike the others. There's a steady attentiveness in his glare and his jawline is slightly tense.[85] It contrasts the fear seen in Brianna's blurry eyes. By the look on his face, Anthony doesn't seem to hold fear. He holds wonder and curiosity. When Troy leaves, he yells out to Anthony to start working on his paintings again, and

[84] DaCosta, 9:00.
[85] Ibid, 10:45.

to that Anthony responds, "he's right" and the scene ends.[86] Staying true to elusive knowing that needs another way of making sense to understand the knowing more clearly, we never see Candyman, the figure, unless in a reflective surface, like a mirror. He's invisible, which suggests a non-reality. On the other hand, we do see the violent, bloody aftermath and death that occurs when his spirit is evoked. We see bodies hoisted up in the air by an invisible force as blood gushes from their bodies.[87] The characters and viewers of the film are tasked with understanding and making sense of something that cannot be made to make sense. Therefore, could the knowing brought forth by suspicion lead to obsessing over what it would take to concretely make sense of this knowing?

Anthony grapples with confirming his knowing and sharing this knowing obsessively. Soon after Anthony heard the story of Candyman from Troy, the film shows a montage of Anthony looking up information about Helen's dance with Candyman.[88] The aesthetics of a montage demonstrate actions that occur quickly and in abundance over time, adding to the incessant quality of validating suspicion. The film shows the different ways Anthony searches for elusive knowing of Candyman, even going to the university to collect Helen's archive materials, which no one else has even inquired about. The film captures the fixated quality of obsession and represents that visual through the facial expression and actions of Anthony. When he sees people engaging with his artwork at the gallery— a cabinet bathroom mirror to evoke Candyman with an installation on the inside that is a reminder of Helen's travels to the inside of a bathroom mirror to feed her obsession with Candyman in the 1992 film, he stares at gallery guests relentlessly, seemingly unable to move his eyes and his attention elsewhere.[89] When

[86] DaCosta, *Candyman*.13:00
[87] Ibid, 49:00.
[88] Ibid, 14:00.
[89] Ibid, 25:00.

others are interested in Candyman, or how Anthony represents Candyman, there is a steady glare in his eyes. A glare that doesn't shift, doesn't blink. A glare that insists others say his name, to call out to Candyman, and to evoke his presence.[90] When others are engaged with his artworks, which shifts to represent Candyman in the latter part of the film, there is a fixedness on how they are engaging with his work. Almost like a trance. When others are tempted to evoke Candyman, Anthony's demeanor suddenly and eerily changes. Obsession guides Anthony's dance and entanglement with Candyman. I see obsession in his change in aesthetics to his artworks. From a realistic representation of Black pain to painful depiction of what his imagination tells him what Candyman looks like— the reflections he sees in the mirror.[91] I believe these are the aesthetics of obsession. This obsession has such a strong hold that it allows Anthony (and Helen) to open themselves up for possession. On their search for Candyman, the characters go through lengths to get at the bottom of this elusive knowing. What invisible hold does Candyman have on people? What sparks this hold? I don't think we see it as audience members. It's almost like it begins with an interest in stories and the fear that Candyman— this supposedly mythical creature— incites in people that creates an interest in wanting to know more about this elusive figure.

In DaCosta's *Candyman*, the obsession brings forth destruction via Candyman. Brianna holds Anthony, whose body has been taken over by Candyman, destroying his flesh. The police come in and shoot Anthony dead (invoking a familiar story of violence against Black life) and attempt to frame Brianna for the death of Anthony.[92] In response to this, Brianna invokes Candyman, now in the resurrected body of Anthony. Anthony as Candyman comes out, no

[90] Ibid, 45:30.
[91] Ibid, 53:58.
[92] Ibid, 1:19:00.

longer visible, slashing away at the police officers; Brianna can get free from the police car. As Brianna leaves the scene, Candyman is now a figure that is a swarm of bees, representing a vengeful collective of Black beings that have been killed by white power. Candyman's final words are "tell everyone."[93] This final saying, in relation to the destruction that Candyman seeks to bring, speaks to the knowings of this elusive figure. No longer just a feeling that he exists that can't be explained. The destruction offers a space for this figure to be fully known in the world.

The Rider

Throughout her body of work, Tananarive Due shows what's at stake in considering alternative knowledge productions for Black imaginations. To demonstrate the stakes, she pulls from Black histories consistently in her stories—from death threat to powerful Black women in *The Between* (1990) to the inhumane care of people who have been discarded in our prison systems in *The Reformatory* (2023). With such attention to history, she embeds speculative practices as a relationship between the past and present, as a way for us to imagine the past, which supports Ashon Crawley's point of Black thought being "between time and space."[94] In her short story, "The Rider" (2023), she pulls from the history of her mother's interaction with civil rights protest and police violence. Her mother, Patricia Stephen Due (who was also a fan of horror), wore dark glasses because "she was taking part in a non-violent protest march to try to free students who had been jailed after sit-ins… This police officer took a tear gas canister, threw it in her face, and said 'I want you.'… She felt sensitivity to light for the rest of her life."[95] By

[93] DaCosta, *Candyman,* 1:25:25.
[94] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought," 143.
[95] Tananarive Due, "Healing Our Histories Through the Lens of Horror: Guest of Honor Plenary Address Online at VICFA 2022, 'The Global Fantastic.'" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 33, no. 3 (2022): 133.

placing what happened to her mother into a horror short story, Due considers the violence that's stake when fighting for liberation and creates a story where redemption is felt.[96]

In "The Rider," two Black women, Patricia (also goes by Pat) and Priscilla, are "members of the Congress Racial Equity [and] veteran of sit-ins and bland food and thin cots at the Tallahassee jail."[97] The sisters are wide known across Tallahassee for being loud disrupters of the Jim Crow laws that they seldomly abide by. They immediately go to the white only sections when they enter public places, and they return the stares of white people. The story begins with the sisters in the bus station waiting to "join the Freedom Riders in Montgomery."[98] The narrator situates the reader in a moment in time pivotal to Black civil rights movements that responds to Jim Crow laws, police violences, and community support. "The Rider" shows how this moment in history is one where the characters find themselves in situations that can be ripe with dread. Their senses are activated as a mode for protection and safety. This short story conveys Black women's precarity and agency.

The story utilizes a swamp as lucrative for Black possibilities. Swamps have been taken up by cultural critics and producers to explore the complexities of fugitivity. C. Riley Snorton in *Black on Both Sides*: *A Racial History of Trans Identity*, pulls from Harriet Jacob's time with fugitivity as she hides from plantation life in a small attic and a swamp. Snorton writes, "the swamp stages the transversal relationship between fugitive life and death."[99] In a talk at the University of Chicago where Snorton presents a longer, forthcoming work, *Mud: Ecologies of Racial Meaning*, he digs deeper into Blackness's (and other marginalized and oppressed

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[96] Due, "Healing Our Histories," 140.
[97] Tananarive Due, "The Rider," in *Out There Screaming: an Anthology of New Black Horro*r, ed. Jordan Peele (New York: Random House, 2023), 97.
[98] Ibid.
[99] C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. (1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 72.

peoples') relationship to swamps across histories. In this talk, he says, "the swamps become a rubric for reading how freedom functions as an exercise that works in and on the body."[100] Swamps allow for contemplation on "nonbinary, indeterminacy, and uncertainty as principles and possibilities for living."[101] These thoughts allow for a critical reflection on swamps areas that continue to be expounded upon in "The Rider." The otherworldly being, and the one that helps provide the redemption for Patricia and Priscilla, is a figure of and from "Reclamation Swamp [where] good folks… didn't need any laws but their own. They made their own peace. Their own justice."[102] The swamp, in Due story, evades classification and capture. The figure of the swamps has ability that allow for reflection on the ways knowledge is shared telepathically.

"The Rider" is a horror short story that pulls from Black Jim Crow histories and utilizes the metaphor of swamps to challenge the "normative order of knowledge."[103] One of the ways Due challenges knowledge productions is in the form itself. The narration communicates the characters', mainly Patricia's, inner thoughts as well as spoken thoughts. As usual, what's spoken is in quotation; however, the inner thoughts aren't followed by the usual ", she thought" as is often the case with narrations communicating the inner thoughts of a character. Rather the inner thoughts are in italics. For example, when Patricia woke up on the bus, the narration indicates her thoughts: "Pat sat up straight with a thought as certain as any she'd ever had: *Something will go badly wrong on this trip.*"[104] Italics continue to be used when the sisters share knowing via looks but not verbal, a common practice in Black discourses: "*Not now,* Pat told her

[100] C. Riley Snorton, "The Wild Man in the Green Swamp and Other Stories about Race in America," Filmed November 5, 2021 at University of Chicago, video, 2:17, https://youtu.be/csOk-3KGVXk?si=gtoLSDe5sbPhcR5a
[101] Ibid.
[102] Due, "The Rider," 105.
[103] Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found," 26.
[104] Ibid, 102.

sister with her eyes. *Not yet."*[105] Another example: "Priscilla gave her a look: *How the hell will we do that?*[106] The reader can differentiate between verbal and direct communications and knowing that is share through looks. Now, this might seem like a minor point that is just a writer's preferred style, but this move is an indicator. Further into the story, we meet the non-human swamp character, called The Rider, who only communicates with thoughts. Due offers a mythical figure that can participate in telepathic sharing of knowledge and produces fear in the characters and readers. However, the only clue that The Rider has infiltrated the brain is that narration surrounding the characters suddenly becomes italicized. With this ability, The Rider forces people to "tell the truth on [themselves] because it likes the truth to be told."[107] This truth telling comes to the aid of Patricia and Priscilla. The complex and experimental approach to knowledge production demonstrates the necessity of suspicion.

Suspicion is first evoked through what was being elusively communicated through stares, hints, and suggestions. Patricia and Priscilla paid attention to the ways people stared at them:

> …The silver haired window clerk at the Tallahassee Greyhound stations glared at Patricia Houston when she and her sister, Priscilla, pivoted to walk toward the shiny wooden benches in the Whites Only waiting area....[108]
>
> …The mousy clerk's glare suggests unspoken curses, but she kept her mouth shut... [109]
>
> …Pat didn't miss the way the driver cut his eyes toward her and Priscilla...[110]

[105] Ibid, 101
[106] Ibid, 109.
[107] Ibid, 111.
[108] Ibid, 97.
[109] Ibid, 98.
[110] Ibid, 100-101.

> …The deputies were watching through the windows for the first chance to put hands on them, and it was too soon…[111]

Glares from white people, especially during racial power dynamics, show up consistently in Black literature—from Frantz Fanon's "Look! A Negro!" to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and the store clerk's dismissive glare to Pecola.[112] The glares, stares, and quick looks that Patricia and Priscilla experience are in line with this tradition of white supremacy to assert the "power in looking."[113] This power to watch also comes with a power to define and control. Furthermore, Due shows how the looks cause suspicion in Patricia and Priscilla, and thus suspicion in the reader. Objectively, stares are not clear communication; however, the ways they were being stared at made clear that something was being communicated and it would serve them best to figure out what it is. These moments of abstract ways of sharing knowledge offer a case for suspicion as being a valid and necessary form of communicating knowing.

Suspicion is predicated on "wrong-ness," or perceiving something that goes against what is expected. The need to know more and to confirm such knowing comes through when normalcy is challenged and disrupted. Patricia and Priscilla first become suspicious when Pat realizes the bus is not on the proper route: "Isn't this Bloody Twenty-seven? … A second sign followed in identical script: Reclamation Swamp… 'Oh, *hell*, no. This isn't the route."[114] To reconcile the suspicion, she attempts to call attention to the bus driver for clarity; however, he doesn't answer, just stares at her from the rear-view mirror while driving. Although stares from white people are expected, the extended stares while driving is not. Normalcy is further

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[111] Ibid, 97-100.
[112]Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. (First edition, New edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008): 91; Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. (New York: Plume Book, 1994):48.
[113] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Second edition. United Kingdom: Routledge, 2014): 115. doi:10.4324/9781315743226.
[114] Ibid, 103. Emphasis original. Italics for emphasis, not inner thoughts.

challenged when The Rider appears in the center of the path of the bus whose driver is not properly looking. The Rider does not fit into the expectation of how a human looks:

> His brown-gray face was not made of skin. His face was knotty wood, with round gaps where his mouth and eyes should have been. What she had mistaken for clothing was a nest of leave and debris still damp from the swamp, fashion like a hood. Sewn by vines, as some part of her had already known.[115]

The Rider is made of and from the swamp; He is the walking embodiment of fugitivity, unclassifiable, and fleeting.[116] His difference disrupts Patricia and Priscila expectation of their bus ride and who they might be riding with. The Rider captures their attention immediately— his heaviness shakes the bus, his smell troubles their nose, and mosquitos that came with him now bite their arms. As the narration describes The Rider, he "Looked wrong. / Smelled wrong. / All of him was wrong."[117] Suspicion around what this figure is and what it can do is important and can be known through Patricia and Priscilla's engagement with what seems wrong to them.

Being a genre of being that isn't human means that he will carry other ways of knowing that aren't readily accessible to Patricia and Priscilla. The Rider shares his knowledge and communicates with others by coming in their heads, inserting his words with their thoughts, and speaking through them. The Rider has the otherworldly ability to alter voices once he is inside the character's head and speaks through the character. When the bus driver gets overtaken by The Rider, the only indication that something peculiar has happened is the strangeness, wrongness in the bus driver's voice. The bus driver (though really The Rider) explains where they are, "Reclamation Swamp," and Patricia notices that the bus driver's "stare was wrong, first

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[115] Ibid, 110.
[116] Snorton, "The Wild Man in the Green Swamp," 2:02, 24:01; 23:48.
[117] Ibid, 106.

off: His eyes didn't blink. And his voice! A man's voice, yes, but as gravelly as the road, with the quality of a radio signal phasing in and out."[118] The voices being altered is another clear sign that something is wrong, and the characters need to figure it out. The ways Patricia and Priscilla grapple with their suspicion will get them to understand The Rider's ways of knowing and sharing knowing. They will come to understand epistemological alterity.

Patricia and Priscilla should pursue their suspicion of The Rider because historically suspicion has been helpful to Black communities. Suspicion makes sense of unclear and potentially harmful situations by using Black sensibilities that are passed down through past experiences. Patricia and Priscilla are suspicious of not just The Rider, but of the bus driver and route. They hold their suspicion as valid knowledge production based on Black experiences with law and police enforcements. When they are waiting in the bus station, a Black custodian shares his suspicion as a warning. He advises them to drive instead of taking the bus because he was told that people know that the Freedom Riders are coming.[119] The custodian's knowing, which he came to via suspicion, is confirmed by the history of police's relationship to Freedom Riders. The past experiences give weight to the validity of knowing in communications that are not concretely known.

This kind of suspicion about white authorities already has "epistemic confidence" for Patricia and Priscilla, as representations of Black activists.[120] Their suspicion of The Rider—who he is, what he can do, and what he knows— offers an opportunity to gain more alternative knowing. With the figure of The Rider, Due shows suspicion as a form of knowing that has stakes to it (as most modes of horror employ suspicion). Patricia and Priscilla must understand

[118] Ibid, 105.
[119] Ibid, 99.
[120] Dotson, "Theorizing Jane Crow," 424.

The Rider so that they can protect and take care of themselves. This urgency that accompanies suspicion will offer strategies to understand and trust elusive knowing. The strategies that Due offers to know The Rider represent concerns related to Black autonomy and explores speculative methods of collaborating with a terrifying mythical figure.

One of the ways the sisters grapple with their suspicion of The Rider is through paying attention to their body's sensation as a reaction to threat, fear, and dread. When Patricia realizes that she must take control of the bus because The Rider killed the bus driver (who was clandestinely trying to kill the sisters), her body reacts. "She felt her heart pounding in the pads of her fingers as she clung to the seat in front of her."[121] Her body reacts to make sense of a confusing situation where she knows she must take action and drive the bus. Additionally, whenever The Rider infiltrated the bus drivers voice (before she knew/ confirm that The Rider had this ability) "Pat's ears rang. The voice came from Rich's lips, but it was as if it also came from the air itself."[122] To confirm that The Rider was not human, she noticed the ways he smelled, "Pat smelled him before she saw him: He reeked like a walking bog."[123] Due brings forth senses as sharing knowledge. By paying attention to how her body reacts to uncertain situation, Patricia taps into what her body knows and how the body makes sense of The Rider's ability. The smells, ears ringing, and threats are all indicators of The Rider's alternative abilities. To understand The Rider, Patricia must understand what's changing about her in relation to him.

By paying attention to her ears ringing, Patricia realized that The Rider communicates telepathically. Such ways of communication and knowledge sharing is invasive. The Rider invades the brain. It is unwelcomed and forced. Although The Rider fights against power, it's

[121] Ibid, 105.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

power must also be reckoned with. The narration confirms this non-consensual invasion by following Patricia and the use of the italics:

> ...to help him somehow || *even though he wouldn't have lifted a finger for us if he's watched us set on fire*||. That last thought felt more like an invasion than inspiration, as if it had come from outside of her... Pat was sure the creature had taken her… Her mind had been drifting somewhere, just as she feared.[124]

Although this is a redemption story and The Rider is positioned as a savior figure that helps to fight back against violent police power, The Rider also has power that crosses bodily autonomy.

Through a more generative reading, Due's intention is to offer speculative collaboration with a power that supersede police power. One of the ways to grapple with suspicion of The Rider is through collaboration as Patricia does. Through telepathic communication, which now Patricia knows to expect communication from The Rider via thoughts, The Rider shares knowledge about the ways the bus driver was in cahoots with the police. The Rider also tells how Patricia can get herself and Priscilla out of the danger. Eventually, Patricia sees this knowledge sharing as collaboration as both The Rider and Patricia have similar desires and goals—to defeat anti-Black police violence and the strategic ways police enforce Jim Crow laws:

> When the Rider sent knowledge to her, Pat's temples tightened with a headache. It was prodding her || *because you know what must happen now and you must be ready* ||… Until the last moment, the waiting hoodlums [the police waiting for the bus to bring them Patricia and Priscilla] were certain the bus would stop. But they [the waiting police] didn't know about the Rider, who rode the bus and Pat's traumatized heart… with the

[124] Ibid, 108, 111, emphasis original, underline mine.

> help from the Rider, Pat did not feel her despair or fear. The grin widening her face was mostly not her own. Mostly.[125]

The bus driver was sent on a mission to go off route to where the police were waiting for Freedom Riders. These were the hoodlums waiting for them. However, this scene shows that The Rider and Patricia shared one body and mind and worked together to not only become aware of evils of white supremacy that are waiting for them, but to destroy them. Embracing epistemic alterity for Patricia and Priscilla allowed them to be aware of what they didn't know, and gave them tools for alternative knowing.

Conclusion: Suspicious and Obsession bring in Destruction

In Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks.* Huey and Riley, voiced by Regina King, was in the car with the DIY detective Gin Rummy, voiced by Samuel L. Jackson. Riley questions the detectives knowing because to Riley's logics the detectives' suspicion isn't adding up. This line of questioning cause Rummy to shout: "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence… there are known knowns, there are known unknowns, and there are unknown unknowns– things we don't know that we don't know."[126] Though this scene satirically makes fun of suspicion, "there are known unknowns," can sum up my theory of suspicion. "Known unknowns," means that there are valid ways of knowing that are easily accessible to some logics but doesn't make sense to other logics or methods of knowing. However, when a knowing doesn't make sense readily, then suspicion offers clues to how an unknown can be known.

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[125] Ibid, 112-113.
[126] *The Boondocks,* directed by Aaron McGruder (2006; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment). Digital stream.

In this chapter, I consider an area of philosophy that explores ways of knowing and sharing/ disseminating that knowing. The problem with this is that the western world prioritizes colonial, white, European epistemological practices. In Black studies, many scholars contribute to challenging and expanding of epistemology. They make a case for Black thought to continue to develop alternative epistemology and offer new ways of knowing. In this vein, I make a case for suspicion as sensing something to be true without having concrete knowledge. Prioritizing colonial knowledge makes it so that white ways of knowing are seen as concrete, while other ways of knowing lack logic. However, something that lacks logic to the western imaginary doesn't prevent its actuality, truth, reasoning, and logic. Suspicion is that confrontation with normalized ways of knowing that have been unjustly prioritized. How does one grapple with unknowability that has hints on being known? How do they share it in a way that convinces others? Cultural productions show that they take the hints as clues to alternative logics that are needed in order to gain access to what is unknown. Reconciling suspicion appears like strategizing ways to express and make real this knowing and make it concrete. That's the challenge. The playful part comes in the experimental and creative ways the fusion of knowing takes place. Through art, dreams, mirrors, and telepathy, all of these are tools that characters use to make sense of their suspicion and make it real. It adds to the ways we can make sense of what first appears unknowable.

Analyzing suspicion in Black horror makes clear epistemic alterity, urgency, and knowing that is felt. The characters know something is occurring, but do not have the logics to convince others that this occurrence is happening. Or rather, the characters that need convincing do not value the logics that is necessary to believe in the occurrence. That is, a character can sense a danger and tries to convince other danger is present, but the other characters won't

believe them because of the illogicalness of the danger according to normalized ways of knowing. However, as horror will tell, the danger is still there even though it is unbelievable. Through seeing the ways characters grapple with their suspicion, which comes off obsessively, can give insights into the ways we can grapple with unknowability.

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Chapter Two

Catastrophe, Apocalypse, and Survival: Otherworldly Logics in Jordan Peele's *Us* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

As we enter the 2020's, recent conversations are concerned with so-called world ending events, especially in the world of Black and queer pop culture media. Kid Furry and Crissle of *The Read* podcast, consistently remark on waiting for the end to come.[1] Aliah Sheffield, creator of the alien beckoning call "Earth is ghetto," recently shared AI generated images of UFOs attacking earth, with a caption that reads: "For the record, I will not be running" (@aliahsheffield, January 20, 2023). Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown host a show entitled *How to Survive the End of the World*, where they discuss creative and spiritual practices rooted in Black feminist and queer politics as a means of survival admis global destructions. All these sentiments of world endings are in response to the historical and current violences against Black life where vulnerable subject positions are consistently harmed when neoliberal, colonial, and capitalistic methods of control are involved. [2] That is, world endings imaginative evocations are prompted by oppressed people's desire for the destruction of systems that violate them. In the mist of these conversations, Black science fiction and horror productions that offer world ending imaginative adventures can be a generative site to discuss what is meant by catastrophe,

[1] One of *The Read's* episodes that spends time talking about the world ending, "The End Is Boring," published June 8th, 2023.

[2] For example, on one of the episodes on *How to Survive the End of the World,* adrienne maree brown talks with healer and magical bodyworker, MawuLisa Thomas-Adeyemo, about how connecting with the body in rituals is a possible way to survive and challenge the medical industrial complex, which consistently harms, threatens, and kills Black bodies due to racist and capitalist neglect and mistreatment. In my view, the medical industrial complex is the catastrophe, alternative ways of connecting to our bodies is survival, and the ways we imagine a world where the medical industrial complex is destroyed and alternative & communal ways of taking care of our bodies is brought in is the apocalypse. See adrienne maree brown, "Witch School Chapter 18, MawuLisa Thomas-Adeyemo" January 26, 2024, in *How to Survive the End of the World,* podcast, https://endoftheworldshow.org/episodes/witch-school-chapter-18-mawulisa-thomas-adeyemo.

apocalypse, and Black survival. This chapter reads into the apocalyptic references Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019). As a work of science fiction and horror, respectively, Butler and Peele explore Black survival as means of creating new ways of being, relating, and knowing each other during and after the world ends and a new one takes over.[3] By pulling from real world catastrophic events rooted in performative multiculturalism and nuclear war threats of the 1980's, they create a world order where Blackness, that exists in Butler's and Peele's imagination, operates differently.

Butler's *Dawn* creates an imagined world on a living spaceship that feeds off the destruction of other worlds. The story takes place during the late 20th century, and the world is destroyed by a nuclear war between powerhouse nations.[4] As the narration makes clear, "Humanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable."[5] Most human beings are assumed to be dead or dying. But we see through the awakening of Lilith, that rather than dying, otherworldly beings of this living and hunting ship, called Oankali, come to the Earth to take some of the dying humans and prep them to merge with the Oankali's life. They aim to make a new genre of being— a mix of Oankali and Human— to inhabit the Earth. The novel opens with Lilith, a Black woman who was dying in the nuclear war. After Lilith awakens in an isolated room, she encounters a mystical being with a very unfamiliar body. His name is Jdahya, and he will be Lilith's guardian through this transition. Jdahya has torso and legs, but long hairlike moving tentacles on his head, body, and arms.[6] His, along with other Oankali, tentacles allow them to latch onto each other and communicate thoughts, feelings, and moods without the

[3] Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Warner Books, 1987); *Us,* directed by Jordan Peele (2019; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures,) Digital Stream.
[4] Butler, *Dawn*, 172
[5] Ibid, 15.
[6] Ibid, 25.

destructive confides of words. Throughout the novel we see conflicts of how Oankali and humans relate to each other through particular codes of logic, or a commonsense way of relating to each other and to their ship. Because of this conflict, we see Lilith must sacrifice her former perceived notion of life and what it means to be, ontologically speaking, and gain otherworldly abilities that are inaccessible to humans. As we witness Lilith's transformation, readers are able to experience embodied memories as valid ways of knowing, connections with others as witnessing their innermost worlds, and a respectful relationship to land in space.

Oankali logic is often seen as coercive and manipulative. Not only does Lilith compare her awakening to prisons and other control institutions like FBI or CIA, Oankali come to a dying planet to "save" inhabitants from dying themselves, and this saving is more like controlling their autonomy— they must adapt to the way of life of the Oankali or die anyway.[7] The way that humans must adapt to this new world does not resemble free-will. It's like humans leave a coercive and manipulative world order to be forced into a new one. In many ways and readings, the Oankali are the villains of the story, the ones the main characters must escape to live. However, while understanding the violence of Oankali methods, I want to take up a more generative reading of Butler's worldbuilding possibilities. Although adjusting to this world comes with friction, Oankali way of life in their world can be didactic and speak to Black desires of life and community. Their approach to community with each other is written as patient, engaging, withholding, and attentive to what lies beneath another's surface. Most communication happens by tapping into another person's depth to experience them from a distance.[8] Their relationship to their ship, or their land, is rooted in care. The ship itself is alive, a being that

[7] Buter, *Dawn,* 12.; Lisa Dowell, "Treasured Strangers: Race, Biopolitics, and the Human in Octavia E. Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy," *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3 (2017), 507.
[8] I am of the belief that this aspect of Oankali communication could be understood as empathy in a human sense. See Butler, 77.

breathes, moves, cares, and provides.[9] And everyone on the ship understands and respects this. They see the ship as their own kin. The way Oankali operates gives me pause to situate them tightly in Western colonizing frameworks. Rather, I want to see Butler's narrative as an *attempt* to imagine survival in another world while experiencing the catastrophe of world powers issuing nuclear war threats.

Jordan Peele's *Us* creates an imagined world that exist in underground concrete facilities. For decades, there has been an underground world full of beings called the Tethered who look exactly like the beings above ground, as if they are clones; however, the beings underground are subjected to a reality that lacks conditions that would make them human— autonomy, care, genuine love, a variety of foods.[10] In their anger, bitterness, and frustration, the Tethered organize a plan to come above ground to destroy human beings in the hopes that they may have access to what has been denied to them. A notable scene in the film shows the eerie and chaotic meeting of the two families— The Wilsons and their Tethered.[11] During this lecture given by the leader of the Tethered, Red, the above ground family must sit in their fear as they are being told of the alternative life— or lack thereof— that awaits them as the underground world comes up to have a chance at an autonomous life. Red details how they intend to have their freedom by killing their counterparts, long and slow so that they can revel in this long-awaited moment.[12] Most of the plot involves the above ground people running from their perceived-as-evil counterparts. In the end, although the leader, Red, does not survive, we see the Tethered coming together, holding hands across the land. This move references the Hand Across America campaign, which was a performative effort to demonstrate care and togetherness across ethnic,

[9] Butler, 63.
[10] Peele, *Us*, 00:01:09, 00:47:26.
[11] Ibid, 00:35:00.
[12] Ibid, 00:44:50.

racial, and geographical differences. This move also challenges the aims of the campaign by representing it through gory means.

In *Us*, we see another complex story where the villains can be empathized with. Afterall, they are the result of a botch government experiment where they were meant to be clones, but they couldn't be the soulless beings that the government wanted them to be.[13] Although their bodies are different and separate, their souls are tethered to their counterparts. Their soul also seems to be their lifeforce because the Tethered also live out the same lives as their counterparts— each movement, each life change that the ones above go through, the Tethered also experience the same against their will. The ones above can live a life of their own choice and autonomy, which also seems to be connected to a capitalist way of life and how they are able to move within it. The conditions of the Tethered make their apocalyptic chaotic event understandable and necessary. This film considers the catastrophe of technological advancements and creating conditions that render people erasable and nonexistent. It also demonstrates individuals within a community coming together for liberation aims and survival.

With different operating logics that animate their alternative worlds, the works of science fiction and horror yield an understanding of alternative modes of relation in community that are influenced by Black means of liberation, knowing, and communicating. My main questions are: How do these works reveal an opposing otherworldly logic that undergirds the Oankali and Tethered worlds? Because of the alternative logics of the otherworldly way of life, what is made possible for Lilith and Red that is not currently possible in the depiction of a "real world" in the stories? I shine a light on the ways Butler and Peele demonstrate the process by which Black bodies and material conditions become manipulated, coded, hyper-visible, and invisible (among

[13] Ibid, 00:01:20.

other phenomena) under power systems. The new social logic challenges notions of commonsense experience of space (forged through events of conquest and racial capitalism), memory as a site of counter-historical experience, and communication as the site of expressing one's lived internal and external experience.

New World's Catastrophes, Otherworldly Apocalypse, and Black Survival

Science fiction and horror respond to a long legacy of catastrophes brought on by modernity's mission to colonize the world in accordance to European standards. In "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentations- An argument," Sylvia Wynter makes clear that modernity during the 15th century and onward enforced a version of human-- a western, bourgeoisie version-- whose "genre of being, of truth, of freedom" was regarded as the utmost way of being.[14] Thereby not only disregarding other people outside of the ethno-class ways of being, truth, and freedom, but more significantly using such false reality to create an idea of a "new world" that would destroy the inner and outer worlds of people who didn't take up the position of western, bourgeois man.[15] Modernity's colonial missions brought forth a "new world" that has legacy of catastrophes across the globe.

The "new world" for Black life in America refers to middle passages trafficking during transatlantic enslavement, one of the catastrophes that continues to harm Black life.[16] In this journey to a new world, a particular sort of racialization occurred where Black people could be seen and treated as chattel used to build the wealth of the Western world. In *Critique of Black*

[14] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR*, 3, no. 3 (2003): 312.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, (London: Duke University Press. 2017), 2.

Reason, Achille Mbembe asserts that "race, operating over the past centuries as a foundational category that is at once material and phantasmic, has been at the root of catastrophe, the cause of extraordinary psychic devastation and of innumerable crimes and massacres."[17] One such crime brought on by the creation of the new world is using racial logics to define Black being as non-being, commodity, and thus able to be forced into labor to build the new world that matches the ideals of the overrepresentation bourgeoisie human. Even after emancipation we continue to see Black life being neglected because of perceptive views of nonbeing.

In the contemporary moment, we continue to experience the catastrophes of modernity's "new world" missions. We continue to see land and bodies dispossessed to benefit a version of a human that is wealthy and a citizen of a powerful nation-state. As Mbembe indicates, the 21st century catastrophes involve "globalization of markets, the privatization of the world under the aegis of neoliberalism, and the increasing imbrication of the financial markets, the postimperial military complex, and electronic and digital technologies."[18] There is a widen divide between people and communities in the world that rely on use of technologies and the increase in global markets, while other communities suffer at the increase of neoliberal factors. For example, corporations in America rely on technology that uses cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo; therefore, violence and exploitation is used to extract cobalt from the land and labor from people.[19] Elite public universities in the United States use materials created by prison labor, which continues to make economic precarious communities suffer from intense

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid, 3.
[19] Matthieu Aikins, "How Is Your Phone Powered? Problematically: Nonfiction," *New York Times (Online)*, January 23, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/23/books/review/cobalt-red-siddharth-kara.html.

criminalization.[20] 21st century catastrophes represent "a phase in the history of humanity dominated by the industries of the Silicon Valley and digital technology."[21] The catastrophes that oppressed people have experienced, which are for the sake of building a world of and for the rich, white bourgeoisie's dream, has prompted widespread conversation of apocalypse in popular imaginations.

When Black imaginations create apocalypse, they often refer to these catastrophes that continue to harm and hinder Black life. Apocalypse is a means of "unsettling of this overrepresentation" of the being that is privilege in modernity and unsettling the logics that bring forth modernity and neoliberal catastrophes.[22] In thinking about modernity's catastrophes and how they continue to manifest in the overwhelming violence to Black life and bodies, in *Black Aliveness* Kevin Quashie writes on the failure of the "new world" missions:

> Such a directive [that is, "imagine a black world"] acknowledges that the New World plunder of modernity and coloniality enacts a destruction of the world as it was and might have become — that the New World unorders the relationship of the human to place, time, other human. Or we might say there never was a world, that imperialism's destructiveness is that it imposed a world logic. Either case describes world failure that, among other horrors, mobilizes blackness as an antithesis to human life.[23]

The "new world" catastrophes are proof of the failed new world that modernity built, because such "new world" is a series of violences, disruptions, dispossessions, and failures. In response,

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[20] Haimy Assefa and Erik Ortiz, "'An uphill battle': Harvard students urge school to pull investments that support prisons," *NBC News*, September 3, 2019. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/uphill-battle-harvard-students-urge-school-pull-investments-support-prisons-n1038686.
[21] Mbembe, 3.
[22] Wynter, 260.
[23] Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 13.

Quashie directs us to "imagine a black world," to build and honor Black life despite modernity's and neoliberal's treatment of Black life. The apocalypse in Black cultural productions imagines a Black world that destroys modernity and neoliberal worlds. They represent conditions that historically harm Black life, and they provide means of violently destroying those conditions. As literary scholar Maxine Montgomery notes, apocalyptic scenes in Black imaginations are grounds to respond to long lasting legacies of systemic oppression and rebuild based on the needs and priorities of Black peoples.[24] Therefore, the apocalypse is productive for discussing alternative ways of worldbuilding and relationality. The chaos of apocalyptic scenarios, conditions, and outcomes require alternative collaborations with future beings.

Through exploring Black imagined apocalypse, we touch on a notion of Black survival. Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" calls attention to a world that seeks to systemically prevent the survival of Black women and queer people.[25] Lorde's prayer rings into the present, affecting Black feminist and queer ideologies of being. In *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Kara Keeling notes, "Audre Lorde's…poetry is a way of thinking about the space/time of politics for those deemed disposable or socially dead within the contexts of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy."[26] As a litany Lorde offers a prayer, a deep-seated wish and insistence, to exist and be in *a* world despite the colonial and anti-Black world making such being impossible. In "Blood Relations: Gilda and the Stakes of our Future," the afterword to *The Gilda Stories,* Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes on the survival qualities of Gomez's use of vampiric tropes and Black queer women's lives. Gumbs writes that the protagonist, a Black girls escaping slavery was

[24] Maxine Lavon Montgomery, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 5.
[25] Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*, (New York, N.Y: W.W. Norton Company, 1997), 40.
[26] Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. (New York: NYU Press, 2019), xi.

"never meant to survive and somehow she outlives almost everyone she knows by engaging intimately and consistently with human fantasy, need, and desire."[27] Although *The Gilda Stories* doesn't offer the violent apocalypse that might register at the use of the term, Gomez does offer a new world that challenges and disrupts the idea of Black life as disposable, which is the mainstays across modernity's many catastrophes. Overall, speculative responses to a violent world that we experience in our mundane lives offer readers and viewers a portal to another world that is at least different from the familiar world.

Remnants and Sci-fi/Horror

Black studies, as an interdisciplinary project, has an investment with speculative practices. Their investment shows the ways science fiction and horror can be didactic and expressive in prominent concerns in Black studies—like thriving in the future and lingering grief for ancestors.[28] Why would creative producers reference historical moments to spark the apocalypse and bring in alternative relationality? This question addresses the matter of historicity and the abilities of cultural productions to make social commentary. Although speculative and sci-fi productions rely on constructing an imagined reality that doesn't exist, there are still moments in their works that reference and respond to material world experiences. I call the moments remnants because they don't reflect the historical situations in their entirety. Rather they refer to those historical moments in extreme ways that allow for an opening into alternative

[27] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Blood Relations: Gilda and the Stakes of our Future," in *The Gilda Stories* by Jewelle Gomez (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2016.), 186.
[28] On the didactic historical relevance of *The Gilda Stories*, Gumbs's writes: *The Gilda Stories* provides "a map of the historical connection between sub-cultural spaces of possibility (antebellum brothels, gold rush bars, black women's uplift clubs, beauty salons, off-off-Broadway theaters, black lesbian living-room salons) and the resilience of black women who experience multiple levels of oppression." See Gumbs, "Blood Relations," 187.

ways of operating in a world. Prominent political events from the 1980's are referenced in Butler's and Peele's works and significantly inform their apocalyptic scenes.

Looking at these distorted historical references as remnants highlights the possibility of cultural productions as agents for change. In Kara Keeling's *The Witch's Flight,* there is observation and study of the invisible realm meant to aid in survival of Black lesbian butch-femme sociality.[29] Understanding life via cinema from the position of such sociality can offer glimpses into another mode of thinking that can give way to other ways of living. Keeling makes a case for how "the cinematic… designates a condition of existence, or reality, produced and reproduced by and within the regimes of the image."[30] We are in dialogue with cinema; it's feeding us a reality, and we are feeding the reality of the moving image. Our material world is conditioned by a logic that makes Black femmes able to be mis-seen or unseen. So, if the filmmaker's job is to reveal what has been hidden from the image to comply with the material worlds, anti-Black femme logic, then an appropriate, timely study would be the study of Black femme sociality and how it has been removed from the image yet still informs the image. By changing our "common sense… or a condition of possibility for the emergence of alternate knowledges that are capable of organizing social life and existence in various ways," we can understand and experience other forms of community formations.[31] Although Keeling focuses on the craft of cinema and Black feminism, this sentiment can be applied across Black cultural productions and can give insight to the imaginative wondering of what life could be like after the destruction of limitations that harm Black life in our current material reality. That is, Black cultural productions at once reveal the painful conditions of Black life in this world and show

[29] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*, (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.
[30] Ibid, 3.
[31] Ibid, 19.

ways in which we can ecstatically imagine other conditions. By showing these otherworldly relations, we can experience something new and influence new logics to create new conditions of Black life. I refer to Keeling's notion of common sense to help articulate the usefulness of secular remnants in speculative works because both— Keeling's common sense and my notion of remnants— reveal how cultural productions reflect viewers' and readers' lived realities to get their attention. However, the distortion of the remnant is a portal into another way to experience reality.

Us presents a speculative world that reflects and responds to the governmental policies and behavior that encroach upon safety and autonomous life in our current material reality as well as in the 1980's. At the beginning of the story, we see young Adeliade watching a news report announcing the Hands Across America event with excitement.[32] After watching, young Adelaide and her family go to the boardwalk where young Adelaide gets trapped in an underground world.[33] Later in the film, Adelaide, who is now Red, conspires a takeover of the town.[34] In the end, we see the Tethered hold hands.[35] A remnant that *Us* takes up is the "Hands Across America" event, a 1980's effort to bring awareness to social struggles of poverty and homelessness. Inspired by his food-supplying trip with "USA for Africa," Ken Kragen sought out to bring awareness to inhumane conditions in the United States.[36] So he organized an awareness event for people to join hands from the west coast to east coast of America. Keeping in line with the 80's grandiose, entertainment-focused, performative optimism regarding global equality, people were excited to participate in this event that celebrated community and

[32] Peele, *Us*, 00:01:40.
[33] Ibid, 00:08:35.
[34] Ibid, 01:41:25.
[35] Ibid, 01:51:50
[36] Lindsay Schmitz, "Hands Across America." *The Eighties in America*, Vol 2 (2008). webpage.

multiculturalism, that spoke back to ideas of individualism, and that was seemingly for a social good.[37] Although people met friends and got married in this iconic long chain, not a single structural change was made. "Hands Across America" is more known for its over-the-top social performance than it is for the awareness it brought to struggles of capitalism.[38] People often reflect on the failure of these kinds of activist movements that raise funds and awareness to support people in need; however, the support never seems to reach those in need though there are enough funds to significantly impact hunger and homelessness. As political pundit Keith Lawrence remembers, "There wasn't a single bit of politics involved with either the song or the flags. It was just an event -- OK, a stunt -- that brought America together for a few minutes on a warm Sunday afternoon."[39] *Us* uses this piece of American history and the pattern of performative activism to offer gory outcomes and reactions to long lasting neglect. For the Tethered the long chain is accompanied by necessary (to their view) actions to ensure their inhumane conditions are put to an end. Therefore, we can see this combination of performance and actions as a portal to inform us on revolutionary strategies for worldbuilding.

Another remnant of the events and condition of the material world that is taken up in *Us* is the prospects of cloning and artificial intelligence. The Tethered are U.S. government creations, glitches in cloning.[40] In a recent study about artificial intelligence advancements that work to eventually replace humans by way of exploiting human labor, Brendan Dooley writes, "when we come to realize that technology is moving briskly towards sentience—thinking as a human does— the story [of a game between an AI machine and human] moves from one that

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Keith Lawrence, "We Need Hands Across America," *TCA Regional News,* Aug 21, 2016. https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/we-need-hands-across-america/docview/1812673124/se-2.
[40] Peele, *Us*, 00:01:09.

generates curiosity to one that has been fodder for enduring visions of dystopia."[41] Dystopia is furthered ensured when an overwhelming amount of human labor goes into creating machines that may soon come to replace humans.[42] Peele's horror film certainly depicts a dystopian life where clones plot an uprising, making commentary on the horrific and evil possibilities of technological advancements recreating humans. Peele imagines a world where it is impossible to create a clone of a human that can offer labor power without the soul of the human.

A remnant that Butler uses in *Dawn* is the collective fear of nuclear warfare during the 1980's. Justin Mann's "Pessimistic Futurism" argues that *Dawn* is a response to Reagan's global politics and the impact it had on the American people.[43] Mann pays close attention to the way Butler poses humanity as having contradictory qualities of hierarchy and intelligence. *Dawn* responds to globalization and the nuclear threats nations pose to other nations, which results in threats to citizens' livelihood and emotional and physical well-being. Since Hiroshima and the Cold War, nuclear threats have been on global consciousness as an inevitable terror that depends on political leaders— leaving many publics to feel helpless and pessimistic for decades, continuing into today as nuclear threats persist.[44] In a 1980 review in *The Lancet* concerning the threats of nuclear war and the public's reaction to it, J.H. Humphrey writes, "as the nuclear arms race threatens to accelerate yet again… [there is] the increasing risk that nuclear weapons will

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[41] Brendan Dooley, *Technological Unemployment: Effects of Artificial Intelligence and Automation on Human Labor,* (London: SAGE Publications: SAGE Business Cases Originals, 2020), 4.
[42] Josh Dzieza, "AI is a Lot of Work," in *New York Times,* June 20, 2023. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/ai-artificial-intelligence-humans-technology-business-factory.html
[43] Justin Louis Mann, "Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2018): 62.
[44] For example, *AP News* reports on Vladimir Putin's threats of nuclear weapon use. See "Putin Warns again that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if its sovereignty is threaten," in Associated Press, March 13, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-putin-nuclear-weapons-82ced2419d93ae733161b56fbd9b477d

sooner or later be used."[45] Humphrey points to the looming threat that never really went away that a government superpower will use these weapons to gain territory, resources, and/or people for free labor. As Humphrey further elaborates, "Though it seems to be tolerable to a government resolve, in the final challenge, to fight a nuclear war in defense of territory, resources, and a way of life which it believes to be indefensible by other means, even though the only certain results of the conflict would be the virtual extinction of all that was being defended."[46] Using Butler's remnant, readers explore a terrifying, ironic global prediction, and create the repercussions of a global nuclear event. *Dawn*'s use of nuclear war reflects this world war conditions. In the novel, Oankali come to Earth because they can sense when a planet dies. Earth is dying because of a nuclear war brought on by powerhouse nation states. Therefore, this remnant becomes a portal towards experiencing a new way of life that many times seems to mirror colonial conquest, power, and control that has become all too familiar to many inhabitants of Earth, *and* a life that is so different, it's as if there are "no human parallels" between Oankali life and Earth-human life.[47]

In *Us* and *Dawn*, a world is built that is jarring and goes against many of our collective values around relationality. Therefore, the world-building possibilities that are available in the works run the risk of not being valued and taken into consideration, which is dangerous for a contemporary moment that desperately needs a revolutionary, structural change. Remnants make the speculative world more relatable and tangible, and the world building messages become clear under those conditions.

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[45] J.H. Humphrey, "Nuclear War," *The Lancet (British Edition)*, 316, no. 8204 (1980): 1061.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Butler, *Dawn*, 170.

Reading Against the Remnants

What is a productive way to read Black science fiction and horror that doesn't rely so heavily on using its remnants to make sense of the story? Often, I see stories and their analyses that solely detail, demonstrate, and explain the deadly trauma experienced (and experiencing) among Black peoples. Black characters/figures are placed near any sort of precarious situation, which seems to be "predicated upon [the] impossibility" to live, to be seen, to survive.[48] Such a heavy focus on trauma inscribes Black life "as conditioned by mourning," and death serves as a primary metaphor.[49] This is certainly not a fact of Blackness that I want to disregard. Rather it's a narrative that I refuse to rest in. Following in the line of Dionne Brand, I'm "in search of [a] most resonant metaphor" that gets Blackness beyond this condemned site of impossibility.[50]

There needs to be a way to approach the remnants present in speculative texts in ways that don't re-codify the speculative world under the logics of western colonialism. Speculative works have a desire to imagine a world outside of our current material realities. Although it is impossible to imagine a reality not tied to our material histories (because it's impossible for our conditionings to not influence our perceptions), speculative works deserve a reading practice that experiences the other world on its own terms. To pull from Robin D.G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination,* Black speculative aesthetics and practices "offer a visions of freedom… deep and… expansive... It is a movement that invites dreaming, urges us to improvise and invent, and recognize the imagination as our most powerful weapon."[51] To treat speculative works as a didactic mode for world-building that offer lessons on how to relate to

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[48] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2.
[49] Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, "The Black Ecstatic," *GLQ* 24, no. 2–3 (2018): 344.
[50] Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), 18.
[51] Robin D. G Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2002), 159.

others differently, we must accept the invitation to experience the other world that the stories provide. We must remain from situating the stories within colonial frameworks.

Justin Mann's "Pessimistic Futurism" argues that speculative fiction can be instructive because it "reimagines social realities, offering insight into how the world might be made differently."[52] Rather than death in Blackness be the end all and be all, speculative fiction allows me to think beyond that binary of surrendering or resisting. By considering how the genre allows me to be meditative of alternative ways of existing, perhaps this can get me to a reality that may not look like any pre-existing one.[53] When Black imaginations bring forth other worlds, it allows for more nuanced and complicated versions of Blackness that don't only, just signify death. Indeed, cultural works do depict pain; the texts that I will look at depict horrific violence, struggle, and death. However, to accept any alternative metaphors, there must be a resistance to any temptation to have a reading that takes any possibility of life and reduces it to another form of death. Mann's reading practice of looking for the possibility of new-ness (a new world, being, ways of thinking, etc) can be useful for how I understand *Us* and *Dawn* as responses to legacies that destroy Black life as well as how Black imagination use destruction as a means of liberation. Mann's reading practice oscillates between afro-futuristic and afro-pessimistic concepts.[54] They "couch the prospects of tomorrow in the uncertainties conditioned by the past and present."[55] A reading practice that I want to take up sees a dynamic exchange between anti-Black material realities and what is beyond their limits.

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[52] Mann, 64.
[53] Andre M Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 20.
[54] Mann, 62.
[55] Ibid.

What if the "villains" of stories are seen as understandable consequences of modernity and neoliberal catastrophe? I wonder what reading practice will see the apocalyptic situations as the should-be-expected results from the villains of anti-Black world orders. We need a reading practice that will allow us to see the Tethered and the Oankali as metaphoric figures that can usher in a new and understandable way of being that can influence our material realities and bring forth a new world where being this way combats the material world limitations. The reading practice I take to imagine the possibilities outside the death metaphor needs alternative logics. The relationality within this dynamic is fueled by different underlying sets of logics that undergird the world of the Oankali and the Tethered. By sets of logic, I'm referring to underlying assumptions, codes, signifiers, ways of thinking/communicating that serve as a foundation to conditions of living for those who live in an environment that is operated by those logics. I argue that *Us* and *Dawn* take the anti-Black logics of our anti-Black past and present and restructures them in a new world that is similar to anti-Black, violent material realities but reworked to the point that I find it hard to argue that they are a mirror of any anti-Black logics.

In short, I read *Dawn* and *Us* to see the otherworldly logics that rephrase human conditions, underlying structures and manifest an alternative world for nonhumans who live by different rules. I argue that these texts travel to the site of subjection using remnants of the western humanist grammar of enslavement, capitalism, colonization, war, and threats, but these remnants don't perform the same functions because the conditions of other beings' lives are different. My task here is to outline the world of the Oankali and The Tethered by viewing how the Butler and Peele approaches the purposes of location, memory acquisition, and communication and changes them to make something that is impossible, possible for the beings of a new world.

Otherworldly Location

In both *Dawn* and *Us*, location alters the social logics of the other beings. The Oankali live on a moving and living spaceship that was formed out of another planet and now roams the galaxy to merge with another dying planet.[56] The Tethered live in a government constructed world several feet underground.[57] The insides resemble detention centers and modern-day school.[58] The only access to this place is a one-way escalator going down.[59] Both of these stories take on a location that has roots in anti-Blackness— detention centers and ships—but they rework the meaning and significance of the locations. Ships do not cleanly fit in the narrative of transatlantic enslavement and detention centers do not fit into the narrative of capitalist enslavement and school-to-prison pipeline. Rather the possibilities of these two places have something more complex about them that allows for an alternative (if only a mild one) outside of the traditional meaning of these two places.

Ships are significant in discussions of transatlantic enslavement and in *Dawn*. In both, ships connote vessels that contain captured bodies. They are mobile rebirthing wombs where those within are captured and transformed into the captors' desires. In "Treasured Strangers," Lisa Dowdall argues that the juxtaposition of the Oankali's determination for a new species and the humans' insistence on choosing their own means of reproduction reveals a conflict that speaks to "rapidly evolving bioeconomic machinery of late capitalism."[60] To Dowdall, Butler's narrative is "a mirror of the relationship between African-American slaves and their masters,

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[56] Butler, *Dawn*, 45.
[57] Peele, *Us*, 00:01:15.
[58] Ibid, 1:41:00
[59] One-way routes to evil and destitute places also shows up in Eddie Murphy's *PJ Projects* theme song. In Peele the one-way route is to the underground detention centers. See Peele, *Us*, 1:33:35.
[60] Dowall, "Treasured Strangers," 506.

with the flesh of black bodies constituting a valuable form of biocapital."[61] Indeed, I cannot deny the close resemblance between colonization and the new world of the Oankali. Lilith's "flesh [can] be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge" within this rebirthing womb. [62] This is not unlike the ways Black people, women in particular, have been marked, inscribed, stitched and poke during the middle passage (and throughout the history of anti-Blackness).[63] The vestibule of the Oankali (the not quite the ship-proper, but the underbelly or inner world of the ship where we first see Lilith) is not unlike the belly of the boat of enslavement described by Edouard Glissant: "the belly of this boat dissolves [Lilith and other humans], precipitates [them] into a nonworld from which [they] cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss."[64] In a way, the Oankali ship can and does hold Lilith in the same way as Hartman says the anti-Black Atlantic world holds Venus: "The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus," a Black woman who is nameless, whose objections are not heard, and whom "it would be centuries before she would be allowed to 'try her tongue.'"[65] Ships of the transatlantic enslavement allude to brutal death by being held captive sleeping on human-size storage boxes, lined up like cargo and the threat of being thrown overboard, a nameless corpse at the bottom of an unknown ocean.

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[61] Ibid, 508.
[62] Butler, 6.
[63] Hortense Spillers in concert with Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* discusses the transformation of Black bodies into flesh, which renders Black people objects and commodities with only enough life for labor and use value. Therefore, there is no sacred regard for Black bodies and thus torture the body enough to sustain life. Such torture involved "lacerations, wounding, fissures, rears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rending, punctures of the flesh." Such marking confirmed ownership. See Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.
[64] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.
[65] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 1.

The Oankali ship in Butler's imagination offers something different in the way Lilith can move and exist amongst the Oankali people and other humans. Butler uses the ship as an anti-Black remnant but rephrases it and gives it alternative abilities and meaning. One of the ways she reworks the ship is by taking it out of the ocean and into space. Water, especially the Atlantic, has a significant place in Black history and cultural memory.[66] Water connotes dehumanizing and capitalist power dynamics that govern anti-Black relationality.[67] The touching, counting, and inscription are all a part of capitalist production of enslavement and colonial relations of those in power and the domination and control they have over people, turning people into objects and labeling them nonhuman.[68] The relationships on the ship in the middle passage relies on bodily fetishism of Black bodies. In *Capital,* Karl Marx articulates commodity fetishism as the acts of violence that occur when individuals' labor powers are transformed into commodities. In the case of enslavement, not just labor power is objectified, but the entire Black body is used as a commodity in this one-sided surplus gain. The social relations between the capitalist and the one who holds labor power is more between objects rather than people. "As soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" — surpasses feeling, emotion, soul.[69] Their body is seen as a container full of unwaged labor power, placed in the market of the auction block, inspected, and bought by a future "owner" and sold by the current. The wake of the water is where Black generational pain moves. [70] Glissant also describes the trauma of the water: "The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave

[66] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe. *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 35. doi:10.1515/9780822373452.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
[69] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique Of Political Economy*. (New York: International Publishers. 1967), 163.
[70] Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 68.

chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing the cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark … these lowest depths…"[71] The water holds dead Black bodies who didn't make it to the new world of being a capitalist's object. The water houses Black death.

The Oankali's ship is in space, which alludes to a different history and understanding of Black existence.[72] Black speculative projects often use space as the realm of freedom, a mode of escape, especially during the funk music era. Not only is Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (1972) an indicator of this; we can also look at George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic's P-Funk Mothership, a spaceship that soars through a concert while the crowd sings "Swing Down, Sweet Chariot. Let me ride."[73] They take a well-known Black spiritual that alludes to freedom being heaven and imply that freedom is in space, rather than heaven. Present-day, Erykah Badu gave an interview with *Pitchfork* where she's salty because she hasn't been abducted yet. Saying she's done everything one "could possibly do to get abducted."[74] For many Black imaginations, space is freedom and a desired place to belong. This change in location, from a ship in the ocean to a ship in space, forces me to be hesitant on tightly situating the Oankali in familiar anti-Black logics.

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[71] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 6.
[72] As Kara Keeling writes on Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and Octavia Butler's *Parable* novel, "space exploration and settlement in outer space provide an opportunity to forge new relations by radically disrupting existing relations and the logics and violences through which they are held in place. To the extent that space exploration seeks to find another place to escape a catastrophic situation on earth, it should not be surprising that it is a recurring theme of Afrofuturism." See Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures,* (1st ed. Vol. 30. New York: NYU Press, 2019), 67. doi:10.18574/9781479841998.
[73] Parliament Funkadelic. "Mothership Connection, Live in Houston 1976." *Youtube,* uploaded by Romnyc. 2012.
[74] Pitchfork Media. "Erykah Badu Rates Aliens, Period Tracker Apps, and Porky Pig | Over/Under" *Youtube,* uploaded by PitchforkTv, 2017.

The Oankali ship is a remnant of history that contemplates the concept of reciprocity, or "trading," which becomes the metaphoric engine of the ship (like the way racism is the engine of the slave ship).[75] Although Butler's exercise of reciprocity is not perfect, it does allow for contemplating alternative modes of sharing resources outside of capitalism. There is a vexed moment when we see the troubling use of "trading," when Oankali cut open Lilith while she is sleeping to remove a cancer that is forming in her body. She did not know about the cancer or the Oankali's surgery. However, this notion of trading challenges consent and autonomy because Lilith is neither aware of the cancer in her body nor does she give permission to the Oankali to remove the cancer. There is a viable reason for touching, marking Lilith's body without consent that calls for investigation: they removed a cancer that has killed the women of her family for generations; the Oankali have made it so that it will never be a part of her family in that deadly way again. Spillers suggests that markings done by capitalists on the slave ship (and throughout enslavement) "'transfers' from one generation to another."[76] In this way, the markings are like Lilith's cancer. Cancer that is not cancerous to the Oankali. It doesn't harm the Oankali in the way it harmed Lilith and her foremothers. In fact, it benefits them in the opposite way that it harms Lilith. The Oankali find cancer beautifully complicated.[77] Therefore, the trading logic is thus: cancer is removed from Lilith's future family and Oankali studies cells that cannot kill them. So, they take what is killing her, what has killed her for generations, out of her. Although appearing very similar to capitalist production, there is a level of reciprocity in the grammar of Oankali and human relationship that is not within capitalist production. In that, there is a value to life that is highly regarded. The Oankali's weather that motivates the ship is that of "give and

[75] Butler, 41.
[76] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
[77] Butler, 48.

take," or "trade."[78] It's ironic that the humans in the novel resist this level of reciprocity; they come from the capitalist tradition of taking what is only beneficial for them and using it for their own gain ("learn and run").[79]

I argue that Butler's space, falling in line with the metaphor of space in many Black imaginations, offers a set of logic where Black people can exist and relate to others in ways they cannot in the anti-Black world. Oankali continues to manipulate Lilith's body (a relic of how slaveholder could manipulate Black women's bodies) but this manipulation gives her abilities to interact with the ship that the Oankali declare is alive and thus is treated as such. The Oankali call the ship's surface, flesh. This connotes that they view their secular world as a living body. They use their flesh to communicate with the ship, and the ship's flesh moves to accommodate them. Lilith can use Oankali abilities to move about the ship, to open doors and walls, such are (seemly) permanently closed to her in the racist grammar of the anti-Black Earth. She can interact with the live ship as a living vessel to be reciprocally interacted with. The grammar of the Oankali forces them to feed the ship; they must not waste what the ship gives them. They must wait and allow for the ship to change with their touch to move around. They cannot exploit it in the ways capitalist and colonizers exploit the Earth, the ship will not allow it. They give Lilith the potential to re-attach herself to land base knowledges and relationalities. Knowledges within colonial worlds are often forbidden and definitely forsaken. Part of the pain of diaspora is being robbed of a sense of indigeneity for the sake of capitalist, imperial conquest.[80] But now, as the co-creator of the new world, Butler attempts to reinstate what was taken from her.

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[78] Ibid, 40.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Sandra Harvey, "Unsettling Diasporas: Blackness and the Specter of Indigeneity." *Postmodern Culture* 31, no. 1 (2020). doi:10.1353/PMC.2020.0026.

When it comes to the conditions of place, The Tethered understand that they would be different people if they lived with the same conditions as the humans above. Characteristically The Tethered appears animalistic. They grunt, moan, groan, hiss, and shriek, as well as use body language to communicate (more on that later). They seem to lack a control of range of human emotions. For example, when Dahlia, a Tethered, sees her Tethered partner Tex, dying, Dahlia's first reaction is long silent sobs with a distorted face. A facial movement that is familiar to how we've seen human reactions to a brutal death of a loved one. However, these silent sobs quickly and smoothly transition into a full body silent laugh.[81] Dahlia's facial expression seems to resemble the icon of theater masks of tragedy and comedy, Thalia and Melpomen, and it demonstrates that Dahlia, as well as The Tethered, cannot actually feel emotions— other than rage. However, we are witnessing The Tethered as they are newly out of the underground dungeons that trapped them. With this in mind, we can see how the conditions are preventing Dahlia to experience a control of emotions.

Red and Adelaide switch places when they are young.[82] This switch causes a blur in personality and persona. This blurring makes it clear that the condition is what makes the person behave and act in particular ways and that they are not an innate behavior trait. The switching and blurring, of Adelaide, who is actually Red (or maybe Red is now actually Adelaide, or both), shows that the conditions are what creates the idea of human— one with autonomy, life, access to the Earth, full range of emotions, familial and friendly connections rooted in love and respect--because Adelaide (who was born Tethered) is able to learn how to communicate, love, and make decisions for herself, while Red (who was born human) is now unable to linguistically communicate with ease or show a range of emotions because she was raised Tethered. When

[81] Peele, 01:14:41.
[82] Ibid, 01:49:20.

Adelaide chooses to fall in love with Gabe, has children she adores, eats whatever she wants, Red is partnered with someone she doesn't know, has monsters for children, and eats bloody and raw rabbit.[83]

At the start of the film, there is a caption that reads: "There are thousands of miles of tunnels beneath the continental United States… Abandoned subways systems, unused service routes, and deserted mine shafts… Many have no known purpose at all."[84] This connection makes it seems as though the abandoned routes and mine shafts were reconstructed to have a purpose to house The Tethered. However, the way that they are reconstructed makes it seem as though these places had the purpose of imprisoning The Tethered and subjected them to inhumane conditions of control that are salient to US prison systems.[85] The underground appears as abandoned schools, detention centers. There are hallways with flickering fluorescent lights. Pale tiled linoleum floors. Concrete walls painted off-white. Uniform desks in each of the rooms, all facing a chalkboard.[86] Their sleeping quarters are old, rusty bunk beds side-by-side in large rooms.[87] Tethered conditions are remnants of institutions of control where they experience social death. In revealing the conditions of incarceration, Joshua Price outlines the contours of social death that can be seen in the living conditions of The Tethered— "generalized humiliation,"

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[83] Ibid, 00:46:17.
[84] Ibid, 00:01:11.
[85] In Angela Davis's *Autobiography*, she spends a lengthy amount of time describing the inhuman conditions that she suffered while in various carceral institutions. On one occasion she writes, "inhumanity seethed from all the cracks and crevices of that place," as she reflects on the control and neglect of the psychiatric cellblock she was forced into to. Later when reflecting on the community of those imprisoned, she writes, "Jails and prisons are designed to break human beings." See Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis--an Autobiography*. (New York: Random House, 1974), 49, 58.
[86] Peele, *Us*, 01:36:17.
[87] In *Burning Down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison,* Nell Bernstein records the daily routines and environment of a California State Juvenile Prison. Much of his accounts, including bunk beds, lighting, and control, match the visuals in Peele's *Us.* See Nell Bernstein, *Burning down the House: The End of Juvenile Prison*. (La Vergne: New Press, 2014), 21-30.

when the Tethered must mirror their counterparts against their will; "institutional violence," seen in their entrapment because of a government technologic fail; and "natal alienation," in the ways they are not able to have communal and familial ties of their choosing.[88]

By being a horror movie, the location can have a different purpose. The location of the underground provides the Tethered with the ability to scheme their revenge. School systems don't have that possibility, especially public-school systems with heavy security and surveillance practices.[89] The conditions of the underground as they seem to mirror the condition of the same places above ground makes it seem though there are no other possibilities for The Tethered other than to stay soulless and controlled. However, something is different that allows for a restructuring of how one thinks about the possibilities within such conditions. One of which being Red's presence, who uses the condition of their environment to teach coordination and planning for their escape, using the chalkboard and other visuals to aid in their planning. They are forgotten underground and thus not surveilled, which gives them the opportunity to surveil their counterparts in a God-like omnipresent manner, meaning they can sense into their being and thoughts to know their whereabout and intentions. It was during a dance scene that The Tethered recognized the abilities of Red. They recognized that she was different and chose her to "deliver them from their misery."[90] It's unclear what about Red was different from them or what they see in her underground dance recital. However, what was interesting in Red's monologue is that she indicated that she felt what her tethered felt. She said: "Years after we met, a miracle

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[88] Joshua M. Price, *Prison and Social Death*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 6.
[89] Heise, Michael, And Jason P. Nance. "'Defund The (School) Police'? Bringing Data To Key School-To-Prison Pipeline Claims." *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1973-)* 111, no. 3 (2021): 724. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48617797.
[90] Peele, 01:40:22.

happened. That's when I saw god and he showed me my path. You felt it, too."[91] Perhaps the Tethered connection isn't one-sided, where the ones above control the movements of The Tethered, which is seen often through the film. When the ones above move, hit, dance, The Tethered must do the same. Another instance that shows The Tethered has mind-reading-surveillance abilities that they mastered in the underground center: Adelaide indicates that they, her family, need to run because The Tethered "think like [them]. They know where [they] are."[92] The Tethered not being surveilled as well as having access to the ones above thoughts and motives, gives them the ability to alter the logics of their location and plan for their escape and teach other coordination. In this way, their relationality which seems fueled by rage and desperation, brings in this alternative way of relating to each other. They have a common goal to free themselves and work together to make this happen.

In this section, I think about location as being prominent in *Dawn* and *Us*. The locations are remnants of places in our material world that are historically anti-Black. Dawn references ships, which are etched in to Black memories as the site where Black bodies became commodities, and we can see such violence happening with Lilith. However, Butler changes the ship and place it in space. Therefore, the grammar of the Oankali ship allows for a different relationality between beings. The location of *Us* reference detentions centers which often surveille their students; however, the detention centers that the Tethered are housed in allows them to do the surveilling rather than being surveilled, which gives them the possibility to use the school's forgotten resources to plan their rebellion. My goal with this section is to make a case for how alternative locations bring forth alternative logics of relationality in the apocalypse, which takes a location rot with modernity's logic and turn it in to possibility for Black survival.

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[91] Ibid, 01:40:00
[92] Ibid, 01:18:00

Otherworldly Memories

In both *Dawn* and *Us*, memory and knowledge acquisition for both humans and the non-humans act as a mode of collecting information about people. Both works reflect power dynamics by bringing forth a destructive confrontational relationship to obtain a knowledge of self that does not solely rest in how their counterparts want to know them. In regard to relationality under anti-Blackness, it's easy for Black people to come to know themselves and their history through the eyes of whiteness. One of the aims of Black studies is to interrogate the knowledge of self that is produced in an antagonistic relationship to white, liberal notions of being. To think about such dynamics, I revert to WEB Du Bois's question that resounds throughout much Black scholarship: "What does it feel like to be a problem?"[93] This is more of a rhetorical question when he, and Black people alike, are confronted with white gazes set on defining Black personhood as a problem to white, liberal notions of being. Such defining gaze brings forth that metaphoric veil that represents the stark separation of Black life from the white world and the relationship that forms due to such separation. When writing on the objection of Black women as a result of this encounter, Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* reflects on how this dichotomy of Black and white relation produces worlds that are at odds with each other. Collins writes, "subject/object gain meaning only in relation to their counterparts… difference is defined in oppositional terms… not just different from counterpart but opposed counterpart."[94] Thinking of this separation as opposition, rather than just differential, reveals how white notions of humanity are developed through forcing an opposition. That is, in order for white subjects to be called human, there needs to be forced opposition that deems other people as

[93] W. E. B. Du Bios, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (1903)*:* 1.
[94] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 69.

nonhuman. Collins suggest that we must resist knowing oneself through how anti-Blackness constructs Blackness.

In *Dawn,* the history of the Oankali people is embodied and knowledge is passed down through generations. Written, documented, archival information is a primary way that Western humans collect information and hold onto memories of the past to try and figure out the present. These modes are forbidden on the Oankali ship, despite Lilith's insistence on having paper or plastic to help her write because "we humans need to do such things to help us remember," which disregards and dehumanizes the learning abilities of oral societies.[95] Lilith has been conditioned to learn by using colonial, anti-Black forms of communication (English writing and reading) because of enslavement and colonization. We can look at Hartman's work to see how these modes of communication and sharing are riddled with power and work to further subjugate people into a position close to or in line with death.[96]

Joseph and Lilith decide to learn what they can from the Oankali and run away from them as soon as they are back on Earth. I could see this as a way the human characters resist colonization and fight against Oankali power to take what they need for humans. However, I find the humans are (re)enacting modes of colonization: The humans want to take any knowledge that they can from the Oankali, learn their ways of survival through close observation and build their own "human place… off limits to" Oankali while on the Oankali ship.[97] Colonists use knowledge of others to fuel their own motives and run with it. They use it to define others in ways that are significant to how they define their own self and superiority. I find this grammar informs the paranoid misreadings and skepticism performed by humans in the novel. On the

[95] Butler, 123.
[96] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.
[97] Butler, 205.

"training floor" surrounded by other humans, Lilith gets influenced by others' paranoia, despite her relationship with the Oankali people and land. "What if the others were right?" she asks herself, but she stops this thought, "Where had the doubt come from?"[98] The humans in the text were convinced that the Oankali were evil creatures without knowing anything substantial about them. What they (thought they) knew is based in their own imagination, which is similar to the process of colonization and racialization that works to create a fiction of Blackness— white-imagined Blackness is not Blackness; human-imagined Oankali is not the Oankali.

Memories and knowledges are embodied— not written or transcribed— for the Oankali. We see through Lilith that memories and trauma travel through Black women's collective memories and bodies, but such memories aren't seen as valid in the archive and academic disciplines; they must coincide with the archives to be valid. But this different way of remembering is valid for the Oankali knowledge production. The Oankali just don't observe, they perceive. With their senses and by connecting to the Oankali world and others with their tentacles, they can understand their world, their histories, and their surroundings. The Oankali remember what is "passed on biologically. [They] can remember everyone that has taken place in their family," because the knowledge is passed through their senses and bodies.[99] The Oankali do not need written material to remember the way humans on the ship do. After the Oankali manipulates Lilith's body chemistry, she's able to remember her surroundings and her relationship to people by just knowing. No longer does she need to rely on manipulated archives to find out who or where she is.

Concepts like "pre-literate" are anti-Black, anti-Indigenous colonial impositions that work to situate people into the categories of human and non-human in the colonial world. Orality

[98] Ibid, 207.
[99] Ibid, 36.

is shunned in colonialism but is celebrated in the land of Oankali. The Oankali don't need such tools or forms of communicating and learning to the point where it is banned. They are steadfast and hold the position of the "pre-literate" despite the colonial urge to convert. Lilith notices that she has "never seen any of them read or write anything."[100] And they intend to keep it that way because they are not interested in having their history and knowledge of self be manipulated by those outside of their communities.

In *Us,* The Tethered attempt to understand themselves outside of being tethered to the one living above ground and outside of being a botched government experiment. The Tethered do not seem to know themselves outside of how they relate to their above ground counterparts, and that is a main reason why they organized the Un-Tethering. In *Us,* knowledge of who the one's above are and where they come from seems to directly reflect how modern-day, neoliberal humans come to know and identify themselves— through what they can buy, the additional homes they have and/or the luxurious homes they are able to rent out, and their achievements and abilities. The ones above are also on vacation which is language tied to capitalist productivity and suggests that the ones above come to identify with their working culture. However, The Tethered, not having access to all these modes of knowing themselves, are seemingly without self-knowledge. However, through the metaphor of The Tethered as shadows to human existences (shadows as the obscure reflection of the human), we can see what alternative abilities towards self-knowledge are possible.

The blurring of Adelaide and Red complicates how The Tethered can know themselves and thus sparks the un-tethering. Red experienced life as a human above. The film shows what has influenced her knowledge-of-self right before the switch: a TV ad about the goals and

[100] Ibid, 61.

"benefits" of Hands Across America.[101] Consequently, this becomes what leads the untethering rebellion. As a young child, Red was inspired by what relationships and unifying connections can do. In an ironic, gory way, The Tethered demonstrates unity as a way to free themselves from adversity. In Black studies, unity to overcome racial conditions is a mainstay. However, neoliberalism and capitalist desires do not allow for an actual unity. The Tethered being able to obtain their freedom through unifying to destroy and kill the systems that destroy them makes a case for abolition, though abolition doesn't necessarily need to be as bloody and deadly, but who knows.[102]

Red was able to offer The Tethered some avenues through which to know themselves outside of their connection to their counterparts and outside of their conditions. The Tethered demonstrate a knowledge of self that coincides with a belief in god that ordained Red to be the leader. This decision came about after a dance that obscurely reveals that Red is not like the others. Red is special because she knows a life above ground that The Tethered have never experienced. In a way, she is otherworldly, coming from another world with knowledge about how to get out. The film demonstrates that the one that will save them is one that knows the system from the inside and outside and strategically abandons the system.

The Tethered are able to understand and know themselves as unapologetically cunning, a characteristic that in the neoliberal sense is tied to manipulation for capitalist greed. However, The Tethered uses cunning-ness and manipulation as an act of revenge and to come free, similar to the archetype, The Trickster. Peele brings back the figure of the trickster in a way that

[101] Peele, 00:02:00.
[102] Andrea Ritchie, *Practicing New Worlds: Abolition and Emergent Strategies*, (Vol. 9. La Vergne: AK Press, 2023): 57.

demonstrates how one comes to know themselves within the catastrophe of technological advancement is challenged by how Red uses such self-knowledge to incite the un-tethering.

In this section, I think about memory and knowledge-of-self is vexed in anti-Black worlds and conditions. The means by which Black people come to know themselves are imbued by white supremacist desire to know Black people as insignificant. However, Butler and Peele take these conditions and challenge them in their stories. Butler creates a world where Lilith no longer needs hard archival material to remember, nor will anyone in her future generation, because the Oankali have given her the ability to remember and know her past within her body. In *Us*, by being influenced by "Hands Across America" before being trapped underground, Red influences the Tethered to come to know themselves as cunning tricksters. Both apocalyptic stories allow for Black ways of knowing to survive among the catastrophes of white imposed knowledge productions.

Otherworldly Communication

Alongside memory and knowledge acquisition, communication is a key part of relationality in both the human world of the text and that of the beings of other worlds. Communication is how we convey our innermost worlds for others to be in community with. Communication styles and expectations are varied across people, cultures, and communities. However, for communication to effectively convey one's innermost worlds there has to be an agreement amongst people on how to express with given language rules and styles. During the initial meeting between two worlds, a known/ familiar human world and a speculative, imaginative world, communication complications are amplified. Not only are there usual differences when one meets someone that communicates differently than they do, but there are new differences that bring forth radically different grammar or underlying logic. Oankali

communicate by words and using tentacles tapping into another person to feel and understand their depths. The Tethered communicate through finger snaps, grunts, yells, and screams, except for Red, who knows how to speak with words although her words come through a harsh crackled and strained voice from not being used in years. The difference in how the Oankali and the Tethered communicate reflects their alternative, and perhaps limited, abilities and can provide insights on alternative ways we can communicate in other worlds.

Oankali's way of communicating begs the question from me, what would consent and knowing what another person wants to look like if we could go inside each other's bodies and sit with other's unfiltered complexities? In *Dawn,* we often see tension by way of communication when Oankali and humans, in particular, Lilith, interact. I argue that this tension leads to misunderstandings, and it fosters a sort of assumed evil intentions that the humans have of the Oankali. For example, in the case of the ship, Jdahya describes it: "This is my home. You could call it a ship— a vast one compared to the ones your people have built. What it *truly* is doesn't translate."[103] As discussed before, many have attached human history of colonization and enslavement on the ship, using language to describe it. However, according to the Oankali, there is no human language that can truly give the ship its true meaning. Although Lilith will be understood if she called it a ship, the trouble is that the human connotations are being carried over when the language of the "ship" is attached to it, even though it's not what it truly is. Later we see Joseph comparing what they do on the ship to human history: "there was a lot of work being done in genetics before the war. That may have devolved into some kind of eugenics programs afterward. Hitler might have done something like that after World War Two if he had the technology and if he had survived…"[104] He states this before he plots to get away from the

[103] Butler, 14, my emphasis.
[104] Ibid, 143.

Oankali to live amongst other humans. Before even meeting the Oankali, Joseph has decided who they were because of familiar surroundings and using familiar language to describe those surroundings. But the text makes it clear that who they are doesn't translate into colonial language. The example of the ship can permeate through other ways humans are understanding Oankali only on their terms.

The humans in *Dawn* communicate with colonial languages. In the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Mask*, entitled "The Black Man and Language," Franz Fanon writes, "the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language … the closer he comes to becoming a true human being."[105] Fanon suggests that in order to be placed in the category of human one has to speak a language, and not just any language, one has to speak the language of the colonizer. Ken Saro-Wiwa also attests to the pervasiveness of colonized languages, such as English, and their imposition onto other people. He speaks of English as the "language of learning" and "standard English… expressed simply and lucidly… communicates and expresses thoughts and ideas perfectly."[106] However, this is a falsified idea of colonized languages that is meant to dupe people into "exist[ing] absolutely for the other," as Fanon argues.[107] To speak to the colonists in a language that is clear for them to understand is to exist for them. For example, Lilith translates Nikanj's (her spelling) oral name to how she would say it: "She … experimented with different possible spellings of Nikanj's name. *Necange* didn't look right— nor did *Nekahnge*. *Nickahnge* was closer. She listened in her mind to Nikanj saying its name, then wrote Nikanj. That felt right, and she liked the way it looked."[108] Lilith imposes her English way of communicating onto

[105] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008), 2.
[106] Ken Saro-Wiwa, "The Language of African Literature: A Writer's Testimony." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1992): 156.
[107] Fanon, 17.
[108] Butler, 61, original emphasis.

Nikanj, disrespecting the orality of its ways of communicating because those ways do not suit her, which is in line with colonial logics that informs her human behavior. Despite the urges of the humans to label the Oankali according to their values (undoubtedly conditioned by anti-Blackness), the Oankali are hesitant to accommodate communication modes that would make them more acceptable to humans. Though they speak English to communicate with the other humans, they refuse to totally assimilate to the standards of English communicators and leave behind or over explain their innate communication abilities.

We see tension throughout the text because Butler shows that colonial "language can be deceptive," and thus, unreliable.[109] The ways Oankali communicate work to interrupt such deceptiveness that comes with the inadequacies of communicating only with words. With language comes the ability to lie, with not only ourselves but also to others. For example, communication through language causes conflict with Paul and Lilith. When Paul attempts to rape Lilith and nearly kills her, right before he knocks her unconscious he says, "they said I could do it with you. They said you could stay here if you wanted to. And you had to go and mess it up!"[110] But according to Nikanj, what was actually expected: "'They knew you wouldn't stay with him permanently, but they believed you would share sex with him at least once.'" [111] Though Nikanj is guilty of presumptions of Lilith's desire, ultimately the Oankali did not promise Paul that he would have sexual relations with Lilith. Paul as a Black masculist human man imposes his power on Lilith, which falls in line with the long history of Black men's relationship to Black women's bodies and sexuality— as something that inherently belongs to him. The Oankali are not a part of that tradition; they see sexual activity as something that is

[109] Brand, 21.
[110] Butler, 96.
[111] Ibid.

"shared," not something that is inherently owed. However, it's these separate logics that are not (perhaps cannot) be communicated with language.

The Oankali mostly communicate with each other by connecting their bodies, deeply empathizing with one another. We see Oankali communicate with each other when Nikanj brings Lilith to meet its friends. "They spoke aloud very little, but there was much touching of tentacles to flesh or tentacles to other tentacles."[112] At this moment, we don't see how or what they are communicating because Lilith (as the one the omniscient narrator focuses on) doesn't understand, but later when Nikanj can communicate with Lilith in this way, we see that such connection allows for a person to feel inside another person— experiencing (though not becoming) their thoughts and moods. Another human in the novel, Curt, kills Joseph, Lilith and Nikanj's partner, which leaves Nikanj and Lilith in mourning. Nikanj wants to share these feelings with Lilith. This is one of the ways they trade through relation and communication:

> "I want to share, not mute or distort," [Nikanj says]
>
> "Share? Share my feelings now?" …
>
> "Lilith he was mine, too. You brought him to me."
>
> "You brought him to me." [Lilith says]
>
> "Let me share what you feel." …
>
> "Approximate!" she demanded. "Trade!... Give me something of yourself!"
>
> Nikanj pressed the back of her neck with a sensory hand… They stopped walking by mutual consent and faced one another.
>
> It gave her…. A new color. A totally alien, unique nameless thing, half seen, half felt or … tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly, compelling….

[112] Ibid, 57.

> A half-known mystery beautiful and complex….
>
> "That's all I can give you," Nikanj said. "That's what I feel. I don't even know whether there are words in any human language to speak of it."
>
> "Probably not," she whispered.[113]

Connecting and communicating with their bodies allows them to share a part of themselves with the other without having the trouble of putting their words into a colonized language that cannot possibly encompass exactly what they are feeling. The scene demonstrates the unjust lack and insufficiency of language. The ways of communicating of the Oankali offer a way out of dishonesty with ourselves and thus with others. It also challenges the white supremacist ways of understanding people that (mis)recognize and return the Black body "sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning."[114] A gaze that can only see the fiction of the Black body, like how Paul can only see the hypersexualized fiction of Lilith's Black femme body. In the Oankali way of communicating or relating, as soon as they connect, they can feel the other, they carry their trauma, their feelings, their inexpressible (through language) thoughts. Thoughts that would go unexpressed or inadequately expressed if it weren't for this ability. They take on the embodiment of the other as a form of communicating and understanding the other.

Later Nikanj impregnates Lilith with its and Joseph's seed. She doesn't verbally consent to it, and it causes controversy in the way others discuss the novel and how they perceive the Oankali. This is used to label the Oankali as a power-manipulator-colonizer, understandably so. However, I see this as another tension brought on by communication differences. Nikanj states "You could never have said so. Just as Joseph could never have invited me into his bed— no

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[113] Butler 247.
[114] Fanon, 86.

matter how much he wanted me there. Nothing about you but *your words* reject this child."[115] Nikanj takes Lilith and the reader back to the scene where they "shared sex," Nikanj, Lilith and Joseph, where they were "lost in one another."[116] While communicating with Joseph's body, he knew exactly how he would react to ooloi sexual experiences: "He'll be angry— and frightened and eager for the next time and determined to see that there won't be a next time…. I know this one."[117] I don't see this as a predictive ability, I see this as Nikanj communicating with Joseph and Lilith's bodies to know how they feel and to know what they truly want even though language will be illusive and deceptive. However, on the issue of consent through language, we see with the example of Paul, language doesn't arrest anyone. However, would Paul still have attempted to rape and demand control over Lilith if he could feel all her anxieties, fears, and histories as if it were his own?

In Peele's *Us*, communication amongst The Tethered is not verbal language. They are guttural moans calling out and waiting for guttural moans, screeches, and screams in response. They communicate by clicking their tongue, through hand gestures, grotesque body language, and eye movements. In this way, the film potentially portrays The Tethered with animalistic qualities, which works in line with the narrative that their being is lesser than those who are more humanistic. White supremacy, particularly anti-Blackness, has a history of constructing Blackness as animals as a way to set up and justify the hierarchy of white men being seen as quintessential humans. In order to uphold the idea of white humans being greater than other beings, such as animals, there have been the invention of zoos, taxidermy, and other schools of thought that violently demonstrate, perpetuate, and solidify the idea animals are lesser than

[115] Butler, 247, my emphasis.
[116] Ibid, 162.
[117] Ibid, 164.

humans.[118] This mode of reasoning is also in connection with how Black bodies are considered animalistic and are subjected to the same or similar scrutiny, like Sartjee Baartman and how she was exhibited around Europe to gaze upon her body, mocking and degrading her features and violently taking her body parts to contribute to the narrative of her body being lesser than human.[119] As Sylvia Wynter's question makes clear in "No Humans Involved: Open Letter to my Colleagues," what are the logics, and whose are they, that can perceive certain beings as lacking humanity and permit behaviors towards those beings that solidify their lacking humanity through an anti-Black perspective?[120] It could seem like Peele is working within the anti-black narrative by showing the Tethered, as oppressed humans, as lacking humanity with their alternative communication styles. On the contrary, I read the Tethered staying true to their methods of communication in similar ways as the Oankali. In addition to that, the above ground humans cannot use familiar methods of classification to name and label the Tethered as less than human in order to uplift themselves. Therefore, the Tethered, with their refusal to assimilate to language and communication style that would classify them as human in the eyes of the above ground human, are forcing a new way of relating and perception that the above-ground humans will have to get on board with if they want to live— if that would even work.

In Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Anti-Black World,* she indicates that Black cultural productions alter meaning and significance of being human through engaging imaginative practice that challenge the perspective of a history of

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[118] Blanchard, Pascal, *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boetsch, Éric Deroo, Sandrine Lemaire, and Charles Forsdick, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).
[119] Reilly, Kara. "Two Venuses: Historicizing the Anatomical Female Body." *Performance Research* 19, no. 4 (2014): 111–21. doi:10.1080/13528165.2014.947129.
[120] Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues" *Forum NHI Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1.1 (Fall 1994), 42.

Blackness as animalistic— knowing that this idea is only rooted in anti-black perspective and not reality. Bestialization and thingification is the process of imagining Black people as an empty vessel as being nothing, an ontological zero.[121] Cultural productions often take the condition of Blackness as constructed by anti-Blackness and warp it to expose its faults and fill in the vessel with our own imaginative being. Although the guttural sounds of the Tethered are meant to increase fear factor, play into their villain roles, and make them seem like it's a triumph to defeat them, with an alternative perspective, their guttural sounds convey a depth of emotions that actually increase their being. Their sounds carry a sonic aesthetic to it, making them have meaning and reasoning to their communication. Having reason to the way they communicate breaks from the idea that they are lesser species. In a way, it puts human— but more like colonial and western— language on the stand to have its superiority questioned. Because the Tethered are able to find each other, execute their execution, take direction from each other to orchestrate and coordinate this beautiful freedom dance. Also, through strained voices from not being used in such a way and only one person, Red only used human language in order to tell the Wilson family of their planned fate, which seems like a courtesy because only the Wilson family received such warning. By having The Tethered sophisticatedly plan a serial killing in the name of their freedom without the use of colonial language, *Us* demonstrates how marginalized and oppressed people of the world can abandon colonial ways of communicating and relating to each other in order to obtain their freedom.

It could be said that nonverbal sounds have a way of carrying emotions that cannot be carried through words or may even be squashed through words. In this way, I'm drawn to look at the aesthetic of sounds, particularly sounds of rage, anger, and hunger for another way of life.

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[121] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. (New York University Press, 2020).

The high-pitched screeches have an urgency to them, the low groans have a deep base to them that seem to come from the center of their being. In all, the aesthetics of the sounds seem to communicate power. Which has me asking, what power could be brought to the front if we removed colonial ways of communicating with each other, and like the Oankali, returned to the depth of our inner world and communicated our feelings through demonstrating the bodily sounds of what is experienced in our internal worlds? In this section, I think about the catastrophes of colonial modes of communication— through colonial languages and grammars. However, both *Dawn* and *Us* offer forms of communication that is embodied and expressive. Such communication teaches us about alternative possibilities brought forth by apocalyptic scenarios.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I'm concerned with the world-ending sentiments of contemporary Black popular cultures. Such apocalyptic imaginings are in response to catastrophes brought on by modernity's mission to realize a "new world" that only brought forth endless Black death and unlivable conditions. Black science fiction and horror cultural production imagine a chaotic meeting of the two worlds. Such chaos is a new world with new radical logics coming in. Although frightening, the new world logics challenge normative relationality, especially such relationality rooted in anti-Black power dynamics. Through looking at human and Oankali relationships in Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and the human and Tethered relationship in Jordan Peele's *Us*, I've made a case for how the works challenge traditional modes of being in the world. By changing how we think and perceive location, memory, and modes of communication

as setting the logics for how people relate and behave towards each other, we are learning how to live in another world that is radically different than the one we inhabit.

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Chapter 3

Hollow Bodies and Temporal Blurs:

Alison Saar's *Cotton Eater* and Evie Shockley's *the new black*

In 2019, Simone Leigh presented her iconic and moving solo exhibition at the Guggenheim-- *Loophole of Retreat*. She showed multitextural sculptures of dark brown and black bronze, raffia leaves, and terracotta clay (Image 1). She fuses representations of Black women's bodies, domestic household objects, and shelters across temporal and national boundaries.[1] The exhibition calls attention to the historical legacies of Black women's bodies being used for labor and the ways Black women create communal practices to challenge the perceived ownership of their bodies.[2] In this exhibition stands *Panoptica* (2019), an 11 foot tall sculpture that resembles a shelter with no visible way to get in or see in (Image 2). It is covered with layers of raffia leaves; each layer creates a sharp edge. Sticking out of the top of the shelter is a terracotta pipe with two holes pointing downward. The pipe resembles a periscope, an instrument used on machines where the body of the machine is hidden (such as a submarine). The title of the exhibition, and many of the art objects within, reference Harriet Jacobs's

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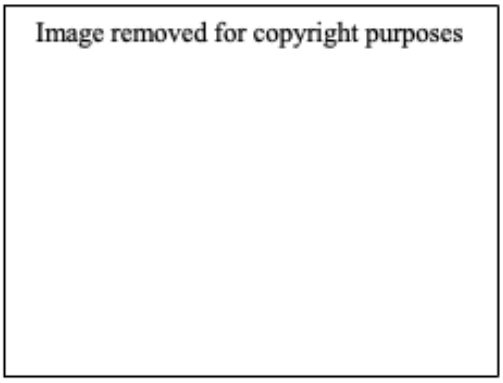
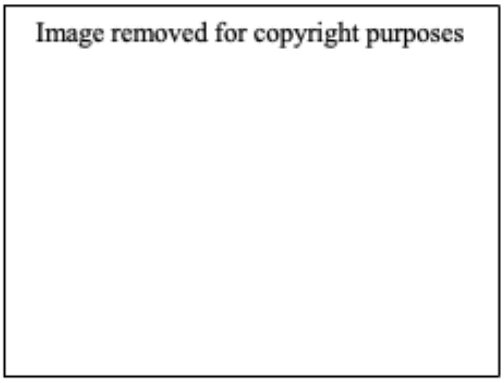
[1] Many art critics who discuss Leigh's *Loophole of Retreat* point to the mixture of representations that emphasize Black women throughout diaspora and time periods. Critic Nzinga Simmons notes how the raffia leaves reference tropical environments in African countries used to build shelters and later notes how Leigh "draws from a wide range of references— the voluminous gowns in Velázquez's Las Meninas, the dome-shapes dwellings of the Mousgoum people in Cameroon and Chad— and perhaps most compellingly, Mammy's Cupboard, a soul food restaurant in Mississippi." Additionally, critic Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts points out the connection between 1931 Colonial Expositions in Paris and Mammy's Cupboard in Mississippi founded in 1940 and writes, "Leigh shows us both their distance from each other and their proximity." See Nzinga Simmons, "Simone Leigh: *Loophole of Retreat." Art Papers,* Fall 2019, https://www.artpapers.org/simone-leigh-loophole-of-retreat/; Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts "For Her Own Pleasure And Edification" in *The Hugo Boss Prize 2018*, https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/guggenheim-sharifa-rhodes-pitt-essay-simone-leigh-hugo-boss-prize-2018.pdf.

[2] Nzinga Simmons, "Simone Leigh: *Loophole of Retreat." Art Papers,* Fall 2019, https://www.artpapers.org/simone-leigh-loophole-of-retreat/.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), a biographical narrative that informs readers about methods of community, fugitivity, and (non)escape through the lens of a Black woman's subjectivity and storytelling during the antebellum period.[3] In particular, Leigh's *Panoptica* references Jacobs's fugitivity in the attic where she was able to see out in the yard; however, only a trusted few knew where she was.[4]



(Image 1) Installation view: The Hugo Boss Prize 2018: Simone Leigh, *Loophole of Retreat*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum



(Image 2) Simone Leigh, *Panoptica*, 2019, Terracotta pipe and chimney, steel, and raffia, 317.5 x 304.8 cm, Guggenheim, New York, https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/simone-leigh

By engaging in Jacobs's story, especially the chapter where she is hidden in her family's upstairs adjunct space and remains relatively unknown, Leigh engages in the concepts of unknowability and how Black women engage in the limits of being known throughout time.[5]

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[3] On this point, Gloria T. Randle writes, "Harriet Jacobs's story is the unfolding of her ability creatively to construct sites of temporary refuge where none exist; to discover space where there is no space; to identify, over and again, the narrowest wedge between the rock and the hard place." See Gloria T Randle, "Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," *African American Review* 33, no. 1 (1999): 44. doi:10.2307/2901300.

[4] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Edited by Lydia Maria Child. (Boston: Published for the author, 1861), 173.

[5] I want to take a moment to acknowledge the ways critics discuss the opaque elements in Leigh's show. Rhodes-Pitts points out the interior of the art objects and remark on "doors may be shup up— none make enter." Similarly, critic Seph Rodney discuss the lack on eyes and the refusal of reciprocity in gazes and recognition. See Rhodes-Pitts, "For Her Own Pleasure".; Seph Rodney, "Simone Leigh's Debris of Silence," *Hyperallergic*, January 31, 2019. https://hyperallergic.com/510618/simone-leigh-loophole-of-retreat/

Unknowability is represented by the inability to engage in the interior of the shelter of *Panoptica*. In addition, I assume that there is another layer underneath the raffia, perhaps made of bronze like the other sculptures, but we are not even invited to see that interior. I can only imagine and assume. Most obviously, the sculpture speaks to Jacobs and her community's ways of using hiding mechanism for protection against continued white supremacist violence that violated her body, as well as speaks to her ability to surveil without being surveyed.[6] In another way, I find that *Panoptica* provides visual language to demonstrate prominent conversations in Black studies that deal with the insufficiency and inadequacy of archival materials to understand Black life during slavery.[7] The inability to engage in what is missing from the historical accounts of Black life is felt when I witness the refusal of interior that is *Panoptica*. Leigh pulls from what she can know and trust in Jacobs's narrative– that Jacobs was hidden and that she could see out– but respects Jacob's act of hiding and thus does not offer the interior of the space.

In this chapter, I discuss 21st century visual arts, literature, and criticism that references, critiques, challenges, and experiments with historical accounts of slavery.[8] I intend to emphasize that this reflection, engagement, and representation of slavery in Black arts not only engages life during slavery but also indicates and reflects contemporary Black desires that yearn to know about Black life that isn't through the lens of ownership, nonbeing, and inferiority.[9] I look at the

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[6] In Jacob's chapter, "The Loophole of Retreat," Jacobs writes on making a one-inch hole in the shed that her uncle built on top of her grandmother's house. Through hole she watched her children play in the field. See Jacob, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 15.

[7] Scholars of note who engage in these conversations: Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" (2008); Hartman's "The Time of Slavery," (2002); Christina Elizabeth Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (2016).

[8] This can be seen in Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (2013), Stephen Best's *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (2019), Soyica Diggs Colbert, et al's *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (2016).

[9] In pulling from Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best, Soyica Colbert argues that "political projects of the present" are concerned with contemporary desires for liberation and emphasize those desires by referring to slavery and its afterlife. See Colbert, *The Psychic Hold of Slavery,* 2.

creative methodologies that challenge the linearity of time as artists and writers imaginatively travel to varying sites of slavery through their engagement with visuals, sounds, artifacts, movements, and stories that originated during the four centuries of American slavery.[10]

Regarding methods of sharing and finding historical accounts of Black life during slavery, remembering is a vexed and prominent concept.[11] In discussing Black American's tourism and traveling in West Africa countries, literary and cultural theorist, Saidiya Hartman references a plaque that stands before the Elmina Castle, the home of "The Door of No Return." The plaque states "Remember the dead." Hartman reflects on this command: "Remembrance is entangled with reclaiming the past, propitiating ancestors, and recovering origins of the descendant of this dispersal."[12] The work of our present moment is to remember, recall, and honor the life of those whose subject positions in modernity's white supremacist conquest marked them as someone to own, to not know, and to forget.[13] Additionally, Black Americans do this work so that we can come to know ourselves more deeply.[14] Although this reflection on remembering as imaginative temporal travel is an essential quest for Black studies and Black

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[10] In thinking about the artifacts of slavery that help to build the art and literature of the late 20 and 21st centuries, I refer to Huey Copeland's *Bound to Appear*, wherein he writes: "How did visual artists figure the 'peculiar institution' as a cultural and political fact? In so doing, upon what materials—whether historical, textual, vernacular, or artistic—did they draw, and why?... How did visual practitioners reckon with the slave's position as a form of sexed and gendered property located at the nexus of Western civilization's material, aesthetic, and phantasmatic economies?" Copeland's inquiry allows me to see the various historical artifacts that artists and writers must use to comment on contemporary desires to engage slavery. Because of their use of artifacts, we must understand the limits of the archives to speak to contemporary longing for Black life and liberation. See Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*. (Chicago: London, 2013), 4.

[11] This sentiment can especially be seen through an engagement with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and her invention of "rememory." Literary critic, Margo Natalie Crawford writes that "remembering the trauma of slavery is often inseparable from the need to twist and turn this lingering pain inside out." See Margo Natalie Crawford, "The Inside-Turned-Out Architecture of the Post-Neo-Slave Narrative," in Th*e Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, ed. Soyica Colbert Diggs (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 69.

[12] Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly: SAQ*. 101, no. 4 (2002): 758.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid, 758.

liberation, it is difficult to remember a past that is ongoing, incomplete, and inadequately archived.[15] Upon visiting archives and studying the conditions of slavery, Black artists, writers, and critics must work with archival materials that do not satisfy Black desires to know, understand, and embody life.[16] As Hartman continues to suggest about the limits of archives of slavery: "We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of…captors and masters..."[17] This problematic duality of needing archival information and not trusting it spans across the 20th and 21st centuries as creatives, scholars, and activists repeatedly discuss the absence of Black life in the historical accounts of enslavement.[18]

I focus my analysis on the visual art of sculptor and printmaker, Alison Saar, and poet and literary scholar, Evie Shockley. Saar's *Cotton Eater (head)* is a sculpture of a midnight blue disembodied head with a hollowed interior. Its companion, *Cotton Eater II,* is a woodcut print of a Black woman's body painted blue amid cotton stems that hover in a yellow background while resting her hand on her enlarged belly. In the sculpture and print duo, Saar recalls the fact of field and reproduction labor forced onto enslaved Black women. Saar experiments with linearity of time by representing a contemporary yearning for recognition of Black women's lives via referencing and representing slavery. Additionally, she challenges historical factuality of archival information by distorting realist representation of the conditions of the enslaved. Saar demonstrates harsh death of an enslaved body that was used for field and reproductive labor, while the hollow insides are visuals for inability to know her interior, her soul and essence. I will

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[15] Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 19.
[16] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 8.
[17] Ibid, 2.
[18] Soyica Diggs Colbert pulls from Cheryl Wall to make clear that Black studies preoccupation with historical archives of slavery can be seen in mid-20th century activism and political work that calls attention to a "loss of a history that had never been accurately recorded." See Diggs, *The Psychic Hold of Slavery*, 2.

turn to Evie Shockley's *the new black* (2011), a collection of poems that experiment and play with language and space on the page. This playfulness allows readers to experience Black past and present temporal blurs. Shockley's poems challenge and feed into a need for new-ness that shows up consistently in Black discourses.[19] In her accounts of painful and mournful moments in slavery and its aftermath, Shockley celebrates and remembers historical figures that are too often overlooked. I work towards an experimental mode of criticism that sees Saar's art objects and Shockley's poetry as a collaborative process between creator and audience with fluid meanings that considers what we know about Black historical life and what needs to be imagined.

Alison Saar's Refusal

How does art respond to the limits of archival information of Black life during slavery and represent contemporary longing for alternative narratives? Furthermore, can the public engagement of their art demonstrate collective challenging of the way Blackness is represented in archives, collective mourning of what is lost, and collective imagining of stories that can fill the gaps? In this section, I look at Black arts and criticism of the late 20th century to reflect on the ways many artists turned towards slavery. Such art practices have continued into the 21st century as demonstrated by Alison Saar's contemporary body of work. Through a close reading of *Cotton Eater (head)* (2013) and *Cotton Eater II* (2014), I show how Saar recalls conditions of dual reproduction labor of enslaved women's bodies— field labor and child labor both reproducing commodities for the growth of American capital. However, Saar doesn't repeat the story of dual violence, she lets us know that because of such violence, we can never know the interiority of the Cotton Eater.

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[19] Miriam Thaggert, "Black Modernist Feminism and This Contemporary Moment: Evie Shockley's *the new black*." *Feminist Modernist Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 45. doi:10.1080/24692921.2017.1387414.

In *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America,* art critic and historian Huey Copeland notices how "a generation of African American practitioners in the late 1980s and early '90s negotiated both racialized discourses and art-historical antecedents in framing their work."[20] Black artists had to come up against continued logics and discourse of Blackness and nonbeing (for example, Copeland critique's art critic Jack E. White's notion of widely recognized Black artists are coming out of the ghetto).[21] Copeland calls attention to the painstaking ways Black artists needed to acknowledge this continued degradation as well as support Black communal desires for liberation.[22] As an example, Copeland reads Lorna Simpson's *Guarded Conditions* (1989), a project consisting of six individual photographs of the backside of a Black woman dressed in a simple white gown (Image 3). Copeland writes that Simpson's works "summon and critique those phantasms associated with the historical staging of black female subjects in the visual field from slavery to the present."[23] Along with speaking to the anonymity and the inability to truly know Black being within white supremacy practices like enslavement, Simpson represents anti-Black traditions of framing Black women through language and of placing Black women upon platforms at auctions.

(Image 3): Lorna Simpson, *Guarded Conditions*, 1989, 18 Color Polaroid Prints, 21 Engraved plastic plaques, and plastic letters, Artstor, library-artstororg.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001330297.

[20] Ibid, 1.
[21] Ibid, 2.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Copeland, *Bound to Appear*, 65-66.

To add to Copeland's analysis of late 20th century Black art, Carrie Mae Weems's *Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995) is a series of deep blood red tinted daguerreotype photographs, many a copy from the mid-19th century original daguerreotype of enslaved peoples. White texts are superimposed on top of the images that disclose the purpose of the photographs: to maintain systems of white supremacy that see Black bodies as something to own (Image 4 and 5). The series challenges historical perceptions that often see these photographs as evidence of rightful ownership, and viewers are asked to contemplate the violence inherent in archival images.[24] Mourning, sadness, and anger is felt in the story that Weems creates. The superimposed texts on the images tell a story from a perspective of a present-day reader, perhaps archival researcher, who must contend with the subjugations of nonbeing that images were intended to represent. Part of the story reads: "From here, I saw what happened/ You became a scientific profile/ A negriod type/ An anthropological debate/ A photographic subject/…. And I cried."[25] The words represent the names, labels, and conditions that Black people were placed within that defined their being and subjectivity. The words demonstrate the present-day viewer's clear vision of the names and conditions of coercion represented in the photographs and how that impacts our ability to understand Black pasts in the present and future moments. Words suggest a feeling of sadness at the state of historical Black conditions. The blood red emphasizes the life that is within the people depicted although they are immersed in conditions that don't see their life.

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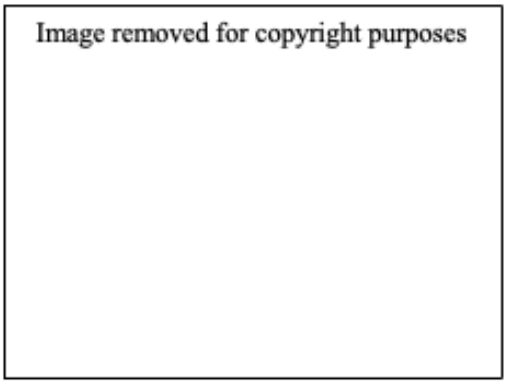
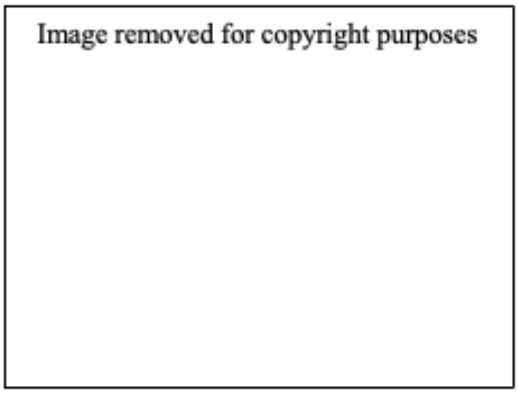
[24] In an interview with Museum of Modern Art, Carrie Mae Weems said that "When we're looking at these images, we're looking at the ways in which Anglo America, white America, saw itself in relationship to the black subject. I wanted to intervene in that by giving a voice to a subject that historically has had no voice…. I used images that were preexisting, and my intervention was to reinscribe them by making them all consistent, in terms of size and scale and format and color." See, Carrie Mae Weems, *Open Ends,* Audio Interview for Museum of Modern Art, 2000.

[25] "From Here I Saw What Happened…And I cried," Carrie Mae Weems, 1995-1996, https://www.carriemaeweems.net/fromhereisaw



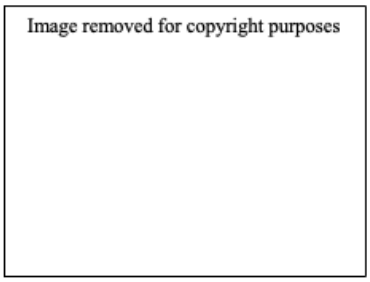
(Image 4): Carrie Mae Weems, "You Became A Scientific Profile," in *From Here I Saw What Happened and Cried, 1995-96,* Toned Prints. Artist Website.



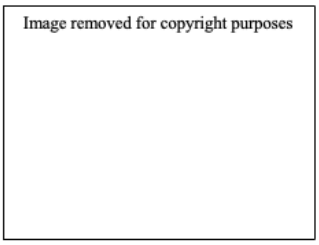
(Image 5): Carrie Mae Weems, "An Anthropological Debate," in *From Here I Saw What Happened and Cried,* 1995-96, Toned Prints. Artist Website.

Although Alison Saar began her career among this generation of artists who negotiated the dynamic that Copeland calls attention to, she didn't clearly and initially begin with this attention towards representing slavery and continued fighting for Black liberation. Saar received her MFA from Otis College of Art and Design in 1981. During her early career, much of her studies focused on African American folk-art traditions.[26] The visuals in her mixed media sculptures, woodcuts, and mosaics play with textures and shapes to offer stories and characters who are situated in mythologies that are central in Black folklore and biblical storytelling, as the case with *Lazarus* (1988) (Image 6). The characters and stories also reflect quotidian Black life in familial and social settings, like *Man in Blue Suit* (1981) (Image 7). Indeed, pain and emotional distress are depicted in the characters, as well as limits to what we can know about them, like *Jezebel Going to the Dogs* (1982) (Image 8). However, Saar's early works isn't attached to challenge the limits of knowing slavery.

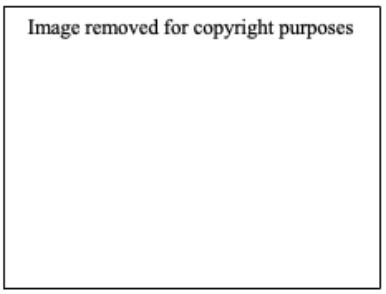
[26] See "A spiritual and symbolic display through sculpture with Alison Saar: Still," The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture, August 01, 2013, https://driskellcenter.umd.edu/news/alison-saar-still.



(Image 6): Alison Saar, *Lazarus*, 1988, color monoprint.



(Image 7): Alison Saar, *Man in Blue Suit*, 1981, Mixed media mosaic, Crocker Art Museum collection.

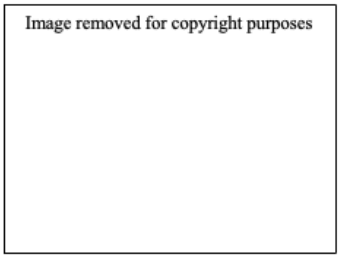


(Image 8): Alison Saar, *Jezebel Going to the Dogs*, 1982, Mixed media sculpture, Los Angeles Modern Art.

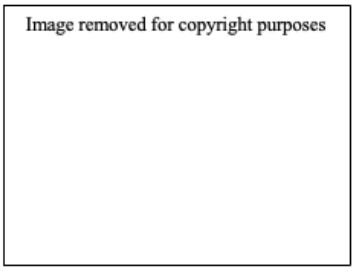
Saar's work during the 21st century began to engage with the conditions of slavery, especially how Black women's bodies and labor was extracted and continues to be so in slavery's wake. In a 1995 interview with bell hooks, Saar discusses the representation, invention, and storytelling of her characters. When asked about what inspires her stories, Saar says, "we don't just remember things we've experienced. There are memories that come to us in visions—as dreams… before I do a piece, I spend time in that imaginative space."[27] Saar's imaginative space and the time she spends there is a productive connection for the new modes of challenging historical accounts. Her methods provide strategies for engaging with painful and insufficient archives to tell stories about Black life that move beyond the limits of the archives. When Saar does this process for her depictions of slavery, she engages a transtemporal journey to the site of pain and places her contemporary sensibilities into that space to imagine narratives and lives that aren't recorded.[28] Saar engages with common representations of Black women in 19th and early

[27] bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 22.
[28] In defining and theorizing "after-image," Kimberly Juanita Brown refers to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and her characterization and storytelling of Margaret Garner through Sethe. Brown writes, "Negotiating multiple traumatic violations against her body (physical, sexual, psychological, generational, scopic, maternal), she retreats into a world of word, sound, and image, vacillating between the material and the ethereal as her long- dead daughter returns to her in the flesh." Brown's description of Morrison's writing

20th century. Many of Saar's artifacts show Black women bodies in some sort of position of labor— washing clothes, picking cotton, lactation (Image 9 and 10). The works also contained emotional hardship and pain—woodcut prints of Black women drowning and covered behind a sheer veil. Despite her representation of Black women's bodies being overworked, and rooting such representation in the conditions of slavery, Saar also limits what can be revealed and known about Black enslaved women and what we can know about their realities. I see the knowability limits through the distortions of the Black women's bodies and their conditions. That is, although she provides realistic conditions based on knowledge of Black people during slavery, her experimenting with realistic representation challenges the firmness of historical representation. Coloring, shapeshifting, and cutting off the body doesn't provide utmost clarity about Saar's invented Black bodies— like where they reside and how they come to exist. We are left with a mystery, or more like a riddle, where we, the audience, must also go into an imaginative space to make sense of the distortion.



(Image 9): Alison Saar, *Washtub Blues*, 2000, Woodcut on paper, National Museum of Women in the Arts.



(Image 10): Alison Saar, *Grow'd*, 2019, Bronze sculpture, $78^{1/2}$ x 39 x $38^{3/4}$, Contemporary Art from the Collection of Jordan D Schnitzer.

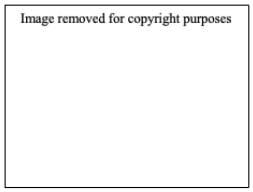
methodologies on conditions and events of slavery is similar to Saar's visions and dream in her imaginative space. See Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 5.

Further in the interview with Saar, hooks insists that "the politics of passion and desire that is articulated throughout [Saar's] work needs to be discussed more… we need to talk about the vulnerability in these images— the passion of remembrance."[29] It's the passion of remembering and the longing to know what happens to the Black body dispossessed that I'm interested in when engaging with Saar's works. She illuminates the consciousnesses around the past, calling towards a secret memory that I find crucial to this discourse around Black reproducing bodies in the wake of capitalist possession— a main theme in Saar's *Cotton Eater II* and *Cotton Eater (head)*.

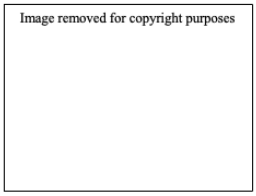
In 2017, Saar presented *Crepuscular Blue* at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland. In this exhibition, Saar showcased old and new work— *Equinox* (2012), a soft, translucent blue and crimson lithograph print showing a mirrored image of a Black woman with milk flowing from her breast; *Haint Blue* (2016), a woodcut of a translucent blue body in a clear slip dress softly caressing herself, floating in yellow space (Image 11 and 12, respectively). Along with realistic representations in the show, Saar's works depict Black women's bodies in unreal ways— their bodies are severed, fragmented, manipulated, and altered human forms. Their flesh is quiet with dark tones of twilight blue or blue black. Crimson visually brings them together: red liquid is released from their breast, red yarn is pulled from their vulva, and red tears fall from their blank eye sockets. The exhibition spoke of the irony of high visibility— the artifacts filled a small, brightly lit gallery within a much larger institution. The room had pale white walls on one side and clear glass from floor to ceiling on the other. Despite the highly visible container, the work within *Crepuscular Blue* forced viewers to consider what is not visible or clearly understandable. All these obscure and distorted representations within Saar's

[29] hooks, *Art on My Mind,* 34.

work are moments for brief encounters of mystery and wonder. They are invitations to play with imagination, which continues to make me think that there is more to the Black life represented than what is highly visible.[30]



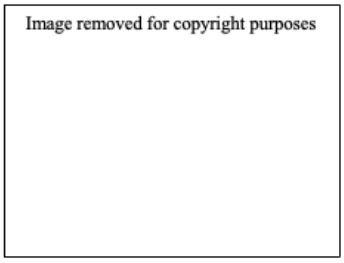
(Image 11): Alison Saar, *Equinox*, 2012, Five-color lithograph, 48 x 16 inches, Tamarind Institute. https://tamarind.unm.edu/product/alison-saar-equinox-2012-12-312/



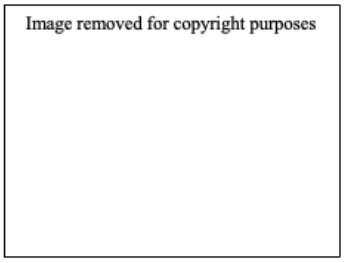
(Image 12): Alison Saar, *Haint Blue*, 2016, Woodcut on Chiri mounted to Revere with cotton muslin overlay from a found vintage quilt and shellac, 24 3/4 x 14 1/2 inches, Tandem Press. https://tandempress.wisc.edu/artwork/saar-haint-blue/

In *Crepuscular Blue, Cotton Eater (head)* (2013) was on a white podium towards the left, back corner of the gallery (Image 15). Her dark blue, ceramic head is hollowed out; I could see through her eye sockets, nostrils, and open mouth. The inside wall of the head, although empty, is textured, handled, and not smooth, as if it once was lived in and left vacant. The base of the severed neck is open, and the edge is jagged. Her head rests on the side, tilted up slightly towards the ceiling. Regurgitated cotton burs, many with bract still attached, spill out of her mouth and onto the podium. I looked up to see *Cotton Eater II* (2014), directly behind it (Image 14). This woodcut print shows a blue flesh woman with blank, white eyes and a sheer slip under which she is nude. She stands surrounded by erect cotton stems, floating around her. Coral peach hue fills the atmosphere. The cotton is not rooted; there is no ground on which she stands. She consumes the cotton while resting her hand on her enlarged belly. It's unclear if she's pregnant or full of cotton.

[30] There are present and past tenses in the paragraph. The past tense is reserved for articulating my experience of the exhibition, which happened in the past. However, the present tense discusses the visuals and analyses of the artwork, which can currently be seen and experienced.



(Image 14): Alison Saar, *Cotton Eater II*, 2014, Woodcut, 72 × 34 in. Friends of Art Acquisition Fund, 2015.15



(Image 15): Alison Saar, *Cotton Eater (head)*, 2013, ceramic, acrylic, graphite and cotton bolls 7 1/2 x 13 x 10 1/2 inches Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer.

I must have stood in front of these pieces for hours, listening, watching, and imagining a story being told to me of a life unseen and unknown. I listened for a story of Black women's bodily presence amid the capitalist regime but also a rejection of that story. The rejection isn't replaced by another story; it's replaced with a refusal to bring that story to the light. Viewers must do the work to unknow the white supremacist logics that create her—the Cotton Eater's—public body in order to begin to see that there is another narrative. The figure of Cotton Eater is a version of a controlling image that reveals the common notions of the Black body represented through capitalist eyes and how that results in a body that is alienated from the self to create a public body.[31] In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine writes: "When you lay your body in the body/Enter as if skin and bones were public places."[32] In relation to Rankine's line, I see the blue-black body of Cotton Eater as "the body" that is a public place. However, the "your body" that is laid in the "the body" is the inner part of the blueblack body, the part that is vacant.

[31] Collins talks about controlling images that aim to force Black women into categories that are constructed by the white imagination and are used to benefit white imaginations. Figures like: Mammy- the one who will take care of you, Matriarch- the head of the house hold, welfare mother- the one is "lazy" and just wants government checks, and Jezebel- the one who offers access to their body freely. Controlling images do not regard Black women humanity. There is very little regard to Black women as people when we become covered by the controlling images whenever anyone holding the white gaze looks upon us. See, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 30th anniversary edition, (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 7.
[32] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014), 20.

This body is a mystery that we must imaginatively travel to another way of looking, seeing, understanding, and remembering to potentially see and understand.

Both *Cotton Eater II* and *Cotton Eater (head)* make visible the sexualized Black body exploited for field and reproductive labor. Within the realm of social reproduction and cotton manufacturing, which are all key elements of America's early stages of racial capitalism, there is a particular notion of bodily fetishism as a material condition of capitalism and Black women's bodies. Acts of violences occur when individuals' labor powers are transformed into commodities. The social relations between the capitalist and the one who holds labor power is more between objects rather than people. Marx calls this violent transformation of human relations into object relations fetishism. "As soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness" — surpasses feeling, emotion, soul.[33] This is the cold relation between human interactions at work, but it doesn't consider a life that is work itself, forced and unpaid. His analysis doesn't fully consider those who are producers of commodities *and* are also considered commodities themselves; their body is seen as a full container of unwaged labor power, placed in the market on the auction block, inspected and bought by a future owner and sold by the current. A life where their bodies— not just their work— are determined by a monetary exchange value by capitalist for the capitalist. Because Black bodies were considered commodities, Black bodies were seen as always, already a tool ready to be used for what the capitalist needs and seen as someone that always belongs to another person, no longer belonging to themselves. This fetishistic violence alienates Black people from their histories and traditions. This dehumanization process is what Cedric Robinson sees as the

[33] Karl Marx, *Marx's Capital*. A student ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992), 163.

"creation of the Negro;" destruction of one body to create another.[34] Saar's *Cotton Eater* duo reminds us that Black reproducing bodies within the history of capitalism were very crucial to the production of increased capital.[35] The *Cotton Eater* duo represents a sort of "self-estrangement." Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* stretches Marx's fetishism to say that "the alienation from the body is a distinguishing trait in capitalist work-relations."[36] For Black women, her labor power is her body; she is never outside of it.[37] This appropriately reflects the public knowledge of Black women's bodies as always up for use. This notion can also be applied to the nude body of the Cotton Eater. With the sheer slip, Saar shows that her body must be understood as always available for sex and work.

Cotton Eater II calls attention to Black women's bodies in dual labor for the sake of capitalist accumulation. With the ambiguity of the enlarged belly in a field of floating cotton, Saar recalls the specific violence done to Black bodies who can give birth to more Black bodies to work and increase the capitalists' profit— Partus Sequitur Ventrem, the absurd logic-turned-law that imagines reproducing people as commodity-making machines. A law that will ensure steady and increased production via enslaved labor. *Cotton Eater II* makes a very interesting response to Partus Sequitur Ventrem as a cause for an alienated body. It alludes to the times when capitalist slaveholders needed a way to maintain surplus value by all and any means. Sasha

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[34] Cedric J Robinson. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

[35] These violences have been strategically ignored or removed in Marx's *Captial*. As Cedric Robinson points out in *Black Marxism*, Marx's analysis is mostly descriptive of Europeans relationship with capitalist. See Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

[36] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*. (Second, Revised edition. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2014), 135.

[37] Saar revisits this phenomenon of becoming a tool throughout her work. As a part of a *Strange Fruit* exhibition, she created two sculptures of nude Black women bodies in hypersexual poses and bright red lips. They were attached to a ho and a pitch— field tools. Saar says that these pieces represent "sexually promiscuous ideas of women of color and women of labor, and then it also plays back into slavery and hoeing." See Mary Nooter Roberts, *Body Politics: The Female Image in Luba Art and the Sculpture of Alison Saar*, (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2000), 46.

Turner in "Home Grown Slaves," recalls that "in the 1780s, … initial campaigns focused on [abolishing] the slave trade. Reproduction was a complex question of engineering a more productive and efficient labor system."[38] British abolitionists worked to put a stop to the Atlantic slave trade— the reproduction process of the boat, which "mobilized a particular racial violence against black sexuality and motherhood."[39] Therefore, capitalists enacted a law that will ensure steady and increased production via enslaved labor: view reproducing women as dual laborers— they can work in the field and produce more commodities. Laws shift for the convenience of increasing production, which work to make the dispossession and repossession of the Black body fixed into the capitalist ideology. As Jennifer Morgan states, "slave societies needed reproducing women. Building a system of racial slavery on the notion of heritability… required a clear understanding that enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children."[40] This law made Black bodies to be viewed, by the white, patriarchal, capitalist, colonial public, as their own money-making machine. To return to the question: is she pregnant or full of cotton? Either way to the public's logic, she's full of a commodity.

American slavery alienated people from kinship and family as a part of the creation of hypervisible Black women's bodies in the public eye. As Morgan indicates, Black women "had to be understood as dispossessed, outside of the normal networks of family and community, to justify the practice of mass enslavement."[41] Profiting from reproducing lives is evidence of this dispossession. When we see the body of the Cotton Eater, we see the violence done when

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[38] Sasha Turner, "Home-Grown Slaves: Women, Reproduction, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Jamaica 1788-1807." *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 42. doi:10.1353/jowh.2011.0029.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Jennifer L. Morgan, "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery." *Small Axe : A Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (2018): 1. doi:10.1215/07990537-4378888.
[41] Ibid.

"economic structure supersedes kinship."[42] We see the violence as she is alienated from her body and thus her kin in blood. Just like the distorted relationship between workers that Marx describes in the working relationships, there is a violent distorted relationship between her as a mother and her children that feeds the public perception of Black kinship.

By consuming the cotton, the body becomes cotton. This is the public, capitalist perception of what many have come to understand about American slavery and Black women's bodily experiences within it. Let's take a review of *Crepuscular Blue* by art historian Laurel Pavic for an example. She analyzes the *Cotton Eater* duo:

> Here, Saar deftly confronts American history and the legacy of cotton as labor and symbol. Picking cotton was presented as a means to salvation through "honest" hard work. Yet the people picking the cotton did not reap the economic rewards of their labor, the work allowed them to survive but not to thrive or change their situation. Saar likens this to food in which there is sustenance but no ultimate nutritional value.[43]

The review critically calls attention to the public consumption of Black bodies in this position in the past: "means to salvation through 'honest' work."[44] But presently, her perception, which is reinforced by the capitalist public, doesn't shift that much because she views this exploitation as a means of survival, seeing the consumption of cotton as offering some sustenance. There is violence is seeing slavery as a means of survival and sustenance. No one can survive as this public image, nor does the visual of Cotton Eater resemble survival. It more so resembles death. Saar is asking us to go beyond this public body to see survival. The public knowledge of the

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[42] Ibid, 2.
[43]Laurel Reed Pavic, "Alison Saar: Racial History and Its Implications." *Oregon ArtsWatch*, 1 Oct. 2017. www.orartswatch.org/alison-saar-racial-history-and-its-implications/.
[44] Ibid.

Cotton Eater's body informs Pavic's liberal, well-intended analysis. Pavic's review reveals a common view of an alienated body that appears to be invested in being a machine.

Although Saar represents a return to a painful past in the history of Black womanhood, she challenges what is available to know about Black women. The body of the Cotton Eater is a remnant, or an artifact left behind.[45] Referring to bodily alienation, the body went through a process of "unnaming and renaming" as a corporeal machine, "placed in a soulless world."[46] To return to the removal of eyes as a motif, Saar says "it's about how all these women are always being perceived and viewed… You're seeing her experiences but you're not really understanding her experience of being observed."[47] The blank eyes and empty head tells us there is a lack of embodied understanding of Black women.[48] The observation and scrutiny that Black women are under affect how they show up and move in a white supremacist world. The vulnerability that it takes to know and understand Black women cannot be present under such constraints. Therefore, there is an interior that isn't welcomed in a capitalist world but exists in another world where such constraints are not present. However, the only knowledge we know about this world, as viewers, is one that we must imagined. In order to understand the inner body of the Cotton Eater, we have to imagine what sort of world and logics can support Black women.

We often see Blackness and struggle run hand in hand. But there's a danger in never moving beyond that. Saar tells us that the danger is that we don't ever see or understand inner

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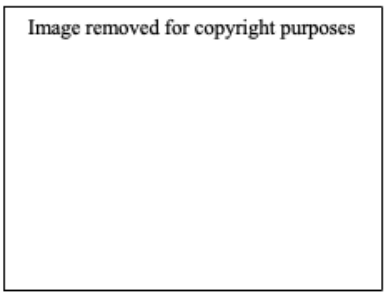
[45] Referring to bodily alienation, the body went through a process of "unnaming and renaming" as a corporeal machine, "placed in a soulless world," See Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 148.
[46] Kinnahan, Linda A. *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*. (University of Iowa Press, 2004), 81. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 148.
[47] Roberts, *Body Politics*, 16.
[48] Art critic Mary Nooter Roberts responds to Saar's missing eyes, saying that "downcast eyes in art history… [is seen to be] a reference to the other world and to divination." I think this insight is helpful to seeing how the inner body of the cotton eater is in another world of and for Blackness. See Roberts, *Body Politics*, 16.

Black being if we only look with this public view. I refuse to believe that the Cotton Eater's experience is solely being a machine, rather that's an experience that anti-Black logics want to deposit in the empty body to justify racist views of Black existence and to justify the continued exploitation of labor. Saar's distortions show the possibilities of bodily alienation and fugitivity. Her severed head, *Cotton Eater (head)*, with cotton burs coming out, revealing the empty inner body, reads as death to this public body. It's a refusal of the white, capitalist knowledge of Black women's bodies. The body of the Cotton Eater tells us that a soul does not reside in the public body created by the white capitalist colonial imagination, a body that went through a process of unnaming and renaming as a corporeal machine. Rather this body is more like an empty cast. I see the blank eyes in this print as an indicator of a body empty of soul (or full of a commodity), but also a sign of a separate reality and alternative world that Saar finds in a temporal journey to the past to connect with her.

The narratives behind Saar's work (attempt to) restore what has been lost. With *Cotton Eater (head)*, I think that the restoration is a rejection of the knowledges that Western public assumes they know and understand about Black life. Because the alternative existence stays in the shadow, and the viewer has to, first, do the work to unknow the knowledge of Black bodies brought on by the public view in order to, then, see and know what happens in the shadows. Saar is forcing people, especially those who only see Black pain as the utmost knowledge of Black existence, to rest in the discomfort of not having easy access to all forms of knowledges.

While Saar represents Black women's bodies in ways that portray social expectations, she also celebrates the ways Black women have harnessed spiritual resources overtime to go beyond the conditions. I see the severed head as a rejection of the commodified body in a similar way that Kimberly Juanita Brown sees Black women with their back turned to the viewer in

photographs as a refusal, not only for the viewer to know them, but a rejection of what viewers thought they knew. Brown writes "to refuse (by turning your back to someone) is to move outside the realm of racial and corporeal familiarity and 'knowing.' It is to turn your back (refusing a full entrance into the frame) on those who would propose to know you, to put mystery in the place of that knowing."[49] When analyzing Carrie Mae Weems' *Re-enactment of the Jefferson-Hemmings Affairs* (2003), Brown notices how the Black woman, who represents Sally Hemings, in the image has her back turned to the camera. Brown articulates that at this moment, "she is a figure of both mystery and mastery" (Image 16).[50]



(Image 16): Carrie Mae Weems, *Re-enactment of the Jefferson-Hemings Affair*, 2003.

With the jagged edge at the nape of the Cotton Eater's neck, Saar shows how the Black body from within has "mastery," control over her body, which works to subvert the control of capitalist over the Black body seen as a machine. Saar also shows a mastery over one's self-knowledge.[51] To use Naisargi N. Dave, perhaps the unknown body resides in the "space of intimacy" a private, vulnerable space that isn't safe in our capitalist world, a world that is always ready to capture anything that is free and used to gain surplus capital.[52] So, we need to rest in the

[49] Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 8. doi:10.1515/9780822375418.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Naisargi N Dave, "Death and family: queer archives of the space between," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia*, ed Leela Fernandes, (Routledge, 2018,) 162.

discomfort of realizing that public knowledges of Black enslaved life need to be challenged. Thus, we either remain unknowledgeable or we take an imaginative journey to the painful places and hear and embody the stories, narratives, and experiences.

Evie Shockley's Temporal Collage

Challenging historical representations of Black life, being, and bodies during slavery, and thereby offering representations that are fictional or speculative counter-narratives, is not only reserved for Black women's visual arts. Late 20th century Black writers and literary critics engage the legacies of slavery and its aftermath in a way that discloses what can be known and what is unavailable.[53] In a keynote at Princeton University in 1994, Toni Morrison discusses representing Black experiences and the troubled dynamic that is upon Black writers. In "Race Matters," Morrison writes, "wasn't I (wouldn't I always be) tethered to a death-dealing ideology even (and especially) when I honed all my intelligence toward subverting it?"[54] Morrison adds more frustration to the conversation of Blackness and Black representation needing to highlight struggle, pain, and death to be visible to a large public audience and to be considered an artist worthy of recognition. However, she also recognizes the need to attend to Black histories of

[53] Colbert discusses Black women writing in the 1970's that account for the eras of Black life and suffering that are the afterlife of slavery— Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *Third Life of Grange Copeland*— and asserts that the Morrison, Walker, and their contemporaries, "sought to recuperate partially documented histories." See Colbert, *Physic Hold of Slavery*, 2.

[54] In this speech, Toni Morrison discusses a situation for Black writers trying to break through literary canons. Race and racism impacted how writers could bring language to their imagination, which was already a difficult task. In trying to theorize or think of a world where race doesn't matter, she makes clear how much racial construction is through language— a writer's tool. She also discusses the deliberate impossibility of writing that pleases and assimilates white ways of writing, so she reveals strategies to escape and elude those confines conditions. She is left with a question of how Black expression can be about Black life and not about white supremacist views of Blackness. See Toni Morrison, "Race Matters," in *The Source of Self-Regard*: *Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditation,* 133. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2019.

slavery to honor Black life because such honor wasn't offered to those enslaved during their lifetimes.[55]

When thinking about late 20th century literary representation of slavery, Morrison's *Beloved* is often cited.[56] Morrison revives the life of Margaret Garner in her characterization of Sethe; however, Morrison's encounter of Garner's life in a newspaper clipping makes clear that "nobody else would want to dig deeply into the interior lives of [the enslaved], except to summon their nobility or victimhood, to be outraged or self-righteously gripped by pity."[57] Morrison inserts her critical imagination of the life of Garner; *Beloved* reflects Morrison's concerns to know about the interior lives of enslaved and newly emancipated Black women that doesn't only show their subjugations but makes their lives humanely complicated. Morrison's novel reflects a larger concern in the eighties around women's autonomy.[58] As Morrison indicates, because such knowledge about slavery that is in line with Black desires for autonomy doesn't exist in the archives and historical accounts of slavery, such stories must be imagined.[59] Therefore, attending to the gaps in history via imagination is an act of "recuperating lives

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[55] Copeland also reflects on Morrison's literary work of *Beloved* as being a "inimitable conjunctions— of collective memory and historical fact…[that has made Beloved] a central touchstone for subsequent revisitations of slavery." See Copeland, *Bound to Appear,* 3.

[56] Morrison's Beloved is analyze through Mourning and melancholy in Colbert's "Do You Want to Be Well?'" and Margo Crawford's "The Inside-Turned-Out Architecture of the Post-Neo-Slave" in *The Physic Hold of Slavery*, and Stephen Best's *None Like Us,* . And the novel is analyzed for it counter-narrative of slavery in Kimberly Juanita Brown's *The Repeating Body* and Copeland's *Bound to Appear*.

[57] Toni Morrison, "On Beloved," in *The Source of Self-Regard*: *Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditation,* 282-283. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2019.

[58] Morrison concerns that impacted her re-historicism and imagining the life of Garner is inspired with women movements in late 20th century. Morrison engages conversations around Women's bodily autonomy, motherhood, women supporting each other. Morrison writes, "*Beloved* originated as a general question, and was lanced by a newspaper clipping. The general question (remember, this was the early eighties) centered on how — other than equal rights, access, pay, etc.—does the women's movement define the freedom being sought?" See, Morrison, "On Beloved," 281.

[59] Morrison writes, "There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves…. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to." See Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road," *World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Associate* 3:1 (January 1989). https://www.uuworld.org/articles/bench-road

entangled with and impossible to differentiate from terrible utterance that condemn them to death."[60] However, how can this be done without contributing to the archives of pain?[61] Morrison like other writers cannot represent Black life during slavery without the logics of suffering, but the accounts of suffering can be made more complicated with imagination. By complicated, I mean, that the imagination can envision love, kinship, community, playfulness alongside the suffering. All of which are in *Beloved*. Yet still, even though imagination is a generative counter-history tool, it still contains impossible realities and impossible knowing.

The loss of Black history, especially experiences of slavery, is felt deeply in Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts." Hartman addresses the *Recovery,* a boat carrying enslaved people, including two girls who were murdered by Captain John Kimber.[62] However, Hartman is met with gaps and limitations when she inquires about the perspectives of the Black girls. Hartman finds eyewitness accounts of how the Black girls were murdered by the captain and finds accounts of the judge and jury acquitting the prisoner due to lack of evidence.[63] In responds to such archival recordings, Hartman asks the resounding question: "What else is there to know?"[64] As she reflects on the archival materials she notices that Black women who were transgress and violated carry "the same fate as every other Black Venus: no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said or observed that she refused to say anything at all."[65] I hear

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[60] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.
[61] In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick also pulls from Morrison's writing practices as traveling to the site of memory by reflecting on the visuals, sounds, and music of the Black pasts as represented in archival and historical documentations such as materials Fredrick Douglass's home, documents of middle passages. McKittrick indicates that this imaginative time journey through collective memory is "painful work." See Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 32-33.
[62] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 7.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid, 2.
[65] Ibid.

in this question and answer both a limit and a longing to go beyond the limit.[66] Hartman is imbued with a sense of loss at the realization that women in the archive will never have the opportunity to share their stories, and the imagined narratives that researchers create about the lives of Black people in the archives might be the only satisfaction.

By imagining what is lost that cannot be romanticized and returned regardless of how the heart yearns, writers invent tools and methodologies of attending to archives through the feeling of loss. One such mode of feeling the longing and loss that Hartman offers is "critical fabulation," a narrative approach to insufficient archives.[67] Hartman's writing practice "strain[s] against the limits of the archive."[68] The loss and longing in her critical writing practice is expressed in the telling of an "impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling."[69] That is, this strategy does not cover up violence towards Black life in the middle passages, but insists that there should be more to tell about the lives of murdered women. Because of the lack of such information in archival representation, we can create narratives of longing that do not fill the gaps. The imagined narratives are moans of longing and grief.[70] Hartman's writing practice is based in speculation but a careful speculation that imagines "what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."[71]

Moving into the 21st century, re-historizing and creating fictions that challenge the narratives of slavery is still a prominent practice that is not only reflected in Hartman's writing

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[66] Ibid, 9.
[67] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.
[70] The idea of Hartman's narrative strategies are moans is a nod towards Fred Moten's use of "mo-nin," or the registered aural quality— the screams, whistles, hums— of visuals of Black death. He writes, "To move or work through that something, to improvise, request thinking about morning and how mourning sounds, how moaning sounds." See Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin." In *Loss*, 66. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. doi:10.1525/9780520936270-005.
[71] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

practice, but in contemporary fiction and poetics.[72] In this section, I reflect on Evie Shockley's poetry and criticism as both forms challenge and experiment with linear temporality of Black life through various eras and movement. Shockley's poetic inventions push the boundaries of acceptable poetic practices that also experiment with attending to Black historical life in imaginative ways.[73] This push is helpful for the innovation of new modes and methods that challenge stereotypical images that circulate to represent Blackness. In "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing'," Shockley addresses the expectations of Black writers and artists to represent Blackness in distinct and knowable ways, especially in a social climate that is influenced by the late 20th century's concern with multiculturalism and performative colorblindness.[74] Shockley begins her inquiry of Black representation in literary and visual works by asking readers what Blackness looks like— "afros… brown skin… fancy footwork … cotton crops…" among other images that are evoked through words.[75] The visual representations that Shockley writes reference histories of Black cultural expressions— "footwork"— and the results of oppression— "cotton crops."[76] By taking cues from Nicole Fleetwood, Shockley considers the persistent "trouble" behind controlling images of Black life— even ones that are rooted in cultural and community expressions can and will be exploited by mainstream media and visual cultures.[77] Therefore, Shockley's visual experimentations in her poems refuse firm definitions and closure,

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[72] The writing practice I'm referring to is "critical fabulation." See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.
[73] While discussing the overreliance of musical influence critics associate with Black poetry in "Soundtrack for a Generational Shift," Vrana writes, "Shockley's practices deserve our attention because the field of Black poetry could still benefit from creating a more expansive definition of the innovative," or what it means to successfully challenge traditions to bring forth new poetic expressions. See Vrana, "Soundtrack for a Generational Shift: Music & Innovation in Evie Shockley's 'the New Black.' *Obsidian* (Raleigh, N.C. : 2006*)* 41, no. 1/2 (2015): 374.
[74] Shockley, "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing'," 509.
[75] Evie Shockley, "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing': Poetry and Blackness Visualized," *New Literary History* 50, no. 4 (2019): 499. doi:10.1353/nlh.2019.0051.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Shockley refers to Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Image:* to echo that Western visual culture will always impact Black racialize representation. See Shockley, "On See and Reading the 'Nothing',"499.

which aid in fostering many ways of understanding her works.[78] Shockley refers to this as the dynamic of image-text— a piece of "art made with words"— making it so that the interpretation of poetry requires more than a literary analysis, but a visual one as well.[79] Because of the multiple meanings, we can understand Black historical events in necessary counter-historical ways. Shockley writes:

> Black artists working in various literary, visual, and multimedia genres have experimented with ways they can productively activate both looking *and* reading in tandem; they play these modes of engagement off of one another and draw energy from their fusion, which enables artists to investigate, ignore, momentarily elude, or attempt to explode the constraints that white supremacy places upon the production and reception of their works.[80]

Poetry is both visual and literary, and I argue that the experimental engagement between them— their fusion— is a portal to experience Black imaginations that goes against normative, and often anti-Black, representations of Blackness that we would easily see in archival information. A new mode to challenge historical representation plays with the fusion to understand what is real (historical, emotional, experiential, material) in imaginative representations. To play with and experience the fusion means to epistemologically access multiple imaginative ways of knowing.

One work of Shockley's that explores this dynamic is *Half-Red Sea* (2006). In this poetry collection, Shockley contemplates the history of power dynamics playing out across gender,

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[78] Vrana, "Soundtrack for a Generational Shift," 373.
[79] Shockley, "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing'," 500.
[80] Ibid, 500. Emphasis original

race, and nationalism by examining the middle passages.[81] Although there are some formal and traditional aesthetics in this work— sonnet, pantoum style— Shockley produces interruptions in form by using fragmented stanzas, incomplete endings, and mesostics writings.[82] These visual and literary interruptions not only speak to the historical violence of slavery, but it makes clear that such violence continues to interrupt Black life. The interruption forces a new way to interpret Black literary and visual arts. [83] Shockley's use of fluid and experimental poetics allows for representations of experiences and poetics of Blackness that veer away from distinct representation of Blackness.[84] Her poems have been recognized for how she pays attention to impactful moments in Black history, and she shares perspectives that are unconsidered.[85] In *Half-Red Sea*, Shockley's perspective on the Middle Passages offers poetic narratives that are an embodied, time-travelling journey into a present-day investigation of the past. She evokes, or conjures, gendered voices that are in the wake of the middle passage— like Gwendolyn Brooks and Phyllis Wheatley.[86] Through experimenting with the telling of historical moments and their impact, another way of experiencing the moment through a Black perspective and another understanding of a past moment is revealed. Treating the text as visual art— experimenting with punctuations, syntax, fonts— affects how we read the work that provides information on

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[81] For example, "writing on the mayflower," offers some metaphoric imagery of transgressing Black women bodies on middle passage ships. See Evie Shockley, *A Half-Red Sea*. (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Wren Press, 2006), 5.
[82] Nancy Kuhl's descriptions of Shockley's writing in *Half-Red Sea* shows how Shockley works explores prominent historical moments in a lens that is not considered enough: "The poet's preoccupation with history and her deft experimentation with strict and loose poetic forms give the reader of *a half-red sea* a feeling of discovery; we are witness to the poet's process of articulation, her unearthing of new ways to tell the conflicting truths and stories that make up her American history." See Nancy Kuhl, "A Half-Red Sea Review," *Rain Taxi*, 2007, https://raintaxi.com/a-half-red-sea/.
[83] For example, "bio/autography" alludes to Phyllis Wheatley and her time in Boston and England but frames her short biography through multiculturalism in the 18th century. See Shockley, *Half-Red Sea,* 3.
[84] For example, in "blue-ing green: the sonobiography of Miles Davis" puts visuals to the blues and still roots the sonic experience in Black expressions. See Shockley, *Half-Red Sea*, 40.
[85] Kuhl, "A Half-Red Sea Review."
[86] Shockley, *Half-Red Sea*,3, 25.

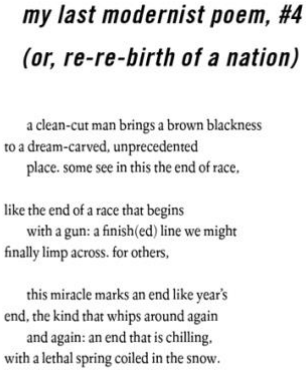
historical moments. However, the reading of the experimental styles isn't always clear and concrete; there's not a set rulebook for how to read disruptions, which makes readers responsible conjuring new modes of engaging the middle passage imagery. The reading, then, needs to prioritize how the reader experiences the work in collaboration with how the writer articulates her account of history.

Through a close reading of Shockley's *the new black* (2011), reflections on the dynamics between text and visual, that requires a curiosity about the placement of words as art, yields fluid meanings that have readers experience temporality as a collage. Recent conversations in Black studies have been concerned with a sort of new-ness as it relates to temporality. Literary critics, Laura Vrana writes, Shockley "begs readers to reconsider the popular rhetoric of newness and being 'finish[ed]' with the past and to instead look to history for unlearned lessons."[87] Shockley responds to these conversations by showing that a contemplation of prominent historical figures and events are key to addressing and building Black presents and futures. My entire project is concerned with newness in conversation in Black studies; therefore, Shockley's poetic responses are generative to working with gaps in Black historical knowing because the ways we understand history can always be (re)explored.

In *the new black,* Shockley consistently reinserts Black women's voices into Black history. Mariam Thaggert highlights methods of bringing forth Black feminist legacies that help "challenge temporal frameworks."[88] Thaggert writes: "By invoking and then questioning the temporal progress of the race, Shockley's *the new black* offers a Black female modernist intervention into contemporary black literary scholarship and critiques the linearity and

[87] Vrana, "Soundtrack for a Generational Shift," 373.
[88] Thaggert, "Black Modernist Feminism," 45.

temporality of such a conception of advancement."[89] By returning to historical eras that committed failed promises of new ways of life for Black people— Reconstruction, Harlem renaissance, Black Arts Movement, Obama election— Shockley's image-text, or poems, invite readers to see the history in a new light. By highlighting Black women's voices who were significant yet overlooked during those times (as part of the failed promises), Shockley shows us how new-ness isn't about temporal futurity, but how we perceive the past and present; we are able to experience new-ness by shifting perspectives. There is a need for curiosity for what is unclear. On one hand, there is trouble in recognizing what is seemingly nonexistent (according to historical narratives written to support white imaginations). On the other hand, there is a knowingness that there is more and that the gaps aren't empty— like suspicion. This suspicion drives curiosity, which allows for what is seemingly not there to be present, though not fully. Whereas Saar's sculpture forces us to confront a forever mystery, Shockley's poems force us to decode image-text to reveal new experiences from historical moments. Both require labor and imaginative collaborations between reader/viewer and artist/writer.



my last modernist poem, #4
(or, re-re-birth of a nation)

a clean-cut man brings a brown blackness
to a dream-carved, unprecedented
place. some see in this the end of race,

like the end of a race that begins
with a gun: a finish(ed) line we might
finally limp across. for others,

this miracle marks an end like year's
end, the kind that whips around again
and again: an end that is chilling,
with a lethal spring coiled in the snow.

(*Image 17)*: Evie Shockley, "my last modernist poem, #4 (or re-re-birth of a nation)," in Shockley's *the new black,* 2011.

[89] Ibid.

The visual relationship in Shockley's "my last modernist poem, #4 (or, re-re-birth of a nation)" allows space for an imaginative and collaborative reading practice (Image 17). [90] The poem that opens the collection, visually describes the present through forward and backward motions, which allows readers to experience a present that is a moving conglomeration of multiple temporalities. The first two stanzas are three lines each. In the first stanza, the second line is projected, reaching out past the first and third line. The opposite happens in the second stanza; the second line in the stanza is indented past the first and third line, making the tail of the line project past the first and third line. The outlines of the first two stanzas appear as arrows pointing backward, or to the left, and an arrow pointing forward, to the right. Because the poem (and entire collection) is concerned with how we remember prominent historical moments that seem to be a marker of progression for Black life and how we build futures based on our understanding of history, the visuals of arrows bring in ideas of movements to the conversation. Movements treat history and moments in time as not stagnant and not only existing in the present. The idea of movements suggests, or encourages, remembering the past and imagining the future in the present. Movements are related to traveling, which highlights the experiential nature of the poem; it has the reader tap into their bodily sensation when asked to experience a memory. This back-and-forth traveling is visually depicted as zig-zag line formation in the third stanza. That stanza has four lines and each line alternates between indentation and projection, left and right, or forward and backwards. In comparison to the concreteness of forward and backwards of the first two stanzas, the zig-zag image of the third creates unclarity and confusion in movement. The fast pace feels unsteady. However, upon closer look, the beginnings of the

[90] I placed an image of the poem in order to emphasize the visuality of the piece. The indentations are too precise and important to mimic through quotation or to replace with a forward slash.

lines in the stanza sway back and forth; however, the ends of the lines are smoother. It invokes a feeling of an uncertain, rough start that gets easier when adjusting to the fast pace motion of temporal time travel.

Noting the literary aspect of the poem, the language plays with time through start/end dynamics, repetition, and dream-like depictions. This is initially seen with the title: "My *last* modernist poem…" and "re-re-birth of a nation."[91] The reference to *A Birth of a Nation* demonstrates that modernity has historically influence a nation state to see Blackness as non-human and treat Black peoples as such. Thaggert writes that summoning of modernism "intervenes in discussion of blackness in the 21st century, a period that is becoming marked for both its promise and precarity for African Americans."[92] The poem calls attention to repetition of that history through waves of start and stop motion. That is, to re-do something means to end the first try and start again. As the poem conforms and marks a recreation of a society, it also indicates a break, a finality, "My *last* modernist poem."[93] However, this finality is offset by doubt with the use of "re-re," indicating that a false finality has been present before. With these two phrases as an opener, the poem offers history as repetitious with few changes and alterations for future and present moments, despite the desire or prediction for such finality.

The imagery the words depict are dream-like in their lack of clarity: "A clean-cut man brings a brown blackness/ to a dream-carved, unprecedented/place. Some see in this the end of race."[94] The reader is asked to collaborate in the visualization as some words lack crucial descriptions that would yield a universally concrete image that all readers would visualize. An

[91] Shockley, *the new black,* 1, emphasis mine.
[92] Thaggert, "Black Modernist Feminism," 45
[93] Shockley, *the new black,* 1.
[94] Ibid.

"unprecedented/place" will invoke different time periods in different readers' imaginations.[95] A man bringing a "brown blackness" conjures multiple possibilities to visualize: A Black man holding an ominous brown ball in his hand, walking forward; A racially unknown man holding a container of brown- black substances.[96] Although Vrana and other critics read as a reference to President Obama and thus would seem appropriate to follow suit, the description is so open that it depends on the reader's memory or knowledge of a time when a collective society saw a clean cut man as a signal of end of race, which happens frequently through time.[97] The description could be Barack Obama, as well as WEB Du Bois or Malcom X. Additionally, it requires readers to recall how modernity and the creation of nations promising violence and hate against others has shown itself in multiple ways across the world. The note of the man bringing brown blackness to a "dream-carved" place reinforces the literary depiction of visuals as purposefully unclear, which makes the reader engage their imagination and their memory to confront/ make sense of the visuals their imagination creates.[98] The second stanza offers a similar quality of visual language— elusive, collaborative and dream-like— and we are meant to visualize a sort of beginning. Shockley invites readers to visualize time in beginning and ending tandems that are continuous.

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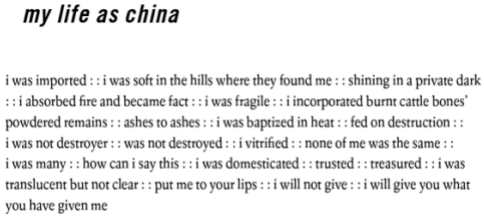
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Both Laura Vrana and Mariam Thaggert read this imagery as Barack Obama in their analysis of the poem. The election of Obama into presidency is highlighted in their readings of *the new black* because this is a point in time that signaled hope and progress to many Black communities and individuals, but such hope was short lived and the violence of anti-Blackness that has resurfaced for centuries would soon come again and spark the Black Live Matter movements. To many critics, *the new black* is about the dynamics of progress and regression and Obama election is generative for that discussion. Therefore, seeing this figure as Barack Obama helps fuel their analysis. See Vrana, "Soundtrack to a Generation Shift," 373; Thaggert, "Black Modernist Feminism," 46.
[98] Shockley, *the new black*, 1.



my life as china

i was imported : : i was soft in the hills where they found me : : shining in a private dark
: : i absorbed fire and became fact : : i was fragile : : i incorporated burnt cattle bones'
powdered remains : : ashes to ashes : : i was baptized in heat : : fed on destruction : :
i was not destroyer : : was not destroyed : : i vitrified : : none of me was the same : :
i was many : : how can i say this : : i was domesticated : : trusted : : treasured : : i was
translucent but not clear : : put me to your lips : : i will not give : : i will give you what
you have given me

(Image 18): Shockley, Evie. *"my life as china".* In Shockley's *the new black*. 2011

A similarly collaborative in interpretation poem, or image-text, is seen in "my life as china," the first poem in the "out with the old" section (Image 18). The use of the double colons allows space, literally, for imaginative and collaborative interpretations. In between groups of words, or fragmented sentences, are two colons with a space between them, ": :".[99] Reading the colons feels like a breath, or a pause. What can we do in such space? The space is more powerful when it engages with the text. The first-person narration is ambiguous; the text is the narrator describing who they are, like a riddle. That is, the narrator never says who or what they are outright, rather their descriptions are clues told with figurative language. After each clue, the reader is offered space to pause. Strikingly, it is unclear what literary device Shockley uses, which makes the riddle more challenging. At times it appears as if personification is being used; however, it doesn't appear as though an object has human qualities. Rather, a human has been treated as an object: "i was imported : : i was soft in the hills where they found me : : shining in a private dark."[100] The language gives clues to the capitalistic and conquest nature of middle passages, where Black people were treated as commodities.

Much of the language in "my life as china," describes a feeling and sometimes qualities attributed to supernatural beings or gods. The elusive narrator describes herself "i absorbed fire

[99] Ibid, 5.
[100] Ibid.

and became fact : : i was fragile : : … I was baptized in heat : : fed on destruction : : i was not destroyer : : was not destroyed : : i vitrified".[101] The figure resembles a god of fire— being created by fire and destruction. The narrator can wield fire, having the ability to vitrify as opposed to being vitrified. Towards the end, the narrator reaffirms their permanent elusivity, describing herself as "translucent but not clear."[102] Using the past tense but maintaining the qualities. The coded language cannot hold static meaning.; the riddle cannot be solved definitely. This accompanies the space of the colons to allow for the reader's imaginative collaboration to make sense of the poem.

Shockley's *the new black* experiments with text and image to discuss new perspectives of Black history, to experience time as fluid and non-stagnant, and to challenge ideas of progress. The collection also aids in Black feminist thought because it spends a large amount of time acknowledging the physical, emotional, and violence done to Black women in the past and will likely continue to persist in the future. Shockley pays tribute to Black women's artistic and intellectual labour, which helps to repair historical narratives that leave Black women absent and unconsidered. Not only does she reinsert Black women into history, but she also highlights them with powerful descriptions. An experimental and collaborative reading practice meets elusive play with words and visual as an offer to engage the imagination and experience what the language and visual evoke for the reader. Although the language and visual are concrete enough to inform imagination about Black life and time, it challenges readers to collaborate by co-visualizing. Such a mode of criticism helps proliferate the many meanings Shockley's works points to, which thereby allows for a larger conversation about Black history and how it shows up in the present and future.

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[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.

Conclusion

Throughout the chapter, my main goal was to participate in conversations around 21st century Black arts and literature that challenges historical representation of Black life during slavery and its afterlife. All throughout Black cultural productions, we see an engagement with slavery as an act of remembering. As Katherine McKittrick writes: "imagination requires a return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship."[103] Black arts and criticism animate imaginative counter-narratives that work to remember the past and to honor Black life.

I engage Alison Saar's *Cotton Eater (head)* and *Cotton Eater II* and Evie Shockley's *the new black.* Both artists represent reoccurring hardships in Black history, but they also leave us a mystery. That is, when looking at Saar's work, I see a story of being subjected to dual labor: commodity biological reproduction and fieldwork, and when engaging Shockley's work, I understand the failed promises of progress that impact Black life. But I also see a gap that can lead me to another world to experience or can lead to imagining the past in new ways. The distortion of temporality and realism in their arts and poetics need a reading practice that collaboratively plays with fluid possibilities of what a work can mean and how it can represent Blackness during their contemporary and during slavery.

[103] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle.* (1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 33.

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Chapter Four

Worldbuilding, Vengeances, and The Body: The Potentials of Black Horror

In Tim Story's *The Blackening* (2022), a group of friends, all Black but diverse in subject positions, are lured to a cabin by an old frenemy that they assumed is trying to get back into their good graces, awkward as it might be. However, prior to the trip the old frenemy hired white supremacists to murder the friends. The deadly racism heightens when the friends are forced to play a trivia game that makes fun of Black stereotypes. If they get answers wrong, they are chased and killed in extreme ways. There is one scene that stuck with me. The friends collaborate to take down one of the chasers. Lisa, played by Antoinette Robertson, takes a candlestick and repeatedly whacks the already dead hunter.[1] With each whack, blood splatters onto her face and clothes. With each swing, she shouts the name and conditions that she had experienced during the trip and throughout her life — the brutal death of her friends, Morgan and Shawn, racism that Black women face, the excessive responsibilities of Black women in communities, her tiredness. The movements and sound desync; slow motions mixes with steady sounds. My body squirmed at the sight and sound of blood splatter. My heart raced with excitement as I empathized with Lisa, and as I vicariously experienced the cathartic release of avenging what Black women experience. That moment speaks of immersion into the world of *The Blackening* and the power of revenge fantasies in horror stories. In speaking to Black lived experiences, horror allows for Black people to assert themselves into the genre, expanding the definition, function, and aims of horror. [2]

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[1] *The Blackening,* directed by Tim Story (2022: Liongate Film), Digital.

[2] Historically, horror has missed the mark for provoking intentional bodily sensation in Black audiences. Callender notes that Black emotional reactions to depictions of scenes that are often used in horror will be different than other viewers: "for the leading voices of black horror today… the visceral feeling of horror

Scholars, producers, and critics of Black horror explore its many possibilities to impact and express Black cultures and histories. Robin Means Coleman's groundbreaking study, *Horror Noire: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to Present* (2013), details the genealogy of Black horror and offers critical reading practices that connect the genre to the legacies of Black life in America.[3] Although *Horror Noire* is a scholarly production, there is ample discourse on the impacts of Black horror. Most of this discourse takes place outside of academia and in more casual and public places, like in online publications, media resources, and blogs. [4] In the documentary version of Coleman's study by the same name and directed by Xavier Burgin, we see the discourse occur between long-time public researchers, actors, directors, and fans of Black horror.[5] Some scholars refer to horror as a low brow genre and excessive or unnecessary, but the public conversation around Black horror points to the significant ways horror speaks to the cultures of Black communities.[6] Therefore, horror has a significant potential and ability to allow for reflections and representations of Black life in affirming and exciting ways. Black horror scholars, producers, and critics show the power of the genre because it emotionally affects bodies and cultural expressions and historical knowledge. With these impacts, horror can usher audiences into the terrifying world that engages their bodily sensations to experience alterity— alternative worlds, beings, and situations.

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depends more on racial triggers than otherworldly frights." See Brandon S Callender, "The Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do The Exorcist." *Qui Parle* 31, no. 1 (2022): 68.

[3] Robin Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, (1st ed. Florence: Routledge, 2013).

[4] For example, Director Ashlee Blackwell's online community in *Graveyard Shift Sisters*, Kendra's blog *Black Girl Horror*, and Mark H. Harris's database, Blackhorrormovies.com.

[5] *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror,* directed by Xavier Burgin (2019: Brooklyn, New York: Icarus Films, Digital.

[6] To help define excess (low-brown) and horror, Linda Williams refers to horror as a low genre. See Linda Williams, "Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film Carol J. Clover." *Film Quarterly,* 46, no. 2 (1992): 58.

Horror is known for offering scenarios that disrupt experiences of life as calm, safe, rational, and real.[7] In this chapter, I'm concerned with how feeling and affect are analytical tools to understand the experiential quality of emotionally impactful fiction, namely horror. I argue that having a deep-felt reaction to a work of horror allows for a deeper immersion into the world that it creates. Horror creators build terrifying worlds that pull from Black historical and contemporary experiences; therefore, the worlds will impact Black audiences' emotional state and immerse them into the worlds to experience the frights that intentionally resonate with Black cultures. The terrifying worlds in Black horror are about disrupting moments, time periods, and events that have occurred, or are occurring, in Black American lives throughout the centuries of subjugations in America. Indeed, these worlds will produce fear, but they often are empowering for Black characters, and Black audiences, as horror worlds challenge the normalcy of white supremacist anti-Black violence that impacts and impacted Black life. Through horror worldbuilding we can also see how Black horror provides catharsis via revenge fantasies, which expands the abilities of the genre. In other words, I argue that the worldbuilding in horror allows for Black bodies to experience reactions— fears, uncertainties, and anxieties—that are generative and informative to the mission of Black studies to explore the expressions of Blackness, as well as, to explore means of liberation.[8] Black horror also provides outlets for

[7] Isabel Pinedo offers five characteristics of horror that she calls "post-modern": There is a commonsense idea of "real world" that gets violently disrupted; the boundaries, laws, and regulation for the limits of violence gets transgressed; Notions of real and rationality is thrown out the window; and especially in regards to film, the films offers a bounded and safe place to experience fear. See Isabel Pinedo, "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of The Contemporary Horror Film." *Journal of Film and Video* 48, no. 1/2 (1996): 20.

[8] I would say that terror worldbuilding that disrupts the order to anti-Black normalcy that as aspect of Black dreaming. In *Of Black Study*, Joshua Myer analyze the critical practices and theories of Toni Cade Bambara. Pulling from Bambara, Myers notes that the purpose of Black studies is to engage a "space for considerations of Black liberations form the rms of order, from the present order of knowledge." Futhermore, dreams as realizable but not yet real, "embody what could or should be real." The disruption of normalcy that horror brings ushers critical thinking around what is wrong in the real world that horror possibilities can correct. See Joshua Myers, *Of Black Study*, (London ; Pluto Press, 2023), 183-184.

cathartic experiences of revenge, against anti-Blackness, sexism, and queer phobia, that can be purged through vicariously experiencing the fictive horror worlds.

In recent years, Black studies has turned to affect. [9] Scholars in this field look at feelings and emotional responses to Black communal conditions and anti-Black racist conditions. They also look at how Black feelings are sensed through creative art and literary practice, activism and social movements, and through community relations. Affect studies and reading practices have been critiqued for the ways they are inattentive to racial, ethnic, and geographic differences. For example, one of the main concerns in Tyrone S. Palmer's "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," is that Black affect and feeling is impossible in an anti-Black order of the world that forecloses making meaning of Black feelings.[10] This sentiment is echoed in Rebecca Wanzo's "The Deadly Fight Over Feelings," wherein Wanzo asks us to consider whose feelings are privileged when ignoring Black affective experiences; such privileging and ignorance has deadly effects.[11] For this study, I participate in affect by acknowledging that feelings and sensations in the body open up to another way to experience the world where Black affective experiences cannot be ignored.

Affect is connected through worldbuilding because having a fictional world impact bodily sensations allows the world to feel more real. Feelings are a way of experiencing and

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[9] For example, affect and literature, creative practice, and community can be seen in: Kathy L Glass, *Politics and Affect in Black Women's Fiction*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018); Jaye Johnson Thiel and Bessie P. Dernikos, "Refusals, Re-Turns, and Retheorizations of Affective Literacies: A Thrice-Told Data Tale." *Journal of Literacy Research* 52, no. 4 (2020): 482–506; Bettina Judd, *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2023); Affect and activism can be seen in the work of Lisa M. Corrigan, *Black Feelings: Race and Affect in the Long Sixties*, (1st ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020).
[10] Tyrone S. Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," *Qui Parle* 29, no. 2 (2020): 251.
[11] Rebecca Wanzo, "The Deadly Fight Over Feelings." *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 228.

immersing oneself in a world.[12] The feeling in the body responds to living conditions of being Black in an anti-Black world and being a being that feels deeply.[13] Palmer's body of work explores Black affect as it relates to metaphysical concerns of world-building.[14] Palmer suggests that to understand Black feeling and experiences in the anti-Black world that we have to "turn to and defamiliarize the concepts of the world."[15] Black horror worldbuilding offers a world where Black feeling is considered and catered to, even if such attention to Black feeling doesn't transcend the anti-Black world wherein Black affects is impossible.[16] Scholars who engage affect look at how bodily reactions can change and transform the world.[17] Therefore, engaging the affective theories generates a productive view of horror and the genre's promise of destructions and chaos.

That is to say, Black horror's stake in bodily reaction is related to concerns of Black affect. Conversations of affect make clearer the ways bodily reaction and catharsis are productive for the worldbuilding aims of Black horror. Worldbuilding is not just an adventure of the mind via imagination, but is about opening up space for a different, perhaps not better, world. Looking at the worlds that are built in Black horror and how they respond to the experiences of Black life not only points to collective Black imaginations, but also points to the bodily sensations that Black producers and writers believe that Black people need to feel. This points to a generative power of Black horror, where Black viewers experience a world where villainous actions are

[12] The conversation around Black feeling and knowing is one that I take up in Chapter 2. Rather, the focus on this chapter is about feeling leads into being in another world.
[13] Lisa Corrigan. *Black Feelings: Race and Affect in the Long Sixties*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020): xvii.
[14] Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," 273.
[15] Ibid, 250.
[16] Ibid, 251.
[17] Ibid.

possible, which opposes a world that frequently harms and interferes with Black life with barely any consequences.

To analyze how worldbuilding relies on the reactions to the fictive characters and situations, I join scholars and critics to contemplate the emotional state of the audiences when witnessing the abilities of the horror tropes and situations.[18] After all, as horror philosopher, Noel Carroll puts it, the genre is "named by the very affect [it] is designed to provoke."[19] However, what is needed to evoke fictive horror in Black audiences, especially women and queer audiences, will require us to rethink the constructive possibilities of the genre. A tale-tell aspect of horror is how the characters react to the modes of terror.[20] The viewers and readers then mimic or respond to the character's reactions. That is, if the characters shriek at the sight of the threat, then audience members are likely to as well (that is the producer's intention anyway).[21] However, if there aren't any Black, queer and femme characters or the characters' depictions do not align with Black, feminist, and queer worldviews, then this aspect of horror is more complicated.[22] The construction of horror tropes and situations respond to familiar material

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[18] Many critics indicate that one of the main ways of analyzing the genre is through the emotional that the works intend to impact. Carroll's Philosophy of Horror "presume[s] that the genre is designed to produce an emotional effect." Linda Williams indicates the "gross" factor that audience members feel when engaging horror. See Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 8.; Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2.

[19] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, 15

[20] Many scholars echo the ways audiences engage and relate to characters who interact with the monster or other horrific happenings. The following horror scholars all note that a key aspect of horror is how audience members mimic the reactions of the characters. See Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 8; Linda Williams, "Film Bodies," 3; Callender, "Devil Finds Use," 68.

[21] One of the main arguments in Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* is how horror film directors and producers use women characters to demonstrate the horrifying aspect of the horror film.

[22] The vexed nature of Black viewers seeing pleasure in non-black horror productions is explored in Brandon Callender's "The Devil Finds Use" wherein he employs disidentification so that Black audiences can have pleasure in horror viewer by identifying with characters and situations that aren't coded as Black. See Callender, "The Devil Finds Use," 69.

realities that develop laws, social customs, and norms on the foundation of creating a safe environment for privileged members of the community.[23] However, horror encourages reflections around who is safe and at what cost is that safety for those at risk. Black, feminist, and queer horror invents and imagines worlds that challenge senses of normalcy for heteronormativity and anti-Blackness.

To move through my argument, I begin with engaging Black horror discourse to examine how scholars and critics see the distinctions of Black horror to other ethnic and racial horror productions. I examine the history of Black horror, its stakes, range of productions, and gaps. Then I move into a discussion of worldbuilding as a generative site for analysis for producing Black fictions. Worldbuilding is a way to vicariously experience another way of life because it confronts the possibility that the material world will never relinquish the power to control Blackness and will never be a world that is suitable for Black life; therefore, (im)possibilities— other possible communication patterns, other ways of relating, of being and embodying life, of making art, of loving that are not possible in the current world— allows for alternative experiences. Then, I reflect on how horror worlds evoke bodily sensations by exaggerating Black histories and life experiences to explore the worst possible outcome. Black horror offers a generative possibility that will allow Black viewers and creators to offer new figures, archetypes, and horror tropes to elicit fear. I home in on a particular productive bodily sensation for Black queer and feminist sensibilities—catharsis through revenge fantasies. Revenge motivates a lot of

[23] This is echoed in the opening pages of Kinitra Brooks's *Searching for Sycorax* when Brooks writes, "Contemporary horror fiction is a space in which deep-seated human anxieties can be given free reign… We create governments and prisons to civilize ourselves and abate our fear of anarchy and mankind's potential for savagery." See Kinitra D Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror*. (1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 1.

horror stories because it calls attention to an emotional experience that is so painful that the means of retaliation cannot be fulfilled in the present material reality.

I examine how contemporary horror shows up in three mediums— cinema, visual art, and short stories. Bree Newsome's *Wake* (2010) is a short independent film with a surreal twist towards horror. The film blurs the line between reality and hell, a world that can elicit unease in the body and that points to Black Southern church stories and occult practices. Through strategic angled shots, sound effects, and costuming we are able to see how the mode of cinema can produce horror stories to make them look and feel real. Wangechi Mutu's *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012) and *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* (2012) are collages that show scenes of violent bursts of blood, puking up globs of hair, and bodies that have been mutilated and put together that cannot be said to be anything human.[24] Through layers of hair, small three-dimensional, and even two-dimensional objects placed on top of each other, the collages appear as relief, or pieces of art that come out of the constraints of a two-dimensional art piece. This visual art affect is haptic and makes the figures appear off the page and in our world. Nnedi Okorafor's "Dark Home" (2023) incorporates Igbo spirituality to animate Ajofia, a figure from a world of darkness and death influenced by Nigerian cultural and spiritual practices. Through metaphors, linguistic imagery, and chilling prose, the story gets into the mind of the reader and the reader must co-visualize the frightening power of Ajofia. Together these texts are representative of the power of horror, worldbuilding, catharsis, and bodily sensations. Ultimately, through examining the terrifying worlds that are imagined and explored across the three works we can see how they support revenge narratives and impacts Black bodily sensations.

[24] "Alhamdulillah" can be translated from Arabic to English to mean "Thank god!"

Black Horror's Discourse

These three texts are a part of a large growth in Black horror in the 21st century.[25] Additionally, even if not directly named "horror," we are seeing an increase in speculative works that play with images that are frightening and dreadful.[26] Horror has been defined in terms of demonizing differences represented in character constructions, it's evocation of fantasy seen in their mythical creatures, and moreover "meets our collective understandings and expectations of what is horrific."[27] Although there are stable characteristics of the genre, like fear and violence, there are flexible characters that have to do with preferences, taste, and individual desires.[28] There are all sorts of violent and frightening depictions that horror relies on. In terms of beings, horror features monsters, vampires, ghosts. In terms of situations, there are mass murders, bodies being mutilated, minds being possessed, apocalypse.[29] Horror is sometimes hard to define because it relies on how audiences identify something as horror.[30]

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[25] Robin Coleman, Gabrielle Bellot, Dani Bethea, Monika Negra are all Black horror critics who remark on the surge of Black horror productions. In particular, Coleman writes, "I am especially enthusiastic about the depth in which this second edition [of *Horror Noire*] attends to the extraordinary and exciting outpouring of Black horror in recent years and its cultural and ideological influences." Coleman, *Horror Noire, 2.*

[26] For example, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) plays with ghost stories and haunting although the work is not considered horror. In "Speculative Sankofarration," Kinitra Brooks et al, argues that building the body of Black horror requires looking at ghost stories written in the early 20th century even though they wouldn't necessarily fit in the horror category. See Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing: A Novel* (1st ed. New York: Scribner, 2017); Kinitra D. Brooks, Alexis McGee, and Stephanie Schoellman. "Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction." *Obsidian* 42, no. 1/2 (2016): 238.

[27] Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 5.

[28] Ibid, 4.

[29] Linda Williams, Carol Clover, Robin Means Coleman are a few of horror scholars who begin their arguments and analysis with typical horror depictions. For example, Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* names "spawning vampires, trolls, gremlins, zombies, ghosts, and other unnamable concoctions" in his early pages as common horror tropes and themes. See Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror,* 2.

[30] Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax*, 4.

Across literature, films, and visual arts, we see increase production and diversity of how horror can be represented. We see this in the film world with productions by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz's *Antebellum* (2020), and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's adaptation of the Octavia Butler novel, *Kindred (*2022). In literature, we have renown horror writer, Tananarive Due's *The Reformatory* (2023), Erin Adams's *Jackal* (2022), and Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023). In the art world, we have dark aesthetics represented in Bianca Xunise's comics, Kara Walker's sculptures and silhouettes, and Chelsey Scully's hoodoo dolls *in Tales from the Stitch* (2018). The different modes allow audiences to experience and identify horror in different ways. That is, the visuals of horror in 2D art will impact bodies and produce fears in a divergent way than literary methods can produce fear. Examining horror across modes side-by-side will further exemplify characteristics of the genre in total as opposed to disparate accounts. These works have a commonality of visual and literary depictions that place them in sub-genres of horror like ghost stories, historical horror, supernatural and fantasy. Horror stories imagine ghosts with their own agencies and monstrous figures that either represent supernatural entities from Black urban and spiritual stories. Such depictions uphold themes of apocalyptic situations by imagining how the familiar world ends and Black worlds take over or imagining Black supernatural beings as powerful and vengeful figures. Concepts may point to tangible, secular concerns, like abolition strategies and community care that doesn't rely on state and governmental promises of care, as well as violent justice when American justice system continues to fail Black people. Like many modes of speculation however, horror incorporates fantasy elements that offer terrifying ways of embodying life, of engaging with history and time, and the knowing of another world that can only be accessed through spiritual means.[31] I argue that this surge speaks to ways Black people

[31] Kinitra Brooks, Negra, and Bethea all discuss the common visuals, themes, and concepts in horror, and how the themes relate to history of Blackness in the United States, as well as concerns of activism. See

demand alternative ways of life. We see this demand through confronting the violences with violence when revisiting historical sites of Jim Crow or slavery or when commenting on continued anti-Blackness that reoccur through the ghosts and otherworldly figures.

There is a prominent thesis amongst Black horror criticism: Black history is horror.[32] This thesis has provoked horror stories that are race-based in their expression of the terror of the persistence of white supremacy.[33] For example, rather than simply depicted as a villain because white audiences need to maintain their fear of Black people, Black horror villains will likely stand up against white supremacy. Black horror invents beings that reimagine white supremacists as monstrous, as seen in Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* (2020), and informs us that ghosts are people who had violent deaths at the hands of enslavement, as demonstrated in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), or the hands of police states and legacies of Jim Crow as with Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). Although this thesis has created an abundance of race films, which seeks to educate audiences on the impacts of anti-blackness, we need more horror representation outside of this thesis.[34] As Black horror critic, Brandon Callender, asserts, "reading only for collective traumas erases the idiosyncratic and even playful attachments that black viewers cultivate towards horror." [35] Horror that follows the Black-life-as-horror thesis makes it so that anti-Black violence is the horror, which, although accurate, limits the possibilities of Black horror and still centers whiteness.

Kinitra Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax : Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018). doi:10.36019/9780813584645.
Dani Bethea and Monika Negra. "Black Horror Beyond the White Gaze: A Conversation." *Studies in the Fantastic* 12, no. 1 (2021). doi:10.1353/sif.2021.0008.

[32] This thesis is sparked by Tananarive Due's assertion that "Black History is Black horror" in her participation in Xavier Burgin's *Horror Noire.* See Burgin, *Horror Noire* Film, 00:05:00.

[33] Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 9

[34] Ibid, 7.

[35] Brandon S Callender, "The Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do The Exorcist," *Qui Parle* 31, no. 1 (2022): 68.

Criticism and mainstream production of Black horror has largely excluded women and queer subject positions.[36] Works of horror have often upheld misogynistic values and treatments against women. Women characters are usually the tropes that demonstrate how powerful the monster is, or a sacrifice to enhance believability in the scariness of the monster.[37] However, this criticism of horror has mostly focused on white women in horror while ignoring how Black women are subjected to the harsher treatment in horror productions. In "Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction," Kinitra Brooks, Alexis McGee and Stephanie Schoelman discuss the ways Black women have long engaged horror themes though they often don't get recognized for doing so. Their work "supplement[s] the perceived 'lack' of Black women's horror discourse and simultaneously displac[es] its perceived 'absence'."[38] Additionally, Brooks's *Searching for Sycorax*: *Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* indicates how Black women's presence in horror is like a ghost— present and absent at the same time.[39] The "perceived 'lack'" in Brooks et al's argument points to the ways Black feminist and queer cultural productions approach and engage horror themes without being properly assigned horror. Therefore, they are not considered in horror discourses. Callender's "Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do *The Exorcist"* reveals that Black queer viewers need to use disidentification in order to relate and enjoy works of horror. [40] Repurposing José Esteban Muñoz theory of disidentification, Callender argues that rather than

[36] The absence of Black women and queer people in Black horror shows up significantly in the works of Brooks, McGee, Schoellman, Negra, Bethea, and Brandon Callender. All of these scholars' works build theories and frameworks to insert Black femme and queer voices into the Black horror discourse.
[37] This is a primary argument in Linda William's "Film Bodies" and Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, and Isabel Pinedo's *Recreational Terror* (1997).
[38] Kinitra Brooks, McGee, and Schoellman, "Speculative Sankofarration: Haunting Black Women in Contemporary Horror Fiction." 238.
[39] Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax,* 5.
[40] Callender, "The Devil Finds Use," 69.

finding solace in the depiction coded as Black and Queer in works of horror, Black queers can find resonance in the screams as queer lovemaking.[41] Disidentification allows for queers to see themselves represented in horror in a work that excludes or misrepresents them.[42] There is a need to see how Black feminist and queer horror can further expand the limitations of the horror genre, including Black horror canons, without the need of disidentification.

Black horror that prioritizes and reflects the experiences of Black women and queer people have been discussed by looking at the ways they engage taboo subject matter. For example, Zora Neale Hurston's "Jack Beats the Devil" (1935) engages a devil figure—a cunning, charming, misleading and more manipulative than white people—which pulls from Black collective imaginations in the early 20th century.[43] Fast forward to a century, we have Black queer imaginations playing with devil aesthetics as prompted in the mainstream by Lil' Nas X's "Montero," where the devil figure becomes a source of empowerment. Not only do these moments show how Black women and queer people engage in a genre that largely excludes them; the playfulness with horror themes enlightens us on Black desires and needs that can be fulfil through engaging terrifying aesthetics.

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[41] Ibid.

[42] In particular, Callender writes, "These [disidentifying] reading strategies ensure that black subjects can experience racially affirming connections both with and within the horror genre even when they are least intended to do so. Moreover, disidentification disrupts how horror both markets and identifies itself. The horror genre may be named after the very emotion that it hopes to provoke in its audience, but the leading voices of black horror today never rightly experience those horrors most intended by the genre." See Callender, "Devil Finds Use," 69.

[43] Zora Neale Hurtson, "Jack Beats the Devil," in *Shakespeare and the Folktales* edited by Charlotte Artese. (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2019,) 329-35.

Introducing the Case Studies

In Bree Newsome's short film, *Wake* (2010), we experience wake, the term, in many iterations. *Wake* shows Black traditions of close community members and family viewing of bodies that recently passed before the funeral and to share condolences with the family in a more intimate setting. Additionally, *Wake* explores conjuring as a way to awaken spirits and the dead. Conjuring and hoodoo are important practices in Black southern women's spirituality. Hoodoo practices are expressive means of engaging in unseen but felt spirits to bring forth feelings of love, life, community, and revenge. As Lindsey Stewart writes on Black women's hoodoo practices seen in literature and music, "Hoodoo is a complex set of practices whereby a person's physical, psychic, and spiritual life is fundamentally altered through a relationship to the dead," or to well-known spirits.[44] Through hoodoo, Charmaine, the leading role, engages death, sacrifice, and making a deal with the devil.

The film opens with Charmaine, played by Sahr Ali, standing over her father's dead body.[45] Soon after, she hosts a wake and funeral to honor her father's life. While Charmaine prepares her small rural Southern home for the wake, the narrator, which is assumed to be Charmaine's voice, discussed how God made man from dirt and man returns to dirt after death.[46] The way the narrator talks about Black southern wake practices makes them seem like rituals.[47] Traditionally, people in the community come to the house of the decease to help them passover. During the wake and funeral, as the community mourns Charmaine's father, there are three women who catch Charmaine's attention because they appear to be gossiping about her.[48] As her

[44] Lindsey Stewart, "Work the Root: Black Feminism, Hoodoo Love Rituals, and Practices of Freedom," *Hypatia* 32, no. 1 (2017): 107.
[45] *Wake*, directed by Bree Newsome, (2010: Independent) Digital Film, 2010, 00:20.
[46] Ibid, 00:28.
[47] Ibid, 00:27- 1:00.
[48] Ibid, 1:26.

father is laid into the ground, we can hear them talk about Charmaine being "couped up" in the house with her father and how her father prevented her from marrying.[49] They also suggest she should hurry up before she becomes an "old maid."[50] It's not clear if Charmaine hears exactly what they say; however, when the camera cuts to Charmaine she has a mischievous smirk on her face as she pours dirt on her father's grave, making sure to keep some of the dirt.[51] The reason for Charmaine's smirk, as told by the narrator, is because she's "fixin'" to conjure.[52]

Later, Charmaine goes to the woods with a box that holds the image of her ideal husband.[53] She follows the rules and techniques of rootwork, including laying salt and bringing dirt.[54] And The Demon, played by Buena Batiste Webber, appears to collect her offering.[55] Through The Demon and Charmaine's conversation, it becomes clear that Charmaine killed her father to collect his dirt for this rootwork. The conjuring was successful and Charmaine's man (character name is "The Man" played by Benton Greene) appears.[56] Their relationship was fun for a few days, but then he turns violent, controlling, manipulative, and forces himself on Charmaine.[57] Charmaine returns to the woods to do rootwork, but The Demon told her that she wasn't going to take him back.[58] Taking matters into her own hands, Charmaine successfully gets rid of The Man. The story ends with Charmaine being pregnant with the devil's baby.[59]

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[49] Ibid, 2:06.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid, 2:47.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, 4:25.
[54] Ibid, 3:10.
[55] Ibid, 4:20.
[56] Ibid, 6:20.
[57] Ibid, 11:45.
[58] Ibid, 13:50.
[59] Ibid, 15:45, 19:36.

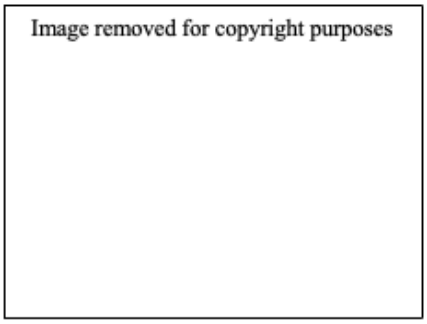

Image 1: Wangechi Mutu, *All the way up, all the way out*, 2012. Collage and mixed-media on linoleum.

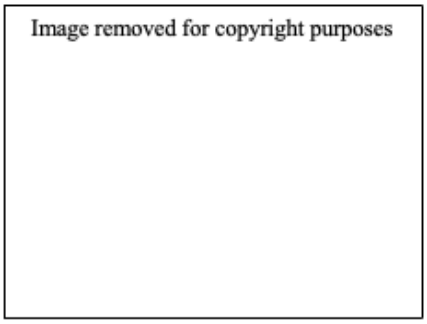

Image 2: Wangechi Mutu. *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah*, 2012. Collage on linoleum.

Wangechi Mutu is a contemporary collage and sculpture artist born in Nairobi, Kenya and currently works from New York and Nairobi. She has presented her work all across the US and globally; however, her widespread participation in the arts in the US makes her work contribute to discussion around Afrofuturism that circulates Black American discourses. Mutu's work adds to this conversation by representing Blackness that crosses national and cultural borders. In *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012) (Figure 1) and *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* (2012) (Figure 2), Mutu challenges anti-Black perception of Black feminine bodies in ways that show such harmful perceptions are global. That is, she presents Black feminine bodies and form in sexual, provocative, and animalistic ways which speaks to the public viewing of Black feminine bodies as always available, and (in some cases) as asking for sexual pleasure. Critics have seen the ways Mutu's work speaks to the mistreatment of Black women and speaks against views of seeing Black women as savages and in need of domesticating.[60] However, Mutu challenges these perceptions by the way she makes these

[60] Scholars and critics who have contributed to this argument: Giovanni Aloi, "Wangechi Mutu, Intertwined," *Esse* 109, no. 109 (2023): 74–77.; Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Studio Call: Wangechi Mutu," *NKA (Brooklyn, N.Y.)*, no. 52 (2023): 108.; Vittorio Colaizzi, "Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey," *Woman's Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (2014): 47–47.

figures move in powerful and frightening ways and with cunning facial expressions as if they enjoy provoking fear.

In *All the way up, All the Way Out* (2012) the being spews globs of hair outside of her mouth, or what I would assume to be her mouth.[61] Her flesh is swirls of white, pink, and orange. At times the swirls remind me of marble and other times the grotesque swirls of different tints and tones of pink and peach remind me of the insides of flesh, like muscles and tissue. Her body is covered with fishnet stockings which are being torn apart by flying creature made of light and dark green and gold with long antennas. We see the profile of the being's head, which is an intricate and layered collage of yellow and gold. Clusters of gold and pearls line the mouth and the single blue sultry eye. Within the forehead are lines of yellow, blue, and red, which makes it appear like technology and cyborg being.[62] The body leans forward in the midst of her violent regurgitation. Out of their mouth is an onset of black curly hair. There is more hair than the size of the being's mouth, than the being's body. There are globs of long curly black hair covering the being's back. The merging and collecting of the hair appear like an avalanche. The projectile rejection of hair appears so violent that makes the figure look unstable. The being's platform shoes are off-centered, and the legs are crooked. The being contorted arms draw over her back and her fingers curled up in opaque, rough textured blackened claws. It appears as if the being is ready to fall off the mound following the globs of hair.

In *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* (2012), the being spews a tornado of hair from her lower abdomen. Her flesh is light brown and lightly textured. Her head

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[61] Even though I believe that Mutu's imagined beings cannot be contained into a category of being and thus cannot hold a gender, I'm choosing to use she/her pronouns to employ Mutu's use of feminist theories and Black women condition and experiences.

[62] See Tiffany Barber, "Cyborg Grammar? Reading Wangechi Mutu's *Non je ne regrette rien* through Kindred," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016).

is mostly charcoal grey hue. Her single orange eye, with a sultry heavy lid, is adorned with pearls and gold eyeshadow. Coming out of the figure's head are brown, shadowy tentacles. Her flesh around the open stomach is swirls of orange and pink, abstractly resembling exposed guts. Out of her stomach is a tornado of Black and brown wooly hair layered on top of each other. The tornado of hair takes over the top half of the art object and goes beyond its borders. This violent release makes her body go into a back bend position, like a death drop in dance techniques. One of her legs is folded behind her and another leg folded in the air. She's lays over a mound of curly black hair. The being is situated between the globs and mountains of hair underneath and above her. Small black birds with feathered wings surround the being, especially her head. The atmosphere is an eerie red and yellow, appearing like sunset.

What happens when Blackness is conceptualized, thought about, and embodied in another world to which the beings— seeming to merge and blur the line between representation of humanity and representation of an imagined being— belong? The depiction of the beings allows us to experience Black femininity with horror abilities and within horror worlds. Their regurgitation appears powerful and disastrous, the atmospheric setting around them resembles an apocalypse or hellscape, especially in *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* because of the streaks of grey and hues of orange-yellow that fades in bright saturated red.

Nnedi Okorafor's "Dark Home" (2023) plays with reliance on high tech, African spirituality, and getting on a powerful figure's bad side. Most of the story takes place in Arizona, where Nwokolo's immediate family had moved from Nigeria. The story is within the Peele's *Out There Screaming*.[63] In a multinational horror anthology, we explore spiritual worlds' similarities and differences across Black national borders. The anthology speaks to Black diasporic

[63] Jordan Peele et al., *Out There Screaming*, (Random House, 2023).

aesthetics of horror that pulls from spirituals visuals, rituals, mythological figures. Through analyzing diasporic horror monsters that derive from gothic aesthetics, Maisha Wester writes, "Black diasporic [horror] artists … introduce new monsters — antagonists which often blend figures from African and Caribbean folk belief with Western compulsions — to better encapsulate the horror of racial subjugation and construction, and the insidious terror of western regimes."[64] I would add that the harmony of Black diasporic expression in horror stories and art plays with the horror of Black cultural imaginations, which may or may not be directly in conversation with "terror of Western regimes." [65]

In a first-person narrative, we are introduced to Nwokolo experiencing her father's death. Similar to Newsome's *Wake*, the narration invites us to experience the communities and families coming together to celebrate and honor those who have passed on. In Isiekenski, a village in Nigeria, Nwokolo mourns and lays to rest her last living parent, her high society father. After the funeral, she sits in her family's home contemplating her father's loneliness in death. Suddenly, a mysterious and rhythmic beat and flute sounds appear.[66] The family and Nwokolo pause to the listen to the melody. Out of fear of her father who is alone, Nwokolo runs to his body despite her family demanding otherwise. When she is out there, men in uniform holding candles (who are responsible for the melody), approach her father's body. And they usher in Ajofia who appears behind them.[67] Ajofia comes to take her father's spirit because he is a titled man, and it's customary for "big spirits [to] come…see him home."[68] Ajofia towers over Nwokolo. Its

[64] Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2019,) 289.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Nnedi Okorador, "Dark Home," in *Out There Screaming*, edited by Jordan Peele, (Random House, 2023), 161.
[67] Ibid, 163.
[68] Ibid, 164.

presence takes over many of her senses— sight, smell, skin. Despite its dark and towering presence, Nwokolo crosses Ajofia by taking her father's high society ring, which Ajofia needs.[69]

After she returns to Arizona with the ring, Nwokolo's life is disrupted. Her daydreams and nightmares are haunted by her encounter with Ajofia, both her actual encounter and imagined encounter.[70] She sees shadows and mirages of unclear figures that evaporate and disappear when she gets closer.[71] Her futuristic technology— miniature house robot, security, and sound system— starts malfunctioning and glitching. [72] She tells her colleagues at her father's restaurant about her encounter with Ajofia and her stealing her father's society ring and they remark with dread and insists that she return the ring.[73] After multiple scenarios of Nwokolo being reminded of Ajofia and its power, Ajofia finally shows up to Nwokolo's neighborhood, even though she thought she escaped it by travelling internationally.[74] It fills the neighborhood with smoke, which angers and confuses the neighbors. The ghost of Nwokolo's deceased parents arrive, and they give Nwokolo a look of disappointment.[75] Ajofia's frightening and threatening presence demands the ring back from Nwokolo. Angrily Nwokolo throws the ring to Ajofia who then nicks Nwokolo with its tendrils before it descends into the ground.[76]

Worldbuilding and Black horror

[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid, 169.
[71] Ibid, 170.
[72] Ibid, 171.
[73] Ibid, 174.
[74] Ibid, 181.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid, 184.

Worldbuilding in media scholar, Mark J. P. Wolf, situates literary worldbuilding in the philosophical inquiries of "possible worlds theory."[77] Such theory sees relationships between an "actual world" and other imagined renditions.[78] Wolf indicates that the theory suggests that if we consider the world as we know it could be different, then we would open our imaginations up to "problem-solving … that considers possibilities, imaginary objects, their ontological status, and the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world."[79] The building of the possible and imagined worlds in art, literature, and film moves the possible world theory from the abstract and conceptual to something that can be experienced through design.[80] My use of worldbuilding points to the methods that artist and writers use to make sense of the relationships between imagined or/and (representations of) real: beings, environments, common sense and logics, and behaviors that challenge the common sense of our material realities.[81] Although otherworldly, the depictions may be a response to, reference of, or divergent from familiar material realities that humans' experience globally. The worldbuilding is manifested in the work itself; however, the world continues to build when audiences engage with the other worlds with their imaginations.

Black imaginations have long built other "possible worlds" in our cultural productions. Possible world theory suggests that other worlds are connected to an actual world, and other

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[77] Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 19.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid, 20.
[81] On the point of constructing and designed world, Marie- Laure Ryan writes that world building in virtual reality "connect[s] set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members" in order to be immersive. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 91.

possible worlds are imagined in order to speak towards a hidden truth in the actual world.[82] The hierarchies in the "actual world" challenge Black expression due to white supremacist imagination and its constraints in the actual world. Therefore, imaginative and speculative worldbuilding shows up all throughout Black arts as artists and writers pay attention to Black needs. In order to speak to Black audiences, these works explore other worlds through visuals, sounds, and literature.[83] Even in realist productions of Black arts there are hints that something lies beyond the reality the text overtly represents; these hints often appear spiritual, dark, and obscure.[84]

For Black horror worlds, using the space of literary and visual arts, and cinema to tweak, distort, and destroy the world to realize a new one offers a playing ground that "is a laboratory for our most radical desires and mines the recesses of our darkest longings."[85] The making and imagining of horror worlds respond to radical desires that long to explore the taboos, forbidden, and off-limit aspects of one's inner and outer world. Because Black life is restricted in the anti-Black world, such forms of worldbuilding aim at liberation. Beyond the current portrayal of

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[82] On possible worlds revealing truth of the actual world, Wolf writes that "possible worlds theory places the "actual world" at the center of the hierarchy of worlds, and "possible worlds" around it, that are said to be "accessible" to the actual world. These worlds are then used to formulate statements regarding possibility and necessity (that is, a proposition is "possible" if it is found in one of the worlds, and "necessary" if it is found in all of them)." See Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 17.

[83] Though I have discussed the visual and literary representations of other worlds, for the sonic world I pull from Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters* in which he articulates the worlds of Blackpentecostal having their own sonic epistemology. See Ashon Crawley, *The Lonely Letters*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

[84] This can be seen in the experimental style of the civil rights novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) by Toni Bambara, in the fugitivity of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in Lorraine Hansberry's Black pessimistic play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), among others.

[85] Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 6.

Black horror through the lens of anti-Blackness, Black horror worlds can respond to Black redemption concerns.[86]

For worldbuilding as it relates to queer studies and feminism, a helpful analytic is Jose Muñoz's "horizon," the point in the distance that holds queer desires "beyond the limited vista of the here and now."[87] Horizon is a productive metaphor for the space of (im)possibility. Queer theories' use of horizon makes clear that the world is insufficient.[88] Therefore, building worlds becomes a way to step outside material reality as the realm of possibility that limits Black life, especially women and queer life, and step into a reality that makes possible what feels impossible. More so, Nadia Ellis uses horizon to theorize the gap between what is presently insufficient and the goals that Black diasporic communities are moving towards that feel sufficient yet imaginative.[89] The worlds built in horror are not just imagined places, more importantly, they are imaginative experiences filled with the potential of building a space to fulfill longing and desires. Black horror uses the imagined space to declare that the world as-is is not enough. We can vicariously experience the world's Black horror offers. Even though it's not literally placed, it offers a space to exist, to know, to be different.

Wolf writes that fictive "worlds often exist to support the stories set in them."[90] Many works of horror create Black terrifying and mythical worlds that imagine possible yet impossible stories to acts of injustice and wrongdoing in the familiar material world. In Victor LaValle's

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[86] Tananarive Due, "Healing Our Histories Through the Lens of Horror: Guest of Honor Plenary Address Online at VICFA 2022, 'The Global Fantastic.'" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 33, no. 3 (2022): 140.
[87] Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (1st ed. New York: NYU Press, 2009), 22.
[88] See Nadia Ellis. *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora*. (Duke University Press, 2015), 3.
[89] Nadia Ellis explores this example with Erna Brodber's b l a c k s p a c e in 1989. See Ellis, *Territories of the Soul,*14.
[90] Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 29.

The Ballad of Black Tom (2016), a being is created that can be summoned to respond to Black urban communities' police crises which has its roots in duping, displacing, and killing Black people.[91] Story's *The Blackening* (2022) depicts a world with violent revenge, clever tricks, and by-any-means necessary modes of protection for Black women who come up against villains. The world in Tananarive Due's short story, "The Rider" (2023), shows two Black women during the civil rights period aligning with a nonhuman figure whose purpose is to "protect the innocent" against white police men with intentions to kill the two Black women.[92] Kara Walker's *Slaughter of the Innocents (They Might Be Guilty of Something*) (2016), shows silhouettes of scenes that represent images of slavery with clothing and head wraps, as well as scenes of murder, fire, abuse, escape, demons, and mutilated bodies. Black audiences are able to experience the worlds in these stories because of their connection to the "actual world;" however, the imaginative and horrifying distortions speak to Black needs for alternative and drastic modes of safety, spirituality, community, and revenge. Black horror worldbuilding explores Black fears and freedom dreams that are logistically impossible in the current material reality.[93]

Black worldbuilding offers "narrative and interpretive strategies that shape how readers notice race as to build, anticipate, and organize the world."[94] Through "interpretive strategies," we can see how worldbuilding is at play between collective imaginations coming together to

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[91] Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*. (New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book, 2016).
[92] Tananarive Due, "The Rider," in *Out There Screaming: an Anthology of New Black Horror, ed. Jordan Peele (N*ew York: Random House, 2023), 97.
[93] The use of impossible when dreaming or imagining another reality finds resonance in Kara Keeling's use of impossible possibility in Queer temporality and world-making, "a temporality that raises the possibility of the impossible within colonial reality: Black liberation." See Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. (1st ed. Vol. 30. New York: NYU Press, 2019), 81.
[94] Mark Jerng, *Racial Worldmaking: The Power of Popular Fiction*. 1st ed. New York: Fordham University Press (2017): 3.

invent a place and space that responds to the conditions of a familiar world. Horror and worldbuilding work together to increase the experiential nature of speculative productions. Horror is noted for its violent disruption of quotidian life as normal and safe, and the anxieties due to the disruptions can be increased through a coherent and sound otherworldly ecosystem. Worldbuilding offers logics and common-sense ways of operating and behaving in the world, and this aspect of worldbuilding can help horror aims of transgressing the boundaries of violence that are often in our real world. And because horror intends and aims for audiences to be impacted emotionally and sensationally, audiences' impacts can help them continue to build the world in horror. The intersection of horror and worldbuilding reveals horror worlds' ability to continue to be imagined and created because of audiences' reactions and an ecosystem of otherworldly beings, situations, and environments that challenge how we experience the world.

The practice of worldbuilding allows for Black imaginations to collectively imagine and experience alternative relationality, epistemology, and ontology. Horror worldbuilding considers other ways to commune, communicate, and be with each other.[95] Horror epistemology demonstrates ways of knowing and sharing knowledge that isn't recognized as valid in traditional epistemology.[96] Horror ontology plays with other ways of embodying life and alternative forms of humanism.[97] Black horror's representation challenges reality because what

[95] In Nalo Hopkinson's "The Most Strongest Obeah Woman of the World" (2023), the deep water blue fish monster communicates with Yendril through mind reading, and thus she learns how to communicate this way rather than out loud. A similar way of communicating is seen in vampire worlds experienced in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991). See Nalo Hopkinson, "The Most Strongest Obeah Woman of the World," in *Out There Screaming: an Anthology of New Black Horror, ed. Jordan Peele (N*ew York: Random House, 2023), 199.

[96] In Octavia Butler's and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Kindred*, transtemporal knowledge helps keep the Black characters alive and challenges anti-Black methods of dehumanization seen in the prohibition of literacy. See Octavia E Butler, John Jennings, and Damian Duffy, *Kindred*. (1st ed. New York, NY: Abrams, Inc, 2017).

[97] This is most seen in common horror tropes— vampires, ghosts, and mythical figures.

can be seen as alternative has roots in Black communities' ways of knowing, being, and speaking, even though it's exaggerated.[98] These philosophical categories are organizing principles that develop the logics that undergird the horror world.

Not only is world building a collective activity, but it is also a collaborative activity. The difference between collaborative and collective is that collaborative highlights that there is work that members of this imaginative world need to do in order to keep it going. The work is interpretation.[99] Not only does worldbuilding engage collective and diverse Black imaginations, the worlds built in works of horror demonstrate the result of the writer's and artist's imagination (or a team of creators), but the world continues to be built in the imaginations of the audience who engage the text. When Black creatives come together to express similar concerns and ideas, there is a choral quality to the message. There is a harmony of the different expressions of building the alternative reality for Black ways of being and socializing in a world. Horror worldbuilding responds to the way Blackness cannot exist in its fullness in a world that accepts only the parts of Blackness that can be used to maintain the white supremacist and capitalist world order while other parts of Blackness are harmed, destroyed, sanctioned, and forbidden.

We can see worldbuilding in Newsome's *Wake.* Most of the scenes in this short film reflect a familiar material reality in the early 20th century. The setting consists of large open fields, dirt roads, rural farms, and a simple wooden two-story house with enlarged front porch for socializing. The attire of the cast includes plain, floral, and paisley a-line dresses with gaudy lace collar for formal wear, long cotton shirt dresses and slip dresses for casual wear, and polly cloche

[98] This sentiment of Black fictive worldbuilding has been expressed throughout the works of Kevin Quashie, Katherine McKittrick, Kara Keeling, Kinitra Brooks, Ashon Crawley, and Alex Zamalin.
[99] Quashie notes that "the idiom 'a black world' names an aesthetics imaginary that encompasses heterogeneity." Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 11.

hats and scarves to cover the hair. The diction and speech throughout are long, southern drawls, casually interchanging “is” and “are”, and gossip about the proper ways women are to be domesticated. The style of talking, location, and attire places the narrative in the early 20th century Black southern world, though the location and time period are never overtly named. Seeing a familiar world contrasts and highlights another world that the story revolves around, but we don’t see that alternative world fully.

We can see the potential of building another world in *Wake* through the ways Charmaine communes with the demonic spirits of the other world— The Demon and The Man. The other mystic world is made real through collective Black spiritual practices, storytelling, and beliefs. For example, the laying of salt, collecting dirt in white cloth, incorporating chicken bones with the offering, are all information collected from Black Southern tradition across decades. The otherworld that Newsome builds is one that is connected to Southern Black modes of mysticism—rootwork and hoodoo. Newsome represents conjuring as a large practice in these modes of working with the occult. To conjure is to bring something to life by working with otherworldly, spiritual beings— gods, ancestors, and other spiritual figures like Legba. Through interpreting the otherworldly visual and sonic representation in *Wake*, many Black audiences with roots in Southern ways of knowing can find connection in the fictive world that Newsome imagines. Because of that connection, we experience the practice and rules of conjuring (what needs to be done in order to successfully conjure), as well as the terrifying encounter with the demonic worlds.

Wangechi Mutu’s worldbuilding comes through the beings that she collages and through the setting she creates as a backdrop to the alternative beings. The beings in both collages appear the same genre of being— they have bodies that read as feminine with long limbs, pale brown

flesh; they are dressed in fishnet hosiery being ripped apart by bird-like creatures with emerald bodies and yellow wings; and their heads completely warp any idea of humanity. The beings seem to have similar abilities of expelling large amounts of curly hair from their bodies— but perform this removal differently in each of the collages.

Mutu brings us into a hybrid world that is influenced by secular cultures— especially regarding Black feminine sexuality. With the visuals of the full body, ripped fishnet stockings and the platform sandals with spiked straps, we are reminded of a world that celebrate Black women's embrace and display of sexuality. Mutu has discussed being inspired by pornography posing. In a talk with Artnet's *Artist Breakfast with Wangechi Mutu*, Mutu discusses wanting to see representation of Black women's bodies, but find much misrepresentation.[100] However, turning to pornography she notices what Jennifer C. Nash's sees as ecstasy and Black women embodying pleasure. Mutu says, "Funny enough…I found that pornography with black women in it tended to have the most natural real bodies of Black women."[101] Mutu continues by acknowledging the racist connotations that is within "pornography [as] a racialized episteme" that impacts the way Black women's bodies are treated. [102] Yet, she sees something that is beautiful and excessive in the media that has painful history and treatment. She creates imagery that honors the beauty and wonder in the "stretch marks and the bulges and … saggy boobs, all of it."[103] The worldbuilding that Mutu offers speaks the world of Black women's ecstatic sexual experiences, but she doesn't stick to the violences of this world. Rather, the way she exceeds the

[100] Wangechi Mutu, "Artist Breakfast with Wangechi Mutu," *Artnet,* 15:00.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Jennifer C. Nash. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, (Duke University Press, 2014,) 38.
[103] Mutu, "Artist Breakfast," 15:46.

sexual representations that blends with something otherworldly with frighting power, she transports us into another imagined world.

Mutu's bodily distortion are portals to the horror world. Imaginative journeys and movements are central to Mutu's work, and she intends for audiences to be impacted and moved by the work.[104] In the same art talk with *Artnet*, Mutu says, "how do I make people go, you know, *feel* like they're no longer here? They're in another world. They're actually able to *immerse* themselves…in these works."[105] Mutu connects with the audiences' ability, and her desire for this ability, to affectively connect with the otherworldly imagery in her work. Through this affect, this *feeling,* Mutu wants viewers to immersed themselves in a place that is "not here"[106] In *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* and *The Storm*, otherworldliness can be felt in the hands that are claws or tentacles, the obscene amount of hair, and the under-skin imagery of the flesh. Although Mutu's body resist strict labels and categorization, many have considered the monstruous depictions of her work. Art critic, Lilana Pavier writes that "Mutu's collages merge monstrous mythology with the female body, tinged with violent eroticism, in a manner reminiscent of the conflation of female sexuality with supernatural terror."[107] Through interpreting the abilities and backstories of the figures, we join Mutu by being immersed in the world and making sense of what's happening.

Okorafor's "Dark Home" shows us the material realities of Arizona and Nigeria to juxtapose the spiritual world. In both places, Nwokolo lives a life that is not out of the ordinary although nontraditional. To situate readers in the real world in the fiction, Okorafor offers

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[104] Beyond imaginative journeys, Mutu says that such ideas are rooted in her being Black transnational and questioning "home." See, Mutu, "Artist Breakfast,", 27:34.
[105] Mutu, "Artist Breakfast," 27:48. Emphasis mine.
[106] Ibid, 27:46.
[107] Liliana Pavier, "The Liberating Power of Monstrosity," *Worker's Liberty: Reason in Revolt*, August, 25, 2023.

weather patterns that are common to Arizona, like the dust storms.[108] She offers familiar cultural dissonance living in a predominantly white areas as a Nigerian— seen through nosy and controlling neighbors, a restaurant full of "adventurous" white people among other Nigerians who find solace in connection in Nigerians living in the town.[109] In Isiekenesi, a village in Nigeria, Okorafor shows deep-seated gender traditions that are rooted in the customs of that village, all of which Nwokolo defies— the expectations to have kids and be married, to only socialize with women, and this idea that she is a stupid woman when she doesn't abide by the men's orders.[110] All of these descriptions that Okorafor gives us of this world help to provide a contrast to the world of Ajofia.

"Dark Home" shows us an alternative world based in Igbo culture represented by Ajofia. Ajofia is from Igbo spirituality can be roughly translated to Evil Forest. In Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), he describes what Ajofia represents: "Every clan and village had its 'evil forest'.... The clan buried all those who died of the really evil diseases… It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died… an evil forest was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness."[111] Ainehi Edoro- Glines reads the evil forest as that which is "bristling with residual daemonic powers," which fits Okorafor's description.[112] Okoraforr description of the Ajofia is in alignment with Achebe's and Edoro- Glines's description:

> It stood ten feet tall and was wide as a van. Dark and looming, it was a great mound of black palm tree raffia. Rotted animal furs hung from its midsection. Leather tassels with

[108] Okorafor, "Dark Home," 176.
[109] Ibid, 173.
[110] Ibid, 164.
[111] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).148
[112] Edoro-Glines, Ainehi. "Achebe's Evil Forest: Space, Violence, and Order in Things Fall Apart." (*Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 2 2018), 178

> cowry shells at their ends clicked and clacked as it shimmied then bounced toward me. Black feathers with white stripes protruded from the top, and oil white smoke dribbled from between them. It smelled sweet and camphoraceous like cedar… Ajofia was swaying to the melody. Bouncing. The smell of smoke, forests burning. It shivered, dust and dirt puffing from it. It was a higher spirit… Its voice came from all around me. Close to me. Far from me. Beside me. Above me. Below me. Like smoke. It was sharp and harsh and hot… The sight of it made my eyes burn and twitch.[113]

The large being is a moving embodiment of a hollow dark forest that appears evil, opaque, and vast. Along with alternative beings of another world is alternative abilities. Despite Nwokolo's ability to fly internationally with modern technologies, she is not able to escape Ajofia. It is not beholden to Nigeria, rather this figure has an unknown ability to move across the planet. Flight travel is not the only modern technology that Ajofia can bypass, it also has the ability to shut off Nwokolo home safety technologies. Through interpreting the ways Ajofia impact Nwokolo's senses and home life, readers are asked to continue envisioning the powers of Ajofia— his modes of travel, smell, and sight.

Body Genre

My particular interest in worldbuilding and horror has to do with horror's ability to impact the body and make the viewer feel like they are in a real world that is fiction. The ways in which cultural producers create horror and their reliance on social fear-based anxieties, makes horror what is called a "body genre." [114] Linda Williams makes a case for how "body genre"

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[113] Okorafor, "Dark Home," 164-165.

[114] The notion of horror being a body genre is first seen in Linda William's "Film Bodies" wherein William explores the bodily sensations reaction to horror as excess, or feelings we wish to exclude or find unnecessary. See Williams, Film Bodies, 8.

denotations are not universal and will vary across individuals and communities; nonetheless, there are texts that provoke so much bodily sensations that they are cast as unserious, lacking "logic or reason."[115] One of the many arguments in Callender's *Devil Finds Use* is the way he continues the thought of body genre. Callender writes that horror "provokes bodily responses over thought… horror relies on our ability to be shocked or grossed out in ways that mimic character responses on-screen."[116] I draw from Callender's and William's claims about body genres being necessary, which goes against opposing claim about body genre's being excessive and illogical. I continue these claims by suggesting that body genres are important because they reveal deep-seated fears and experience cathartic releases.

To impact bodies, cultural producers need to pull from events/phenomena that have historically produced fear in the audiences they serve. Done deliberately and with intention, writers, filmmakers, and artists point to and exaggerate moments within history and within contemporary moments that have produced social anxieties in real life— for example, apocalypse and the inevitability of the world ending, serial killers and the acknowledgement of ongoing homicide crises.[117] When we think about Black history and Black life, there are an additional set of fears and anxieties based on experiences and stories within Black communities (like church, school, friend groups, family, etc) that horror creators can pull from. There are also stories and events based on the history of anti-Black violence that horror creators can use and exaggerate to elicit fear in Black audiences— fictive historical takes on slavery, creating a scenario where slavery can be experienced again in more horrific ways, anti-Black violence at the hands of the police and other modes of criminality are common themes and problems that

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[115] Williams, *Film Bodies,* 3.
[116] Callender, *Devil Finds Use,* 68.
[117] This is seen in the relationship between art horror and natural horror as developed first in Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*. See Carroll, The Philosophy of Horror, 59.

Black horror takes up. Different communities will have histories of events/phenomena that have produced fear. The ways in which horror is a body genre allows horror to play with the line between impossibility and possibility in order to illicit fear.[118]

The bodily reaction can be accompanied by other emotions that aren't associated with horror, such as dread and sadness; suspense and anxiety; fear and catharsis/ vindication. It is common for Black horror to also incorporate comedy, which emphasizes the low brow expectation that many critics have assigned to horror.[119] It could also apply some "comedic relief" to a stressful situation. However, a different affect is had with horror and sadness or mourning which we can see in ghost stories like Morrison's *Beloved* (1981) and in other grief situations like in Cadwell Turnbull's "Wandering Devil" (2023). Along with experiencing exaggerated natural horrors, we also experience emotional releases related to the lack of belonging, loss, and other themes that can intersect with horror. The ways horror interacts with other body genres further proliferates horror possibilities.

With body genre, audiences are expected to identify with the character so that they can mimic, or in some way respond, to the character's reaction. Carroll writes that "the emotional reactions of the characters, then provide a set of instructions, or rather examples about the ways in which the audience is to respond to the monsters."[120] Characters are used to help guide the audience in how they, the audience, should react to the situation, which helps to reinforce the horror aspect of the works to ensure it will fit into the genre. That is, when a character screams, the audience members are alerted to either scream, or react however their body would in

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[118] In Brooks, McGee, and Schoellman's "Speculative Sankofarration" discusses line blurring qualities of Black women's literature and horror: "There exists a mutable tension between Black women's bodies of literature and their horror discourse in which both are 'worrying the lines' of each other's constructed boundaries." Brooks, "Speculative Sankofarration," 240.
[119] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies," 4.
[120] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 18.

response to sudden fright. With this idea, there is a proliferation of the kinds of reactions people can have to horror. For example, some audience members may relate to the fearful characters mimicking those bodily sensations, but perhaps there is another character who is adventurous and bold as they stand up to the frightening figures and situations. I see this diversity of reaction in Nalo Hopkinson's "The Most Strongest Obeah Woman of the World" because most of the characters are horrified by Yenderil transforming into an underwater creature; however, there are other characters who are curious about the ways of the creature like Yenderil is. There are other characters who are disgusted at how the sea creature is slowly eating Yenderil.[121] Even if readers don't mimic the characters' reaction that typically read as horror, readers can mimic and respond to other characters' reactions.

Newsome employs knowledges that is shared amongst Black hoodoo witches and other religious and spiritual communities to bring forth bodily reactions of dread and anxieties. Most profoundly is the scene where Charmaine returns to the woods because she realized she made an err in conjuring.[122] Rather than conjuring a lover to make her frenemies jealous, she conjures a devil that wishes to use her body and control her. As she quickly repeats the steps for conjure, she doesn't lay enough salt to close the circle.[123] In conjuring, the circle of salt is for protection. Practitioners place salt because conjuring is tricky. There may be intention to conjure specific spirits; however, when the portal is open any spirit can show up. The salt makes it so that whomever they may conjure, that spirit cannot touch them.[124] In *Wake*, Charmaine's protection

[121] Hopkinson, "Most Strongest Obeah Woman of the World," in *Out There Screaming* ed. Jordan Peele. (New York: Random House, 2023): 199.
[122] Newsome, *Wake*, 13:28.
[123] Ibid, 13:38.
[124] This information is from personal conversations with my communities of spiritual practitioners and my Southern roots that understand and know conjuring rules passed down to me.

was interrupted by The Demon who places her foot into the incomplete circle of salt.[125] This produces anxiety in knowledgeable audiences because we know The Demon now has the power to harm her. The anxiety turns to fear as we witness what devil stories warn us about— The Demon grabs Charmaine by the neck, cuts into her skin, and hovers over her; swirls of dark whispers clatter together as maggot infested arms come up from The Demon's gown and reach for Charmaine.[126] This is certainly a moment that's intended to produce fear in knowing audiences. The Demon makes it clear that Charmaine is indeed stuck with the devil. The bodily reactions provoked by "Wake" could be used to further reinforce belief systems that shame occult practices; however, the visuals of The Demon and the hints of hell, speak to Black collective cultural imagination and proliferate how demons can be thought of in works of horror.

Mutu's collages evoke the question: what's so scary about Black femininity being violent? The function of the aspects that provoke a bodily sense of terror and anxieties seem to be attached to ideas of revenge, but I will cover that in the next section. I'd like to reflect on what— in regards to form, material, visual— feels like terror in the collages and why. The otherworldly bird-like creatures that tug at the beings' flesh and fishnets and swarm around them are minor in comparison to the beings' massive bodies, as if the beings could crush them with their claws and tentacles. However, the beings are too busy spewing globs of hair over the atmosphere which leaves me to imagine the destruction the hair causes— who or what are covered by globs that flow over the mound like an avalanche, who/what gets swept up in the tornado of hair. Mutu's use of horror interrupts feelings of safety if one assumes the ability to contain and control Black women's bodies. For Black women and queer people safety is often compromised because they are perceived as threats to most of the anti-Black world. They are

[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid, 15:20.

policed so that the anti-Black world can feel safe. However, the beings seem to not be able to be policed and constrained. Mutu imagines and creates beings that defies humanity and are beings that would be harder to control. These beings with their massive size, contortionist limbs, and claws/tentacles will evade captures, or in the very least challenge old systems of control. The terror in Mutu's imagination might be more terrifying for anti-blackness while empowering for Black women and queer peoples.

Regarding the body genre aspect of Okorafor's "Dark Home," readers are prompted to feel suspense by responding to the main characters' emotions and reactions. The narration shows Nwokolo feeling suspicious when she is away from her home in Arizona (while she is at work or out running errands) and her home security system glitches and shuts off. Nwokolo's feelings of suspicions leave the readers feeling suspense.[127] Because Nwokolo thinks something is off or wrong, readers come to anticipate something dreadful will happen. There is also a feeling of suspense that through the sounds of the Ajofia coming back at Nwokolo's funeral. Mimicking the characters, the readers are confused about what the sound is and where it is coming from, but readers notice how the party stops and everyone is stiff waiting for the noise to reveal itself.[128]

There is also fear in not understanding or knowing the ways of the spiritual being. These feelings respond to the main character's relationship to Ajofia and mimics other characters who warn her. This can be mimicked through the other character' reactions outside of Nwokolo. Because Nwokolo has more love for her father and wants to keep what belongs to him, she doesn't seem to have an arresting fear of Ajofia. However, readers know that something fearful is happening through the reactions of the other family members who attend her father's funeral

[127] Okorafor, "Dark Home," 179.
[128] Ibid, 161.

and who witness the arrival of Ajofia, and who see Nwokolo not budging when it arrives. [129] Their screams, warnings, and demands that Nwokolo leaves Ajofia and returns to them in the safety of the house is an indicator to readers that Ajofia is a figure to fear.

Revenge Fantasies

Black vengeance is one of the pleasures Black people can take towards viewing horror films. Black vengeance in horror allows for experiences of cathartic release when the act of actual revenge isn't possible in our current world. Regarding persistent anti-Blackness, Black revenge fantasies in horror can still elicit similar social fears in all viewers (provoking fear of death or otherworldly frights), as well as turn the tables to use otherworldly figures to illicit fear in white audiences. In this way, Black horror often finds a kinship with the otherworldly figures or allows viewers to have a kinship with them. In "Speculative Sankofarration," Brooks, McGee, and Schoellman use Avery Gordon's work to explain the purpose of ghost and their abilities to haunt. They write, "these entities become signifiers of oppressions and/or repressions, [and signifiers] of 'abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impact felt in everyday life'."[130] Although they confine their theories to ghosts, I believe there are theoretical similarities signifiers in otherworldly creatures that show up in Black horror, and the vengeful abilities is a response to the abusive systems of power. The figures with their vengeful power can come to the aid of Black characters as they suffer the continuation of anti-Blackness. It's expected that Black people experience a desire for revenge against those to uphold anti-Black behaviors, customs, and so forth; however, these desires for violence and destruction cannot be fulfilled in real life.

[129] Ibid, 163-165.
[130] Brooks, et al. "Speculative Sankofarration," 239.

Revenge narratives turn the table on anti-Blackness. In a conversation between filmmakers and film critics Dani Bethea and Monika Negra, they discuss how horror impacts them as Black viewers and film makers. In their conversation about DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) and Negra's collective called Audre's Revenge Film, they discuss the value of narratives that incorporates Black vengeance: "I think that *Candyman* definitely upped the ante on what is possible in the realm of imagination for Black vengeance…And there's …so much animosity towards any hint… or desire for a Black person to actively destroying what slowly destroys them.[131] Negra makes a case for the impact of vengeance for Black viewers. Black horror often has limitations, but Negra adds what is possible for Black horror in the realm of vengeance. Negra's continues to note her obsession with experiencing vengeance narrative, which speaks to the overwhelming need to have a cathartic mode of releasing the anger of experiencing persistent anti-Blackness. In the foreword to *Out There Screaming* (2023), Jordan Peele discuss how cathartic horror was for him as a child but having seldom experience that catharsis because of the lack of Black horror representation. Peele writes, "I view horror as a catharsis through entertainment. It's a way to work through your deepest pain and fear— but for Black people that isn't possible, and for many decades *wasn't* possible, without the stories being told in the first place[132] As Peele, Bethea, and Negra emphasize Black people releasing hard emotions, like pain, fear, and anger, through violent depiction is socially taboo but is incredibly necessary.

Black vengeance concerns power dynamics and confronts white and colonial power and control over Black life. Power and control are necessary to understand in any conversation about Black life and the relation to whiteness. Anti-Blackness is about power to control the narratives,

[131] Ibid
[132] Peele, *Out There Screaming.* Random House, 2023, viii.

treatments, and views of Black people.[133] There are movements all throughout the history of Blackness where Black people assert their own power and confront, reveal, and fight against power of white supremacy. Horror stories that highlight Black vengeance are using supernatural, beyond human means to show the fighting against power. Revenge narratives offer a feeling of power in a world that persistently disempowers. Seeing the inversion of power dynamic makes the power of white supremacy clearer and shows strategies to continue to fight against it.

Black vengeance is mostly thought about in relation to persistent anti-Black violence, but that sentiment can put unnecessary constraints on the power vengeance plays in horror narratives. Betha and Negra discuss how vengeance is nuanced for different groups within Black communities— like Black queer vengeance, trans vengeance, feminist vengeance.[134] In the texts that I close read for how they participate in horror, the representation of vengeance is clear; however, the revenge isn't always against anti-Blackness. They reference issues that impact Black women and queer peoples, but not necessarily the whole of Black communities. By incorporating many perspectives in vengeance, horror attacks power dynamics from multiple sides.

Vengeance narratives speak to the overwhelming need to release anger and grief. Tananarive Due speaks on the healing that writing horror has brought to her. During a speech, entitled "Healing Out Histories Through the Lens of Horror," given at the 2022 *The Global*

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[133] In *Spectacular Blackness,* Amy Ongiri discusses the birth of Black power as a discursive response to continued control and power white supremacy had on Black life. Ongiri discusses the foundation of Black Power Movement was the need and demand for "economic independent and cultural self-determination." See Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*. (1st ed. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 6.

[134] Negra writes, "And I think that with Audre's Revenge Film [her film collective], [Black vengeance] always been my focal point. It's just talking about what does Black vengeance look like, particularly amongst Black marginalized people within our own communities, and that includes queer and Trans Black folks and Black women." Bethea, "Black horror Beyond White Gaze, 77.

Fantastic, Due discusses her family's involvement with civil rights protest. Through hearing how she witnessed her family being abused by police and white supremacist citizens, it obvious the impetus of her writing is to feel redemption for those violences.[135] For example, her mother was made legally blind because of a police's tear gassing; therefore, in the short story "The Rider" the main character, who was made legally blind via police violence, runs over a brigade of cops with a bus. Due's insights demonstrate that catharsis produce by experience horror works is not just about releasing fear, but can also be about confronting traumas that Black people personally experience. Creating narratives that avenge those traumas is a form of healing.

In Newsome's *Wake,* we see the painful impacts of unfair expectations of women. Furthermore, we see the shame that is imposed when women are unmarried and do not have children. *Wake* presents three women who gossip about Charmaine while at her father's funeral— Florence, played by Christina Faison, Bootsie, played by Geany Masai, and Ruth, played by Dravon James. They make sly comments about how she can finally get married over her father's dead body, and that no one will want her because she's "past the old maid mark." [136] Their comments feel weighted, as if these three women consistently spread rumors, gossip, and harmful comments about Charmaine. We see that Charmaine hears the comments; however, we only see that she reacts to the comments through rootwork. The box that she brings to the woods and to The Demon is an image of a man that would be her lover. The image is of a man that would be considered by their Black society as beautiful— brown taut skin, steady built, chiseled jaw and cheekbones, and most spectacularly, green eyes.[137] Later, when the man magically

[135] Due, "Healing Our Histories," 133-34
[136] Ibid, 2:20.
[137] As a way to see how horror intersects with humor, at the sight of the image of Charmaine's ideal man, The Demon laughs in surprise and says, "A man!?" As if Charmaine is ridiculous for summon The Demon just for a man. Ibid, 4:24.

appears and Charmaine approves, we see a scene where Charmaine delightfully gets her revenge.[138] The three gossip queens come by the house to see The Man sitting on the porch with Charmaine. When they come to inquire, Charmaine and The Man corroborate a fictive story about their relationship that is sure to make them jealous and throw their rumors back in their faces. Not only is his good looks a threat, but he's a doctor from the city. When the three friends leave in shock and disbelief, Charmaine and The Man cheer in delight in the house.[139] Thrilled at the look on the gossip queens' faces, Charmaine is satisfied that the rootwork helped her get back at the three women.

In my reading of Mutu's *All The Way Up, All The Way Out*, and *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* vengeance shows up through the globs of hair that violently come out of the figure's abdomen and mouth. It reads as destruction because of the way it takes over the scene. Art historian Kristine Stiles discuss Mutu's visuals at length that could be associated with horror genres. Stiles discuss how "simulated blood and wounded women appear throughout Mutu's work."[140] I would add to Stiles's analysis that the wounds and blood don't always appear as if Mutu's otherworldly figures are harmed. Rather the smirky and orgasmic expressions on the figures' faces make it seem like they are doing the violence or are comfortable in a world where such violence can happen, as the case with Mutu's *Magnificent Monkey-Ass Lies* (2004), where the hybrid-humanoid figure looks longingly and with love at a hybrid monkey figure as burst of blood surround them in the background. And in the case of *All The Way Up* and *The Storm*, the figures are causing the destruction. The figures' destruction

[138] Ibid, 6:23.
[139] Ibid, 9:16.
[140] Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*. (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 354.

resonates with Imani Perry's notion that Mutu's art meets "Hortense Spillers's call to 'embrace the monstrosity.'"[141] Perry places Mutu and Shelley's Frankenstein side-by-side to say that unlike Frankenstein "there is no imperative to destroy the magnificent creatures created."[142] Even though the figure can produce fear, uncertainty, and dread, they also appear as if such destruction is necessary. Art critic Giovanni Aloi notes that Mutu's art "does not seem to seek revenge-- her approach is discursive and indexical, nuanced and grounded. Her will to decolonize is based on integration rather than rejection."[143] And although this can resonate in Mutu's other hybrid figures, I don't see integration in *All The Way Up* and *The Storm*. I only see rejection— rejecting what's in the body and exploding it out— and through this rejection is a sort of decolonial means to reckoning with anti-Black, anti-woman beliefs of Black women's bodies and lives.

Vengeance in the story challenges the relationship between being scary and villainous. Often villains are portrayed as characters that unjustifiably seek to harm and express ill-will towards other characters who are seen as innocent. This isn't the case in "Dark Home" because the wrongdoing is in Nwokolo's actions as she takes something that she believes belongs to her father but in actuality it belongs to Ajofia.[144] Although Ajofia appears to be the villainous character in the story with its otherworldly abilities that are utterly impossible to fight against with human power, it is actually the innocent one in the story and the one that deserves justice via revenge. It doesn't just get back the ring, it's mode of revenge is to frighten Nwokolo by: interrupting and preventing her sleep which enhances hallucinations while she's awake, filling her neighborhood up with choking smoke, disrupting her security systems, and slapping her with

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[141] Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: on Gender and Liberation*. (London: Duke University Press, 2018), 194..
[142] Ibid.
[143] Giovanni Aloi, "Wangechi Mutu, Intertwined," *Esse* 109, no. 109 (2023): 74.
[144] Ibid, 164.

its long tentacle after it gets the ring back, which leaves her with a bloody scar so that she will remember what happens when she crosses Ajofia. It harms her, causes her emotional distress because she harmed it. Villains seeking revenge challenges horror villainous tropes.

Conclusion

Horror is enticing because the genre's stories unapologetically transgress boundaries of what is normally constituted as safe and real, which can be productive and generative to Black expressions that engage taboo and dark desires. Black horror is interested in Black affect because horror is a body genre, so Black horror producers must cater to what will impact Black audiences. With such attention to bodily reactions, horror ushers audiences into another world that has connections to fantasy, mythical, criminal, and spiritual elements. Black horror worldbuilding, then, allows Black audiences to experience a terrifying world that speaks to Black cultures, stories, practices, and desires. In particular, I spend most time discussing Black desires for revenge. Black horror takes us into a world when Black characters use impossible (in our real world anyway) means of seeking revenge against real world violences.

In *Wake*, Bree Newsome blurs the boundaries of hell with rootwork and conjuring with hoodoo rituals based in Black southern occult-spiritual means. Not only does Newsome give us a hell world, she gives us a world of early-to-mid 20th century Black rural South that engages with the hell world to seek revenge. The gossip and expectations of women who are Charmaine's age is a harmful burden and to relieve the burden and get back at those who look down on her, she turns to The Demon. Newsome offers viewers a Black demon who is formed by Black spiritual practices, which such knowing impacts Black emotional reactions and immerses them into the world. In Wangechi Mutu's *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* and *The Storm Has Finally Made It*

Out of Me Alhamdulillah, the otherworldly beings, made of exposed flesh and bejeweled sultry eyes and wearing fishnets stockings, violently regurgitate clusters of black, curly hair. The hair piles in layers, making the 2D art object feel like a relief. The hair takes over a large space of the canvas. Viewers are ushered into a world to witness an otherworldly being that is influenced by Black femininity and Black women experiences related to bodies, hair, and sexuality, which are all categories that have been heavily policed in our real world. With the violent rejection of hair from their bodies, more hair than what their body can hold, Mutu's figures give an otherworldly power to Black women's bodies. In Nnedi Okorafor's "Dark Home" we meet a vengeful spirit based in Nigerian spirituality, Ajofia. The knowledge of the spirit, its history, stories, and how it can be engaged, makes this figure more frightening. This spirit comes during night and is made of fast darkness and animal carcasses. Readers are immersed in a world where a dark, looming spirit from which one cannot escape and has the ability to disrupt high technology. Additionally, the story turns the table on modes of revenge in horror. Usually, the monster is conducting the wrongdoing and the human figure must avenge the monster; however, Nwokolo wronged Ajofia and therefore it has the power of revenge. Across film, visual art, and short story, these works show the imaginative, worldbuilding techniques of horror playing with tropes that evoke unexpected sensations of dread and terror in the body and satisfy long standing feelings of revenge.

A study of Black horror will help the aim of Black liberations because the genre offers a way to confront anti-Black violence and transgression with otherworldly and violent transgressions. Black horror challenges the order of the world that is historically and continually oppressive with Black death and oppressive with violating Black life. Black horror offers an imaginative world where justice can be experienced. Because Black affect is concerned with how

Black affective experiences cannot be considered in the anti-Black world, the worldbuilding in Black horror offers a world where Black affect can be felt, seen, and validated.

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Coda

Experience the (Im)possibilities

Throughout this project, my main goal was to explore and experience the possibilities of speculation as represented in Black horror and science fiction. That is, I explore what is only possible to experience vicariously through science fiction narratives and visuals—adventures in intergalactic travels to planets only visible through the Hubble telescope, communing and learning from beings that would be impossible on Earth, and aesthetics that break the bound of normative beauty.[1] In a similar vein, I explore and experience what is possible in horror narratives and visuals—nightmares that disrupts feelings of safety and wielding the power of nightmarish conditions to seek revenge.[2] The visuals and literary metaphors in science-fiction and horror stories, films, and arts can only be reached via the imagination of the creator and continues in the imagination of the audience.[3] These texts challenge the bounds of experienced reality and the present moment, to offer something that can't be real even though the body begs

[1] For example, Samuel Delany's "The Star Pit," explore life at the end of the galaxy and Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" creates a society where humans are in relationship to an otherworldly being who might resemble a large insect. See Samuel R Delany, *Aye, and Gomorrah: Stories*. (1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3-69. Octavia Butler, *Blood Child and Other Stories*, (New York City: Seven Stories Press/Turnaround, 1996), 3-35.

[2] For example, Little Marvin and Lena Waithe's evokes a racist blackface figure, Da Tap Dance Man, who comes up for vengeance and Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* offers a world that may resemble mid-20th century New York City yet beautifully and suddenly blurs with the world of underwater sea god that causes destruction. See Little Marvin and Lena Waithe, *Them*, (Amazon, 2021). Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom*. (First edition. New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Book, 2016).

[3] In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin DG Kelley's discuss how surrealism is a mode of knowledge production because it is an "adventure of the mind," which allows him to argue that surrealism "offers a vision of freedom… deep and… expansive... It is a movement that invites dreaming, urges us to improvise and invent, and recognize the imagination as our most powerful weapon." See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 159.

to differ.[4] The imaginative stories are powerful as they offer tools and modes of catharsis that are responses to Black lived conditions across the globe that continue to suffer at the hands of those in power seizing, abusing, and killing Black peoples' resources, land, rights, bodies, and lives.[5]

I could say this project started with a question that was felt deep beneath my skin. What would life be like to really be otherworldly? And not only that, what if the breaking of the barriers of reality gave way to feelings and desires taboo in normative society? I also could say that these questions, that are filled with so much desire, are products of my Black, queer, feminist sensibilities. I grew up in the South where I witnessed the legacies of slavery on my daily encounters. I also witnessed the ways friends, communities, and family created ways of living, playing, loving, and trusting that made a stark contrast to the practices of anti-Blackness that surrounded us.[6] I see our desires reflected in science fiction and horror stories. Through the exploration of possibilities, we get to experience the other ways of being and knowing that we dreamed of. And through that experience, we engage Black studies, queer studies, and feminist studies that, at the intersection, are committed to building worlds that center Black queer and femme lives.

As I seek to join these fields with this project, I want to explore these possibilities as it relates to Black worldbuilding as a beautiful response to continued antiblackness. As much as we

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[4] This sentiment is a nod to horror scholars who call the genre a "body genre." Brandon Callender refers to horror's impact as "provoking bodily response over thought." See Brandon S. Callender "The Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do The Exorcist." *Qui Parle* 31, no. 1 (2022): 68.

[5] In this regard, I reflect on David Fickling's reading of *Black Panther* and its symbolism for the violent extraction of cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The film offer a secret hidden society that is hell-bent on protecting their resources and people. See David Fickling's, "Black Panther's Lesson for Cobalt," *Bloomberg*, February 20th, 2018.

[6] With this sentiment, I reflect on Christina Sharpe's discussion of her family coming together to support each other while living with hard economic condition, death, and working-class housing. She notes how her mother "tried to make a small path through the wake" of continued anti-Black subjugation by cultivating joy, beauty, and love between the family. See Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

understand that Black thought cannot unthink about death and mourning—with the continued murders of the police systems that vow to protect us, with the controlling and theft of our intellectual abilities, with the hypersexualizing of Black women's bodies; we also understand that Black life is conditioned by survival—the strategies to bring in and affirm knowledge productions that go against the grain of normative knowing, learning the highs and the struggles of relationality and employing empathy, feeling the loss of historical and archival knowledge that opens up new pathways to engage a past that is both lost and ongoing.[7] Modernity, racial capitalism, and the slave trafficking to build the "New World" yields a long desire for another new world that centers Blackness.[8]

Philosophical concerns of epistemology and ontology, as discussed through Black studies, especially feminism and queer theories, has been a crucial thinking point for liberation projects.[9] Black studies is expansive, fleeting, and exploratory.[10] The expansive nature of Black science fiction and horror harmonizes with that of Black studies. Queer studies commitment to "a horizon" resonates in the same way. Horizon is a faraway distant point that holds queer desire for nonconformity, authenticity, and embodying all the felt senses that life brings. [11] And the journey to the horizon is filled with ecstatic love, experimentation, being and non-being.[12] The

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[7] Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?smid=url-share

[8] Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 13

[9] Some of the scholars I have pulled from for epistemology and ontology: Ashon Crawley's "That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3." (*CR: East Lansing, Mich.* 16, no. 2 (2016); Kristie Dotson's "Theorizing Jane Crow, Theorizing Unknowability." (*Social Epistemology* 31, no. 5, 2017); Gaile Pohlhaus's "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of 'Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance.'" (*Hypatia*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2012).

[10] Crawley, "That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3," 130.

[11] Scholars how theorize the horizon: Jose Munoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman's "The Black Ecstatic" (2018), Nadia Ellis's *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (2015).

[12] Ibid.

necessity of Black worldbuilding that responds to the material realities of Black women and queer peoples offers imaginative explorations.

The Chapters Take Aways

In "Suspicion: Epistemic Alterity in Black Speculative Productions" I ask if suspicion, as seen in speculative works like horror, is in line with Black epistemological alterity? If we were to consider the epistemic hold that colonialism and modernity has on knowledge productions, we would come to understand that it is reasonable and inevitable that gaps and limits exist to normative knowledge, ways of sharing knowledge, and knowledge holders.[13] Thus, the work of Black epistemology scholars is to consider Black thought as expansive and thus will offer ways of knowing that challenge such normativity.[14] Through theorizing suspicion, as a felt way of knowing that doesn't yet have logics to make the knowing make sense, I ask readers to experience the possibilities of creating other sense making mechanism and strategies. I pull mostly from horror because suspicion in the genre is urgent and obsessive. It's dire to know differently and believe in alternative logics. That is, I'd like for readers to experience the reading and communicating with brain waves in Tananarive Due's "The Rider," and experience knowing about encounters with a mythical being that holds collective Black rage and grief in Nia DaCosta's *Candyman*.[15]

In the chapter, I focus mostly on horror though I nod towards other speculative projects that utilize suspicion in a way that produces alternative modes of making sense. One of the

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[13] Sylvia Wynter, "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism." *Boundary 2*, vol. 12/13, no. 3–1, (1984), p. 26. doi:10.2307/302808
[14] Ibid.
[15] Tananarive Due, "The Rider," in *Out There Screaming: an Anthology of New Black Horro*r, ed. Jordan Peele (New York: Random House, 2023). Nia DaCosta et al. *Candyman*. Universal City, CA: Universal, 2021.

projects I briefly discussed was N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, a science fiction trilogy.[16] I paid particular attention to the Orogene's abilities to sess—a way of feeling into the earth and communicating with it.[17] In the chapter, I placed sessing and suspicion side by side. Now, I'd like to pay some attention to narrative strategies and the use of second-person narration. As readers, we follow the main character in a non-linear account of her life across three names, stages, and personalities. Essun is her final stage, and her narration is written in second person. I find this to be such a powerful move because readers are forced into a world and into a being that can sess, or has the ability of alternative knowing with the body. The narration style goes beyond the interiority of a first-person account. Rather than the reader having access into the character, the character now has access into the reader and forces the reader to embody a felt sense of knowing that doesn't readily make sense to non-Orogenes. The narration teaches readers how to sess, how to feel without concrete knowing: "Down below your feet... a shake begins. It's hard to tell, at first. There is no warning jangle of sesuna... you're beyond sense and preparation... The vibration of what you're doing rises, fast, to become a rumble of tension that can be perceived with ears and feet and skin."[18] The story begins when the world is ending, and Jemisin creates a character that guides the reader into feeling how the world ends and how the world quakes. This move offers the urgency of a different way of relating to the world and earth that will challenge traditional and normative modes of making sense. In the chapters using second person narration, we, readers, get to experience epistemology alterity that is felt in the body.

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[16] N. K. Jemisin, *Fifth Season, The Obelisk Gate, and The Stone Sky*. (First edition. New York, NY: Orbit, 2015-2017).

[17] In our material realities, Orogeny refers to the process of the earth mantles and plates colliding into and moving with each other to form new continents, earthquakes, and volcanos. See. Lucinda Roy, "Orogeny." *The North American Review*, Fall 2012, 25. *Gale Literature: LitFinder* (accessed March 20, 2024)

[18] Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 56.

In "Catastrophe, Apocalypse, and Survival: Otherworldly Logics in Jordan Peele's *Us* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn,*" I ask, is the apocalypse in popular Black imagination in response to modernity's catastrophe? After and during the new world mission of the transatlantic slave trade, an onset of catastrophes was unleased and continue to unfurl.[19] With so many catastrophes that consistently challenge Black survival, imagining the apocalypse makes sense. Therefore, through witnessing fictions that offer a world ending and another world beginning, we get to experience a chaotic clash. In Octavia Butler's *Dawn* and Jordan Peele's *Us*, I argue that apocalypse in Black imagination not only responds to late 20th and early 21st century catastrophe of nuclear war, multiculturalism, and technology advancement and failures, but offers new worlds that *attempt* to appease what modernity takes away—like relationship to land and other beings that is reciprocal, communication that is embodied and guttural.[20] Through the clashing of worlds, apocalypse brings in a new way of life that fails at quintessential Black liberation, but succeeds in imagining what Black survival could look like.

What prompted the inquiry in chapter two was a curiosity about the abilities of the Oankali tentacles and how they communicate with each other. I focused on *Dawn*, but later in the trilogy, in *Imago*, the third novel, Butler offers a first-person account of Oankali experience as they communicate by feeling into each other. Jodahs is one of Lilith's and Nikanj's children and is an Ooloi, a genderless version of an Oankali. As it (Jodahs) goes through metamorphosis, Jodahs senses are heightened, and it can feel into the earth, atmosphere, and people around it. Jodahs's narration notes that Oankali ways of speaking is through "touch signals, signs, and

[19] Quashie, *Black Aliveness*, 13.
[20] Scholars that I pulled from late 20th century catastrophes: Brendan Dooley's *Technological Unemployment: Effects of Artificial Intelligence and Automation on Human Labor* (2020), Justin Louis Mann's "Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's Dawn" (2018), J.H. Humphrey's "NUCLEAR WAR" (1980).

multisensory illusions transmitted through head or body tentacles."[21] I became fascinated by the different occasions of Oankali communication that would come up across the three novels. They shared colors as indicators of moods, orgasmic memories, and visual/images/ pictures. The narration remarks on the level of intimacy that is tied to experiencing someone else that thoroughly.[22] There was much critique of human communication in the novel that I resonate with. Jodahs remarks that "humans said one thing with their bodies and another with their mouths and everyone had to spend time and energy figuring out what they really meant."[23] In these moments, I see Butler critiques human contradictions and hypocrisies, especially during political moments of multicultural aims of embracing ethnic and racial diversity yet Black lives were still faced with violence. However, I see Butler pointing to an insufficiency with communicating with language. She emphasizes the trouble with translating the complexities of information in the body to the rigidness of language. Yet, through Butler's fiction I can experience the possibilities of communication in the body that doesn't have to be translated. I get to fulfill the desires of experiencing a world where the beings can hold and understand internal complexities.

In "Temporal Blur and Hollow Bodies," I ask, how do artists and writers revisit slavery in their arts without the proper archival resources? The archives are a vexed place for housing Black artifacts and for telling the stories of Black life because much of the artifacts therein are meant to demonstrate ownership of Black bodies and labor, white supremacy violence, lack of human and civil rights, and Blackness as object/nonbeing.[24] Even though, or because of, archives

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[21] Butler, *Imago,* 534.
[22] The narration follows Akin, another Oankali, and notes on their communication as "self-dissolving closeness." See Butler, *Adulthood Rites,* 455.
[23] Butler, *Imago,* 548.
[24] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008).

are infuriating and give way to great grief, Black diasporic experiences long to know what is missing from archives of slavery.[25] Black arts, literature, scholarship, and activism demonstrate this longing with repeated calls to slavery and challenging historical knowing with fictions that attempt to soothe the loss though can never fill it.[26] We cannot rely on archival materials to tell sufficient satisfactory stories about Black history on their own. We must, as Saidiya Hartman would say, read against the strains of the archives.[27] Artists and writers who pull from the histories of slavery need the archives, but the archives do not answer quintessential questions around Black life. Therefore, through engaging the Alison Saar's *Cotton Eater (head)* and *Cotton Eater II* and Evie Shockley's *the new black*, I discuss how their works reflects what could have been possible or what is impossible as they take a temporal travel to painful archives and reflect on the gaps, limits, and fictions. They engaged in collective mourning while offering counter narratives that neither fill in the gaps nor accept the limits of the archives. Collective imagination is necessary to engage the gaps of slavery with fiction that help grieve the loss.

In this chapter, I mostly focused on Black arts and literature's engagement with slavery. However, I believe that such contemporary temporal experiments and distortion of realist representation is necessary throughout 20th century. Shockley's "good night women (or, defying the carcinogenic pen)" is another image-text in the "out with the old" section in *the new black* that honors the lives of Black women writers of prominent artistic movements.[28] The poem

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[25] Saidiya Hartman, Stephen Best, and Soyica Colbert argues that contemporary arts and political project are concerned with contemporary desires for liberation and emphasize those desires by referring to slavery and its afterlife. See Soyica Colbert Diggs et al, *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 2. Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly: SAQ*. 101, no. 4 (2002): 758. Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
[26] Ibid,
[27] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.
[28] Shockley, "On Seeing and Reading the 'Nothing'," 500. Evie Shockley, *The New Black*. (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 12.

celebrates their work by comparing them to celestial entities, like stars. The last stanza memorializes: Audre Lorde, whose work contributed to Black lesbian queer thought and creative practices by allowing women to see a relational bond between each other and the deep, empowering love within us, and Toni Cade Bambara, whose experimental literature during the Black arts and civil rights movement challenged male domination in Black empowerment groups.[29] The poem is in memory of Black women writers who did not receive the rightful recognition of their time because of the racism against their Blackness and the misogyny of their perceived womanhood. Shockley returns to the past to create a present and future that honors them by stating "they are : (*like stars*)" (Image 1).[30]

good night women
(or, defying the carcinogenic pen)

they are : (*like stars*)

rising

always brightly there behind our blindness,
pricking through the dark tent
with a fine, white rage
that burns garbage to ashes,
that fires truth to ceramic strength.

shining

beaconing us to a north we bring along
in our pockets, constellating,
andromedas fighting their own monsters,
dipping into history and wisdom,
filling to overflowing the big and little gourds.

falling

ripping hot and fierce down the night sky
till they are out of our pining sight,
too quickly, more frequently than we can bear,
their incandescent metal, incinerating, is
the occasion and inverse of wish.

—in memory of: audre lorde (1934–1992) / toni cade bambara (1939–1995) / thorley anne williams (1944–1999) / barbara christian (1943–2000) / claudia tate (1947–2002) / june jordan (1936–2002) / nellie mckay (c. 1933–2006)

Image 1: Shockley, Evie. "good night women. (or, defying the carcinogenic pen)" in *the new black* (2011).

The image aspect of the image-text plays with the opacity of the font. Most of the poem's stanza are in standard black ink. Shadow, gray texts are right aligned on the opposite side of the

[29] Shockley, *the new black,* 12.
[30] Ibid.

page to the standard black texts. The shadow texts are one word and are placed in between the stanzas. Because the first phrase of the shadow text pattern is "*like stars*," the rest of the shadow texts describe how the Black women writers carry star qualities by "*rising…shining…falling*".[31] Although these qualities are also human experiences of the ebbs and flows of life, to attribute the qualities to stars allows us to experience the Black women writers in otherworldly and powerful ways. Stars live on far beyond human lifespans, making it so their work will affect generations to come. Stars cultivate solar systems with their gravitational pull, making us realize the ecosystems and communities the Black women writer's influence. Stars are endless in our vast galaxy, making room to acknowledge the number of women artists who continue to influence and contribute to Black feminism. The black text in the poem makes clear that Black women artists are present and impactful despite how society refuses to acknowledge their power. The poem begins with "they are … always brightly there behind our blindness, pricking through the dark tent/ with a fine white rage/ that burn garbage to ashes,/ that fires truth to ceramic strength."[32] Shockley offers the motif of fire that has the power to affect those who might not be aware of such power. The poem indicates that the Black women writers have the power to "burn garbage," permanently remove what no longer serves us as a collective, and they have this power despite anyone's "blindness."[33] Shockley compares the Black writers to north stars because their words have the power to instruct us as we build our future. Shockley notes their quickness, the quickness of human lifespans. Although their work will linger on and teach the future for centuries, their physical form is quicker, "too quickly, more frequently than we can bear."[34]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

In "Worldbuilding, Vengeances, and The Body: The Potentials of Black Horror," I ask, what's the relationship between Black affect and worldbuilding in Black horror? Horror is a body genre, in that, a tell-tale sign of the genre is the way it impacts the body to involuntarily feel anxious, dread, and fear.[35] Yet, the genre uses fantasy elements that make the fictive worlds unreal but pulls from our real experiences. Being a body genre places a lot of reliance on understanding what will impact people from different ethnic and racial world views. Therefore, Black horror pulls from Black history, sensibilities, aesthetics, and cultures to impact Black bodies and submerse Black audiences into a world that will allow them to experience revenge fantasies that are not possible in the present material realities.[36] In Wangechi Mutu's *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012) and *The Storm Has Finally Made It Out of Me Alhamdulillah* (2012), the otherworldly figures release large globs of hair from their mouths and bowels that take over the scenery.[37] We experience the possibilities of destructive colossal release of emotions that the body holds. In Bree Newsome's *Wake* (2010), we get to experience root work and encounters with a powerful demon to conjure up the main character's desires.[38] Although this leaves her with a baby devil in the end, she gets to experience temporary revenges to the stereotypical gossip that was imposed on her for being single at middle-age. And finally, Nnedi Okakaofa's short story, "Dark Home," evokes the Nigerian mythological figure, Ajofia, that interrupts the main character's sense of safety.[39] This short story allows for contemplation of horror stories

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[35] Scholars who discuss horror as a body genre: Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess." In *Feminist Film Theory*, 267–81. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Brandon S Callender, "The Devil Finds Use: Black Queers Do The Exorcist." *Qui Parle* 31, no. 1 (2022): 67–98.
[36] Robin R Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to Present*. (Second Edition. New York, NY; Routledge, 2023).
[37] Wangechi Mutu (Kenya, born 1972), *All The Way Up, All The Way Out*, 2012. Collage on linoleum, framed. 76 ½ x 52 7/8 x 3 in. *The Storm*, 2012. Collage on linoleum, framed. 75.75 x 116 x 3 in.
[38] Newsome, Bree, director. *Wake*. Independent, 2010
[39] Nnedi Okorafor, "Dark Home" *Out There Screaming : An Anthology of New Black Horror*. Random House, 2023.

across Black diaspora. Across three mediums—short story, film, and visual arts, I contend that worldbuilding horror engages affect allowing for an immersion in another world that speaks to the plurality of Black liberation aims.

I spent much of the chapter discussing terror worldbuilding and its effects on bodily reactions—like dread, fear, and anxieties. However, in a sadist/masochist twist, horror entices audiences with playful dark imaginations. Paying attention to Black horror will reveal what is pleasurable and desirable for Black horror lovers, particularly Black audiences. The discourse around Black horror talks about race and violence of anti-Blackness.[40] The discourse also includes those who are enticed and pleased by what they are seeing/ reading. In the film adaptation of *Horror Noire* many cultural producers of horror reveal how the genre entertains them. When discussing Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, Paula Jai Parker, actor in *Tale from the Hood*, points to moments with awe and states "Isn't it beautiful."[41] Meanwhile, Migeul Núñez, Jr's favorite part in the film was when "they [the Black characters] were beating they [the white characters'] ass!"[42] Seeing Black horror through the lens of pleasure will challenge the Black life as horror thesis; This can really explore what horror critics call "art horror."[43] Pleasure and playfulness are important aspects of Black social life, and we can see how they manifest throughout all of Black cultural production.[44] Black pleasure has been a discursive tool to undermine and challenge the emphasis of Blackness equating to pain, suffering, and death. As

[40] Callender, "Devil Finds Use," 70-71.
[41] Xavier Burgin et al. *Horror Noire : A History of Black Horror*. Brooklyn, New York: [Distributed by] Icarus Films, 2019, (0:01:43).
[42] Ibid, (1:14:05)
[43] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror,* 8.
[44] For example, we can see pleasure and playfulness is in Zora Neale Hurston's silliness in her performance in "How It feels to be Colored Me", The playfulness of the trickster characters, the ways in which Black laughing styles have been observed, even the most serious of texts will employ at least a little humor.

most literary and visual experiences, horror can, or some may say needs, to be pleasurable.[45] Afterall, it is a source of entertainment. Ensuring pleasure can be an ironic and necessary task for Black horror— a genre that emphasizes pain and suffering while instilling entertainment for Black viewers. Through the lens of pleasure Black horror producers can exaggerate Black cultural fears to speak to and impact Black audiences. Black horror can invent and introduce new horror tropes and offer new abilities of traditional tropes.

In Closing

My hope is that my arguments contribute to Black studies liberation aims. My readings across genres-- science fiction and horror—and modes—film, visual art, poetry, and prose—resist paranoid readings, as reactive and assumptive reading methods.[46] In that, I contend that worldbuilding is meant to challenge what we may recognize in our material realities, or as real, common sense, normative, and customary. Worldbuilding requires us to read against the realist grain. This sentiment grounds my commitment to (im)possibilities and opening myself up to the possibilities of fictive worlds even if it fails at Black liberations, at sound logics, or at immersing the reader. The possibilities are tools. That is, even though it is impossible for me to grow tentacles and tap into my peers and feel their colors, perhaps with experiencing Jodahs's story, I can learn how to have empathy as an experience of someone's interiors. I can learn to have more

[45] Callender, "The Devil Finds Use," 71.
[46] In *Speculative Blackness,* André Carrington demonstrates a very similar caution of reading Black speculative text by using Eve Sedgwick's paranoid reading and reparative reading. Paranoid readings are suspicious and reactionary readings that "rely on unmasking fraud and finding out betrayal [within a text] as the means of proving itself right," while reparative reading "assembles and confer a plentitude on an object… to offer to an inchoate self." See André M Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. 1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) 18.

grace when bodies and words don’t match. My view of worldbuilding says that to build another world we must imagine and experience other's imagination.

As a blossoming literary and art critic, I intend to continue developing experimental modes of criticism. I read into the ways the text breaks boundaries to offer a literary and visual experience that need experimental rubrics of sense making that both attends to traditions and standards in reading literature and art, as well as strategically breaks free from standards to offer another way of engaging with visual and literary aesthetics. Through these successes and failures of experimental reading, I prioritize reading practices that are curious and playful.

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