

BIRTHING YOUR MOTHER: BLACK ATLANTIC FEMINISM

by

Emani N. Walke

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_____ Director

_____ Program Director

_____ Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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by

Emani N. Walke
Bachelor of Art
Virginia Commonwealth University

Director: Rachel A. Lewis, Professor
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

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Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the Black women who fought to birth me into existence, to God for his guidance, and to my mother who encouraged me to never dull my Blackness.

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ABSTRACT

BIRTHING YOUR MOTHER: BLACK ATLANTIC FEMINISM

Emani N. Walke, M.A.

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Thesis Director: Dr. Rachel A. Lewis

Transnational feminist epistemologies seek to connect the lived experiences of women across nations. With the ongoing imperialistic nation-state building of the West, transnational feminist theorists currently center an analysis of nationalisms and nation-states to articulate the effects of globalization and capitalism (Mohanty, 2003). As such, transnational feminist theory also rebukes feminist epistemologies concentrated in normative White Western contexts (Mohanty, 2003). Although such analyses are unequivocally important, transnational feminist theory does not properly interact with the epistemologies of Black Atlantic women. By providing a theoretical intercessor, the Black Atlantic mother, I suggest Black Atlantic women's epistemologies as sites for rethinking transnational feminism's discussions of citizenship and nation-state, and ultimately propose Black Atlantic feminism (s) as sites for more humanly workable geographies (McKittrick, 2006).

INTRODUCTION: LAND IS NOT A DECORATION

It is often said that pregnancy and motherhood are events that are experienced in the same way by black and white women. I don't doubt that. But I have asked myself many questions during my pregnancy and since the birth of my son that keep coming up over and over again ---be it around the construction of his identity, his personal development, and my ability to raise him in a white world. (Kebe, 2015; para. 4)

Within feminist theory it is not uncommon to claim women define a nation (McKittrick, 2006; Mohanty, 2003).¹ Thus in linearity, one could also suggest that women birth a nation (McKittrick, 2006). For Black Atlantic women, birthing children is a history of immense trauma. Through the production of transatlantic chattel slavery, Black women of the Americas were forced to birth human property (Hartman, 2007; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). Moreover, Black women's wombs functioned as a site for capitalistic nation-state building (Hartman, 2007; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). Thus, *the-space-between*, Black women's wombs, is a space of citizenship (Philip, 2001, as cited in McKittrick, 2006). If feminist epistemologies were to center the space between, what could we unearth? With the implementation of the Black Atlantic mother, I argue more *humanly workable geographies* (McKittrick, 2006).

¹Because nation-states are embedded in White heteropatriarchal norms, feminist theorists often argue the marginalization of women is an action of nation-state building (McKittrick, 2006; Mohanty, 2003).

Background

Transnational feminism, in its simplest definition, seeks to unite women for political change in the local, regional, and global context (Mohanty, 2003; Scholz, 2014). Within this current era of U.S. globalization, embedded in neo-liberalism and consumerist citizenship, transnational feminist scholars have rightfully critiqued U.S. and Western exceptionalism (Grewal, 2005; Mohanty, 2003). Currently, transnational feminist thought has entered its post-colonial stage in which it “revolves around a critique of the centrality of nations, nationalisms and the national scale in feminist political imaginaries” (Conway, 2017; p. 208). Black feminist thought has also engaged with theories of citizenship, of nation-state, of Western exceptionalism (Cooper, 2017; Hartman, 2007; Lorde, 1984, McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004). Yet, there is a disconnect between the two epistemologies. Chicana feminist Sandra Soto (2005) suggests this is based in the assumption that women of color feminisms do not heavily interrogate Western exceptionalism, and are too U.S and or Area Studies focused. However, Soto (2005) negates this as epistemological truth. She argues women of color feminisms have always interrogated, refuted, and condemned Western exceptionalism, colonialism, and imperialism. Thus, I am in agreement with Soto (2005), I am suggesting that Black feminist theory is site of possibility for transnational feminist theorizing.

Most specifically, I situate Black feminist theory in the transnational context of the Black Atlantic, a term coined by Guyanese British theorist Paul Gilroy (1993), describing the shared dialogical culture and theory of Blacks of the Atlantic hemisphere, most specifically assigned to those of transatlantic enslaved lineage. Thus, because of

shared Western imperialism, both transnational feminist theorists and Black Atlantic feminists consistently critique ideology produced by White Western liberalist theorists (Grewal, 2005; McKittrick, 2006; Mohanty, 2003; Wright, 2004). Yet, while transnational feminist theory rightfully analyzes the works of liberalist theory, it does not properly interact with theory and literature produced by Black Atlantic women, the women who birthed “the New World” (McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004).² How can transnational feminist theory reach its full epistemological potential if it does not actively articulate the White liberalist’s institutional opposite... the Black other (Wright, 2004)? Because Black Atlantic women consistently sit in an accumulation of unseen geography (theoretical invisibility), Black Atlantic feminists often deploy a theoretical corrective to Black women’s erasure: The Black Atlantic mother (McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004).

Purpose of Thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to rebuke the ongoing marginalization of Black Atlantic feminisms within transnational feminist theory, and to affirm the Black Atlantic mother as a site of possibility for feminist theorizing (McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004). Thus, my research question is embedded in centralizing Black Atlantic women’s epistemologies: What does citizenship, nation-state, and geographical belonging mean to Black Atlantic women? By combining my interest in transnational feminism, the Black Atlantic, Black Atlantic feminisms, and the African diaspora more broadly, I seek to connect the lived realities of Black Atlantic women, particularly those with an enslaved lineage, to a broader context of the local-global. Thus, the core of my research purpose

² Importantly, this complex birthing is in dialogue with Indigenous women, the original and ongoing mothers of the Americas.

lies in affirming the immense global relevance of the transatlantic slave trade and the women who produced it. Moreover, I situate my research within chattel slavery's successor: the *afterlife of slavery*, i.e. the global institutionalization of anti-Blackness (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). Thus, in alliance with Hartman (2008) I am affirming that the Black Atlantic mother must speak in transnational feminist epistemologies.

Significance of Thesis

In an era in which transnational feminist discourses are pursuing a more equitable approach to Global South and Global North interactions and exchanges, a marginalization of Black Atlantic feminist theory is present (Conway, 2017; Soto, 2005). For Black Atlantic women, this represents a multi-layered disregard in which normative Black Atlantic masculinist theory and transnational feminist theory render the epistemologies of Black Atlantic women as additive (Cooper, 2017; McKittrick, 2006; Soto, 2005). Furthermore, the transatlantic slave trade and the theory produced by its' citizens is related to the ongoing neo-imperialism of the Global South, as Western modernity is heavily infused with the labor of enslaved persons and their descendants (Gilroy, 1993; McKittrick, 2006; Soto, 2005). Thus, transnational feminism cannot fully address the Global North's positionality without heavily interacting with Black Atlantic feminism (Soto, 2005; McKittrick, 2006). By intervening with the Black Atlantic mother, it is possible to convey a fuller transnational feminist epistemology in which Black women of the Americas positionalities are institutionally acknowledged (Hartman 2007; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006; Soto, 2005).

Theoretical Overview

The theoretical frameworks for this thesis are complex and related. Because the Black Atlantic mother's textual arrival addresses the problematics of White liberalist and Black masculinist theory most specifically, my critique of transnational feminist theory is also embedded in critiquing the former (Wright, 2004). Thus, to build upon previous literature means to explicate her textual origin (Wright, 2004).

Wright and McKittrick

In the beginning chapters of *Becoming Black* Wright (2004) contextualizes the divergent citizenship formations of Blacks in the Western world. Through her study Wright (2004) establishes the theoretical and social institutionalization of the White subject and the Black other. She places theorists Thomas Jefferson, Arthur de Gobineau, and Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel in conversation with well-known Black Atlantic thinkers W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Fanon, to demonstrate "masking" as a common counterdiscourse to anti-Black citizenship theory. Yet, Wright (2004) notes within their counterdiscourses, Du Bois, Fanon, and other Black Atlantic male theorists, consistently negate Black women's epistemologies and theories, situating Black women as most relevant when in positions that build up a Black nation. This is often most recognizable in the charismatic (presumably heterosexual) male leader archetype:

[c]harisma is founded in three forms of violence: the historical or historiographical violence of reducing a heterogenous Black freedom struggle to a top down narrative of Great Man leadership; the social violence of performing social change in the form of a fundamentally antidemocratic form of authority;

and the epistemological violence of structuring knowledge of Black political subjectivity and movement within a gendered hierarchy of political value that grants uninterrogated power to normative masculinity. (Edwards, 2012, as cited in Cooper, 2017; p. 121)

The ongoing negation of Black women's epistemologies leads Black feminist theorists to center the intergenerational reality of the Black Atlantic. By using the poems of Audre Lorde and Carolyn Rodgers, Wright (2004) suggests *the Black mother* is deployed to refute a "motherless" Black nation and to affirm who creates and births Black people.

In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006) challenges the reader to consider their geographical placement. Using Gilroy's (1993) theory of the Black Atlantic, McKittrick (2006) specifies the importance of geography (nation-state) and mapping (epistemology) in relation to Black Atlantic women. She constructs the term *geographies of domination* to describe the White supremacist epistemologies assumed as inherently factual, and thus problematizes the idea that space and geography merely create itself. Moreover, she argues space is consistently created and is centered in White experiences. Finally, she claims Black Atlantic women's epistemologies (Black feminisms) are central to understanding the institutionalization of geographies of domination, as Black women's bodies have been the source of reproducing geographies of domination (McKittrick, 2006).³

McKittrick (2006) uses M. Nourbese Phillip's (1997) theory of the space-between to articulate the betweenness of Black Atlantic women's racialized and gendered

³ Meaning, Black women birth persons whose institutional positionality functions as the upholder of geographies of domination.

geographies. Philip's (1997) situates Black women's bodies as "historical terrain" to ultimately exemplify Black women's womb as the producers (mothers) of enslaved chattel (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Moreover, the space between helps us to understand the formation of Black women's bodies in the Americas, the multiplicative context of expecting to be both Victorian ideals of femininity, and a body of capitalistic productive reproductive value (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Because Black Atlantic women sit in in-betweenness, and are women whose bodies have always being inseparable to the development of the Americas, McKittrick (2006) suggests Black women's epistemologies are sites of possibility for more humanly workable geographies, because Black Atlantic women have never had the privilege of being centered.⁴

Hartman and Sharpe

In *Lose Your Mother* Saidiya Hartman (2007) travels to Ghana to study the history of the transatlantic slave trade. Through her personal narrative, Hartman (2007) wades through her own feelings on being an African-American, being a U.S. and Grenadian enslaved persons descendant, and being "American" in Ghana.⁵ In her book, she maintains honesty about her own misperceptions and expectations of Ghana, and her sensitivity to being seen as an abandoned child who "lost her mother."⁶ From her experiences, she theorizes Black Atlantic subjectivity as within the afterlife of slavery, i.e. the ongoing institutionalization of anti-Blackness post-emancipation (Hartman, 2007).

⁴ Humanly workable geographies is to mean more open and equitable ways to see geography, space, nation-state, de-centered from Whiteness (McKittrick, 2006).

⁵ Stereotypical associations of "Americanness" (American exceptionalism/Whiteness) that does not often match the lived reality of many Black Americans/Black people in the U.S. (Hartman, 2007).

⁶ Losing kinship because of her enslaved persons lineage (Hartman, 2007).

Hartman's (2008) article "Venus in Two Acts" takes to task Hartman's own analysis of the "dead girl" in her book *Lose Your Mother*. She, like McKittrick (2006), questions how to equitably discuss the silenced epistemologies of Black Atlantic women. By leaving "the dead girl" as she found her in the pages of history, she argues she privileged a White masculinist reading of "the dead girl." Because history's remembrance is often created to uphold Eurocentric epistemologies, and Black Atlantic women and girls have always been institutionally defined by its' standards, Hartman (2008) contends an ethical action is to imagine and write the possible stories of Black Atlantic women whose lives were merely a number in a book.

Sharpe's (2016) first chapter in her book, *In the Wake*, lists Hartman's (2007) theory of the afterlife of slavery as a theoretical basis to view her theory of life *in the wake*. Thus, she too theorizes *Black being* in the "New World" as one of living in the afterlife of slavery. She nuances her epistemology via conceptualizing the process of Black Atlantic death/dying. For Sharpe (2016) death is not only literal, but also institutional. By viewing death and dying within the context of systems of oppression, the reader is able to contextualize the ways in which White supremacist infrastructures halt and deteriorate the quality of Black Atlantic life. She notes that life in the wake for Black Atlantic mothers is one of no-nation state protection, of non-status. Thus, Black Atlantic children inherit the non-status of their mothers (Sharpe, 2016).

Theoretical Definitions

By synthesizing the works of the four women above, I have expanded their terminology and theory to fit the focus of my paper. I use the term the Black Atlantic

mother in reference to Wright's (2004) positioning of the Black mother as a theoretical interruption to ahistorical Black masculinist theories. By merging the theories of Gilroy (1993), McKittrick (2006), and Wright (2004) the term the Black Atlantic mother takes on a more discernable transnational condition. Within this thesis, the Black Atlantic mother should be recognized as a feminine figure who interrupts the normative geographies of Enlightenment theory, Black Atlantic masculinist theory, and transnational feminist theory (McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004). Thus, the Black Atlantic mother stands as the birther of the "New World," an entity that must be invoked and possessed to reveal the fullness of Black epistemologies.

Black mothering is centered in the lived experiences of Black mothers. Thus, it will be deployed in correlation with the Black Atlantic mother as a space of real-world applicability. Theoretically it will be used in correlation with McKittrick (2006), Sharpe (2016), and other secondary scholars whose theories focus upon Black women's wombs, sexualities, and mothering status.

Chapter Explanations

Chapter one is the introduction of the Black Atlantic mother. Through invoking Hartman's (2008) experience in Ghana with Phillip's (1997) space in between, I suggest the marginalization of Black Atlantic feminism within feminist epistemologies (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Secondly, I suggest Black Atlantic feminisms and the deployment of the Black Atlantic mother as a site of possibility for more humanly workable geographies, by citing McKittrick's (2006) theory of geographies of domination. I also include my own suggestion of viewing the concept of citizenship as the basis to

understanding geographies of domination (McKittrick, 2006). Thirdly, I contextualize the embodied discourse of Pauli Murray and Zora Neale Hurston as a repossession of the Black Atlantic mother, and as exemplifiers of theorizing beyond binary citizenship epistemologies.

Chapter two is in two parts. Act one centers Sharpe's (2016) theory of life in the wake. I use my assertion of Black mothering to contend with the non-citizen status of Black mothers, and thus Black Atlanteans. Through the short narratives of two Black mothers who lived through and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, I argue Black mothering and Black mothers are exploited by the U.S. as a source of nation-state maintenance.

Chapter two act two is the second iteration of a similar argument of life in the wake. By weaving the narrative of a Black mother, McKittrick's (2006) discussion on Black Canada, and poet Dionne Brand's (2001) "the Map to the Door of No Return" I suggest Canada's rejection of the Black Atlantic mother negates Black Canadian claims to space (as cited in McKittrick, 2006).

The intermission is a non-theoretical short reflective section in which I contextualize personal conversations centered in discussing Ghana's Right to Abode legislation. By including my personal narrative I focus on highlighting life in the wake, the Black Atlantic mother, and citizenship understandings for everyday Black Atlantic women. Based on the discussions, I suggest the perpetual displacement of Black Atlantic women is a problem that must redressed beyond gifting citizenship.

Chapter three deploys Hartman's (2008) implantation of *Venus* to situate the research findings of the autobiographies of Audre Lorde, Assata Shakur, Mary Prince, Buchi Emecheta, and Carolina Maria de Jesus. Secondly, I claim the Black Atlantic mother as *a* voice of the institutionalized and silenced Venus' of transatlantic slave literature. By using the autobiographical work of five Black Atlantic women, Grenadian American, African American, Antiguan, Igbo Nigerian/Nigerian English, and Brazilian, I connect the transnational reality of Black Atlantic women. By coding themes based on frequency and bodily reclamation, I offer three motifs: birthing, mothering, and corporeal resistance. These themes are interrelated to the space between, to Venus, and thus are embedded within the Black Atlantic mother. I conclude with recommendations for future study.

The conclusion restates the purpose of my thesis, provides personal reflection of one my foremothers, speaks on my Black Atlantic ethno-racial lineage, and cites Sylvia Wynter's (1995) theory of *unresolved geographies* to express my final analysis of the Black Atlantic mother (as cited in McKittrick, 2006).

Key Terms

The term Black Atlantic women refers most specifically to Black women of the Americas whose partial/full lineage is that of transatlantic slave trade (Gilroy, 1993; McKittrick, 2006). However, because of the complexity of the local-global, in necessary contexts, it can also be used in relation to Black women in the Americas more generally. In chapter three, I use the term more generally.

The term Black Atlantic feminism (s) is to be read as the divergent but distinct epistemologies derived from Black Atlantic women.

The term Black Atlanteans is an overarching term for all enslaved persons and their descendants in the Atlantic hemisphere.

CHAPTER ONE- BLACK ATLANTIC FEMINISM: WHO IS YOUR MOTHER?

Introduction: Searching for Mother and the Space Between

In Saidiya Hartman's (2007) piece *Lose Your Mother* Hartman travels to Ghana as an academic researcher, centering her studies on the transatlantic slave trade. But this trip is also personal, she is also traveling to make amends with her own her geographical displacement as an enslaved persons descendant. She discovers during her academic stay that there is no singular remembrance of the transatlantic slave trade. While those of the Americas often traveled to Ghana to search the slave dungeons for ancestral connection, the Ghanaian communities were most concerned about the effects of colonialism. Hartman thus submitted to a necessary truth: she was an obruni (stranger) to those she encountered, as she could not negate her Black American positionality nor claim an indigenous Ghanaian ethnicity. While visiting Elmina Castle a young man by the name of Isaac presented her a letter commonly distributed to Black American tourists, the closing of letter goes as follows: "Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from" (Hartman, 2007; p. 85).⁷ Hartman contextualizes her interaction as pointing to a painful ethnoracial-national (spatial) positionality: she was framed as an orphan (Hartman, 2007).

⁷ Elmina Castle is a trading post built by the Portuguese in 1482 in Elmina, Ghana (Hartman, 2007).

Yet, orphans do not bear themselves. Trini Canadian poet and theorist Marlene Nourbese Philip's (1997) essay "Dis Place---The Space Between" contextualizes Black women's bodies as a "historically produced terrain through which a different story is told-..." (as cited in McKittrick, 2006; p. 46). This ongoing narrative is described as: "the place in between the legs: the seemingly silenced and expendable black feminine body/part and selves" (as cited in McKittrick, 2006; p. 46). More specifically, it represents the labor of Black Atlantic women's wombs. Black women's wombs were established as an "invention" of the "New World," and as a *product* to produce offspring, who themselves produce and maintain economies (Hartman 2007; McKittrick, 2006). Thus, Black women's bodies represent traces of the historical past, a past unresolved and dangerously decentered in current theorizing on the formation (forming) of the local-global (McKittrick, 2006).

However, the space in between does not begin on the sugar cane or cotton fields, but on the slave ship itself (Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). Not only is the slave ship a man-made vehicle whose improvement was directly related to the transporting of Africans to the Americas---it was a literal womb to the "New World" (Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). Within its uterus held the subjectivities of enslaved persons who themselves, and their offspring, would be (are) the economies of current nation-states and are integral to Western "modernity" (Gilroy, 1993; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). Thus, the slave ship literally birthed new countries, new economies, new races, new ethnicities, and subsequently our understanding of the dichotomy of "The West" and "The Third-World" (Gilroy, 1993; Hartman, 2007; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006).

Yet, we do not see any of the above actively reflected in feminist theory (McKittrick, 2006; Soto, 2005). This is a problem. Philip's (1997) second articulation is profound: Black women are perpetually seen but not heard (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). As such the space between reveals the institutionalization of contradictory and binary epistemologies (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Thus, for feminist epistemologies to accurately contextualize the positionalities of Black Atlantic women, they must also center the Black Atlantic mother.

In this chapter I argue, first, that a privileging of White supremacist geographies are explicitly or implicitly reiterated within the normative theoretical critiques of White-supremacist infrastructures within Black Atlantic masculinist theory and transnational feminist theory.⁸ Second, I affirm Black Atlantic feminism's theoretical deployment of the dialogical Black Atlantic mother as a site of possibility for more humanly workable feminist epistemologies (McKittrick, 2006). Subsequently, through the studying of the methodological practices of Black liberal-feminist lawyer Pauli Murray, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, I suggest third, these women as embodied examples of birthing new ways of subjectivity, of refuting Eurocentric citizenship binaries as our inherent understanding of Black Atlantic epistemology.

Space Is Not Static

Black Canadian feminist-scholar Katherine McKittrick (2006) provides an avenue to discuss the complexities of geography. Via Black American scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002), McKittrick (2006) defines geographies of domination as follows: *the*

⁸ White supremacist geographies should be understood as epistemologies.

displacement of difference, wherein “particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category of “human being” (p. xv). McKittrick (2006) describes this implied *naturalization of difference* (displacement) as working within geographies of domination to institutionalize uneven geographies as “commonsensical” and ideologically “sound.” Furthermore, McKittrick (2006) claims an ungeographic reading of Black Atlantic theory “recycles the displacement of difference” (p. xvii).⁹ She urges theorists to analyze Black Atlantic epistemologies as space-based critiques. As she provides, theories such as Pan-Africanism, Black nationalism, Black liberalism, Black marxism, and Black feminism must be contextualized as theories searching for the unresolved: social-spatial liberation (Dawson, 2001; McKittrick, 2006). Thus, she refuses to frame Black Atlantic feminisms as a “voice on the margins” or as a school of thought that must be found (McKittrick, 2006). Most important to my chapter is the following, McKittrick (2006) is establishing Black Atlantic feminist epistemologies as place-based-critiques to highlight the often disregarded: Blackness is woven *into* - rather than additive of- the Atlantic world. As McKittrick (2006) contends, and as I affirm, Black Atlantic women naming place is inherently a naming of a transatlantic/transnational epistemology as the formation of the Black Atlantic subject is one of nation-state building. If Black women’s geographies are not written from a unitary vantage point, but Black women and geography have always been relational, what

⁹ Reinstitutionalizing anti-Black based epistemologies.

geographical spaces (new ways of belonging) can be imagined by purposefully repossessing the Black Atlantic mother (McKittrick, 2006)?

Cooperian approach

Repossessing the Black Atlantic mother is an active choice (Cooper, 2017; McKittrick, 2006). African American feminist-theorist Anna Julia Cooper provides a pathway to center Black women via her conception of *generative tension*. Generative tension suggests viewing the often depicted difficulties of the gendered and racialized body of Black women as not an obstacle, but a site of possibility for rethinking the institutionalizations of gender, race, class, and nation (Cooper, 2017). Through *embodied discourse*, placing Black women, especially working class Black women, at the heart of our epistemological and methodological activism and praxis, feminist epistemologies are able to disrupt “the tacit and prevailing logic of Western thought that Black women’s bodies are merely there to do reproductive and service labor...” (Cooper, 2017; p. 144). Thus, repossessing the Black Atlantic mother is not simply the material, it is also a vigorous intellectual site.

The White Subject and the Black Other: Where Is Your Mother?

“Old and new worlds stamped my face, a blend of peoples and nations and masters and slaves long forgotten. In the jumble of my features, no certain line of origin could be traced. Clearly, I was not Fanti, or Ashanti, or Ewe, or Ga.”

(Hartman, 2007; p. 3-4)

In response to Martin Luther King Jr’s immortalized “I Have a Dream” speech, a speech empowering many of the Black Atlantic, Anna Arnold Hedgeman (1964), an African American intellectual, and the only woman to serve on the March on Washington

organizing committee, said the following: “In the face of all the men and women of the past who have dreamed in vain, I wished very much that Martin had said, “We have a dream” (as cited in Cooper, 2017; p. 20). Hedgeman’s declaration of “We have a dream” critiques the rewriting of Black Atlantic political movements and leadership as unequivocally heteronormative and male (Cooper, 2017). Hedgeman is also questioning what we believe and thus decide as epistemological truth... Are we ready to acknowledge and honor our Black Atlantic mother?

Wright (2004) states in the process of Black Atlantic men’s diverse counterdiscourses, an ahistorical singular Black male diasporic subject was (is) formed (forming). Undoubtedly influenced by a founding fathers context, Black Atlantic male theorists, of all political associations, commonly use the idealist to write of a Black Nation detached/unimpacted by the colonial past and present (Dawson, 2001; Wright, 2004).¹⁰ By writing a new time and space, Black Atlantic male theorists reiterate a dialectical via the negation of negation (Wright, 2004). Wright (2004) suggests this theoretical flaw as a refutation of Hegelian (and Jeffersonian) thought that perceives (West) Africa as empty and subsequently its descendants as vacant vessels to colonize. Notably, Black Atlantic male theorists will often acknowledge Black women’s activism in the material but mention little of Black women’s positionalities in their theory of nationhood. By reducing Black women to the other from within the other, hyper-masculinist Black Atlantic theory can “grant men the power to determine the race of their

¹⁰ As McKittrick (2006) would suggest this reflects a need for social-spatial liberation, and as I would suggest more specifically a need to escape normative nation-state formations embedded in anti-Blackness.

offspring and the ability to establish finite origins and ends to the national narrative” (Wright, 2004, p.141).

Wright (2004) further interrogates the topic of offspring and racial origins in her analysis of Black feminist responses to the formation of the (straight) Black male subject. Wright (2004) questions the historical accuracy of claiming a homogenous racial society and racial makeup for the average Black Atlantic subjects, and notes its connection to masculinist paradigms of African purity. Moreover, she claims this singular Black male diasporic subject only maintains accuracy if purposeful exclusions are present such as: Black women being the main producers of Black children, including biracial ones. But also, White women (and non-Black women) producing biracial Black subjects. Thus, we see an uneven geography in which the displacement of difference is considered acceptable as long as the means equate to a free (masculinist-one-dimensional-normative) Black male subject in *The Black Nation* (Cooper, 2017; McKittrick, 2006, Wright, 2004).

So, how does one refute the institutionalization of a motherless Black nation? Wright (2004) claims Black Atlantic feminist writings commonly deploy the Black mother as a corrective to the Black nation’s normative Black male subject. Importantly, the Black Atlantic mother is not simply an idealist (theoretical) improvement of the problematics of the Black Nation. As McKittrick (2006) would confirm, it is the revealing of a more human (read as factual) oppositional and simultaneously central geography. As Wright (2004) contextualizes, by centering the intergenerational and transnational reality of the Black Atlantic, via the Black Atlantic mother, Black women

merge the idealist and materialist geography and diminish subjectivity/citizenship as binary (McKittrick, 2006).

Transnational Feminism: What About Black Atlantic Citizenship?

In transnational feminist-theorists' Inderpal Grewal's (2005) and Chandra Mohanty's (2003) pieces, *Transnational America* and *Feminism Without Borders*, both affirm the hegemony of the U.S. as a transnational action. They remind us that there is indeed a dialogue (rather than a one-sided Western conversation) in which the two-thirds world equally impacts and informs the one-thirds world.¹¹ Undoubtedly, with ongoing U.S. and European neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, (and the impacts of global corporations) women and girls of the two-thirds world face the harshest consequences of White supremacist economics (Grewal, 2005; Mohanty, 2003). As Mohanty (2003) accurately contextualizes, there are women of the two-thirds world who live, work, and exist in the one-thirds world such as: the migrant woman who is paid little to no wages as a domestic laborer [to work for a well-off White Western family], the refugee woman who is escaping a brutal regime, and the South Asian immigrant woman experiencing exploitation in the offices of Silicone Valley. Yet, as Mohanty (2003) suggests in her chapter, "*Under Western Eyes Revisited*": *Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles*, when do we as feminist theorists theorize about women's lives beyond archetypes of our preconceived notions? Where is the space for contradictions that challenge us beyond seeking the explanation of cultural relativism?

¹¹ Two-thirds world is a more equitable means to describe the Global South beyond hierarchies of "over and under" and one-thirds world is a less White supremacist/Western exceptionalist means to describe the Global North (Mohanty, 2003).

Mohanty's (2003) resolution is that of a Feminist Solidarity/Comparative Feminist Studies Model in which: the local and global are not geographically defined, but exist simultaneously and constitute each other, distance and proximity are contextualized as the analytic strategy, a refutation of an "add and stir" teaching system, the epistemological placement of the individual as a reflection of a collective, and the active seeking of activism beyond the university.¹² Mohanty (2003) is suggesting geographies of domination in feminist theory must fall. Subsequently, I am affirming Black Atlantic feminisms' intersubjective Black Atlantic mother as an interruption to the violent cycle of the displacement of difference (McKittrick, 2006). As such, I, too, am affirming the necessity of refuting Eurocentric citizenship binaries as our inherent understanding of Black Atlanteans within transnational feminist theory (Soto, 2005; Wright, 2004).

Notably, I am aware Black Atlantic feminism is cited within transnational feminist theory. However, I am suggesting we reconfigure our stagnant understanding of Blackness and its relation to nation-state, especially as it exists in the Atlantic hemisphere (Conway, 2017; Soto, 2005). What could transnational feminist epistemologies and transnational women's movements learn from shifting our understanding of Black citizenship of the West/Atlantic as fixed, decided, and formed? What if we understood all Black women of the Atlantic as descendants of the two-thirds world who have consistently critiqued their enslaved//colonial heritage long before transnational feminism was institutionalized? What if we understood Blackness of the Atlantic as inherently

¹² Distance and proximity as an analytic strategy should be understood as viewing privilege and marginalization as a vigorous shifting context rather than a top down binary framework (Mohanty, 2003). Rebuking an "add and stir" approach should be understood as teaching histories of White women, U.S. Women of Color, and women from the two-thirds world as interconnected rather than separate and additive (Mohanty, 2003).

transnational, multiplicative, and not defined by forced anti-Black colonial geographies? What if we understood Western consumerist citizenship as embedded in the history of the transatlantic slave trade?

We Say Where We Enter

McKittrick's (2006) wording is quite poignant. She prompts feminist-theorists to respect that Black Atlantic subjectivity "is not swallowed by the [slave] ship itself" (p. xii). She is also urgent in her reiteration that location and space are a function of self and communal consciousness for Black Atlantic populations:

...the production of black spaces in the diaspora is tied to locations that were and are explicitly produced in conjunction with race, racism, captivity, and economic profit. Traditional geographies did, and arguably still do, require black displacement, black placelessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays "in place." (p. 9)

Importantly, McKittrick (2006) states Black Atlantic women's oppositional geographies do not seek to reiterate a heteropatriarchal demonstration of socioeconomic possession of land or space. Thus, if Black Atlantic women have been the birthers of nations, democracies, and Black others for centuries, transnational feminist theory must do its part and discontinue passively reiterating Black "placelessness" in feminist theory (McKittrick, 2006; Soto, 2005; Wright, 2004).

Pauli Murray and Zora Neale Hurston: Beyond Doubling

What does it mean to be a citizen? This is a question Western liberalist theory has asked for centuries. Undoubtedly this theory of belonging, and thus not belonging, has

been and is used to enforce White-Supremacist nation-state building (Wright, 2004). Importantly, I challenge us to interact with citizenship as not singularly defined or affirmed by legalities of constitutions or by human-rights based epistemologies. In accordance with Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua (1987) and Mohanty (2003) we actively acknowledge borders as never fixed or complete. We also acknowledge our current understanding of borders is of colonial origin (Grewal, 2005; Mohanty, 2003). Despite this, we must also note the idealist does not always reflect the material reality of experiences (Wright, 2004). For some, nation-state borders are not only a site and hope for traditional understandings of gaining or maintaining citizenship, nation-state borders are also the literal negation and creation of peoples antithetical hyper-existence (Wright, 2004).

Subsequently, while both Pauli Murray and Zora Neale Hurston were (are) established as African Americans I choose, in alignment with McKittrick (2006) and Wright (2004), to view their ontologies as oppositional geographies that cannot be placed “firmly inside an official story or history” (McKittrick, 2006; p. xxiv). Thus, while I am not negating the importance of location in feminist theory -or the problematics it can (does) enact- I choose to contextualize our current normative conceptions of nationality and citizenship as the foundation of McKittrick’s (2006) theory of geographies of domination for the Black Atlantic subject, and thus why the Black Atlantic mother is deployed.¹³ Accordingly, the specific experience of deriving from a lineage of forced displacement and West and Central African chattel slavery indeed informs my theoretical

¹³ Location is contextualized as proclaimed or assimilated national origin.

decision. And in agreement with McKittrick (2006) and Wright (2004) identifiers such as: African American/Caribbean American/Black American, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Trini, Caribbean British/African British/Black British, Caribbean Canadian/ African Canadian/Black Canadian are at once necessary linguistics to trace transatlantic slavery, migration, immigration, culture, language, positionality, nationalisms, exceptionalisms, legitimate nuances of experience; and yet relying in these descriptors as completed or definitive historiographical realities of the African Diaspora is to reestablish geographies of domination and binary thought processes. Thus, once again I am asking us to remember the Black Atlantic mother.

The Afterlife of Slavery: Jim Crow USA

To understand the depth of these women's oppositional geographies, is to understand the context of their embodied discourse. Notably, both Murray and Hurston were born in an era in which African Americans were engaging in newly legislated citizenship inclusion. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendment were passed to give African Americans civil-rights based "freedoms" (Aarim-Heriot, 2006).¹⁴ However, this time of one-dimensional enfranchisement (voting and political participation) was short lived as the growth of reconfigured White supremacist values soon established deeply segregated geographies (Aarim-Heriot, 2006; Cooper; 2017). Subsequently, the institutionalization of post-reconstruction's Best Man masculinity followed legal emancipation. In short, Best Man ideology reiterated White superiority: White purity and the White man's

¹⁴ Abolishment of chattel slavery, naturalized citizenship for formerly enslaved persons and their descendants, right to vote for African American men (Aarim-Heriot, 2006).

“Godly existence” to govern (Gilmore, 1996). White men, disappointed in their reconstruction era fathers, determined they were going to “take back the South” from “Negro Rule” (Gilmore, 1996). Taking back the South included: lynchings, massacres, rapes, mobs, attempts to repeal the 15th amendment, and the official institutionalization of Jim Crow policy (Aarim-Heriot, 2006; Cooper, 2017; Gilmore, 1996).

Race women and respectability

National Association of Colored Women’s leader, Fannie Barrier Williams, theorized the term organized anxiety to articulate the status of Negro women in the Reconstruction/post-Reconstruction era (Cooper, 2017). As William’s contextualized, the basis of organized anxiety was the ongoing racist-sexist imaging of Black women (Cooper, 2017). Conceptualizing Black femininity/Black women’s subjectivity as “more than a slave” or a “low social condition” was thus of utmost importance (Cooper, 2017; p.39). Cooper (2017) explains the complexity of race, gender, and sexuality for each generation of Black American intellectuals:

The overarching narrative of crisis has been a salient feature of Black political life at least since Du Bois began serving as editor of the NAACP...This recourse to the narrative of Black political crisis frequently obscures an attendant upheaval over gender politics, particularly a broad discontent over the opportunities to pursue certain kinds of respectable racial manhood. Consequently, resolutions to the Black political crisis are frequently pursued through the insistence of prescribing traditional gender roles for Black communities. (p. 116)

Thus, the concepts of Race women and respectability are productions of oppositional geographies challenging both White and Black patriarchal norms (Cooper, 2017). Race

women can be defined as the first African American women intellectuals, women who “were “to study” and “to discuss” “all phases of the race question,” and women who claimed themselves as “public thinkers on race questions” (Pauline Hopkins, 1902, as cited in Cooper, 2017; p. 11). Respectability politics (in a Black Atlantic feminist context) can be defined as racial uplift via the concern “not only with the moral and social character of the race, as the ideology of true womanhood dictated, but also with the “intellectual character” of the race” (Cooper, 2017, p. 13). As Cooper (2017) specifies, Race women’s interest in the “intellectual character of the race” is one of birthing. Cooper (2017) makes certain we as readers understand this: Black Atlantic women have never had the privilege of being private thinkers. While White and Black women have the shared status of eugenics-based sexism, Black women have never been conceptualized outside of their womb production. Because enslaved persons and their descendants have never had bodily privacy, Black women’s embodied discourse as Race women was in the hope that by providing public intellectual discourse Black women could birth/mother the ultimate oppositional geography: Black citizens (Cooper, 2017).

Pauli Murray: Disidentification, Intimate Subjectivity and the Silence of Respectability

What does it mean to be a racialized-gendered subject whose intimate subjectivity is read as unintelligible in a White heteronormative geography? How does race intersect with sexuality? Cooper (2017) defines African American feminist-theorist Candice M. Jenkin’s (2007) concept of the “respectable” *salvific wish*:

...the desire to rescue the Black Community from racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology through the embrace of a bourgeois propriety. The salvific

wish is a “response to the peculiar vulnerability of the Black subject with regard to intimate conduct,” which leaves “Black bodies understood as sites of sexual excess... [as] doubly vulnerable in the intimate arena- to intimacy itself as well as to the violence of social misperceptions surrounding Black intimate character. (p. 106)

How does this salvific wish impact queer and non-conforming Black subjects? Cooper (2017) notes a silence in Black intellectual theory as it relates to queer and non-heteronormative sexuality. Notably, little is discussed of the myriad of Black intellectual women of the past who had same-sex romantic relationships, or those who chose to neither marry, remarry, or partner with anyone. How do we analyze this multi-faceted geography of domination? I use Pauli Murray’s embodied discourse and her deployment of the Black Atlantic mother as a site to more equitable human geographies via her negation of binary citizenship theory (McKittrick, 2006).

Cooper (2017) positions Pauli Murray’s embodied discourse as *disidentification*: “Disidentification means that one identifies with some aspects of an oppressive system and rejects others, in pragmatic ways that allows one to thrive” (p.100). In true Black Atlantic feminist epistemology, Pauli Murray cannot be defined in a dialectical understanding of race, sexuality, and gender. For the purpose of this analysis, I center her racial identity, as Murray’s racial identification is the praxis of her non-heteronormative sexuality and gender expression (Cooper, 2017). To recognize the theoretical importance and necessity of Murray’s multiracial embodied discourse, is to understand the institutionalization of anti-Blackness became the first “marker” of “other” for Black

bodies (Cooper, 2017).¹⁵ Thus, Murray deeply recognized the White supremacist Black and White binary informed all forms of her existence.

In her autobiography *Proud Shoes* Murray extensively details the history of her family's generational mixed-race Black/White lineage. Notably, she tells of the self-possession of racial identification. Her family, who lived in the borderlands of ambiguity and White-passing geography, birthed their own racial identity on the census (Cooper, 2017). Not only did they self-ascribe, they made no definitive conclusions, as records show they self-possessed different racial identifications throughout the years. Such inconclusiveness (its own oppositional geography) opened a site of possibility for Murray's own queer sexuality and non-binary gender presentation (Cooper, 2017). Cooper (2017) suggests a fluidity of Murray's gender identity, as legitimate primary resources indicate Murray's proclamation as a self-described man. However, it is unclear if Murray's self-defined masculinity is one of non-cisgender identity or if it is a means to soothe her own perceptions of her queer sexuality as deviant.¹⁶ Subsequently the concepts salvific wish and disidentification become an integral analytic to Murray's sexuality and gender (Cooper, 2017). Thus, I choose to view Murray in a she/her/non-gender conforming identity as reflective of her non-binary approach to race and her Race woman

¹⁵ Yet, gender and sexuality should not be deduced as an additive, but as critical race theory would suggest an intersection (Cooper, 2017).

¹⁶ Meaning if she is a man then she is heterosexual, rather than lesbian, a sexuality she found deviant. Manhood thus places her sexuality and romantic relationships with women in heteronormative "respectable" context she approved of (Cooper, 2017).

public status.¹⁷ Ultimately, Murray's disidentification (public v private displays of gender and sexuality) inform her legal genius (Cooper, 2017).

Jane Crow

Jane Crow is one the first exemplifiers of intersectionality within U.S. Black feminist thought (Cooper, 2017). Murray's discriminatory experiences with Black men in higher educational settings heightened her understanding of the vulnerability of Black women in institutions. Cooper (2017) suggests Murray' masculine-androgynous gender identity/presentation and her will to be "one of the boys" was not approved of by her Black male professors at Howard. Yet, her Blackness was the causing factor of her rejection as a graduate student at the University of North Carolina and Chapel Hill. The "double marginalization" of Negro women was an institutional way of life for Murray. Thus Murray's law degree became an avenue for her to theorize and enact institutional equity for Black women. Consequently, she constructed a legal precedent delineating the anti-racist/anti-sexist legislature necessary to ensuring the protection of Black women in institutions. Jane Crow's discourse was one of recognizing Black women's subjectivities (geographies) under a specific set of social conditions: "mass migration, changing gender relations, class anxiety, and racial strife" (Ayesha Hardison, 2014, as cited in Cooper, 2017; p. 103). Again, while Murray did not identify with a normative cis woman identity, she also understood she would not receive institutional recognition beyond a constructed heteronormative racialized gender (Cooper, 2017). While some may deduce Murray's embodied discourse as recycling the displacement of difference, as she chose to operate

¹⁷ Murray believed her sexuality and romantic relationships with women were not for public discussion, thus I will not be discussing her romantic relationships with women in detail out of integrity (Cooper, 2017).

publicly in a (somewhat) heteronormative subjectivity, I would disagree. Murray recognized the institutionalization of an anti-Black racial binary as a cis heteronormative function all its own, and thus interrupted with the intergenerational Black Atlantic Mother, the mother who birthed an array of mixed-race Black Atlantic ethnicities. Through the embodied discourse of her complex and over simplified racial classification, Murray was able to delineate the falseness of White supremacist and Black patriarchal chronotypes, binaries, and its intersections with gender, sexuality, nation-state and Black women's citizenship. By remembering her conception, challenging racial classification formed a pathway for her to make sense (privately) of her prescribed gender and its relation to her sexuality. Because of her intergenerational/intersubjective oppositional geography Murray helped birth a now well-known feminist epistemology that includes the interrogation of gender and sexuality: critical race theory (Cooper, 2017). This is the possibility of Black Atlantic Feminisms.

***Zora Neale Hurston: "I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads"*¹⁸**

Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist, folklorist, hoodoo priestess, and as Trezfer (2000) would affirm a political commentator. Yet, Hurston's views on politics and its impact on Black women, Black men, African American culture, and a transnational black culture is rarely centered in reviews of her works (Trezfer, 1997; Trezfer, 2000; Walker, 1998). Tellingly, many deduce her as literary genius, but read her personal politics as contradictory, problematic, color-blind, and inconclusive. Such is exemplified in reviews of Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks* in which critics have

¹⁸ (Hurston, 1928, as cited in Davis, 1992; p.150)

maintained frustration with Hurston's lack of a "clear self" (Trezfer, 1997; Trezfer, 2000; Walker, 1998). Davis (1992), Trezfer (1997), and Walker (1998) suggest Hurston's "doubling" or "double doubling" of identities and positionalities inform her perceived contradictions. Walker (1998), using a post-modernist approach, believes the annoyance with Hurston's "performativity" is based in readers expectation of a "true (singular) Zora Neale Hurston"---as Hurston interrupts normative geography with little concern for its negative interpretations. However, if we read Hurston in the context of Cooper (2017), McKittrick (2006), and Wright (2004) we understand Hurston's adamant negation of a dialectical subjectivity is a reflection of the Black Atlantic mother's intersubjective way of being. Thus, Hurston's Black feminist embodied discourse is one of heterogeneity: the dialogical relationship between the self, community, nature, land, and nation-state informs her epistemology.

In reference to the geographies of domination's singular Black other Hurston (1942) deduces the following in *Dust Tracks*:

I maintain that I have been a Negro three times-a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is, then you are in the same place as me. There is no The Negro here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My people! (as cited in Walker, 1998; p. 733)

The statement above confirms Hurston's belief that binary categories do not accurately capture experience and material reality. More textual evidence of her non-binary

epistemology is seen in her writings during World War II in which she notes she has met “good and bad people” in the dialectical designed “Black and White races” (Trezfer, 1997; Walker, 1998). In fact, Hurston once wrote she belongs to no race (Walker, 1998). This was a controversial statement of her time, yet Hurston’s anthropological roots are sound: she is unwilling to adhere to Black-oriented respectability politics or to the White supremacist standard of White exceptionalism and White purity. In Hurstonian fashion, she also negated common themes in African American literature: “identity, voice, and the appropriating power of the voice” (Walker, 1998; p. 390).¹⁹ Hurston’s style and tone in *Dust Tracks* positions her intersubjectivity further as she presents her work within a West-African cultural tradition: oral storytelling. Moreover, Hurston’s non-definitive linguistic choices, one moment she writes in “standard” U.S. English and in the other a Southern African-American West-African infused dialect, also demonstrate her repossession of the Black Atlantic mother (Wright, 1998). Her recognition of the Black Atlantic and West Africa as dialogical informed her ability to seam cultural traditions of the Caribbean, the U.S. South, and West-Africa.

War, voodoo, and nation-state

The previously stated question, “what does it mean to be a citizen?” takes heed as one of the most integral analytics of Hurston, one that informed her actual problematic opinions but also highlight the common institutional contradictions of binary understandings of citizenship. Location/land/nature is essential to Hurston, as she was born into the all-Black self-built community of Eatonville, Florida (Davis, 1992; Trezfer,

¹⁹ Black counterdiscourse established to refute the Black and White binary and its iterations in different Atlantic locations.

1997; Trezfer, 2000). Her region of origin is just as imperative as nation-state within her embodied discourse, as her positionality is once again clear: she is a Southern American Negro Woman. This nuance is paramount, as her backdrop is the Jim Crow South and her interest in “global black culture” is emboldened by the afterlife of slavery (Davis, 1992; Trezfer, 1997; Trezfer, 2000). But, nation-state and belonging is her most genuine conflation and source of nationalism. Interestingly, Hurston did actively negate U.S. exceptionalism. She placed the “Negro problem in the U.S.” (discrimination/subjugation) as a non U.S. specific problem (Trezfer, 1997). In regard to Nazism, she accurately correlated the Holocaust to transnational White supremacy as “exaggerated racial pride” (Trezfer, 1997; p. 77). She also rejected the U.S.’s “democratic” framing of World War II as she understood the subjugation of American Negroes was related to the U.S.’s politics in Europe and the two-thirds world (Trezfer, 1997). Thus, her epistemology holds strong roots of Black Atlantic discourse. However, her interrogation of the U.S.’s occupation of Haiti brings forth concerning contradictions, contradictions that inform my ongoing adamancy of placing binary/Western exceptionalist citizenship epistemologies as the basis of McKittrick’s (2006) analysis of geographies of domination.

During the U.S.’s occupation of Haiti U.S. exceptionalist rhetoric of othering was present (Trezfer, 2000). Hurston, who spent time in both Haiti and Jamaica, presents real contradictory views in which she could not successfully merge her expected “American patriotism,” her Southern identity, and her Black Atlantic/diasporic identity (Trezfer, 2000).²⁰ On one hand Hurston regurgitated U.S./European imperialistic rhetoric of Black

²⁰ I would suggest expected American patriotism as a form of government demanded assimilation.

Haitian subjectivity, as she agreed U.S. occupation could likely help the poverty of Haiti. She also framed the Maroon colonies of Haiti and Jamaica with Western scientific exceptionalist linguistics of “primitiveness.” Yet through her psychic implantation of the Black Atlantic mother, she garnered racial, Black Atlantic, and diasporic pride with the Maroon colonies as it demonstrated a transnational culture of resistance also present in the Southern U.S. and West-Africa (Trezfer, 2000). Her interrogation deepens as she nuanced class in Haiti and its relation to French-U.S. exceptionalism and influence, stating “the upper-class Haitians speak French and the peasants speak Creole.”(Hurston, 1931, as cited in Trezfer, 2000; p. 304) A comparison that sounds quite similar to her critique of Race men and Race women whose respectability marginalized poor African Americans who too spoke unequivocally in West-African tongue (Trezfer, 2000; Walker, 1998). Religiosity/voodoo/hoodoo also stand as thematic shared Black Atlantic/African diasporic embodiments as she viewed the villainized Haitian-voodoo as a source of anti-colonial protest not as a “primitive” expression of possession (Trezfer, 2000).²¹ She, like many Haitian theorists and communities, demystified voodoo as solely spirit possession, suggesting it as a source uplift. Moreover, Hurston affirmed U.S. Southern Black Christianity as a voodoo all its own, as “possession” and uplift can also be found in its practices. Most importantly, she connected voodoo/religiosity as the continuation of West-African ways of being, a subjectivity that is not recognized within geographies of domination (Trezfer, 2000). Thus, her embodied discourse shifts us towards contending with the afterlife of slavery: a transnational understanding of anti-Blackness, and an

²¹ Hoodoo is an African American form of voodoo.

example of the problematics of White supremacist citizenship institutionalizations and its intersections with Black Atlantic subjects positionalities. Not unproblematically, she did re-possess her mother. Thus, her embodied discourse is a site for transnational feminist epistemologies as it reveals the reality of experience. Hurston's heterogenous ways of being signify Black Atlantic feminism's possession of more workable (real) human geographies (McKittrick, 2006). This is the possibility of Black Atlantic Feminisms.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have sought to relocate Black Atlantic women in a multitude of theories which present Black women's epistemologies as additive or non-existent. Subsequently, I assert Black Atlantic feminisms as sites of possibility via the common theme of repossessing the Black Mother's intersubjective way of being. In the process, I have implicitly pursued another underlying issue: the singularity in which Blackness itself is read. As Hartman (2007), McKittrick (2006), and Wright (2004): The Black Atlantic, a positionality within the grander and complex African Diaspora, are correlated and nuanced subjects. Subsequently, my listing of Pauli Murray and Zora Neale Hurston should not be read as either exhaustive to the myriad of Black Atlantic women's oppositional geographies nor as an appropriation of U.S. exceptionalism. These women were indeed subjects forcibly categorized by a larger geography of domination as "undoubtedly" American in theory, yet ungeographically "American" in experience. Citizenship, location, land, race, nationality, and ethnicity (in varied expressions) inform the lives of the Black Atlantic subject. Thus, a larger question precedes the reading of the upcoming chapter: Do we as feminist-theorists take seriously the afterlife of slavery?

Most importantly, what does the Black Atlantic mother say currently? Chapter two will use a Black Feminist approach to contextualize the ongoing social spatial discrimination faced by Black Atlantic subjects.

CHAPTER TWO ACT ONE: YOUR MOTHER'S INHERITANCE

Introduction

“If an African identity was to be meaningful at all, at least to me, then what it meant or was to mean could be elaborated only in the fight against slavery, which, as John reminded me, was not about dead people or old forts built by white men but the power to determine whether you lived or died.” (Hartman, 2007; p. 234)

Chapter one of my thesis contended with the birth of the Black Atlantic, it suggested Black Atlantic feminisms' deployment of the Black Atlantic mother as a site of possibility for transnational feminist theorizing. It also established White supremacist geographies, and the ignorance of Black women's oppositional geographies, as a purposeful function of the Atlantic world. Thus, another perspective exists. If Black birth is necessary to the system of the Atlantic world, can we not suggest Black death is also integral?

The Wake: Unresolved Spaces

This chapter's purpose is to analyze this question: If Black death is the reality of being in the “New World,” what can be learned by putting the Black Atlantic mother in conversation with her own children's death? I am most interested in discussing the interrelatedness of the Black Atlantic mother, Black mothering, death/dying and nation-state. The Black Atlantic mother (the foremother forced to produce the “New World”)

now takes on the role of both theory and real-life narrative (McKittrick, 2006). While chapter one strongly deployed the Black Atlantic mother as a symbolic theoretical entity, act one includes the stories of actual Black Atlantic mothers. Subsequently, Black mothering is witnessing on behalf of the Black Atlantic mother.

Black Mothering

Because Black Atlanteans derive from generations of Black Atlantic mothers, Black mothering becomes its own analytic (Wright, 2004). If we remember M. Nourbese Phillip's (1997) the space between we recall Black women's wombs were "the mechanics" to producing the "New World" economy (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Moreover, the space between speaks to the specific racialized and gendered positionality of Black Atlantic women, and is also reflective of Black Atlantic women's sexuality (McKittrick, 2006). Because Black women's sexuality is often pathologized as deviant, as hyper-sexual, and as always available, Black mothering is thrust into a complex positionality (McKittrick, 2006). Victorian ideals of womanhood and motherhood are demanded of Black mothers, but the legacy of Black women's wombs as reproductive technology is still breathable. Black mothers must attempt to balance a feminine and masculine epistemology, as their femininity is expected, but their masculinity of labor and production (the afterlife of slavery) is institutionalized. Subsequently, Phillip's (1997) describes the space between as a form of racialized-gendered androgyny (as cited McKittrick, 2006). Thus, in a system in which binaries of masculine and feminine are positioned as an either or identity, a racialized-gendered androgyny negates the visibility of Black mother's epistemological complexities (McKittrick, 2006). Because Black

mothering is contextualized as the opposite of White mothering, and White mothers are seen as the producers of “good citizens,” Black mothers are never (rarely) seen as relevant producers of nation-state (Cooper, 2017; Wright, 2004).²² The consequences as Sharpe (2016) discloses are deadly. She argues Black Atlantic mothering is rooted in the following: Black women are institutionally produced as non-citizens with no nation-state protection, and her children, Black children, bear her non-status (Hartman, 2007; Hartman, 2008). Thus, Christina Sharpe’s (2016) theory of life in the wake reveals the Black Atlantic mother’s children, Black Atlanteans, are purposefully positioned as absent (dead/dying) in the local-global.²³ This as an action of nation-state building (McKittrick, 2006; Wright, 2004). Thus, in act one I center the narratives of Black mothers during Hurricane Katrina to highlight the ways in which the U.S. government possesses Black mothering as a form of nation-state maintenance.

Open the Casket

Christina Sharpe (2016), an African American Black diaspora theorist, describes being in the wake as a consciousness in which Black being (living/existing) is one of occupying/occupation, of living through and within the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2007). Specifically, Sharpe (2016) tends to what she sees as the inevitable: Black death and dying in its multitudes. She describes death as not only physical, but the ways in which Black lives are systemically positioned near death in the wake of institutionalized anti-Blackness. How do Black persons theorize and function living a life in which their

²² Presumably producers of Whiteness, of “pure” White offspring.

²³ Meaning, even for Black Atlanteans who live in majority Black-populated countries, the institutionalization of global anti-Blackness impacts access to equitable participation in the local-global (Sharpe, 2016; Mohanty, 2003).

social, political, and economic demise is expected, normal, and as Sharpe (2016) would suggest, a death/debility necessary to the function of nations (Puar, 2017)? Police brutality, forced migration, immigration, refugee movements, red-lining, gentrification, health disparities, low-funded schooling, the prison industrial complex, tourism exploitation, anti-Black immigration laws, and high death-rates of Black mothers during birth are death and its' companions (Hill, 2016; McKittrick, 2006; Roeder, 2018; Sharpe, 2016; Spencer & Bean, 2017). Thus, let us review life in the wake.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina is likely one of the most infamous natural disasters in U.S. history (Bouie, 2015). I find Hurricane Katrina as a striking space of life in the wake, as water, containment, displacement, non-status merge into multi layered complexity. Rather than detail the happenings of Hurricane Katrina, I am most interested in the ways in which Black belonging, nation-state, and Black mothering were used as a means to reiterate archetypes of U.S. exceptionalism, White innocence, and Black non-belonging (Harris-Perry, 2011). Through the narratives of two mothers, one who called for aid during the hurricane, and the other whose family was displaced by the hurricane, we see a candid display of the paradoxical space between, of no citizenship protection. (McKittrick, 2006).

Children Wade In the Water

In the 2008 documentary “Trouble the Water,” a Black mother calls emergency relief during the height of Hurricane Katrina. As the video cuts between the audio of different victims calling for help, we hear the mother plead for the safety of her children,

and presumably for other people's children too (Deal & Lessin 2008).²⁴ She says: "We have water halfway in our house, and we are in the attic" (Deal & Lessin; 00:22:09-00:22:11). The responder: "OK ma'am at this time there is no rescue team" (Deal & Lessin, 2008; 00:22:11-00:22:14). The mother, hearing the responder's response, nonetheless persists saying: "-eight day old baby and the kids"... she begins to count aloud "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve"... "twelve children, little bitty children" The responder states once more, "at this time, they're not rescuing" (Deal & Lessin, 2008; 00:22:25-00:22:34). By the end of the documentary, the watcher is left wondering if the mother (s) and children are dead. There is no closure (Deal & Lessin, 2008).

Nearing the end of the documentary, a young woman named Kim and her husband travel to Tennessee to live with her cousin (after being displaced by the hurricane). Sitting with Kim in the back of a truck, Kim's cousin's wife makes a poignant statement about her feelings on Hurricane Katrina: " I cannot say that they do not have the means...our government is supposed to be one of the greatest...but it's proven to me that hey if you don't have money and don't have status -you don't have government" (Deal & Lessin, 2008; 1:05:18-1:05:33). She scoffs and continues, "My son wanted to join the army, and I'll be damned if he does. No -no way- you're going to go to college, even if I have to wash somebody's floors to make sure you go. You are going to college.

²⁴ All of those who called feared dying, and were told no help was coming. It is unclear if any of the victims survived. Many families/neighbors bundled together in attics in hope of survival (Deal & Lessin, 2008).

You are not going to fight for a country that doesn't give a damn for you. No way" (Deal & Lessin, 2008; 1:05:38-1:05:56).

Both mothers had a tone of desperation, disbelief, hurt, and confusion in their voices (Deal & Lessin, 2008). How could no one help twelve children survive? Her son was born in the U.S. wasn't he supposed to be cared for and protected like a U.S. citizen? The obvious answer may present as no, and as such it would be easy to accuse these mothers of naivete and maybe even the latter mother of embracing U.S. exceptionalism. Indeed, literature has well established the history of institutionalized anti-Blackness and state-sponsored displacement and death (the wake), making the disillusion of both mothers unsurprising to many (Bouie, 2015; Hill, 2016; Sharpe, 2016). However I believe we should consider the emotional toll of the disaster and hold the emotional space for their feelings, as the U.S. government often utilizes Black mothers for nation-state maintenance.

Black mothers, White masks

Black mothering was a strategic source of exploitation for U.S. media in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Harris-Perry, 2011). Poor Black women in particular became the face of the disaster. Pictures of Black women and their children in the midst of climate destruction and poverty were shocking to the general (White) public (Harris-Perry, 2011). Why were Black mother's impoverished status shocking to U.S. viewers? The poverty of Black families in the U.S. is not new, resolved, or an unexpected geography (Bouie, 2015; McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016). Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), an African American political commentator, argues the (White middle-class) revelation was sourced in the assumption that Black mothers (and thus Black children) regularly

receive the same aid, governmental protection, and media-induced dignity as White mothers. For one of the first times in U.S. history, White middle class persons were forced to see the reality of Black mother's experiences, and as I would situate more specifically, the non-citizen status of Black persons (Harris-Perry, 2011). Because Black mothers are supposed to reflect Victorian associations of womanhood and motherhood, and did not receive the nobility of "democracy," it revealed the reality of Black mother's institutional value: there is little to none (Harris-Perry, 2011, McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016). Constructing the institutional devaluing of Black mothering as only in crisis during violent weather is a soothing tool for White supremacist geographies (Harris-Perry, 2011; Sharpe, 2016). It is a symbiotic relationship in which White supremacist nation-states salivate over sensationalizing and pathologizing Black mothering (Harris-Perry, 2011). Sensationalism solidifies U.S. exceptionalism, and pathology solidifies Black mother's and Black off-springs non-status, thus maintaining the racialized-gendered infrastructure of the nation itself (McKittrick, 2006; Puar, 2017; Sharpe, 2016; Wright, 2004). The reality of the Atlantic world is that Black mothering has always been in crisis, in violent weather, silenced for the project of White supremacist geographies (Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). If we honor the androgynous space between, we see the institutional construction of Black mothering has always been one of White supremacist benefit.

In the Wake [of Hurricane Katrina]

Currently, scholars now affirm the federal government failed to act in a timely manner, and were thoroughly unprepared for such a horrid disaster that killed around

2000 people (Bouie, 2015). Yet, as Jamelle Bouie (2015) claims in the piece “If You Want To Understand Black Lives Matter, You Have To Understand Katrina,” the U.S. has been (and is) historically comfortable with Black death, and Black Americans are not unaware of such sentiment (Sharpe, 2016). Thus, the happenings of life in the wake, Black mothering, Black death, Black life, the election of the first African American president, is articulated well by Bouie’s (2015) closing paragraph:

The Obama surge in black optimism is over. Now black Americans are back to their post-Katrina consensus; a deep sense that America is indifferent to their lives and livelihoods. Indeed, when read in that light, a movement like Black Lives Matter seems inevitable. The disaster of Hurricane Katrina and its impact on the collective experience of Black America, sowed the ground for a reckoning. Yes, Obama’s election postponed it for a time, but the recent eruption of black death -- at the hands of the state--- gave it new urgency. And now, as we can all see, it’s here. (para. 21)

Prologue

With act one, I attempted to narrate the positioning of Black mothering as one of nation-state interest. By implementing Sharpe’s (2016) theory of the wake I wanted to establish Black Atlantic death/dying as perpetual via Black mothers/Black mothering’s non-status (McKittrick, 2006). For act two, I would like to discuss the second aspect of non-status: the refutation of Black Atlantic claims to space (McKittrick, 2006).

CHAPTER TWO ACT TWO: YOUR MOTHER'S INHERITANCE

Introduction

Act one contextualized the relationship between the Black Atlantic mother, Black mothering, citizenship, nation-state, and life in the wake. Act two is centered upon a secondary aspect of Black mothering's non-status: Black Atlantic claims to space. By combining a Black Canadian mother's narrative, McKittrick's (2006) literature review of Black Canada, and Trini Canadian poet Dionne Brand's (2001) piece "A Map to the Door of No Return," I wish to expound upon the relationship between the Black Atlantic mother, Black mothering, citizenship/nation-state, and life in the wake, to ultimately suggest my larger argument: the institutional refutation of Black Atlanteans claims to space.

There Is No Door of Return

Trini Canadian poet Dionne Brand (2001) conceptualizes *the Door of No Return* in her piece "A Map to the Door of No Return" (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). Brand (2001) posits the geographical door of no return as an unforgettable moment: the moment in which the Black Atlantic was produced via the local-global transaction of persons; the point in which borders and nation-states of the Americas would permanently be altered by the presence of enslaved persons and their descendants. Notably, Brand (2001) centers displacement and non-status. She says the following about Black Canadian/Atlantic

subjects: “landing is what people in the Diaspora do. Landing at ports, dockings, bridgings, stocks, borders, outposts” (as cited in McKittrick, 2006; p.104). This consistent landing is profound, as she positions the landing as an event “with no destination in mind” (as cited in McKittrick, 2006; p. 104). Thus specifying the problematics of geographies of domination: Black Canadian/Atlantic subjectivity is never conceived as a real status, as a real claim of belonging. The door of no return is also weaved with the pain of hybridity, of nation-state, of “citizenship,” “given” to those forced into “the New World” who now are integral to its functions, and cannot easily be separated from its geography (as cited in McKittrick, 2006). I view Brand’s (2001) door of no return as expressing the contradictions of life in the wake: Black Atlanteans cannot claim a geographical space that must negate them to thrive (Sharpe, 2016).²⁵

“I am afraid for my children”²⁶

In Mullings’ (2013) article “How Black Mothers “Successfully” Raise Children in the “Hostile” Canadian Climate” Mullings interviews her daughter Renee. Specifically, she asks Renee about her mothering. Renee says the following:

I never for one second ever thought my mother was heartless, in fact I knew that her disappointment, her frustration and her anger was rooted in her desire for me to be my best...I only wished that she knew in those moments that the intensity, the sharpness of the words and the anger only me more afraid to try...But how

²⁵ Again I would like to reiterate that even for Black Atlanteans who live in Black countries, with Black governments, and who (rightfully) claim belonging based on independence, the global positionality of the nation-state itself is still subject to anti-Blackness that still renders Blackness as ungeographical even when (somewhat) “independent” of Whiteness (McKittrick, 2006; Mohanty, 2003).

²⁶ Mullings (2013).

could she know?...This is how my mother was mothered, how my mother's mother was mothered...How could she know? (p. 112)

Mullings (2013) confirms her strict Black mothering was fear-based. Moreover, she chose a rigorous approach because she knew the educational, social, corporeal, and emotional vulnerability of her daughters. She specifies a moment in which her worry emboldened her “tough love” mothering:

I remember an incident that set my teeth on edge and caused me sleepless nights filled with fear—the kind of fear that is particular to the experience of Black mothers. Renee, a confident and academically strong child, announced that she was “not smart” anymore after her teacher isolated the four Black children in her class at one table and placed a mixture of East Asian and White students at different tables designated as the “smart tables.” (p. 114)

Mullings (2013) suggests Black mothering strategies (like her own) are “counter-stories” to White supremacist geographies (McKittrick, 2006). This presents as particularly significant because of Canada's negation of chattel-slavery (McKittrick, 2006). Canada claims there is, was, and will never be anti-Blackness in Canadian borders (McKittrick, 2006). The Canadian positionality of the Black Atlantic mother is to present her as if she never existed at all (McKittrick, 2006). As McKittrick (2006) will demonstrate, life in the wake in Canada is one attempting to repossess claims to space.

Black Canada: There Was Slavery in Canada?

In the latter chapters of McKittrick's (2006) piece *Demonic Grounds* McKittrick reminds the reader of the White supremacist rewriting of Canadian history, suggesting

Canada is persuasively framed as a neutral and innocent space (despite its British and French imperialistic roots) whose borders are celebrated via the well-known history of U.S. enslaved persons seeking refuge in its geography. Ironically, this is the only space in which Canada acknowledges enslaved persons and the transatlantic slave trade.

McKittrick (2006) displays a concerning consciousness, many persons in Canada do not know slavery too happened in Canada. McKittrick (2006) claims this situates Black Canadians as “unseeable.” How can we ignore the Black Atlantic mother’s offspring?

Life in the Wake Is Also Indigenous

Although this thesis is not centered on articulating the history and present of Afro-Indigenous relations, I find it necessary within the thesis to openly recognize life in the wake as also Indigenous. Notably, McKittrick (2006) states within the opening paragraph of “Black Canada,” Canadian geographies of domination reiterate Indigenous subjectivity as marginal to Canadian conceptions of nationality itself, despite Canada being Indigenous land.²⁷ Jamaican born British cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1993) importantly reminds the Black Atlantic in his piece, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” that the Americas has its own diverse Indigenous history pre-transatlantic slave trade, and it must not be forgotten in current iterations and discussions of Black Atlantic cultural identity. Thus, the Black Atlantic mother honors the Indigenous Atlantic mother who is with her in the wake, and honors the reality of a dialogical displacement.

²⁷ It is also necessary to recognize persons of Indigenous descent may find the term “Canadian” as inappropriate to their “national origin,” as “national origins”/ nation-states of the Americas derive from Indigenous genocide and rendering Indigenous people as no longer “present” in “modern” society.

New Ethnicities: “Native” Black Canadians and Transnational Blackness

The previous section brings us to a complex intersection of the meaning of national-origin, of indigeneity, of the Black Atlantic other. If the Canadian nation-state does not recognize the enslaved persons of centuries past, what subjectivity is presented to Black Canadians of non-immigrant/refugee origin? Those whose ancestors were enslaved within Canada, who are “native” Black Canadians? Undoubtedly, the concept of national origin and indigeneity as non-Indigenous persons in the Americas is its own unsettled geography. However, if we see this murkiness through the lens of the displacement, of the silencing of the Black Atlantic mother’s mapping, we recognize the contradictions as life in the wake.

McKittrick (2006) questions the national/geographical consequences of delineating Black Canadian subjectivity as only of African and Caribbean immigrant origin. She finds the purposeful erasure of Canadian based slavery as a White supremacist function, in which Canada first began to mark Blackness as unimportant (outside of and yet necessary) to its conception of borders and nationality. State-sanctioned anti-Blackness can be witnessed via the destruction and relocation of Africville, an historically Black Canadian community in Nova Scotia. McKittrick (2006) suggests this geographical movement was eugenics-based and “... was also an attempt to erase black lands through legal and social decentralization” (p. 98).²⁸ Moreover, such erasure of an enslaved past has social and political consequences. McKittrick (2006)

²⁸ Moving Black persons to neighborhoods “they belong in”... away from White Canadians (McKittrick, 2006).

claims the “surprise” of enslaved persons existing in Canada encourages not only the displacement of “native” Black Canadians but also Black immigrants and 1st generation Black Canadians. If Canada’s Blackness is always constructed as “from somewhere else” how does Canada contextualize and deal with its nation-state embedded anti-Blackness? Black placelessness is ongoingly perpetuated by common tropes of Black Canadian geography as negative. Reiterations of Black “criminality,” threats of deportation, anti-Black immigration laws, the “concealment of Canada’s largest invisible slave burial ground,” and the movement/re-naming of Canadian Caribana, are provided examples (McKittrick, 2006; p. 96). Notably, what presents as McKittrick’s (2006) larger frustration is the seemingly obvious: through establishing a long-lived Black Canadian geography, the local-global of the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora can be seen.

Silence: Death in Multitudes

If we place “a landing with no destination in mind” within the context of McKittrick’s (2006) review of Black Canada, we see the ignorance of Canadian chattel slavery as a tactic of literal geographical-historical erasure. By negating the Black Atlantic Mother’s epistemology, Canada is able to negate Black mothering and thus Black claims to space. The consequences of such density produces a silence in which belief of Black Canadian counterdiscourse is seen as not existing at all, not necessary, of no destination, of no history, and of no space (McKittrick, 2006).

Conclusion

Chapter three, the final chapter, is centered in reclaiming the silenced Black Atlantic Mother, who with Hartman’s (2008) historical guidance, I ascribe with the name

Venus. Through a comparative content analysis of five Black Atlantic Women's autobiographies: Audre Lorde, Assata Shakur, Mary Prince, Carolina Maria de Jesus, and Buchi Emecheta, we will see the shared thematic conceptions of diverse Black Atlantic women and mothers.

The Intermission

I situate this time to make things personal. As Stuart Hall (1993) would suggest, we all speak from a specific place, from a specific cultural identity, and sometimes the heart must interrupt theory. Chapter two was very challenging for me to write, as in the midst of writing I recalled the conversations I had with my friends on Black Atlantic citizenship and claims to space. The following personal narrative occurred about three months ago.

Do We Return?

Recently I was introduced to a video published in October 2018 entitled: "Ghana Offers African Americans & Caribbeans Right of Return & Right of Abode (21st Century Afropolitan, 2018). I watched the video with intense interest, and with a bit of skepticism. What I found was most disingenuous was the use of terms "we," "us," "Africans" as if the positionality of Blacks in the Americas and Blacks of Ghana were interchangeable experiences. As a Black feminist I am aware of the global institutionalization of anti-Blackness, and the immigration movements that place Black persons of the African Diaspora amongst each other in the Atlantic world. I am also aware that the "return to Africa/Ghana" Pan-Africanist movement (and the Right to Abode) is a not a new concept. In fact, it is common for Brazilian, Caribbean, and American Blacks to visit and

permanently live in Ghana (Dawson, 2001; Dovi, 2015; Hall, 1994; Hartman, 2007; Gilroy, 1993). Yet after watching, I was left with uncertainty. I found myself sitting with the Black Atlantic mother on my conscious.

Thus, in true Black feminist nature I asked my Black Atlantic friends their opinions of the Right to Abode. One of my friends, a fellow African American political scientist, responded saying something to the effect of: “I am interested in this as someone who considers herself a global citizen. It seems right, considering we have never gotten an apology for being sold in the first place” (Friend A, personal communication, March, 2019). My other friend, a first generation Jamaican American medical student, appeared to be less impressed saying :“I don’t need anyone to tell me I have right to belong somewhere that I clearly look like I could be from. We’re Black, we know we’re African” (Friend B, personal communication, March, 2019). My third responder, a half African American half St. Lucian makeup artist seemed the most unresolved, texting me: “I mean it seems like a cool idea” (Friend C, personal communication, March, 2019).

I was left considering their feelings, finding our collective apprehension in its iterations very telling. Here we were, Black Atlantic women of mixed class, occupational, and ethno-national backgrounds sifting through life in the wake for us all. All of our responses reflected our natural dispositions, our life positionings, and our thoughts on *where* we belong in the world. Some of us appeared to be fine where we were, not seeking Ghana for validation of our “Africanness.” Others seemingly more interested in Ghana, but as a means of reparations. Others, seeming to be indifferent, maybe she would apply if the time was right, maybe not. And me, feeling like where I belonged depended

on the day, sometimes my preference was to be in the Atlantic ocean itself, to be with the Black Atlantic mother, a feeling a nation-state could not solve.

My personal narrative is not intent on demonizing the Ghanaian government, nor placing the blame of the transatlantic slave trade onto everyday Ghanaian persons, nor discouraging other Black Atlanteans from seeking citizenship in Ghana. I do not view this as an either or context (Hartman, 2007).²⁹ However, I believe it is important to break my academic dissemblance and contextualize the real-life positionalities of average Black women living in the wake. It should be clear: we all have our own opinions of our shared conception as enslaved persons descendants, and the geography (ies) we exist in (McKittrick, 2006). And we all in nuanced ways, seem to sit in a space unsettled.

What I must say, is that many nation-states have not attended to the perpetual displacement of the Black Atlantic, or the complexity of Black being/belonging in the Americas. The Black Atlantic mother is still losing children, still silenced, still positioned as non-citizen, still a victim of State-sanctioned violence, still a victim of post-colonial rule (McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016). In matrilineal lineage, Black Atlantic women, girls, and mothers feel this institutionalized dysfunction daily. This is a place unresolved, a place both Europe and West Africa must atone for beyond offers of citizenship (Hartman, 2007). This is my life in the wake.

²⁹ Meaning, I will not dictate the right to abide as the resolver of Black Atlantic displacement nor negate it as a legitimate space for Black Atlanteans to pursue.

CHAPTER THREE: RECLAIMING VENUS

Introduction

In chapter one, I asked important questions that ultimately lead us here: what epistemologies do we value? Do we accept White supremacist geographies as the ultimate way of being? What new geographies can be opened by centering Black Atlantic feminism within our feminist epistemologies? In her article “Venus in Two Acts” Saidiya Hartman (2008) takes this matter to the core of her piece, particularly via critiquing her own contextualization of “the dead girl” she wrote of in “The Dead Book.”³⁰ Her self-proclaimed critique is the following: by disengaging with “the dead girl,” pet-named Venus, she reiterated the epistemic violence of the slave archives. By centering “facts” and following “the rules” of academic research and writing, she argues, she re-silences the narratives of those whose lives are merely marked on paper as property. She notes further, to study the archives of the transatlantic slave trade is to study a deadly terrain, as its history is written through the lens of White supremacist geographies. The climax of Hartman’s (2008) piece is thoughtful: Does she leave Venus where she found her?

But who is Venus? Hartman (2008) defines Venus as a Black woman or girl whose representation in transatlantic literature is found in all parts of the Atlantic world. Her literary purpose: “sprightly maiden,” a “sulky bitch,” “A syphilitic whore,” “a

³⁰ Chapter in her book, *Lose Your Mother*.

flagellant and a Hottentot,” “a dead negress” (p. 6). Venus has no particular enslaved “profession,” she exists in the fields, in the house, she lives in Grenada, in Barbados, in the Dominican Republic, in Cuba, in Haiti, in the United States... Venus is omnipresent. Hartman (2008), in regret of not narrating the possible life of “the dead girl,” explains why we must repossess Venus:³¹

Hers is 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. Hers is an untimely story told by a failed witness. It would be centuries before she would be allowed to “try her tongue.” (p. 2)

Hartman (2008) confirms it is time for us to be that witness. Yet, witnessing is not without its internal pulls. Can she imagine the life of “the dead girl” without romanticization? She concludes she must try.

Research Purpose

Thus, the purpose of this research is two-fold. First, my interest is aligned with Hartman’s (2008) proclamation of reclaiming the institutionally silenced Venus. Secondly, my personal frustration with transnational feminist theory’s underwhelming interrogation of Blackness, Black feminism, the Black Atlantic, and its relationship with nation-state, citizenship, and Western exceptionalism is the second driving force of my research.³²

³¹ A concept she calls critical fabulation. I.e. weaving fictional narrative within the writings of the transatlantic slave trade’s primary resources, to provide an equitable story of possibility and humanity for Black women/girls whose lives, deaths, and voices are not represented in an inherently violent remembering of enslaved women (Hartman, 2008).

³² Specifically the binary positioning of Blackness and Whiteness, theorized within Western exceptionalist rhetoric.

Research Design

My methodological design in this chapter derives from a well-established feminist epistemology: autobiographical work as means to and a source of feminist theorizing (Cooper, 2017; Mohanty, 2003). Autobiographical research's most powerful service is its ability to at once connect the personal, the historical past (local-global), and forecast the possibilities of the future (Cooper, 2017; Mohanty, 2003). For Black women autobiographies possess a nuanced agency (generative tension), as Black women are continuously institutionally positioned as unengaged subjects (Cooper, 2017; Hartman, 2008). Thus the actual words, epistemologies, and theories written by Black women about their own selves, about their children, about their community, about their country (ies), as Hartman (2008) would suggest are a form of reparations. Moreover, women's personal narratives allow us to think diligently about horrors of times past and present, to theorize with liberation in mind, as we have no way of confirming the dread of the past is the worst humanity to be seen (Hartman, 2008). Thus, autobiographies are not a luxury (Lorde, 1984).

Audre Lorde's (1982) *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Mary Prince's (1831/2004) *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative*, Assata Shakur's (1987) *Assata*, Carolina Maria de Jesus's (1962/2003) *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, and Buchi Emechata's (1986) *Head Above Water* are the five autobiographies I chose to source this chapter's analysis. I specifically chose these women for their varied global perspectives: Grenadian American, Antiguan, African American, Afro-Brazilian, and (Igbo) Nigerian/Nigerian English. By

contextualizing the women in a transnational understanding, I seek to affirm Sharpe's (2016) theory of life in the wake as an experience that pushes us towards responsibly contextualizing the systems that inform the similar experiences of Black women in the Atlantic. Importantly, the Black Atlantic, as Hall (1993) reminds us is a cultural space with varied, nuanced, and different expressions of Black identity. Thus within this chapter we must honor the divergent reality of these Black women, of whom only one is present with us to tell her ongoing story.³³ But we must also honor, as Gilroy (1993) makes clear in his piece, *The Black Atlantic*, Black Atlanteans share cultural, theoretical, and political geographies.

Research Approach

In this chapter, my qualitative research approach was one of a comparative content analysis. Specifically, I read and analyzed the autobiographical writings one by one, coded themes for each piece, recorded quotes as a means to maintain thematic consistency of each piece, and compared the coded themes to one another to find the most recurrent themes amongst the five narratives. The relevance to which I consider the chosen themes, is in correlation with the theoretical string of the Black Atlantic mother, who I articulate as *a* voice of Venus, and thus, more largely, Black Atlantic feminism.³⁴

Findings

Through my comparative content analysis I have identified three compelling thematic similarities between the women which can be categorized as: birthing,

³³ Assata Shakur is still alive as a refugee in Cuba (Shakur, 1987).

³⁴ By placing the "Black Atlantic mother" as a voice of Venus, rather than *the* voice of Venus, I hope to maintain Venus as a site of possibility beyond my theoretical assertion.

mothering, and corporeal resistance. Birthing was chosen as category as three out of the five women (during the time in which they wrote about their lives) birthed children. Moreover, because they exist in the Black Atlantic, the five women were birthed themselves. Mothering was selected as it is in dialogue with birthing. Every narrative spoke of the relationship between mother and daughter, often in relation to their own mothering practices, but also in relation to authors' relationship with their own mothers. Corporeal resistance was identified as a theme of reclamation. Because the Black Atlantic mother, Black women, and Black mothering is so often placed in the context of the negation of bodily privacy, I found it necessary to cite parts of the five women's narratives/activisms in which a clear self-ownership is presented. Notably the categories are centered in the Black Atlantic mother, Venus, and thus the literal body of Black women.

Discussion

Introduction: The Space Between

Philip's (1997) articulation of Black women's institutionalized androgynous racialized-gender, the space between, is said to often implore Black feminist theory to remain silent on sexuality and intimacy (Cooper, 2017; Hammond, 1994; as cited in McKittrick, 2006). By placing the Black Atlantic mother as *a* voice of Venus, I am suggesting we view the themes as moving beyond the epistemic silence we assume of Black women's bodies. This means honoring the space between as both a historical site and as a space of psychic, emotional, and physical action.

A true discussion on Black Atlantic women and body must begin with Audre Lorde (1982). Audre's narrative is the anchor of this chapter. Lorde presents the most intimate narrative of Black women, Black womanhood, Black mothering, and Black women's bodies. She, the sister outsider, the Black lesbian woman who could not position herself within normative White spaces, normative White lesbian spaces, nor normative Black spaces, simply yet profoundly contextualizes the complex relationship between Black women. She states in the latter half of her autobiography, "For both Flee and me, it seemed that loving women was something that other Black women just didn't do" (Lorde, 1982; p. 179). Adding context to her reflection she says: "For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion. It was no different in the gay world" (Lorde, 1982; p. 224). Notably, Lorde's non-heteronormative perspective informs her understanding of the historical positionality of race, gender, sexuality, and its impact on Black women, Black mothers, and the complex relationships between Black women. At its core, this chapter is a dialogue among Black women.

Lorde (1982) again presents as central if we are mindful that Black birthing, mothering, and Black corporeal resistance, cannot reach its full complexities when placed within a White heteronormative context. The circumstances of Black Atlantic women, the circumstances of Black mothering and Black children, and the relationships between Black women are inherently encapsulated in the Black Atlantic mother, and the silencing

of Venus (Cooper, 2017; Hammonds, 1994; Hartman, 2008).³⁵ If we honor the Black Atlantic mother's experiences: the womb who birthed property, the one written as silenced in the slave archives her womb produced, the one who is theoretically positioned outside of the Black nation, it is easy to suggest the space between is where birthing, mothering, and corporeal resistance derive from. Thus, the space between is both a silent and audible theoretical site embodied in birthing, mothering, and corporeal resistance.

Birthing

It is not uncommon to hear the religious quote "You inherit the sins of your father," a warning used to invoke mindfulness as to how each generation's actions impact the generations after. It is also not uncommon for the Black Atlantic to use religiosity to dream of a liberated future (Cooper, 2017; Trezfer, 2000). For the Black Atlantic, we may view birthing in the same manner. In chapter two I contextualized the non-status of the Black Atlantic mother, Black mothering, and Black Atlanteans. The preface question to non-status could be: what must it feel like to know your child must be sold? Mary Prince's narrative is helpful here. While Mary Prince's mother was preparing her children to be sold and bought in auction, other enslaved persons came to say goodbye. Mary notes a young Black mother holding her baby and crying. Mary's mother also noticing Moll's tears, said the following "Ay!... your turn will come next" (Prince, 1831/2004; p. 7). While many of us see Mary's mother's response from the perspective of trauma, it is also possible to see it as a source of reclamation, as *she* warned Moll of the inevitable, the

³⁵ I would also suggest the relationships between Black women and Black men, and Black men with other Black men, and Black persons with other Black persons are heavily entrenched in the silencing of Venus (Lorde, 1982; Sharpe, 2016).

birthright of birthing Black children. This is not a miniscule moment, as it was a mother telling another mother (rather than a slave owner) what will happen to her baby. Can we claim Black children articulate their mother's freedom?

Assata and Buchi

Assata and Buchi are in dialogue as they sit in a divergent duality. They are the only women in the narratives to discuss their birthing experience, but they are very different in personality. Assata could be considered the most outspoken of the women (with Carolina Maria de Jesus as a close second), and Buchi to be the most elusive. Yet, both of them, despite the immense stressors leading to their child's birth, suggest their birthing experience as beautiful and quiet (Emecheta, 1986; Shakur, 1987). I believe this is because both of their little girls became the source of their body deliverance.

Assata's birthing context can only be atoned for by openly situating it as deadly. Assata was (is) a Black Liberationist and was attempting to maintain anonymity as the U.S. Federal government was actively spying, destabilizing, and killing Black political organizations and organizers (Shakur, 1987). Her imprisonment involved several accusations but her most infamous charge is that of a murder of a New Jersey state police officer in 1973, after her and two others were stopped by a different police officer while driving. A shootout between the two parties occurred, and one officer lay dead, Assata grimly injured with a shot to her arm. Assata maintains she, nor Sundiata, nor their friend Zayd who also died in the incident, murdered the police officer (Shakur, 1987).³⁶ Moreover, she declares her arrest, trial, and sentencing was unjust and embedded in State harassment of Black liberationists, and in vengeance of police death. Assata's own will to

³⁶ Sundiata Acoli is currently still imprisoned (Feltz, 2016).

live stands strongly in her narrative. Standing in her truth, Assata Shakur gave birth to her daughter while imprisoned in 1974. Her daughter's father, Kamau, was (is) also an imprisoned Black liberationist (Shakur, 1987).

Subsequently, we may ask ourselves, why did a couple in such dire life placement decide on having a child while imprisoned? Assata says the following about choosing to conceive as a prisoner: "And I'm not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they are even born" (Shakur, 1987; p. 93). Her birthing experience: police cars following her transport to the hospital, protests for her right to choose her own doctor, a pregnancy daily diet of powdered milk, juice, and a hard-boiled egg, and the alarming concern of the well-being of her daughter, so much so that Assata proclaims, "I am delivering this baby myself" (Shakur, 1987; p. 143).³⁷ The shining light of her birthing (Divine intervention) is with the help of court orders Assata was able to demand a Black doctor, Dr. Garrett, who assisted her throughout her pregnancy and delivered her daughter. But it was not without pushback and sabotage by the State. She was violated and abused in the prison, by the prison-doctor, by the media, by police, by the Justice system, before her pregnancy, during her pregnancy, and after her pregnancy. Assata states her baby's delivery was quiet and beautiful. However, Assata was prevented from seeing her daughter until six hours after the delivery, had doctors forcibly trying to examine her so that she could be discharged, and was sent back to Rikers Island chained without her baby. Assata states

³⁷ I would also suggest the relationships between Black women and Black men, and Black men with other Black men, and Black persons with other Black persons are heavily entrenched in the silencing of Venus (Lorde, 1982; Sharpe, 2016).

she became depressed after being swiftly separated from her daughter and wanted to be left alone -even if it meant solitary confinement (Shakur, 1987).

Buchi Emecheta (1986), an Igbo Nigerian/Nigerian English writer and novelist, had five children. Buchi immigrated to England as a teenager, already a mother, with an abusive husband. Although Buchi did not give birth to her children while imprisoned, it was not without its ongoing trauma. Her husband was not at the birth of their final child and he took no consistent interest in the livelihood of his own children. But, Buchi (1986) describes her final birthing experience as "...the cry of joy and the cry of freedom" (Emecheta, 1986; p. 37). She noted her baby's birth and personality to be calm and quiet, unlike the birth of her other children. Buchi, alone without her husband, decided having her final baby was enough.³⁸ Yet, the calmness of her birthing experience was interrupted when she learned her four other children had been placed in different homes by her social worker because Buchi was not (could not) be with them while delivering (Emecheta, 1986).

Salvation

A pivotal moment of Assata's self-determination forms when her now four year old daughter visits her and is clearly filled with anger. Her daughter tells Assata, "You can get out of here, if you want to," "You just don't want to." Assata continues, "My daughter goes over to the barred door that leads to the visiting room...she yanks and she hits and she kicks the bars until she falls on the floor, a heap of exhaustion" (Shakur, 1987; p. 258). Assata states this moment was the moment she decided she must escape prison, for her daughter, for the relationship between the two.

³⁸ Buchi had her final child, at the young age of twenty two (Emecheta, 1986).

Buchi's most memorable quote is the following, "And because writing that comes from one's inner-most soul is therapeutic, it could also probably be contraceptive" (Emecheta, 1986; p. 70). This is a deeply earnest quote and although she does not state this openly in *Head Above Water* I believe Buchi was relieved that her husband was not at the birth of their final daughter, as it solidified that writing was her purpose of life, rather than being a wife.³⁹ Notably, when Buchi's husband was present he buried her dreams. Sylvester, displaying his own insecurities with the independence writing presented her, burned Buchi's original manuscript of her novel *The Bride Price*. Moreover, if we look into the chapter "Mock Reconciliation" the celebration of Buchi's first published book, became a moment in which her family praised Sylvester, the man that burned her first writings. Buchi says:

But I could sense that underneath all that congratulations and prayers it was my husband they were praising. Why? Because he was the man. No one would like to offend him, because with me to work and boost his ego, he could one day be very powerful. Mine was to be the reflected glory. But then, is that not the lot of most women? (Emecheta, 1986; p. 86)

Throughout the narrative, it is quite clear Buchi is unimpressed and disengaged with her assumed gender role as an Igbo woman. Moreover, Buchi states in "Mock Reconciliation" that her children being English, understand that parenting is not simply biological. Her final daughter had freed her from her expectations.

³⁹ And rather than birthing children.

What I find most haunting about Assata and Buchi's narratives is that both of the women see their daughters as the citizens they were not, as if their daughters were representatives of them... of the women they could not be but knew they must be. Assata's daughter's resentment pushed Assata to flee to Cuba (Shakur, 1987). Buchi's single and peaceful child birth became an examining tool to remove the chaos of her life, for her baby and for her other children. What makes these moments particularly profound is that Black Atlantic women's bodies have never had the institutional privilege of non-violent birthing (Lorde, 1982; McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016). If we recall Mary's mother, generations of women birthed children who were sold and bought on the coast of West Africa and the Americas, had babies immediately taken from them after birth, had their body integrity pervasively interrupted in gratuitous amounts on slave ships and plantations, and for the livelihood of their children and for themselves had to get up and keep working (Hartman, 2007; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). This is lineage, a site of stress. And in duality with such violence, women fought for the best circumstances for their babies and themselves. Thus, may we see the victories of a calm, beautiful, and quiet birth, births that gave stronger purpose for literal escape, and for freedom to stop having children, a reclamation of the space between. Assata and Buchi's daughters, Kakuya and Alice, delivered their mothers.

Mothering

What is birthing without mothering? This second theme may be the most challenging, the most complex, and the most heartbreaking. It is important to keep in mind the deployment of the Black Atlantic mother of chapter one, the mother who

centered the importance of intergenerational relationships, as this section concentrates most on the intricate relationship between Black mother and Black daughter. We will begin with Mary Prince, move to Assata, Audre, Carolina de Maria Jesus, Buchi, and close with Mary Prince. We will learn reclaiming Venus involves discussing the unpleasant, the reality of Black mothering in spaces of intense racial violence and subjugation. One may argue this section is also about losing your mother- your White mother.⁴⁰

No, all White mothers cannot be placed within the same socio-economical privileges and status, yet the reality is Black womanhood and White womanhood are a dialectical (Feimster, 2009; Gilmore, 1996; Hammond; 1994; Harris-Perry, 2011). There is much literature dedicating it's time to discussing the ways in which Victorian ideals of White womanhood thrive on the dehumanization of Black women and Black people's intimate lives more broadly (Cooper, 2017; Feimster, 2009; Gilmore, 1996; Hammonds, 1994). Here, Mary Prince's (1831/2004) experience help to explicate the power of White womanhood, and why three out of the five narratives connect White womanhood and White mothering as a source of socio-economic power, the "legitimate" space between.

*"Her little nigger"*⁴¹

Mary Prince (1831/2004) is the only woman of the five who was actually an enslaved person. She never mentioned wanting a White mother, likely because she was owned by White women. There are two White women Mary speaks of with dignified

⁴⁰ The expectations of white womanhood (pushed upon and expected by Black mothers).

⁴¹ What one of her White woman owners said about Mary in sadness of her being sold (Prince, 1831/2004).

disdain, “Mrs. I----” and Mrs. Wood. Mrs. I---- and Mrs. Wood’s share a similar brutality I see as immensely important to conceptualizing White womanhood, they both (beyond their own personal abuse of Mary) encouraged their husbands to viciously “discipline” Mary and other enslaved persons.⁴² Mary discusses her owner’s reaction to her marriage to a free man saying, “Mrs. Wood was more vexed about my marriage than her husband. She could not forgive me for getting married, but stirred up Mr. Wood to flog me dreadfully with his horsewhip” (Prince, 1831/2004; p. 29). Throughout her narrative to freedom Mrs. Wood consistently instigates the punishments of Mary, and in a particular way she situates herself as crueler than her husband because she felt empowered (Prince, 1831/2004). Because of White women’s assumed innocence and purity, White women gained the ability to instigate violence, and to be protected from blame (Hill, 2016; Wells-Barnett, 2002) White womanhood and by offset White mothering, is the nation-state protection the Black Atlantic mother, and thus Venus never had (Cooper, 2017; Hartman, 2008; McKittrick, 2006). It is with this expectation, the unprotected space between, that we can infer the resentment Assata, Audre, and Vera (Carolina Maria de Jesus’ daughter) felt for their Black mothers.

“I wish my Mom was White”

Assata, Audre, and Vera all express a similar sentiment: the wish for their Black mothers to be White mothers. The context of their discontent stems from the same source, their socio-economic status (Shakur, 1987; Lorde, 1982; de Jesus, 1962/2003). Assata’s gets right to the heart of the matter stating, “I had very little empathy for my mother” (Shakur, 1987; p. 38). Assata and Audre both watched popular U.S. television shows of

⁴² Mary chose not to explicitly state everyone’s full names (Prince, 1831/2004).

middle-class White families with limited struggle and assumed it was what families were “supposed” to be like (Shakur, 1987; Lorde, 1982). Assata describes her childhood feelings towards her mother in more detail saying, “I was furious with her because she wasn’t Donna Reed” (Shakur, 1987; p. 38).⁴³ Although Assata and Audre both wanted White mothers like they saw on television, Audre’s interaction with White motherhood has interesting complexities. As a young child, Audre was unsure if her mother was White or “Colored” (Lorde, 1982). Audre’s mother, a fair-skinned, grey-eyed Grenadian immigrant passed as “Spanish,” until Audre, her siblings, and her father were present with her (Lorde, 1982).⁴⁴ Audre recalls in the first chapter of *Zami*, being a young child in New York, walking racially mixed streets and getting spat at by people her mother deemed “lower-class.” It was not until Audre was older did she realize she and her siblings, and by proximity her mother, were being spat at because they were Black. She explains, “But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn’t stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else” (Lorde, 1982; p. 17). Thus, while Audre admired her mother’s strength and as a child did not know what “color” her mother was, she still wished her Spanish-passing Black mother was like the “blonde smiling mother in *Dick and Jane*” (Lorde, 1982; p. 55).

Carolina Maria de Jesus’ (1962/2003) narrative is entrenched in the most poverty, describing her life in the favelas (slums) of Sao Paulo, Brazil. She had three children, all

⁴³ White American actress, who starred in the sitcom “The Donna Reed Show” as the quintessential suburban mom (Biography, 2015).

⁴⁴ My assumption is her “Spanish” passing is in reference to being Mestiza or “Ethnic White” (i.e. of Indigenous and European descent or a non-Nordic European).

with White fathers. Carolina's consistent struggle to feed and provide necessities for her children, is the "cause" of Vera telling Carolina (when she was provided with new shoes) "that she was happy with me and wasn't going to buy a white mother" (de Jesus, 1962/2003; p. 60). Being that Vera was (is) biracial, this complicates the context further. Her father was a well-off White man who Carolina demanded (and occasionally) received child-support from with the help of the State.⁴⁵ Carolina maintains a distrust of men in her novel believing she was used by her children's father for pleasure and discarded once their children were born (de Jesus, 1962/2003). If one knows the history of White men fathering biracial children in the "New World" this is not a shocking or unwarranted belief, it was largely the norm for White men to father non-citizens (Hartman, 2008, Gilmore, 1996; Wright, 2004).

Chiedu's memory

In "For Chiedu's Memory," a page dedicated to Buchi's deceased eldest daughter, Buchi says, "...yet you suddenly left, when I was in a position to say 'thank you daughter' for helping me raise your younger brothers and sisters"(Emecheta 1986; para. 1). Her grief continues, "Here is *Head Above Water*, the title we both agreed on four years ago" (Emecheta, 1986; para. 1). Buchi does not detail Chiedu's passing, but throughout Buchi's narrative Chiedu's growing discontent for her role as the eldest and the care taker of her younger siblings is palatable. Buchi honors this feeling further by acknowledging her almost twenty three year old was her "childhood friend who I had when I myself was a child" (Emecheta, 1986; para. 1). Although none of her children

⁴⁵ Vera's father knew Carolina was writing about her experiences in the favelas, and gave her money in hopes that she would not write badly of him in her books (de Jesus, 1962/2003).

explicitly state a want for a White mother, I believe Chiedu's frustration stems from the same source as Assata, Audre, and Vera. Buchi's Black mothering is entrenched in low socio-economic status, in the White supremacist infrastructure of England, in the disengagement of her husband Sylvester, and in her own career activism working with young Black men in organizations such as Dashiki. Buchi states she like other Black immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, specifically sought England as "economic refugees" (Emecheta, 1986; p. 140). Buchi is thus quite adamant on the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness within the UK, stating:

By being told to go into manual work, the black boy sees the end of his dream. He is no better off than his poor parents or the people who helped him to come to England. He will soon learn also that the darker his skin, the meaner his job. (Emecheta, 1986; p. 139)

Buchi is describing life in the wake. The larger context of her mothering is one of little nation-state protection, of continual displacement (Emecheta, 1982).⁴⁶ Thus it is possible to infer Chiedu's anger towards her mother could have been less strenuous if not for systemic anti-Blackness, a reality connected to White supremacy, White persons, White women, and White mothering, and the space between (Cooper, 2017; Harris-Perry, 2011; McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016).

Corporeal Resistance

Within the lineage of systemic based silence we also know Black women are persistent resisters, and as I stated in the introduction to "Findings" I view the space

⁴⁶ Literal and theoretical, Buchi was consistently looking for stable housing until her writing career was established, and was assigned a social worker (Emecheta, 1986).

between as also audible. Subsequently for this final theme, I would like to center re-possession as it relates to the actions taken by the five women to boldly express the space between. Indeed we can suggest their autobiographical work as the first exemplifier of such (Cooper, 2017). However, I am interested in contextualizing particularly profound moments of their narratives in which they interrupted geographies of domination by literally breaking silence (McKittrick, 2006). Let us first start with Mary Prince, then Carolina, Buchi and end with Assata and Audre.

Mary Prince's freedom papers

I believe it is important to start with Mary, as her autobiographical work was a piece used to encourage the abolition of slavery. Mary's repossession is quite straightforward and what we expect of a freed person's narrative. However, I would like us to be present with her as her circumstances were deadly. Moreover, it is important to not take assumed simplicity for granted. At the end of her narrative Mr. and Mrs. Wood are traveling back to England from Antigua as they wanted their children to receive an English education (Prince, 1862/2004). Because Mary would technically be a free woman in England, she agreed to go with the Wood family still an enslaved person. Her treatment by Mrs. Wood was of ongoing extreme abuse, of using her White womanhood as a weapon against Mary. At this point in her life Mary was chronically ill with rheumatism, and Mrs. Wood took Mary's illness and fading body strength as a means to work her harder (Prince, 1862/2004). Mary thus stood up for herself and demanded that the Wood family treat her with less cruelty.⁴⁷ Being calculating, Mr. and Mrs. Wood

⁴⁷ Throughout the narrative, Mary consistently rebukes treatment she sees as an over exertion of power (Prince 1831/2004).

threatened her to leave, stating she would be homeless with no protection in England (Prince, 1831/2004). Mary, being ever so diligent, continues to work for them until the fourth threat. A breaking point emerges in which she leaves, receives aid from Moravian Missionaries, and goes back to the Wood residence to get her belongings. Walking out with freedom papers Mr. Wood had previously used as a source of manipulation, Mary reclaims her body and says:

Stop, before you take up this trunk, and hear what I have to say before these people. I am going out of this house, as I was ordered; but I have done no wrong at all to my owners, neither here nor in the West Indies. I always worked very hard to please...but there was no giving satisfaction, for my mistress could never be satisfied with reasonable service. (Prince, 1862/2004; p. 30-31)

Carolina: "I don't have the courage to kill myself"

Carolina's circumstances are so heavily embodied in the body, this section could easily be only about her. It is necessary to situate her space ajar with the same cautiousness Hartman (2008) described of her relationship with "the dead girl" of "The Dead Book." In this space we recognize the danger of romanticizing poverty and reiterating an archetype of "the strong Black woman." Carolina's corporeal resistance should be viewed in relation to being in the wake, as there are twelve instances in which Carolina brings up the topic of death and suicide, in which all instances are caused by poverty and its iterations (Sharpe, 2016). Her bodily interruption is a body expression not deeply discussed within Black feminist theory: there were times in which Carolina not only wanted to die, but also wanted to kill herself. She confesses:

How horrible it is to get up in the morning and not have anything to eat. I even thought of suicide. But I am killing myself now, by lack of food in the stomach.

And unhappily I get up in the morning hungry. (de Jesus, 1962/2003; p. 92)

What does it mean for a Black woman to openly voice her discontent with her life? To boldly state she wants to take her own? I have no resolve for these questions, but I think it is necessary to break down what we often call “survival.” For a Black woman to state she is tired of resisting and persisting and would much rather kill herself is a text of corporeal resistance we, as Black feminists theorists, need to articulate much more. May we think of the Black Atlantic women who jumped overboard slave ships to rebuke enslavement as the mothers of this death.

Buchi breaks dissemblance

I noted in the section “birthing” that Buchi maintains as the most dissemblance-oriented woman of the five. However, understanding the space between means recognizing the moments in which she allows it to fall. Such can be seen in the chapter “The Black Teacher.” At this point in her career, Buchi was beginning to be revered as a “feminist writer”(Emecheta, 1982). Buchi makes clear she was simply writing about her life, and had only heard the word “feminism” because her writings had taken her to the International Woman’s league. Her experience with White women speakers in attendance brought her usually tranquil spirit to a place of strikingly open honesty. After listening to speakers consistently frame the narrative of what should be done to “help Third World women” Buchi states she was angered with being framed as if she was a problem (Emecheta, 1986; p. 177). She stands up and says the following to the women in attendance, “So I got up and shocked all the ladies, telling them to mind their own

business and leave us Third World women alone” (Emecheta, 1986; p. 177). Buchi contends she was sure she would be told to leave, nonetheless she reclaimed her body.

Audre and Assata-Legacy

I place Audre and Assata together in this final theme, as I see them both sitting in a nuanced hyper-visible space of body. One as a Black lesbian woman whose positionality was always “outsider,” whose body resistance birthed a multitude of theory and epistemologies---including that of my thesis. The other as a woman whose body resistance places her on the FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorist list, a woman still deemed as a threat to the U.S. as a nation-state (Yeldell, 2013). These women’s lives should be contextualized as immense exertions of long-living corporeal resistance, as I cannot place them in the normal dynamics of the space between. Their life circumstances, their specific contribution to Black Atlantic women, Black feminist theory, Queer theory, and Black Atlantic theory cannot be adequately detailed within this chapter. I thus approach their corporeal resistance as an example of what Black Atlantic feminist theorizing should consistently strive towards: representing Venus and re-birthing your mother endlessly.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to connect Venus, the Black Atlantic mother, the space between, black mothering, and the autobiographical work of Audre Lorde, Mary Prince, Assata Shakur, Carolina Maria de Jesus, and Buchi Emecheta. Through the themes of birthing, mothering, and corporeal resistance, we see the ways in which Black Atlantic feminism, and the Black Atlantic mother, live within and refute the circumstances of life in the wake. We also see their works as adding to the theories of

transnational feminism as their epistemologies, pieces, and placements are transnational. Importantly their stories are divergently complex, and filled with many stories to be explored in more detail. Thus, I consider my findings to be the preface to a much grander discussion of what birthing, mothering, and corporeal resistance means for Black Atlantic women.

Recommendations

Subsequently, I do have a recommendations. First, I believe more theoretical time needs to be invested into Sharpe's (2016) theory of life in the wake and its relationship with Black mothering and Black women's emotional consciousness, particularly the ways in which it affects Black women's psychological health. Secondly, I suggest the interrelatedness of the Black Atlantic mother, Black birthing, and Black mothering must be finely detailed, and should be seen as a cornerstone of understanding the Black Atlantic world and the theory produced from it. Thirdly, I urgently suggest theorizing the Black Atlantic mother within nation-states that are largely Black populated. Much of my theoretical work was focused in the U.S. and Canada, and I believe by possessing her throughout the Americas, there is an immense amount of space to theorize in more detail, nuance, and cultural specificity. Ongoing, by using the Black Atlantic mother in divergent national spaces, it would continue to affirm Black Atlantic feminisms as sites of possibility. Finally, I find it necessary to suggest more Black feminist theorists need to articulate the dialogical subjectivity of Black Atlanteans and Indigenous persons, as both groups share a context of displacement, and have a shared history vastly underdiscussed in certain areas of the Atlantic.

CONCLUSION: A CHILD'S BEREAVEMENT

Throughout my thesis I sought to encourage an evolution of transnational feminist thought by intervening with Black Atlantic feminism, the Black Atlantic mother, and Black mothering. I am so adamant about the recognition of the Black Atlantic mother because the transatlantic slave trade is the *only* reason I am in the U.S. So often, we view the one-thirds world with the assumption that everyone here, chose to be here. We also tend to forget that millions of enslaved persons and their descendants were, and are, an economical sector keeping “the West” afloat (McKittrick, 2006). This is a feeling I feel deeply, and it can only be described as suffocation. Transnational feminist theory has taught me invaluable lessons on the lives of other women, who also come from a colonial heritage, who are also tired of the U.S. as a global power (Mohanty, 2003). I believe relationships are most powerful and genuine when they are honest and dialogical. Thus, the Black Atlantic mother is my thoughtful exchange with transnational feminist theory.

Unresolved Geographies?

In the latter half of *Demonic Grounds* McKittrick (2006) contextualized unresolved geographies within the philosophy of Jamaican novelist and theorist Sylvia Wynter. Wynter (1995) believes human epistemologies are always changing, always unresolved, always in formation. Most importantly, she does not see the unresolvable as particularly negative, she sees it as the reality of humanity (as cited in McKittrick, 2006).

I agree with Wynter. Thus, I close my thesis with a biography of one my Black Atlantic mothers, exiting peacefully in the unresolved.

Catherine

My Big Momma died when I was six years old. I remember being at her funeral, and seeing one of my Aunt's (who is named after her) hysterically crying.⁴⁸ Not knowing much about Big Momma, and not understanding death, I reacted in observance like the average six year old. Forward to recent times, to Summer 2018, I began to ask my other Aunt about Big Momma. My Big Momma, a fair skinned Black woman (who at first glance you may mistake as a White woman), was a domestic laborer for a well-off White family who owned car dealerships in the Tidewater area of Virginia. She loved gardening and plants, and lived in a pretty house with my Big Daddy, a man of high compassion and sensitivity.⁴⁹ Talking with my Aunt, I always wondered what life meant for Big Momma. How challenging of an experience must it have been to be a very light skinned (and clearly mixed-race) Black woman, living in Jim Crow Virginia. How did she feel about being a Black woman? Did she resent her light complexion? Was being a domestic laborer the career she would have chosen, if she was privileged to be born in 1994 like me?

My Aunt noted my Big Momma's personality: care-taker, quick-witted, fierce, uncompromising, tough, no-nonsense...and sometimes (to keep it real) lacking tact. My Aunt also told me something that will forever stand out to me, My Big Momma lost her mother at age six, the same age I lost her. Even more timely, my great-great grandmother

⁴⁸ Big Momma is a southern African American term meaning Great grandmother.

⁴⁹ Big Daddy is a southern African American term meaning Great grandfather.

died birthing one of Big Momma's siblings. Since then, I've always wondered how six year old Catherine must have felt with her mother dead. And I wondered how this affected me, how different life could have been for my maternal family if my great-great grandmother hadn't died in child birth. One day, I plan to explore those feelings further.

I began to look at the continuities between my Big Momma and me and decided she must be the source of my some of my personality. I have always been quite opinionated, very to the heart of the matter, and uncompromising when necessary. Because I took on Big Momma, Big Momma also became the face of my Whiteness. Looking at her, I was unable to deny the reality of Black Atlantic birthing. According to particular parts of my DNA, I have genetic makeup that suggests I am English, Irish, and German. According to pictures my Aunt possesses, my Big Daddy's mother was an Indigenous woman. According to other parts of my DNA, my highest African percentage reflects substantial genetic similarities to persons living in modern-day Benin and Togo. Ultimately, I will never know the depth of my ethnic-makeup. I have partially-tested matrilineal estimations, familial pictures, and oral-story telling as my guide. I have accepted this with little anger, rage, or sense of non-belonging, as I am secure in being the amalgamation of many. Because of Big Momma, I have found my mother. This is the possibility of the Black Atlantic mother.

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BIOGRAPHY

Emani N. Walke graduated from Western Branch High School (Chesapeake, Virginia) in 2012. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2016, double majoring in Political Science and African American Studies. She is ongoingly invested in studying and theorizing, the (everlasting) impact of the transatlantic slave trade. Specifically, she nuances her interest in the direction of the following interrelated topics: U.S. Black identity (ies), Black Atlantic citizenship, Black Atlantic cultural identities, and Black Atlantic feminism.